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The Effects of the Disappearance of Moral Knowledge on Virtue Acquisition

I. Introduction

In this paper I defend three main claims: (i) moral knowledge plays a motivational role in virtuous action and virtue formation; (ii) the "disappearance of moral knowledge" degrades or undermines agents' moral knowledge and thereby demotivates virtuous action and virtue formation; and (iii) claim (ii)—namely, that the disappearance of moral knowledge demotivates virtue—is part of Willard's concern about the disappearance of moral knowledge.

II. The Common Story and the De-emphasis of Moral Knowledge in Virtue Acquisition

III. The Role of Moral Knowledge in Virtue Acquisition

IV. The Effect of the Disappearance of Moral Knowledge and Virtue Acquisition

"The institutions of *knowledge* in contemporary Western society do not possess a recognized body of moral *knowledge*, and hence do not make it available as such to the individuals and groups they serve….This is not a situation that a thoughtful person can easily accept or be happy about. Is it really true that what many take to be the most important aspect of human existence, the moral, *must* be lived *blindly*, driven only by instinct, feeling, uncertified opinion, tradition, or one or another type of force?"[1]

"To be without routinely available knowledge with respect to what is good and evil, right and wrong, obligatory or morally admirable or not, might easily be seen as a sweeping social and personal disaster, or the cause of such, when coolly viewed from a rational perspective. But we now are accustomed to the lack and do not see how most of the evils we deplore in the contemporary world might be rooted in it."[2]

"For broad dissemination, within society or trans-generationally, even minimally elaborate bodies of knowledge (not to mention very complicated systems) require that there be institutions to preserve, refine, and transmit that knowledge within the larger human scene. Only in this way can knowledge be *an available resource for living generally*. That means that there must exist institutions that are authoritative: that function as they do because of their widely conceded and justifiable claim to be bearers of knowledge. For knowledge to be available to individuals and groups is almost totally a matter of there being credible institutions which make it available through recognized processes of human interaction."[3]

"The entire point of morality is to restrict and guide individuals and groups by preventing—saying no to—desires that are wrong and inappropriate. There needs to be a basis of power and authority from which these statements can be consistently referenced so that they can

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[1] Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 44.
[2] Willard, "Disappearance of Moral Knowledge Prospectus."
[3] Willard, *DMK*, 21.

be applied. Otherwise, there is no confident means through which a society can actually begin to produce and train the kinds of people who actually are willing and able to live moral lives individually and corporately."[4]

"…desire is what poses the problem for choice and one must have knowledge of good and evil/right and wrong to counteract desire….One of the main lessons we learn through the study of ethics is that our feelings and desires are not our will. But many people in our culture today, due to the disappearance of moral knowledge, do not know that. They think their desires are their will. And that is the source of the many deplorable situations that we face in our lives."[5]

V. A Way Forward

"The behavior of unconscious persons is dictated by their nature. They tacitly identify themselves with whatever response their nature suggests to them. They have not yet discovered the possibility of emancipating themselves, by virtue of their free personal center, from their nature; they make no use as yet of this primordial capacity inherent in the personal mode of being. Hence their responses to values, even when they happen to be adequate, will always have something accidental about them. Their attitudes lack that character of explicitness and full consciousness which is a prerequisite of meeting in a really apposite way the demand embodied in the values. For what the values claim of us is not assent pure and simple, an assent which might as well be a fortuitous efflux of our natural dispositions; it is a fully conscious, rational, and explicit assent, given by the free center of our personality. By such an answer alone does a personal being adequately honor the values and their call, which is addressed to each of us in sovereign majesty, irrespective of his individual dispositions."[6]

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, when it comes to virtuous action and formation, I have argued that there is a tendency to leave knowledge of the virtues and vices to the side and focus instead on other features of acquiring virtue (e.g., weakness of will, practice and habituation, etc.). But to do so leaves out a necessary feature of virtue acquisition: the vivid awareness of the value of virtue and disvalue of vice that plays both an evaluative and motivational role in the acquisition of virtue. Given the current moral climate in the West—what Willard describes as the "disappearance of moral knowledge"—representing the beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice is urgently needed and increasingly challenging.

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[4] Willard, *Divine Conspiracy II*, 110.
[5] Willard, *DMK*, 379.
[6] von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ*, 62–63.