

“Knowledge, Facts & Opinions, and Morality”¹

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I. Knowledge

We humans know a lot. We each know many persons, places, and things on the basis of our direct experiential acquaintance with them. That’s a kind of knowledge sometimes called “acquaintance” knowledge. I know my wife, I know my house, and I know my guitar. And I know them in ways I can articulate and in ways I can’t. Everyone has a lot of experiential acquaintance knowledge like this.

And we know many truths. I know that my wife was born in Seattle, I know that my house is 1309 square feet, and I know that my guitar is a Taylor 413ce. Knowledge of truths is sometimes called “declarative” or “propositional” knowledge. Propositional knowledge can always be articulated by means of saying, “I know that p” for some proposition (or truth claim) p.

Declarative or propositional knowledge, knowledge of truths, can also be characterized as “factual” knowledge—knowledge of facts. That’s because facts are aspects of the way things are in reality. A truth claim or proposition is true when it corresponds to or agrees with the way things are—with the facts—and false when it doesn’t. Saying it’s true that whales are mammals and that it’s a fact that whales are mammals is to say the same thing in two different ways.

Sometimes we come to know facts from other people and sometimes we learn them on the basis of our own direct experience. I learned from an Internet source that the current population of Santa Barbara is over 90,000. But I learned from my own direct personal perceptual observation that Santa Barbara has a new Target store on State Street. And once I had acquaintance knowledge of this new Target store—once I saw it—I came to know on the basis of that perceptual knowledge *that* Santa Barbara has a new Target store. So factual knowledge can be (and often is) based on acquaintance knowledge.

We know many things and we know many truths. We also know many *kinds* of things and many *kinds* of truths. And we typically place the kinds of things and truths we know into categories. For instance, we have a category for *scientific* knowledge and a category for *moral* knowledge.

We know on the basis of science that water is H₂O—we know that it’s a fact that water is H₂O. And that factual scientific knowledge was originally acquired by chemists who became perceptually acquainted with water in a special way by means of scientific experimentation and theorizing. That’s the way scientific knowledge works in general:

¹ Thanks to Gregg Ten Elshof for suggesting the topic of this paper.

we acquire it on the basis of one or more scientist’s acquaintance knowledge of the relevant phenomena structured by theory.

We also know that it’s morally wrong to lie, cheat, or steal in circumstances when no higher moral purpose is served by doing so—we know that it’s a fact that it’s morally wrong to lie, cheat, or steal in such circumstances. Depending on your theory of the origin of moral knowledge, you may or may not think that factual moral knowledge is based on perceptual acquaintance with the acts of lying, cheating, and stealing. But everyone can agree that perceptual acquaintance with such acts can serve at least to reinforce our knowledge of their moral wrongness. One way or another, it’s clear that we have knowledge of moral truths—knowledge of moral facts.

II. Facts and Opinions

But a widespread cultural assumption, reinforced by a powerful social institution, implies that there are no moral facts—just moral opinions. And according to this assumption, facts can be known but opinions can’t. So, this cultural assumption implies that there is no moral knowledge. In this paper, I argue that this assumption is based on multiple confusions and should be rejected. If I’m right about this, then one important and consequential obstacle to the social recognition of moral knowledge is rationally ungrounded. And the more people—especially people with authority and influence—who recognize that to be the case, the more likely it is that this obstacle to the public recognition of moral knowledge can be removed.

The cultural assumption I have in mind is an assumption about the distinction between facts and opinions. And the powerful social institution promulgating this assumption is the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The California Department of Education has adopted its own Common Core Standards, and Oaks Christian, like other California schools, implements them in its educational program.

A main goal of educational institutions like Oaks Christian is to help students learn. And learning involves the acquisition of knowledge. Some of this knowledge is knowledge of facts, factual knowledge. For instance, it’s a fact that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon. When students learn that fact, they come to *know* that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon.

But what are facts? According to the Common Core standards for history and social studies in the 6th through 8th grade, facts are different from opinions. One Common Core standard is that students will be able to “distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.”² So how do facts and opinions differ?

² <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/6-8/8/>

A resource on the Common Core website defines a fact as a “statement of actuality or occurrence. A fact is based on direct evidence, actual experience, or observation.”³ The authors responsible for this definition categorize facts as “empirical.” They define an opinion as a “statement of belief or feeling.” They say that an opinion “shows one’s feelings about a subject” and they add that “solid opinions, while based on facts, are someone’s views on a subject and not facts themselves.” They categorize opinions as “conceptual.” What they call “solid opinions” are what the Common Core standard stated above calls “reasoned judgments.”

Another online document defines a fact similarly (but not identically) as “information that can be verified or proven” and an opinion as “information that cannot be proven or verified” and “can be someone’s belief or personal judgement with which you can agree or disagree.”⁴

These definitions are representative of many others you can find by Googling “fact vs. opinion.” Let’s think carefully about them.

The first source classifies both facts and opinions as *statements*. But can’t there be unstated facts and opinions?

Suppose it’s a fact, known only to Jack, that he has buried a treasure in his backyard. To keep this fact secret, Jack doesn’t express it to anyone. It’s an actual occurrence that Jack knows about based on direct evidence made available by his actual experience and observation. It’s an unstated fact.

Jack is also of the opinion that he is quite clever for having pulled off this feat without anyone else observing him. And of course, he doesn’t share that opinion with anyone. So, it’s an unstated opinion.

Clearly, contrary to the Common Core resource’s definition, neither facts nor opinions are statements. It seems that what the Common Core standard is meant to distinguish are *expressed* facts and opinions. That’s because it concerns how students should deal with written *texts*. Let’s make that explicit by talking from now on about *statements of fact* and *statements of opinion*.

According to the first source mentioned above, a statement of fact is a “statement of actuality or occurrence.” In other words, it’s a *truth claim*. And truth claims are claims about reality. But can’t statements of opinion also be truth claims—claims about reality?

If Carl’s opinion is that there is intelligent life in other parts of the universe, then Carl believes that it is true that such life actually exists in reality. And if Carl expresses that

³ https://www.commoncorehistorysocialstudies6to8.com/uploads/1/3/5/2/13524571/facts_vs._opinions.doc

⁴ <https://www.roberson.k12.nc.us/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=39850&dataid=53761&FileName=fact%20and%20opinion%20mini%20lesson.pdf>

opinion or belief, then he is making a statement of opinion about what is actual, real, and true. But then both statements of fact and statements of opinion can be truth claims. So, the first source's classification of facts as "statements of actuality or occurrence" doesn't distinguish statements of fact from statements of opinion.

Since both statements of fact and statements of opinion can be truth claims, there must be something else that distinguishes facts from opinions if it's possible to comply with the Common Core standard to "distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text."

The second Common Core resource mentioned above provides a clear indication of what this additional feature is supposed to be: a fact is "information that can be verified or proven" and an opinion is "information that cannot be proven or verified" (and it is this alleged difference between facts and opinions that entails that there can be no reasonable disagreement about the former, whereas an opinion is "someone's belief or personal judgement with which you can agree or disagree").

The bottom line is that Common Core resources characterize statements of fact as statements that are known to be true and statements of opinion as statements that are not known to be true because they can't be proven or verified (i.e., shown to be true).

The first Common Core resource also says that statements of fact are "based on direct evidence, actual experience, or observation." And it's clear from the way this definition of "fact" is discussed and from the examples of statements that satisfy it that factual statements are considered to be not merely knowable but also widely known to be true. A characteristic example of a fact statement is, "Your heart pumps blood through your body." So, the first resource treats facts as statements that are known to be true.

Again, according to the second resource, facts are claims that "can be verified or proven." It seems clear that the "can" in this definition, based on the way the definition is used and the examples given of claims that satisfy it, does not connote merely theoretical possibility but instead concrete practical possibility. That is, factual claims can be verified or proven in the sense that there is evidence available on the basis of which someone already knows that the claim is true, and this evidence can be employed to enable others to come to know that the claim is true as well.

In sum, according to the resources available on the Common Core Standards website, facts are statements that are both true and either known to be true or easily shown to be true. And opinions are statements that may or may not be true, are not based on direct evidence, actual experience, or observation, and cannot be proven or verified (shown to be true)—at least given our current epistemic situation. And this alleged epistemological difference between facts and opinions ends up being the sole difference between them and the basis on which one is supposed to be able to distinguish between them. Supposedly, facts are known to be true or easily shown to be true—and opinions are neither.

But even setting aside the obvious fact (discussed above) that facts are not the same as *statements* of fact (and opinions not the same as statements of opinion), it's clear that there are statements of fact—true statements—that are neither known to be true nor easily shown to be true.

Either “There is intelligent extraterrestrial life” expresses a true statement or “There is no intelligent extraterrestrial life” expresses a true statement. So, one of these statements is a statement of fact. But neither of them is known to be true or easily shown to be true. Consequently, there are facts—or better, *statements* of fact, that don't satisfy the Common Core Standard resources definitions of “fact.” As a matter of fact, both of the above statements about intelligent extraterrestrial life would be classified as statements of opinion on the basis of the Common Core definitions—even though one of them is a statement of fact!

This counterexample shows that the definitions of “fact” examined above contain an illegitimate epistemological component. Given our ordinary non-stipulative concept of a fact, whether it is a fact that something is the case depends entirely on the way things are and not at all on what is known—or even knowable—about the way things are.

We can conclude that the definitions of “fact” and “opinion” provided by resources on the Common Core Standards website don't provide an accurate way to distinguish facts from opinions. Contrary to the definitions we've examined, both statements of fact and statements of opinion can be truth claims. And some statements of fact are not known or easily shown to be true.

Our analysis suggests that what the creators of the Common Core Standard that students will be able to “distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text” had in mind is a distinction between *proven* facts and *ungrounded* (or *insufficiently grounded*) opinions (and, in the case of “reasoned judgments,” which I will discuss below, opinions based on proven facts). But there is a big difference between facts and proven facts—as there is between ungrounded or insufficiently-grounded and adequately-grounded opinions. And this terminological imprecision has created a lot of unnecessary and unfortunate confusion resulting in the weakening of institutional support for and promotion of moral knowledge.

III. Moral Knowledge

How has this confusion contributed to the weakening of public recognition of the existence of moral knowledge—of our knowledge of moral facts? In short, the Common Core distinction between facts and opinions has reinforced a similar long-standing but mistaken distinction between facts and values. Consider the following examples of facts and opinions that are intended to conform to the Common Core Standard we've been discussing:

Fact:

1. Dogs have fur.
2. The Beatles were a band.

3. The last day of school is May 22nd.

Opinion

1. Dog fur is pretty.
2. The Beatles sang great songs.
3. May 22nd is the best day of the year.⁵

Notice that all the examples of facts are descriptive statements and all the examples of opinions are evaluative statements. Repeated exposure to such examples can easily lead people to assume—often without much reflection—that only descriptive statements can be facts (and so knowable given the Common Core definition) and that all evaluative statements are opinions (and so unknowable given the Common Core definition).

Of course, none of the examples categorized above as opinions is a *moral* judgment. They are rather evaluative judgments of other kinds—*aesthetic* judgments, at least in the case of examples 1 and 2. But you will be hard-pressed to find any examples of clearly uncontroversial moral judgments in the various fact/opinion examples online that are related to the Common Core standard. And the fact that no moral statements show up in the fact category and that all evaluative statements show up in the opinion category can easily lead one to assume that all moral statements are statements of opinion—even if no moral statements (or at least no uncontroversial moral statements) are listed in the “opinion” category.

But sometimes statements that seem like they could be moral statements do show up in the opinion category. For instance, the following statements are all listed as opinions on one website that offers “Fact and Opinion Worksheets”:⁶

- Copying homework assignments is wrong.
- Cursing in school is inappropriate behavior.
- It is worth sacrificing some personal liberties to protect our country from terrorism.
- Burning the flag should be a crime.

In the answer key, the same reason is given for classifying each of these statements as an opinion: “Some people would disagree” (in the case of the first example, the reason given is that some *students* would disagree). What this rationale suggests is that only *controversial* evaluative moral statements should be considered to be opinion statements. But is the statement “Copying homework assignments is wrong” really controversial? And even if it is—because “some students would disagree”—is that a good reason for thinking that it isn’t a knowable fact—a knowable *moral* fact? Clearly not.

We are left with the impression that all evaluative statements, including moral statements, are controversial and therefore “just a matter of opinion” (and not objects of

⁵ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/facts-vs-opinions-examples-games-activities.html>

⁶ <https://www.ereadingworksheets.com/free-reading-worksheets/fact-and-opinion-worksheets/>

knowledge). But what about obviously true moral statements such as “It’s morally wrong to cheat (in circumstances in which no higher moral purpose is served by cheating)?”⁷ As far as I can tell, you won’t find such examples in the fact/opinion lists and exercises. And this absence can reinforce the assumption that there are no moral facts and so no factual moral knowledge.

But there is a third category mentioned in the Common Core standard we’ve been examining: the category of “reasoned judgment.” And some defenders of the Common Core fact/opinion distinction argue that some moral statements (perhaps just the uncontroversial ones) belong in this category.

In a response to philosopher Justin McBrayer’s claim that “all value claims fall into the (Common Core opinion) category,”⁸ school superintendent Kathleen Porter-Magee states that

. . . moral facts aren’t provable the same way objective facts are. They are arrived at through reasoned judgment. I can “prove” the table is hard. I can “prove” that vaccines prevent disease. But I can’t “prove” murder is wrong, or that it’s wrong to steal. I accept that murder is wrong and that stealing is wrong through reasoned judgment.⁹

What are “reasoned judgments”? According to one Common Core resource, a reasoned judgment is an “opinion with factual supporting evidence.”¹⁰ So reasoned judgments are opinions based on facts. But opinions that are based on facts are not themselves facts, because those opinions are “supported, not proven.”¹¹ Recall that Common Core facts are *proven* truth claims. So, putting moral statements into the reasoned judgment category still leaves them as opinions—even if they would then be opinions supported by facts. And if moral statements are opinions rather than facts, then according to the Common Core definitions, they aren’t knowable. So, the move to place moral statements such as “murder is wrong” into the “reasoned judgment” category doesn’t result in their being statements that can be known to be true.

Moreover, it’s hard to see what kind of reasoning, consistent with the Common Core definitions of “fact” and “opinion,” would support the claim that murder, stealing, and cheating are wrong. It’s easy to see how to argue for the moral statement that copying

⁷ In my subsequent examples of uncontroversial moral statements, the parenthetical qualification will be implied.

⁸ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/?smid=tw-share&r=0>

⁹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/moral-facts-and-common-core>

¹⁰ https://www.commoncorehistorysocialstudies6to8.com/uploads/1/3/5/2/13524571/fact_opinion_and_reasoned_judgment_activity.docx

¹¹ “<https://ereadingworksheets.blogspot.com/2011/02/teaching-fact-and-opinion.html>”

homework assignments is wrong (categorized above on Common Core grounds as an opinion):

1. Cheating is wrong.
2. Copying a homework assignment is cheating.
3. Therefore, copying a homework assignment is wrong.

But this argument is based on the premise that cheating is wrong, which the Common Core advocate quoted above says is not an objective fact but instead a reasoned judgment (and so an opinion based on facts). So apparently, this argument won't provide adequate support for the claim that copying a homework assignment is wrong unless an argument is also provided for the claim that cheating is wrong.

What statements satisfying the Common Core definition of "fact" could provide reasoned support for the moral statement that cheating is wrong? None that I can think of—at least if the reasoning involved is a kind of inference standardly recognized by logicians (deductive, inductive, or abductive). Since all Common Core facts are proven descriptive statements, which merely characterize the way things actually are, no conjunction of them will give us a good deductive, inductive, or abductive reason in support of the moral statement that cheating is wrong, since that is an evaluative statement that presupposes a conception of ideal behavior.

Since there are no facts of the Common Core sort that could provide adequate standard inferential support for the moral statement that cheating is wrong, that statement won't count as a reasoned judgment from a Common Core standpoint after all.

IV. Conclusion

It's time to summarize my case against the Common Core standard we've been examining. If this Common Core standard is acceptable as it is usually interpreted and employed, then uncontroversial evaluative moral statements such as "cheating is wrong" aren't statements of fact (because they're evaluative statements), or reasoned judgments (since there are no proven descriptive statements of fact that could provide them with adequate standard inferential support). And if such moral statements are neither statements of fact nor reasoned judgments, then such moral statements are not objects of knowledge (or even objects of justified or rational belief). But clearly it is widely known that cheating is wrong. So, the Common Core standard we have been examining is unacceptable (at least as it is typically understood and implemented).

I'll leave it to others who are convinced by my argument and in appropriate positions of influence to campaign for the removal or proper revision of this Common Core standard. Such efforts will be needed to prevent this institutional mandate from continuing to hinder the public recognition and promotion of moral knowledge.

And I'll close by providing those who choose to take on this task with a reason to be confident that factual moral knowledge of uncontroversial moral statements such as "cheating is wrong" exists.

Recall the distinction I made in the first section of this paper between acquaintance knowledge and factual knowledge. One good reason to think that all of us have—or can have—knowledge of moral facts (such as the fact that cheating is wrong) is that all of us have been acquainted with morally wrong actions such as lying, cheating, and stealing. And this acquaintance knowledge puts each of us in a position to know that it's a fact that lying, cheating, and stealing are morally wrong. That is, it puts us in a position to have factual moral knowledge. So, there is a sense in which our acquaintance with facts—facts about people cheating—can serve as a basis for our opinion that cheating is wrong. But this relationship between facts and opinions is not inferential. And it yields knowledge rather than mere opinion. The bottom line is that we have moral knowledge. That's a fact, and it's not just my opinion.¹²

¹² Thanks to my colleague Mark Nelson for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.