Book Review

The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge.

Dallas Willard, Edited and completed by Steven L. Porter, Aaron Preston, and Green A. Ten Elsof. New York: Routledge, 2018.

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Dallas Willard worked for years on a book about the way that moral knowledge has disappeared from our societies. Many projects pulled him away from this book, including many of his popular-level treatments of spiritual formation and related speaking engagements. But he continually returned to it and talked about it with students and peers. Willard's untimely death left the project unfinished, but one of the last things he did was agree to allow three men (the editors noted above) to finish the book for him. The resulting eight chapters are predominantly Willard, with the most editorial work done in chapters six and seven. Through Willard's careful thinking and the caring work of these editors, Willard's final work presents a strong and important thesis for understanding our modern world and our understanding of right and wrong.

In the first chapter, Willard lays out his argument for his basic thesis: though moral knowledge was once commonly studied and taught as a serious body of knowledge, that is no longer the case. He notes that this could happen in one of two ways. First, there could have been a time in history when a reasonable case was made to change this view. Second, it could have simply happened through a variety of complex causes. Willard argues that the second is the case. No one actually proved that moral knowledge is inaccessible or nonexistence; rather, various ideas caused this shift. He names a few: discarding religion as authoritative in any way, removing the human self from the arena of true knowledge, the fact that morality varies from culture to culture and that morality could be used as a power play, to name a few (8-11). After laying out these causes and a couple others, he spends the rest of the chapter laying out the implications of this change and the way authoritative institutions have made the change (universities, via both administration and faculty, specifically). This chapter provides the best overall sense of what Willard wants us to see across the whole book. Chapters 2-7 dive into specific treatments of moral knowledge and why they ultimately failed to overcome the disappearance he has charted.

Chapters 2-7 are composed of close readings of important philosophers and movements that impact the changes Willard traces. He argues for "stages" in the disappearance of moral knowledge. The first stage was the late 1700s to the mid-1800s, when the prevailing ethical understandings in Europe began to fall apart. The second phase, covered in chapter 2, responded to this change by attempting ethics as a "science," as a body of secular knowledge. This included the work of G. E. Moore, the focus of chapter 3, leading into nihilistic interpretations. Noncognitivism, especially Emotivism, represents the third phase, making moral judgments not really about anything at all. Willard covers these issues in chapters 5 and 6. From 1950 to the present, the fourth stage represents various attempts to pull back from Emotivism and ethical Nihilism without reverting to the types of ethical knowledge that had fallen apart in the first stage. Willard focuses on two examples for this phase: Rawls (ch. 6) and MacIntyre (ch. 7). He finds both ultimately failing.

Willard concludes the book with "Prospects for a Return of Moral Knowledge," which the editors' note he did not finish. Ultimately Willard views the disappearance of moral knowledge to be related to two main failures. First, "the failure to identify one subject as *the* subject matter of moral theory and to stay focused upon it" (352). In other words, the fact that ethical inquiry quickly jumps from persons to communities to issues and so

on, has weakened its ability to keep a necessary focus. Second, "a persistent tendency to try to force moral knowledge into a model or form of knowledge which it simply cannot assume" (352). In other words, ethics overreaches, tries to do too much, fails to do that, and then encourages skepticism about the possibility of ethics at all. Willard's unfinished "steps forward" center on the idea that ethics should focus on the good person as the central subject of ethical theory, and should emphasize the life and challenges of particular people in particular relationships in particular situations, rather than grand theorizing.

Willard's work in this book demonstrates his genius, breadth of thought, and careful analysis of the philosophical tradition. He makes a good case for what has gone wrong with ethics over the past 250 years, and even though his steps forward remain a sketch, they show promise in avoiding the main problems he identifies. After completing this book, it is easy to see why Willard viewed it as such an important scholarly contribution. It is certainly that, though as a scholarly contribution it asks a lot of the reader: a hefty price tag to begin with, but also the patience to go deeply and slowly through the key players. The book is certainly worth being aware of, but only plan to obtain it if you've counted the cost, in money and in time, to engage it well.

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