

# Recovering Our Knowledge Of The Good Person: A Review Essay of Dallas Willard's *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*

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Abstract: Have you wondered how your students or friends simultaneously deny moral facts yet accept the universal wrongness of bullying, sexual assault, or greed? Dallas Willard's much anticipated final philosophical work offers an incisive analysis of and solution to this phenomenon. Here I provide a brief overview of Willard's main argument for how moral knowledge disappeared and has thereby become publicly unavailable for teaching it to emerging generation. We first look at what caused this "disappearance" at a social level, and then consider how we have contributed to the problem. Finally, we look at Willard's proposal for how we might recover moral knowledge, and I offer three lingering questions that may provide a springboard for those interested in extending his important project.

Dallas Willard. *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 378 pages. \$141.00.

Have you wondered how your students or friends simultaneously deny moral facts yet accept the universal wrongness of bullying, sexual assault, or greed? Dallas Willard's much anticipated final philosophical work offers an incisive analysis of and solution to this phenomenon. For centuries, "It was assumed on all sides that . . . systematic knowledge of the moral life was a necessity to live well, and that *of course* it was possible—though not necessarily easy—to achieve . . . by sensible and thoughtful people" (2). However, a radical reversal has occurred. Currently our default mode is vehement expressions of approval or dislike, but we cannot find a set of publicly accessible moral facts comprising a teachable body of knowledge recognized by our institutions as providing an authoritative basis for living. Willard calls this "the disappearance of moral knowledge" (7).<sup>1</sup>

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1. Some readers might find it helpful to place Willard in a moral philosophical tradition. To do that, one must understand that he was an unrelenting metaphysical and epistemological realist, the former meaning there is a real world that does not depend for its existence on any mind, and the latter meaning we can be in direct cognitive contact with that world—i.e., our knowledge of that world is unmediated by language, percepts, concepts, etc. Both theses inform his moral realist philosophy which may be placed in the broadly phenomenological and

Willard provides six causes of the disappearance. First, religion was discredited as a source of moral reality and knowledge, because God's existence is either an illusion or item of mere "faith" (8–9). Second, the human self disappeared as an item of knowledge, because soul, mind, and self-awareness seemed incompatible with empiricist, existentialist, behaviorist, and logical positivist pictures of human personality (10). Third, differences in cultural mores revealed apparent intractable moral disagreements that pushed in the direction of moral relativism (11). Fourth, "moral standards [are] seen as power plays used by the blind and hypocritical"; but if that's right, then morality is just a social construct and not a set of truth claims. Without truth there cannot be moral knowledge, only social acceptance of majority opinion (12). Fifth, morality is viewed as harmful, since moral rules have either been senseless or used to bring about evil ends (14). Sixth, there's an increasing fear of knowledge, because "knowledge confers rights to act, and to direct action and policy, in a way that feeling, opinion (no matter how widely shared), and tradition do not. That proves highly threatening to . . . self-determination and freedom from social domination . . ." (14). To remove the threat, moral knowledge becomes at most a social-construct lacking authority to tell one what to do or think, whether one is responsible, guilty, morally worthy or repulsive, and so forth. The problem is that this entails all moral judgments are on par (16–17).

Tragically these causes are given full force by universities we trust to provide knowledge of how to live, yet who talk as though there's no accessible body of objective moral knowledge. Ironically, universities cannot fail to provide moral guidance, because they praise or condemn acts such as honesty, discrimination, and sexual assault. Moral conformity comes at the cost of serious moral thought in pursuit of moral knowledge (30–44). For Willard, "To have knowledge in the dispositional sense—where you know things you

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virtue traditions. Here are some important sources for understanding these realist traditions: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Willard, "Utilitarianism and Phenomenology," in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy*, ed. John Drummond and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002); Knud Logstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, ed. Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997); Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Willard, "Moral Rights, Moral Responsibility, and the Contemporary Failure of Moral Knowledge," in *Guantanamo Bay and the Judicial-Moral Treatment of the Other*, ed. Clark Butler (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006); Walter Hopp, *Perception and Knowledge: A Phenomenological Account* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984); Willard, "Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, ed. B. Smith and D. W. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); and Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (1932; New York: Penguin, 1995).

are not necessarily thinking about at the time—is to be *able to represent something as it is on an adequate basis of thought and experience*” (19).

What role has philosophy played in the disappearance of moral knowledge? Some philosophers have sought to develop a “science of ethics.”<sup>2</sup> Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary ethics “purported to derive or even to *prove* Utilitarian principles of ethics from supposedly well-established biological and sociological principles (52).” For Willard, “the basic problem with [deriving an ethics from evolutionary theory] lies in connecting an evolved condition with ‘good’ or ‘better’ in a normative sense that could serve to guide and evaluate action and character. The fact that one (or one’s group) has survived or prospered simply leaves open the question of whether one was right, praise-worthy, or good in so doing evil too can survive and prosper” (57).

G. E. Moore develops his ethics in the opposite direction making “goodness itself” the central subject matter of ethical inquiry, but many have found this abstract universal too “strange” and inaccessible to sense perception (156). Willard opines, “But being ‘strange’ is hardly an argument against the existence of such “goodness,” or against a mode of awareness radically distinct from sense perception through which it comes to the mind” (157). Willard’s main problem with Moore is his separating goodness from the sciences and metaphysics thereby distancing good/bad from its instances (157). How exactly is Mother Theresa good?

Emotivism swings the pendulum again, erasing moral knowledge. A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, and others reinterpret the meaning and use of “good” (and other moral terms) to help resolve disagreements.<sup>3</sup> If moral evaluations are merely expressions of emotion or feelings, then all moral judgments can be equally “valid” (in a nonrational/cognitive sense) though not equally “true” (176–92). The central problem with Emotivism is its “irrationality in moral judgment or decision [which is] set up by the elimination of specific moral qualities and relations. Given the loss of these, truth as a bridge to corresponding realities simply had nowhere to go but away” (207).

John Rawls rejects emotivism (and authoritarianism) and seeks to recover ethical knowledge. Willard argues that Rawls’s epistemology remains constant throughout his career and is a kind of constructionism (constructivism). His early work focuses on “knowledge about character—exemplified in certain ‘rational judgments of reasonable men,’ and will then proceed to elucidate the principles behind it” (256). His later work focuses on justice.

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2. See, e.g., Franz Brentano, *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. Roderick Chisholm and Elizabeth Schneewind (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969); T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, 2nd ed., ed. A. C. Bradley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884); and Herbert Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1879).

3. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); C. L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” *Mind* 46 (1937): 14–131; Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944); and Stevenson, *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963).

There is a three-step process whereby everyday moral judgments are made clear, rationally justified, and then the reasons are justified. The justification buck stops when the consensus of reasonable persons accepts, say, his principles of character or two principles of justice (258–70, 297). Willard objects, “Good reasons have a normative aspect that generates a right, and perhaps in some cases an obligation, to believe. Consensus lacks this normative dimension, thus, there can be no legitimate move from it to “justified belief” in the usual sense of the term. The obvious worry about Rawls’ epistemology is that it opens the door to relativism insofar as different groups of rational people may develop different consensuses about what is good, bad, right, wrong, etc.” (271). Unfortunately, Rawls has not given us a satisfying realist account of moral knowledge, because he fails to give a “prescriptive account of rationality and an order of objective moral facts” (297). Rawls’s account inadvertently undercuts moral authority, for it is unclear how any group consensus can correct another group they believe is mistaken. This leaves objective moral knowledge inaccessible (298).

Willard’s final chapter lays out his plan for a return to moral knowledge. While there is an increasing number of moral realists in philosophy, this has proven insufficient to assuage the disappearance of moral knowledge. The root issue lies in our approach to moral theorizing (349). First, we have failed to identify a single subject matter for moral philosophizing even if thinkers have talked in similar terms or pursued similar questions. This failure goes back as far as Plato and Aristotle (353–5). Second, philosophers have forced moral knowledge into a form it cannot assume, and if you do this to any subject matter, it disappears as a body of knowledge. For Willard, “the appropriate ‘shape’ of moral understanding and knowledge is more like that of Medicine and Geography than that of Geometry or Physics” (357).

Working comfortably in the broadly virtue ethics and phenomenological traditions, Willard thinks the best way forward is to see *the good person* as the central unifying *subject matter* of moral theory (358). Willard doesn’t try to “prove” this. Instead, he says “I shall only assume that it is a real one, and one constantly present in our daily awareness and thought. And then we shall try to see if a substantial but not grandiose all-inclusive body of public moral knowledge could be formed around it” (358). But who is a good person?

“In real life the good person stands out as one who characteristically evokes trust, admiration, support, and a desire to be associated with and to imitate. . . They are individuals who are *intent upon advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, in a manner that respects the relative degrees of importance of those goods and the extent to which their actions can actually promote the existence and maintenance of those goods*” (358, 359). Willard goes on to offer the good/bad will as the fundamental *moral distinction* (360).

Willard's epistemological (moral) realism draws on the works of both Knud Logstrup and Emmanuel Levinas. Logstrup focuses on the *natural trust* in human relationships serving to put me at your mercy. When I do so, you have an obligation to care for me in a way that is unspoken. It's built into the fiber of our relationships: you trust that I'll do what's best for you whether you want that or not (363). Levinas focuses on one's *experiencing* the needs of others by seeing their face, which is made present without layers of meaning and cannot be easily silenced once I am *aware of your face* (364). Willard wants us to see that we can *know immediately* in our experience of one another the obligations we have, and this moral knowledge in particular cases isn't dependent upon a theory or argument (366).

Now we're positioned to describe some *dimensions of the good person*: the one who treats oneself and others around herself with respect and care, pursues and advances the goods relevant to the roles she inhabits, manifests a range of virtues and is a well-ordered self who allows reason to rule desire and emotion, and understands and conforms to moral laws, rules, or principles. Becoming this kind of person requires education and intentional formation (368–71). In the end, we can recover moral knowledge, but we will need many committed to reforming themselves and the relevant institutions of higher education toward that end.

With this sketch of Willard's solution to the problem in place, many readers (including those like myself who are sympathetic to his project and even find broad agreement with his views) will likely find themselves with lingering questions. Due to space limitations, I will express three.

First, it's unclear from Willard's final chapter *who* should lead the way in helping us recover of moral knowledge. Should it be individuals working at the grassroots level, professional groups and guilds, institutions, or some combination of these? For example, he thinks religion and philosophy have contributed to the loss of moral knowledge (see chapter 1), so what role might they play in its recovery, and how will that look in daily moral inquiry and practice? It seems clear to me that philosophers (and religious leaders) must play a crucial role; after all, Willard is a philosopher (and spiritual writer) admonishing fellow philosophers to change course in our moral theorizing.<sup>4</sup> But he doesn't tell us how this might look either inside or outside our discipline, and his sketching a brief moral epistemology from Logstrup and Levinas is likely too lean by itself to provide a sustained recovery project unless there is "buy-in" from philosophy, various disciplines, and institutions (religious and otherwise) that shape how we think about and transmit moral

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4. He has likewise gently admonished religious leaders in the Christian tradition to rethink the shape and emphasis of their ministries to include clear, testable moral (and spiritual) teaching and formation that is grounded in knowledge of moral and spiritual reality. See for example: Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009), chaps. 3, 6–8; *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), chap. 13; and *Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), chap. 9.

knowledge. Willard appears to grant as much (376) but leaves us wanting a plan for next steps.

Second, might the recovery of a body of moral knowledge require episodic *sources* in addition to immediate experience (that is, “intuition”)? Willard opens the door to answer yes when he says moral education and formation are needed to develop good persons, but it wasn’t clear whether he thought moral teachers have *all* they need to shape good persons simply by referring to experience. Might they also refer to moral emotion as a trustworthy source to fill in the “thought” dimension of moral knowledge? Robert C. Roberts thinks that emotion can provide us with such a basis for moral judgments.<sup>5</sup> But while Willard agrees that admiration is an “attitude” associated with the pleasure that arises while experiencing a good person (359), he seems unwilling to call it an emotion. Here one can only speculate why Willard has not discussed emotions as a basis for moral knowledge, even though some of his non-philosophical works maintain a place for well-ordered (Christ-shaped) emotions in the life of the good person.<sup>6</sup>

Or might the major world religions *reveal* who constitutes the good person, and might this provide an additional trustworthy source for moral knowledge? Willard’s other work seems quite open to revelation as a source for an adequate body of moral knowledge (at least from the teachings of Jesus<sup>7</sup>), but the present work is eerily silent as to their role in the recovery project. Perhaps that is due to the suspicion with which many in our broader culture approach religious claims to moral knowledge. Even so, a pluralistic society such as our own must consider the role religious institutions might now play in the recovery process. Including at least these two additional sources for moral knowledge might help offer examples to point in teaching the young or morally immature as they learn to *attend* well to their experience of the needs of others. After all, a five-year-old (as well as some in their fifties) is unlikely to be skilled at looking into another’s face and immediately grasping what goods they should promote. Pointing to what Jesus of Nazareth, Confucius, or Harriet Tubman would feel and do in the relevant circumstances would provide parents and teachers with a robust moral epistemology for instruction and formation.

Third, even if we might acquire moral knowledge immediately by directly looking into another’s face, it’s far from obvious that this is *likely* to occur *frequently* enough to recover robust publicly available moral knowledge. After all, people can (and often do) stare in the faces of those who naturally trust

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5. See, e.g., Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and *Emotions in the Moral Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

6. See, e.g., Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, chaps. 2–5; and *Renovation of the Heart*, chaps. 6–7. See, e.g., *Knowing Christ Today; Divine Conspiracy*, esp. chaps. 1–6; and *Renovation of the Heart*.

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them yet remain oblivious to their moral duties to respect and care for the relevant goods in question. What explains such opaque moral vision? Here readers would benefit from some discussion of the kinds of *cognitive qualities* (or intellectual virtues) one must possess or embody in order to increase the likelihood of knowing who the good person is and what that person would do in the relevant circumstances. By contrast, a discussion of what intellectual vices or cognitive defects tend to decrease or inhibit the direct moral knowledge would likewise be helpful. If, for example, one ignores or suppresses evidence related to the subject matter, engages in wishful thinking, or doesn't care about the moral law and the respective goods in question, one will be adversely affected by these cognitive defects/vices. Either they will be less likely to know what they should do to promote and sustain the relevant goods in question, or they will be wholly cut off from them. An additional benefit of this kind of discussion is it helping to explain why we experience persistent and seemingly intractable moral disagreements. Might it be due to one or both parties to the disagreement suffering from a cognitive malady that effectively cuts them off from moral reality? Readers familiar to Willard's other writings will find the omission of this kind of discussion unusual given that in numerous places he claims that spiritual knowledge is more likely if one wants it, seeks it, acts on or obeys what they already know to be right and good.<sup>8</sup>

While readers might feel left wondering how the recovery of moral knowledge might look on a broad sociocultural level, this is likely due in large part to Willard's passing prior to the book's completion, as well as in part to his willingness to take us only as far as he can *for now*. Those familiar with his broader corpus will sense this quiet yet urgent invitation throughout to join him by building on his present work: "You now are the ones who must think your way forward into understanding of the good person and the good life, and be responsible to lead the way for the society and world in which you and your children will, if we are fortunate, have a life" (380). I hope many will join me in accepting Dallas's invitation, and studying this work will serve us well as we move ahead.

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7. See, e.g., *Knowing Christ Today*; *Divine Conspiracy*; and *Renovation of the Heart*. In the former work, Willard demonstrates familiarity with Alvin Plantinga's work (21), who in his influential book *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), details how cognitive vices, defects, or sin can inhibit knowledge of God (199–240). In addition, Willard was likely familiar with the virtue epistemology literature that discusses the role intellectual virtues and vices play in helping us have or lack knowledge. See, e.g., Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry in the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy, 1999), and Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). So, it is surprising that Willard did not draw analogous insights to how one may or may not apprehend moral knowledge.