

On Becoming a Good Person: What's Knowledge Got to Do With It?

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In our day, people tend to think that being a good person has more to do with what's in one's heart than what's in one's head. But in *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* and elsewhere, Dallas Willard emphasizes the centrality, even the primacy, of *knowledge* in the moral life. "Knowledge, genuine understanding of what is good and bad, right and wrong, is certainly not everything in the governance of action," he concedes, "but it, or its absence, counts for much in behavior, and it has great force—in morals as in every area of activity, from chess to atomic energy. (DMK, 38) Consequently, "the moral life suffers when there is lack of knowledge of the essential properties, relations and distinctions that fall within it. It cannot be lived as well as it could be if such knowledge were available." (DMK, 4) The main reasons for thinking that this is so are easy to understand, at least once we get clear on what knowledge is, and on what it is to be a good person. So let's first try to wrap our minds around the nature of knowledge.

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Knowledge, most philosophers will say, is, minimally and centrally, "justified true belief," or as Dallas preferred to put it, "the ability to represent something as it is on an appropriate basis of thought or experience." These two formulations are not identical in meaning, but they are close, and the differences need not concern us much here. They match up roughly as follows:

<i>The ability to <u>represent</u> something</i>	<i><u>as it is</u></i>	<i>on an <u>appropriate basis</u> of thought or experience</i>
Belief	that is true	and justified.

A brief word on each of these three components:

Representation/Belief:

"Representation," as Dallas used the term, is to be understood as primarily a cognitive/conceptual phenomenon. It is fundamentally a matter of being *conscious of* something. The two fundamental modes of consciousness are conception (thinking of something, whether or not it is directly present to you) and perception (direct conscious apprehension of the thing itself). Belief is just a matter of adopting an attitude of *assent* toward something you're conceptualizing or "thinking of," and thereby being disposed to act as if it were true. Most philosophers focus on *belief* in their definition of knowledge, rather than the broader category of representation, in part because having an adequate basis to think something true naturally inclines us to believe it. One might even say that one *ought* to believe it; that there is a normative presumption in favor of believing what you have good reason to think is true. At the very least, failing to believe what you have good reason to believe is odd and in need of special explanation. In any case, belief, thought and perception are all forms of "representation" in Dallas' sense. And because of the connections between thought and its symbolic

expressions, the category of “representation” extends to language and other forms of symbolization as well.¹

Truth

The concept of truth is, on the face of it, pretty straightforward. Truth, on the classic view, is simply accuracy of representation, the “correspondence” of a representation with what it is about. When we think or speak of something *as it is*, our thought or statement is true.

Linguistically, we tend to use the word “true” mainly in connection with assertoric phenomena, such as beliefs and declarative statements. Mere thoughts, accurate perceptual representations, and the like are usually described as “veridical” rather than “true,” but that is just a contingency of linguistic usage. The core idea of accuracy or correspondence is the same, and of course “veridical” just means “truthful” – it’s a composite of the Latin words *verus* (true) and *dicere* (to speak), so the fundamental idea in veridicality is that of communicating truth.

We need to acknowledge that there are some deep philosophical puzzles about truth understood as correspondence, and that some philosophers have judged that these puzzles render the “correspondence theory” untenable.² We also need to acknowledge that there are other theories or understandings of the nature of truth, some of which are compatible with correspondence and others not. Unfortunately we can’t go too deeply into these matters here. However, it is worth noting that the turn away from the correspondence theory and toward some of these other theories, especially pragmatist and naturalistic deflationist theories, were important contributors to the disappearance of moral knowledge as it unfolded historically.

Justification/Appropriate Basis

Epistemic “justification” is basically a matter of having good reasons to think something true. Philosophers have put a lot of thought into exactly what might count as an appropriate basis for belief, and also into whether something more or other than “justification” (e.g., Alvin Plantinga’s “warrant”) might be a required ingredient in knowledge. For that matter, so have scientists – the recent debates over “statistical significance” and “p-value” is a case in point. But these are matters we don’t need to get into here, at least not very deeply.

Dallas’ view was that there is no universally applicable criterion for being an “appropriate basis” for belief, that what counts as an appropriate basis varies depending on what the belief is about. For example, the kinds of evidence relevant to beliefs about God or the soul are generally quite different from the kinds of evidence relevant to beliefs about the fundamental laws of physics or how the brain

¹ There’s quite a lot to be said about the nature of consciousness and its relationship to language and to knowledge. These matters were the foci of Dallas’ work on Husserl, from his doctoral dissertation through to his first academic book (*Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*), and a great many of his academic papers.

² See Willam Lane Craig’s helpful discussions of correspondence in connection with his work on Divine aseity, e.g., <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/existence-nature-of-god/are-there-objective-truths-about-god/>.

works, and these forms of evidence are generally quite different from those relevant to believing that a certain someone would make a good friend or spouse.³

One common pitfall in thinking about knowledge is the idea that justification requires certainty, that nothing can count as an appropriate basis for belief unless it *guarantees* that the belief is true. For instance, this seems to be presupposed in the retort, “you can’t prove that,” frequently offered as a reason to reject some idea or other. But proof in this sense, if it’s available to humans at all, is available only in the domains of pure logic and mathematics. Although we are accustomed to speaking of “scientific proof,” we really don’t get “proof” amounting to “certainty” in the empirical sciences. Even less in law, where we speak of “burden of proof” and “proof beyond a reasonable doubt.” So unless one wants to suspend judgment about all matters outside of logic and mathematics – which is neither desirable nor psychologically or practically possible for humans – we have to accept that there are tolerably good forms of evidence that, although they don’t provide “proof” or “certainty,” nonetheless provide an “adequate basis” for belief. If such a tolerably well-founded belief (or “representation”) happens also to be true, then it constitutes knowledge.

I’ve just been talking about “certainty” understood as an objective feature of the relationship between evidence and the content of a belief or representation. If the evidence is so strong that it renders it impossible for the content of that belief to be false, then that content is “certain,” in the sense of certainly true. Call this “epistemic certainty.” But “certainty” can also describe a psychological feature of the person doing the believing or representing. This “psychological certainty” is a matter of “feeling certain” or “being sure” that what one believes is true. It is a disturbing fact about human beings that psychological certainty and epistemic certainty can come apart in our mental lives. That is, we can feel certain that something is true even when the evidence does not warrant certainty. This is a common form of irrationality, and it played a major role in precipitating the disappearance of moral knowledge.

One reason why our culture is allergic to the idea of moral knowledge is that previous generations abused the authority that attaches to knowledge, claiming the status of knowledge for views that don’t deserve it, and wielding that pseudo-knowledge as a weapon in the service of oppressive authoritarianism. But in fact, one important dimension of bringing some area of life – such as morality or religion – into the domain of knowledge is that, all else being equal, it places a mandate on us to make the strength of our beliefs proportionate to the evidence we have for them. In an essay titled “How Reason Can Survive the Modern University,” Dallas says that “reason is ... indispensable to knowledge.” This is because reason is “the capacity to apprehend truth itself, as truth is displayed in any true thought, judgment or statement,” and it “involves, among other things, the capacity to grasp logical relations and thereby appreciate evidence for truth.” In other words, reason includes the capacity to note the sorts of evidentiary relations that make something an “appropriate basis” for belief and thereby factor into “epistemic justification.” Without reason, justification – and therefore knowledge – would be beyond our reach. And as we shall see, Dallas took rationality to be essential not only for the possession of knowledge, but also for being a good person.

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³ There is an important question here as to how we know when something counts as an adequate basis for a belief. Dallas’ work on Husserl provides a framework for answering fundamental epistemological questions like this, but we cannot go deeply into that here.

With this understanding of *knowledge* before us, let's turn to Dallas' illuminating account of the nature of the good person. It begins with his observation that

"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. ... [T]he morally good person is... to be thought of as one who is admired and imitated just for what he or she is, and without any essential reference to specific relationships, talents, skills, or useful traits they may have. (DMK, 358-359)

He then offers the following as a description of what, fundamentally, is so admirable about a good person:

The morally good person ... is a person who is intent upon advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, in a manner that respects their relative degrees of importance and the extent to which the actions of the person in question can actually promote the existence and maintenance of those goods. ("How Reason Can Survive The Modern University: The Moral Foundations Of Rationality," cf. DMK 359)

Strictly speaking, this is a description of what Dallas calls "the good will," but because the good will is essential to the good person, the description applies to the good person as well. However, as applied to the good person, Dallas is quick to note that it is not a complete definition. It captures what is most fundamental to the good person, but being a good person requires more in addition. That is because, *moral identity* is formed not by intention alone, but by what Dallas describes as *working a settled intention into the substance of one's life*:

Intention—settled intention, or disposition—is the fundamental locus of moral value, deeper than will as a mere faculty (which does not by itself yield moral value) or as an act of will or choice (which is momentary, as character is not). It is this type of intention, worked into the substance of one's life, that is moral identity." (DMK, 370)

What is required to "work the good will into the substance of one's life"? First and foremost, it requires the will to find and implement appropriate means to bring about the ends of the good will. And it turns out that *moral knowledge* is an indispensable means to successfully implementing the good will. As Dallas puts it:

the will to advance the goods of human life with which one comes into contact is inseparable from the will to find out how to do it and do it appropriately. ... If one truly wills the end ..., one wills the means, and coming to understand the goods which we affect, and their conditions and interconnections, is inseparable from the objectives of the good person and the good will. Thus, knowledge, understanding, and rationality are themselves human goods, to be appropriately pursued for their own sakes, but also because they are absolutely necessary for moral self-realization. (DMK, 370)

Let us pause for a moment to notice that Dallas here affirms that "knowledge, understanding, and rationality are themselves human goods, to be appropriately pursued for their own sakes," as well as for their constitutive and instrumental benefits to us. In DMK, Dallas focuses almost exclusively on the latter reasons to value moral knowledge (including its constituents and conditions) – they are presented mainly as means to the end of being and doing good. But in "How Reason Can Survive the Modern University" he assigns much more importance to their intrinsic value, saying

In order for reason as a practice, or reasonableness, to survive as a governing principle in life and profession a certain awe and reverence for truth and logical relations is required, one that goes beyond whatever utilitarian value they may have--which itself is very great--and accepts their unconditional claim as human goods on our judgment and our behavior.

We would do well to remember this when thinking about the possibility of recovering moral knowledge; for, insofar as that would require the recovery of reason(ableness) as a practice, we will need to think seriously about how to recover “awe and reverence for truth and logical relations” in ourselves and others.

But in DMK the emphasis is on the instrumentality or “utilitarian value” of knowledge. It is easy to see why one might think that knowledge of a given domain would improve one’s performance in that domain. Indeed, one is hard pressed to think of a dimension of human life in which it would not be advantageous to have the ability to think accurately about the central phenomena belonging to that dimension. One of Dallas’ favorite examples was electricity: knowledge of electricity – of its existence and possible uses – makes it possible for us to interact with electricity in beneficial ways. Without that knowledge we would either fail to interact with it at all, or interact with it in disastrous ways. Likewise, if one is building a house, the ability to think accurately about the properties of different sorts of building materials and methods and the various relations in which they stand is going to increase the likelihood that you’ll end up with a sound and durable structure. Similarly, the ability to think accurately about the relationships between forest conditions, weather conditions, and forest fires would presumably increase the likelihood of success in preventing or managing forest fires – and many sources have blamed the massive outbreaks of fires in Australia, and here in California, on a failure to accurately represent these sorts of relations. Thus Dallas observes:

...knowledge ... enables us to deal more successfully with reality.... Knowledge involves assured truth, and truth in our representations and beliefs is very like accuracy in the sighting mechanism on a gun. If the mechanism is accurately aligned—is “true” – it enables those who use it with care to hit an intended target. Correspondingly, if our representations and beliefs about virtue and duty are accurate, one might think, that would enable us to succeed in doing and being what is right and good—though it would not guarantee that. This would be a desirable outcome. (DMK, 4)

In the moral domain, it seems to me that knowledge is useful in three main ways. Moral knowledge:

- enables one to *recognize* and *rank* (or *prioritize*) the various goods of human life.
- guides moral deliberation and action in ways that increase the likelihood of success in advancing or maintaining human goods.
- contributes to the proper formation of our motivational structures, including moral emotions and virtues, which in turn contributes to the likelihood of success in doing good.

I’ll discuss each of these in turn.

First, the ability to recognize the various “goods of human life” requires knowledge – or perhaps we should say that it is a form of knowledge. As it happens, Dallas thinks that, although some measure of moral knowledge, including a set of socially-recognized goods, will usually be available in one’s culture

and imparted by a good upbringing,⁴ the ability to recognize value is fundamentally intuitive or quasi-perceptual:

Good and evil are by and large immediately sensed, and further reveal themselves to reflection and theoretical elaboration. This perception of good and evil is the fundamental intuition of the moral life, and it is given even to small children and unsophisticates of all levels, though they may be unable to articulate or defend it. (*Knowing Christ Today*, 86)

In DMK, he says something similar:

Now, for my part, I believe there is moral knowledge accessible to any thoughtful person, even though there is now no generally *acknowledged* body of moral knowledge. This accessible moral knowledge is rooted in our non-empirical awareness of the will and its properties.... Like logical knowledge itself, basic moral knowledge does not in its beginnings depend upon reasoning, though, along with logic, basic moral knowledge lays the foundation for a body of moral knowledge derived largely through reasoning. The most elemental moral knowledge is quite direct. (DMK 367)

For this reason, “there is no necessity of having a complete list of human goods or a rigorous definition of what something must be like to be on the list.” Nonetheless, Dallas does give a general description of “human goods” as “things that are *good for* human beings and enable them to flourish.” (DMK, 368) He also gives examples of some of the more important human goods, including (368) :

- Material goods that meet basic human needs, like “non-toxic water and food, a clean and safe environment.”
- Opportunities to learn and to work.
- Other human beings and certain relationships to them, and, especially, *good* human beings.
- Stable family and community relations.
- One’s own well-being and moral development.
- Moral rights

A great deal of moral disagreement pertains not to what counts as good (or evil), but to which goods are more important and which less, and which should be sacrificed to which in cases where we are forced to choose. Presumably intuitive data enters into our rankings, but this is often not decisive, and we find ourselves having to reason our way toward what we hope is the truth in a way that takes us beyond what is directly given to “moral perception.” As Dallas says, “basic moral knowledge lays the foundation for a body of moral knowledge derived largely through reasoning.” If we reason well from solid, intuitive foundations, and if our conclusions happen to be true, then they will count as knowledge.

Another role for reasoning in the moral life has to do with determining which goods we should promote and how we should promote them. This is not always a straightforward matter of determining the relative importance of goods, on the understanding that we should all promote the highest goods. As Dallas’ description acknowledges, one also has to take into account the extent to which one can reasonably hope to advance those goods. It may be that, given one’s abilities and circumstances, they are not well positioned to advance certain very important goods, but very well positioned to advance

⁴ Even under “the disappearance of moral knowledge,” Western culture still inculcates beliefs about goods and their rankings, placing *the freedom to do what one pleases* at the head of the list – as Dallas says in many places.

some lesser goods. This raises a difficult quandary about what one should do, and if it can be resolved at all, it will be through moral reasoning.

In these ways, at least, moral knowledge facilitates realization of the intentions of the good will. But, as Dallas observes, the regulation of behavior requires more than knowledge. Other dimensions of character, such as virtues and moral emotions, also play a crucial role. But what is rarely noted is the essential role knowledge plays in shaping and supporting many of these other dimensions of character. In an unpublished paper, Steven Porter observes that:

When we make normative judgments about, for instance, what is more healthy to eat, or which outfit looks better, or what is the best way to get to our destination, we tend to be moved to act in accordance with those considerations. One plausible way to think about this tendency is that in considering a course of action we come to see with some sort of vividness the goodness or beauty or reasonableness of that act. A vivid grasp of, for example, the nature of honesty acquaints us with the intrinsic and extrinsic goodness of honesty. We come to see that honesty is a constituent of a life lived-well and that lying is a constituent of a life lived-poorly. The motivational force is not due to guilt or shame, but rather we begin to see how lying to others devalues them, erodes trust, and treats those we lie to as a means to our own ends of self-protection and self-enhancement. When we have clear-headed knowledge of a vice, like lying, we begin to see it for what it is and we come to not want it to be true of us. And, as we see the goodness of honesty, the integrity that it brings to one's self, the honor and respect it shows to others, we tend to be motivated towards virtue and away from vice. The resultant motivation is not just that we want to act virtuously, but we want to do the hard work of becoming virtuous. ... it is something about the vividness of our grasp of what is truly virtuous and what is truly vicious that enables moral knowledge to play its needed role in identifying and constraining vicious desires. If so, then the epistemic status of an agent's moral knowledge is in some manner connected to the strength of the motivation to act accordingly." (Porter, "The Effects of the Disappearance of Moral Knowledge on Virtue Acquisition")

Dallas doesn't discuss this feature of knowledge in DMK, but it is implied in the VIM (Vision-Intention-Means) framework for moral transformation that he discusses in many of his Christian writings. Intentions are grounded in "Visions," where visions are *representations* of certain states of affairs taken to be desirable or worth having – so there are implicit evaluations built into these "visions." Thus, in his essay "Beyond Pornography," Dallas explains that if one is to overcome addiction to pornography, one must critically explore the "vision" implicit in the lustful desires that drive the addiction, a vision Dallas rightly believes to be false:

So, what is the Vision of pornography use? It is a vision of women (for simplicity sake) as something to be used to stimulate and/or gratify sexual feeling and desire. ... Usually this is accompanied by contempt for women, which makes it easier to treat them as "sex objects." If one knows what pornography is and does not see that it is contempt for women, then that person is blind. Pornography is also contempt for the one using it. ... They are actually using their own bodies and minds to gain pleasure and desire, and they know that that somehow is not right. Also, in most cases this will be accompanied by a vision of one's own body as a source of and means to pleasure.

Coming to see this representation as false, and to replace it with a more accurate (true) vision of the nature of the body, of sex, and of persons, is the key step in transforming one's feelings/desires and the behavior that follows from them.

...this prurient "Vision" must be replaced by a vision of women and of oneself as creatures of God for his blessing, walking the hard path of life where they suffer afflictions and death but are headed for an eternity with God. This vision will allow us to look upon others with compassion and love as creatures of God. Such a vision—to see everything in the light of God—is what has to come back into place, and actually, that alone, in many cases, simply puts pornography away and one no longer has to deal with it.

That feelings (including desires) are grounded in and controlled by cognitive representations (thoughts) is actually the key insight of cognitive approaches to therapy (borrowed from the ancient stoics!), and it's one of the most well supported findings of modern clinical psychology. If we want our feelings to support the intention of the good will, then they must be aligned with moral reality, and the only way to achieve that alignment is through a true cognitive representation of the sort that factors in knowledge. (And the only way to reliably achieve true cognitive representations is to devote oneself to reason.)

For all these reasons, then, "knowledge of the various goods of human life and of their conditions and interconnections" is included among several "elements of human personality" essential to the good person (370).⁵ Elsewhere he puts it like this:

"We have a moral duty to be as intelligent as possible, and that incorporates adherence to truth and sound reasoning, ... being reasonable, or living the life of reason, ... must be incorporated into our moral identity, must be a part of what we understand as being a good person." ("How Reason Can Survive The Modern University")⁶

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Is Dallas' picture of the good person accurate? I believe it is. Suppose a person forms the intention characteristic of the good person as given in the above description. But suppose that person has a very limited grasp of the various goods of human life, and/or no knowledge of their relative degrees of importance, and/or no knowledge of the scope and limits of their own power to maintain or promote any one or more of those goods. Here we have a person who might, with the best of intentions, run into a burning building in order to save someone or something of value, but who could not be counted on to judge that the baby in the crib is of greater value than the family photo album or a stick of chewing gum. Here we have a person who might, with the best of intentions, jump off a pier to save a drowning

⁵ The others are *being conscious* and *having "the capacity to form and sustain long-range, even life-long intentions."*

⁶ Rationality enters the picture because it, along with consciousness, is a necessary condition for the possession of knowledge. Consciousness makes possible "representation," but reason enables us (among other things) to assess evidence and hence to represent things *on appropriate bases*. It also enables us understand the crucial role of evidence in the pursuit of truth, to understand the concept of truth itself, and to note the correspondence between representation and reality in those cases where it is immediately inspectable. Finally, it enables us to understand the conditions required to advance or maintain goods and to reason soundly about our ability to advance or maintain them under particular sets of conditions.

stranger, but without accurately taking stock of the fact that his own inability to swim will render his efforts ineffective, and will in fact multiply the crisis.

What would we make of such a person? Could we reasonably say that such a person is a good person, without any qualifications? I don't think so. A sympathetic evaluation might begin, "so-and-so means well, but..." or "so-and-so has a good heart, but..." But to say "so-and-so is a good person" and leave it at that seems woefully incomplete, to the point of being inaccurate or even, in some circumstances, deceptive. Such a person clearly lacks some of the other key features that Dallas associated with "the good person." For instance, he observes that "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." (DMK, 358) A well-intentioned ignoramus would not, and should not, evoke these attitudes. To be a fitting subject of such attitudes, one must prove *competent* by actually making good on one's good intentions across an appreciable range of cases. That is, unless a person succeeds in doing the good they intend *most of the time*, they are not going to naturally stand out as a good person, and should not be regarded as one. And in fact, a pattern of failure to achieve one's intended aims can, depending on the particulars, count as a reason to doubt the sincerity of that person's intentions. If they were truly intent on advancing goods in the manner of a good person, they would at least *try* to figure out why they had failed, and how to succeed in the future. In other words, they would try to acquire relevant knowledge. Again, "the will to advance the goods of human life with which one comes into contact is inseparable from the will to find out how to do it and do it appropriately." (DMK, 370)

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We don't need to rely solely on the hypothetical example of the well-intentioned ignoramus to demonstrate the importance of knowledge in the moral life. In 2011, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and his team of researchers published some findings about what they called, "The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood." Based on surveys of several thousand 18-23 year-olds from across the United States, and in depth interviews of several hundred more, Smith and company found that these "emerging adults" exhibited some worrisome tendencies:

- Significant proportions seemed blind to human goods beyond those that could contribute directly to material wellbeing, understood largely in consumerist and hedonistic terms.
- Nearly half were given to frequent binge drinking or other forms of habitual intoxication in pursuit of what one subject described as "a fake feeling of happiness." (126) Many (but not all) of those given to frequent intoxication had come to see it as a serious problem threatening their health and wellbeing.
- Most were sexually active but had extremely limited views of the value of sex in human life. As one might have expected, a significant proportion of males tended to see sex in base, hedonistic terms, while a significant proportion of females tended to see sex in naively romantic terms, as something that would magically guarantee a lasting relationship of love and mutual respect. But what was surprising, at least to me, was the proportion of "emerging adults", both male and female, who had an inkling that that there might be something more to sex, but who had so flimsy a grasp of what that might be that they had no reason to resist temptation or social pressure when it came along, and ended up losing their virginity, as it were, "by accident." Many (but not all) of those who had engaged in sex along the above lines had come to regret

their involvement, feeling that something special had been lost, something of value that they had not been aware of beforehand.

- Only 4% were civically or politically engaged to any appreciable degree, with many of the remainder lacking any sense of belonging to a larger social whole from which they had benefitted and to which they might therefore have obligations.
- 60% of their interview subjects espoused a perspective that Smith and company call “moral individualism,” the view that “moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion,” coupled with a commitment to moral nonjudgmentalism.
- Moral individualism would seem to entail some form of “relativism” (either that there are no moral truths at all,⁷ or such moral “truths” as exist are relative to individual preferences and beliefs; either way, there are no objective and universally valid moral truths). 30% of their interviewees (and 47% of their survey subjects) explicitly accepted the relativistic implications of “moral individualism.” ...
- The remainder saw problems with relativism and wanted to resist the entailment, but they couldn’t see how. Rather than settle on a logically coherent position, most of this lot (27%) ended up talking themselves in contradiction-laden circles without ever settling on a logically coherent position. This illustrates a final problem...
- Nearly all of these emerging adults were logically incompetent when it came to matters of value and morality, and by extension, politics (a number of these emerging adults attributed their lack of political involvement to their inability to make sense of the issues). They were often blind to the presuppositions or implications of moral views, and were not able to think coherently about moral matters or engage in effective moral reasoning, with the result that “many if not most emerging adults work to hold together bundles of cultural and personal contradictions...” (155).
- In moral decision making, 39% indicated that one’s own happiness is the best guide, and an additional 9% said self-interest is. So nearly half of the emerging adult population believes that, when faced with a moral quandary, you should do either what makes you happiest or what is to your own advantage.

One point that seems immediately obvious is that that these findings are exactly what one might expect, given the way “the disappearance of moral knowledge” unfolded in the American context (to be discussed in my opening remarks on day 1). The crucial turning point in that progression was the rise of the fact-value distinction and the attendant rise of emotivist tendencies of thought. Together, these items of mid twentieth-century dogma taught people that material/empirical reality is the only reality there is (the only domain of fact), and that values are merely subjective feelings. It’s easy to see how, after nearly a century of indoctrination under these dogmas and their successors (like the fact/opinion curriculum), American culture would be blind to “higher goods” that are not empirically given, prone to assume that the domain of value is governed by feelings (such as pleasure and happiness), and lacking the skill to reason well in the moral domain.

⁷ Contemporary philosophers will often call this “moral nihilism” rather than “relativism.”

Another obvious point is that many of these emerging adults would be benefitted by the kind of guidance that moral knowledge can give. If they were made aware of the existence and significance of higher, non-empirical goods, such as love, friendship, wisdom, virtue, and so on, that might give them reasonable alternatives to making material success and consumption “the guiding stars of their lives.” (p. 9) And in pursuing these higher goods, they might find a sense of meaning that would render seeking distraction through intoxication and/or base, animal pleasures less appealing. In the sexual domain, coming to understand sex as a form of deep interpersonal sharing transforms it from an animal act into something sacred, to be approached with reverence and care. And so on.

Not only would such knowledge enable them to lead better lives, it would enable them to be better people. Like our hypothetical ignoramus, many of these emerging adults have the best of intentions, but they are relatively clueless when it comes to the full range of human goods and their relative values. Consequently, their lives and characters frequently end up looking somewhere between pitiable and repugnant, rather than evoking “trust, admiration, support, and a desire to be associated with and to imitate.”

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Many nowadays are tempted to suppose that our moral problems can be solved merely by cultivating the right sort of moral feelings. For instance, in *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011), Steven Pinker notes that “We live in an age of empathy,” (571) and in fact are in the midst of an “empathy craze” (576) in which “empathy has been overhyped” (573) as a moral panacea. Our contemporary “empathy craze” is a downstream consequence of morality’s divorce from factual truth and the corresponding association between morality and *feeling*.

The problem is that the emotions are unreliable guides. Empathy, for instance, is naturally biased toward (1) those in our “in groups”, (2) the cute, (3) the needy, and (4) the nearby (out of sight is out of heart). So empathy must be guided and corrected by reason if it is to be a force for good. (cf. Pinker 591, 642 ff)

This is not news.

300 years ago, classical moral sentiment theorists like David Hume and Adam Smith knew that feelings like empathy require something like rational guidance to avoid partiality and bias. This is why Smith counseled that we should adopt the standpoint of an “impartial spectator” when determining what is worthy of approval.

Classical virtue theorists like Plato and Aristotle already knew this over 2000 years ago. In a famous passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says:

... moral virtue is a mean ... between two vices, one of excess and the other of defect; ... it is such a mean because it aims at hitting the middle point in feelings and in actions. This is why it is a hard task to be good, for it is hard to find the middle point in anything: for instance, not everybody can find the center of a circle, but only someone who knows geometry. So also anybody can become angry—that is easy, and so it is to give and spend money; but to be angry with or give money to the right person, and to the right amount, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not within everybody's power and is not easy. (1109a27)

One can say precisely the same thing about empathy: the trick is not merely to empathize, but to empathize with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time and for the right reason. And who can do this but the one who, like the geometer, has knowledge?

In our day, empathy without rational guidance has led to serious social ills. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff (*The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018) argue that:

- It has led to overemphasis on the place of positive feelings in human wellbeing: to care for someone is to protect their feelings.
- This led in turn to a policy of emotional overprotectiveness” (“safety-ism”), which has cultivated a generation of emotionally fragile young people who are now experiencing a mental-health epidemic of unprecedented proportions largely because they don’t know how to deal with negative emotions.
- Unable to deal with disagreement from a standpoint of “disinterested reason,” moral disagreements regularly lead to histrionic “witch-hunts” rather than civilized debates. (Evergreen, Reed, Yale, Middlebury, Berkeley, the Avital Ronnell affair, etc.)

Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning (*The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*, 2018) argue that the same tendencies that Haidt and Lukianoff call “safety-ism” are generating a new and morally disturbing subculture which they call “victimhood culture”, which they describe in comparison with cultures of “honor” and “dignity” as follows:

	Honor Culture	Dignity Culture	Victimhood Culture
High moral status based on	Physical bravery	Natural self-worth	Being a victim, esp. being from a historically oppressed class (a naturally empathetic category)
Moral status dependent upon how others see you?	Yes	No	Yes
Sensitivity to slight	High	Low	High
Characteristic response to slight	Violence	Forbearance or Formal Appeal to Accepted Authorities	Very public complaint
Appeal to third parties to resolve conflict	Low	Moderate	High

The characteristics of “victimhood culture” - and the characters of those formed by it – are far from admirable. They are, like the characters of Smith’s emerging adults, somewhere between pitiful and repugnant.

What does all of this show? It shows that, in the context of “the disappearance of moral knowledge,” empathy cannot find the rational guidance it needs to end up reliably on the side of the good. The empathy craze will not solve our moral problems, at least not without an accompanying moral-knowledge craze.