

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE:
HOW IT HAPPENS AND WHAT IT MEANS

In this talk we discuss: What the disappearance of moral knowledge is, How it happened (and how it did not happen), and what it means for our lives.

(1). What is the disappearance of moral knowledge? It is *the social reality* that the knowledge institutions (primarily the universities, but also the “churches”) of our society do not presume to offer *knowledge* of good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice to the public. It is not a part of “testable” cognitive content of any recognized area of scholarship or practice. (The illusion of professional “ethics.”)

What is knowledge and what does it do? Knowledge is the capacity to represent something as it is, on an appropriate basis of thought and experience. It and it alone confers the right and perhaps the responsibility to act, direct action, formulate policy and supervise its implementation, and teach. This helps us see what disappears along with “moral knowledge.”

(2). How did this disappearance come to be the case?

Not through a discovery of some kind: e.g. that there was no such knowledge.

But through *a lengthy historical process of idea change*. Some components:

- (A). The dismissal of theology from the domain of knowledge, and the failure to find a secular basis for ethics.
- (B). Disappearance of the human self and knowledge of the self from “respectable” knowledge. (The “soul” from Plato on.)
- (C). All cultures come to be regarded as “equal.” None are morally inferior. Just “different.” Then there is no moral truth of the matter across cultures.
- (D). Moral distinctions and standards viewed as power plays. (Nietzsche, Marx, Freud)
- (E). Fear or resentment of *knowledge itself* as oppressive. Colonialism.
- (F). Growth of the idea that it is always wrong to make moral judgments: that only bad or disgusting people do that. Pushes moral judgments out of the public domain.
- (G). The failure in Philosophy to recover moral knowledge.

(3). What does the disappearance of moral knowledge mean for our lives?

It means the loss of *moral guidance* concerning good and evil, praiseworthy and blameworthy actions and characters, honorable and dishonorable lives and institutions—both for the individual trying to find his or her way and for groups trying to live together in the way that is best. Without moral knowledge individual and group life is left to drift at the behest of desire, force, and chance. (Hume, Arnold)

A comparison to electricity and knowledge of electricity. We once had no knowledge of it. Reflect on what would happen now if knowledge of electricity disappeared. Perhaps things would work for a while—sort of. Then the certain loss of huge amounts of what is good. Think of doing medicine without electrical knowledge and power. Or household chores or travel.

Moral life is not just a matter of some rules—often rules that make little sense—but of *what we are living for* and the *kinds of persons we are becoming*.

Morality is not just conformity to what is regarded as proper, but is about building a life. *Life has a nature*, a structure; and moral distinctions are a part of the reality which is human existence. Vice is a bitter reality, usually having to do with capitulation of the will and character to desire. We constantly see this in our public figures who fail. The virtues—temperance, courage, justice, wisdom, faith, hope, love—are reliable sources of direction strength, joy, and peace. This is the content of traditional moral knowledge. The “seven deadly sins” by contrast are, after all, *deadly*.

Is it too much to think that our contemporary disasters, such as failure of covenants, obesity, addictions, crime, and financial chaos, *rest in some significant degree* upon the failures of the lives and characters of some people involved? And that those failures rest—again, *in some significant degree*—upon the disappearance of moral knowledge from our society, in the sense explained? It would be a mistake, no doubt, to ascribe all of our problems to that disappearance, but it seems to me that it has had and is having a very harmful effect on much of our life at present, and that it is the responsibility of our “institutions of knowledge” to make moral knowledge available in the extent to which that is possible.

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