**Nominalism and Moral Knowledge**

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In *In Search of Moral Knowledge*, I argued that the history of western ethics since approximately Hobbes has been dominated by a rejection of essences. I also argued that without essences, we cannot preserve certain core moral principles (e.g., murder is wrong; humans should be treated with dignity and respect) and virtues (e.g., justice, love) that, nonetheless, we clearly know to be valid. But, in this paper, I will argue further that this history also is marked by an embrace of nominalism, and because of that, we will lose moral knowledge.

To help show this, first I will give a survey of major historical figures in ethics, starting with Hobbes, and then I will give special attention to examples of two of today’s major paradigms: Christine Korsgaard’s naturalistic, Kantian ethics, and Alasdair MacIntyre’s Wittgensteinian-shaped virtue ethics (who writes in light of the postmodern turn). I will argue that this history of ethics is marked by a turn to nominalism. Second, I will try to show how this embrace of nominalism undermines clear cases of morals that we simply know.

**Nominalism in the History of Western Ethics**

Hobbes was a mechanical atomist who embraced nominalism, empiricism, and rationalism. On these views, there simply is no room for real Platonic universals, which themselves would be metaphysically abstract. Hobbes believed that our lives are basically motions of physical parts which are caused by motions of external objects. Metaphysically, goodness and badness are defined mechanistically. If we have motions toward something, then those motions cause in us our desires for them. What causes desire in us is good; alternatively, motions away from something causes aversions in us for it, and that thing is evil.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moreover, Hobbes advocates not merely that we do in fact pursue our own self-interests and desires, but that we should do so. He endorses both psychological and ethical egoism. Yet, given his nominalism, these interests and desires must be particulars. It is no wonder, then, that, given his theory, Hobbes should see people living in a state of war, with a multitude of different interests, leading to anarchy.

Fittingly, too, Hobbes rejects rights and justice as “inalienable,” instead asserting that these are creations of the sovereign. It would seem that “inalienable” rights, such as a right to life that has been given by God, would be universally applicable and transcend our particularity. Yet, Hobbes’s rights are human products and thus are located historically and contingently.

Additionally, Hobbes’s “natural laws” are quite different than those of someone like Aquinas or Aristotle. They are not moral laws that exist independently of us. Rather, they are maxims for peaceful coexistence.

Hume developed a more consistent conclusion ethically by drawing upon nominalism and empiricism. Since he rejected identities, even between experiences, all our sense experiences are discrete. And, on empiricism, we cannot know a metaphysically abstract entity; all we do know must be located in space and time. So, morals had to be accommodated to a nominalist metaphysic. Moreover, reason cannot tell us what is moral or move us to action. So, Hume treated morals as discrete sentiments.

In his reply to Hume, Kant attempted to preserve a universal character to morals by our willing our maxims to be universal for all. Moreover, morals command us categorically, which also is more in keeping with morals being universal. But, to be absolutes that apply universally, he thought they cannot be part of the realm of daily experience, for that *phenomenal* realm changes constantly. Instead, they must be “in” the unchanging *noumenal* realm, the realm of things as they are apart from our experiences.

But, he also believed “all our knowledge begins with experience.”[[2]](#footnote-2) For Kant, experience only tells us how something appears to us, and we cannot know how that thing really is, apart from how we experience it. Yet, all that we know empirically is contingent. So, it seems there are no knowable, universal and necessary features to all our various experiences. Therefore, Kant also seems to be a nominalist, and we each have our own discrete experiences.

Further, even though Kant regards morals as universally applicable, still, they do not *exist* as universals, i.e., metaphysically abstract objects. Rather, they seem to be our particular maxims that we will to apply universally.

The next major ethical figures I will survey are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who embraced quantitative and qualitative utilitarianism, respectively. They tried to develop their ethical theories in light of empiricism, on which they thought we could determine the rightness or wrongness of an action based upon its net utility. Therefore, no moral principles or virtues could be intrinsically right or wrong; their moral status depends completely upon the sum of the consequences. Further, since we could not know immaterial, metaphysically abstract moral principles by the five senses, utilitarianism has no place for universals as moral properties. So, morals are not objectively real on such a view; instead, they are particular, humanly derived principles, though we treat them generally, so as to apply to many.

The next set of ethical views that arose in the west was naturalistic. While Armstrong has argued for immanent universals on a naturalistic ontology, many philosophers have defended that “naturalism requires a *nominalist* rejection of the existence of properties construed along traditional realist lines as abstract, multiply exemplifiable entities that non-spatially inhere in their instances.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In that light, I will consider briefly several examples of naturalistic, nominalist ethical views. On a naturalist ontology, there are no metaphysically abstract universals or essential natures. So, for instance, Nietzsche rejected Kant’s appeals to the universalizability of morals. He argued instead that our various claims about reality, and thus morals, too, are just reflections of “our artificial (though convenient) *linguistic-conceptual shorthand* for functionally unitary products, processes, and sets of relations.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These are human products, which fits with nominalism, but not realism. For Plato’s metaphysically abstract universals, Aristotle’s immanent universals, or even D. M. Armstrong’s materialist-based immanent universals are all thought to be mind-independent realities.[[5]](#footnote-5) Furthermore, Nietzsche thought that appeals to universal morals actually reflect a will to power we try to exert over others.

The logical positivists, such as A. J. Ayer, continued this emphasis upon our language use and empiricism. Without room for essences or intrinsically moral properties, Ayer instead believed wrongness is a pseudo-concept because it is not verifiable empirically, and so it is not true by definition.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, statements like “murder is wrong” do not have cognitive content. Rather, moral statements just express emotions.

For Simon Blackburn, too, the focus for morality is upon moral *discourse* and not about a moral property being instanced in some action. Instructively, Blackburn clearly understands why: “The problem is one of finding room for ethics, or placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part.”[[7]](#footnote-7) On a consistent naturalism, what is real and brute is matter, and then there are various other ways we conceive of it as moral, social, political, economical, etc. But, nothing is intrinsically moral, for there are no essences.

Two more naturalistic ethical options are error theory and Gilbert Harman’s constructivism. Error theory draws upon the same realization as Blackburn. For Richard Joyce or J. L. Mackie, there are only brute physical facts. So, to speak of universal, intrinsically moral facts that are independent of any human institutions shows that our moral speech is infected with error.[[8]](#footnote-8) Like other naturalists, Harman reduces moral facts to natural facts.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, that does not rule out the reality of moral facts, for “there is empirical evidence that there are (relational) moral facts.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Still, consistently, he too holds that there are no intrinsically moral facts. Instead, moral facts are our constructs.

Additionally, Michael Ruse defends a sociobiological view of morality. On his view, moral behavior is a biological adaptation that has been selected.[[11]](#footnote-11) Since we have adapted through “sociality, we need a mechanism to make us break through that self-centered nature on many, many occasions,”[[12]](#footnote-12) and that mechanism is morality. Since morality is rooted in biology, morals are not transcendent and non-natural. They do not have an essence, since there are no such real things on naturalistic evolution. That we objectify morals is just an illusion thrust upon us by evolution,” so morals are “not arbitrary” and “not relative.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Before examining Christine Korsgaard’s views, we should observe that ethical relativism (ER) arose in the philosophical context of the dominance of empiricism and naturalism and their rejection of universals (as knowable or real, respectively). With the rejection of their existence, ER is a nominalist view. Morals are particulars, applicable just to individuals or cultures if they accept them as such. Thus, there are no intrinsic morals on ER.

Now, Korsgaard embraces the modern scientific worldview, on which brute reality is material. Apart from humans placing value upon some thing or some action, there is no value in the world. That is, the world is unlike that of Plato, Aristotle, and many in the Middle Ages, who thought that what is real is good. This was due to the existence of “form” (universals) in the world. But, without “form,” there is just matter and what we count *as* good and valuable.

How then do we construct such moral value? For her, it is by the imposition of form, which perhaps are better understood as our concepts and willings, upon matter. Moreover, Korsgaard argues that this is what Kant taught us:

If the real and the good are no longer one, value must find its way into the world somehow. Form must be imposed on the world of matter. This is the work of art, the work of obligation, and it brings us back to Kant. And this is what we should expect. For it was Kant who completed the revolution, when he said that reason – which is form – isn’t in the world, but is something we impose upon it. The ethics of autonomy is the only one consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world, and the ethics of autonomy is an ethics of obligation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Korsgaard realizes that morality is a conceptualization that we impose upon matter. As such, morals are human constructs, located in space and time, and they are not intrinsically moral. This is an approach to morality that fits with the ontology of nominalism, not realism, even of Armstrong’s kind.

As an example of ethics done in light of the postmodern turn, Alasdair MacIntyre has developed a reconstituted form of Aristotelianism and, more recently, Thomism. He draws deeply upon his understanding of the later Wittgenstein. In that way, MacIntyre claims there is no rationality as such.[[15]](#footnote-15) Nor is there language as such. For example, there is no English as such; there is only English as is written and spoken in various, particular locations and times.[[16]](#footnote-16) There is no such thing as a universal vantage point that we each can achieve, either; there are only particular standpoints from which we know and perceive reality.[[17]](#footnote-17) Just as in the later Wittgenstein, MacIntyre stresses particulars, and so there is nominalism running through MacIntyre’s thought.

In summary, there has been a shift in the view of the metaphysics of morals that, more or less, parallels chronologically the rise of the Scientific Revolution and nominalism therein. Before that episode took place, Aristotelianism and its particular view of universals dominated western thought, but then that shifted to nominalism with the influences of Ockham and the mechanical atomists, like Gassendi and Hobbes. Similarly, in the history of western ethics, some form of universals tended to dominate until at least Hobbes. But both historical tracks share a common legacy since that time – nominalism has come to dominate, and at least in the two major paradigms of today, naturalism and postmodernism, there is virtually no room for universals.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Now I will turn to see what implications follow from nominalism for moral knowledge.

**Nominalism and Moral Knowledge**

Without giving a detailed defense here, I simply will employ a particularist strategy in epistemology and observe that there surely seem to be several cases of morals (virtues or principles) about which we clearly have knowledge. Moreover, these cases do not seem to be mere opinions, interpretations, or some other kind of construct. Rather, they are things we know to be moral. For example, take the following short list of morals:

1. Murder is wrong.
2. Rape is wrong.
3. Love is good.
4. Justice is good (or, put negatively, injustice is bad).

I think these samples of two principles and two virtues are morals that people clearly know. If they were mere opinions or human constructs, they could have turned out to be otherwise. But that simply does not seem to be the case with these morals. Depending on the audience, I might add some others that today also seem very clear-cut, at least to westerners. For instance, slavery’s and genocide’s wrongness seem to be perhaps as clearly known to most westerners today as the above four samples.

Now, while these seem to be known clearly, it is not as clear to many *what kind of thing* these moral principles and virtues are. There have been many historical options that have been suggested, including ones we have seen such as motions, sentiments, evolutionary products, and so on. I have assessed the range of these specific metaphysical options for the preservation of these “core” morals elsewhere.[[19]](#footnote-19) Here, I will focus on the implications specifically for these morals.

I have argued elsewhere that on nominalism about properties, whether of trope or austere (or metalinguistic) forms, all qualitative facts can be eliminated, leaving us with just bare individuators.[[20]](#footnote-20) This is because both tropes and the concrete particulars of austere/metalinguistic nominalism are metaphysically simple. Thus, any distinction between individuators and qualities (or objects, respectively) is just a distinction of reason, not ontology. A trope, or a concrete particular of austere or metalinguistic nominalism, cannot be a union of two entities, an individuator and some quality (or object) that is thereby individuated. If so, then either the individuator or the quality (or object) can be eliminated without real, ontological loss. If we eliminate the individuator, we have a quality itself (say, white). Or, we have an object (say, white-snow) that is not individuated. But these claims fit with what realists claim. On the other hand, we could eliminate the quality (or object), but then we have just an individuator by itself, which seems incoherent. Since there is no real loss in eliminating either one, we can eliminate the qualities or objects, leaving us with a world without any such things.

Now, let’s apply this finding to ethics, particularly these core morals.

***No Qualitative Content to Morals***

First, if qualities cannot be preserved on nominalism, then these moral principles and virtues have no qualitative content. For one, there would not be any conceptual content. So, murder would not necessarily *be* the intentional taking of innocent human life. Instead, it seems we could define what murder is. This might be accomplished by murder’s meaning being dependent upon what discrete linguistic communities determine, according to their particular grammatical rules. But, that suggests that what murder is (and its moral status) could vary amongst linguistic groups. However, even attempting to give conceptual content to these morals cannot work, for nominalism cannot preserve *those* qualities, either.

Let’s apply this reasoning to justice, too. If there is no intrinsic conceptual content to justice, then it too seems to be up to us according to our various communities, or perhaps even individuals. If so, MacIntyre seems right to ask, *whose justice* are we talking about? Unfortunately, though, for him, there will not be a way to assess if one’s tradition’s views about justice are rationally superior to another, even if we learn that second tradition’s language as a second first-language.[[21]](#footnote-21) Why? On nominalism, there would not be any conceptual content to justice on any of these traditions’ views.

This result leads to major problems in societies like the United States, where many people are discussing and protesting heatedly about injustices they perceive to be happening, such as from police officers’ mistreatment of African Americans, or President Trump’s proposed policies toward illegal immigrants. But, if nominalism is true, then *at best*, one group is merely talking to its own people, for they have a particular conception of justice, whereas others against whom they protest have a different one. Alternatively, they are merely emoting, and that about nothing, for there is no conceptual quality left to justice on anyone’s account. There is no ability, then, to even begin to discuss and assess the claims. Now, it might seem we are left with merely emoting; e.g., “ugh, white supremacists!” But even that ability is undermined by nominalism, for it does not seem there can be any qualities to such utterances, or to those who make them.

Ethical relativism illustrates the problems with nominalism nicely. On ER, there are no universal, intrinsically moral qualities; a given moral principle or value is right for us if we accept it as such, and that acceptance *makes* it right. But, as is well known, the subjectivist version of ER undermines morality altogether because it destroys any moral basis for resolving interpersonal conflicts.[[22]](#footnote-22) And, the conventionalist form seems to reduce to subjectivism, too; after all, if morality is just an invention, why could not the relevant group be just oneself? So, on ER, there is no common basis for making moral appeals to one another.

This is like what happens with nominalism generally, only there are not just any intrinsic moral qualities; there are no qualities whatsoever. By not taking nominalism consistently, we still can think that nominalism does not interfere with there being qualitative facts, albeit just particular ones that we may then generalize. Yet, most western philosophers today (the majority of whom also are nominalists) realize that ER and its denial of any universal, intrinsic moral qualities undermines morality altogether. It therefore is ironic that they do not seem to realize that the same nominalism that drives ER also undermines any intrinsic qualities whatsoever in reality.

Thus far, I have been arguing that, take consistently, nominalism undermines any qualities to moral principles and virtues, and even to moral claims as such. So, there cannot be any moral knowledge, for nothing moral exists, including these core morals. Yet, it seems we can understand what someone means when making a moral claim, such as of injustice, even if we need to work hard at achieving true understanding. But, this ability to understand someone seems to involve a realist understanding of properties, not nominalism. How so?

Suppose we see an action take place: one man walks up and takes a drink from a water fountain, while another comes minutes later, stops, looks at a sign above the fountain, and then walks away. What happened? We can see the actions, but to understand them, we need several concepts. For instance, suppose this event took place in the southern United States in the 1950s. Also, the first man was white, while the other was African American. Moreover, the sign says “colored people cannot drink here.” In order to *understand* this event as a case of injustice and immoral discrimination, several concepts are needed, such as of (1) the context of the Jim Crow laws that prohibited African American people access to, and enjoyment of, the same things as whites; (2) morally, African Americans, as well as whites, are people and thus are morally equals, and equals should be treated equally; (3) injustice is withholding from those to whom something is due, and that skin color is a morally irrelevant quality; and more.

In order for us to understand this case as one of injustice, then, we seem to need to be able to have the *same* concept before our minds. Put that way, it makes it seem as though realism is a clear choice against nominalism. However, some might reply that, literally, we do not have the *numerically identical* concept before all our minds. Rather, all we need is for there to be *qualitative identity*, which (allegedly) nominalism can handle.

To help reply, I will draw initially upon a different kind of case. When my daughter when she was very little, she was learning of the concept of an apple. I showed her many actual apples, as well as pictures of them, too. Over time, from many noticings, she developed a basic concept of an apple. Comparatively, my concept of an apple was much richer and more nuanced, since I used to work in the grocery business and had experienced many more kinds of apples. However, my concept was not nearly as developed as that of a botanist or an apple farmer.

So, strictly speaking, my concept of an apple was not numerically identical in *all* its respects with those of my daughter or a botanist. However, it does seem to be identical in its *essential* qualities – it is *of* apples, not oranges, ducks, or anything else. But, on nominalism, it does not seem even this commonality is possible, even if we appeal to its being a brute fact, for there would not be any qualitative facts. If so, then, by application, it seems that it will be impossible for different people to even begin to understand each other about any moral claim. Yet, we do talk and debate morally. And, there are some core moral principles and virtues that we do seem to know clearly to be true, but that ability for us to understand and know them seems to trade upon what nominalism denies. A consistent nominalism seems to undermine moral discussion and debate, which thereby makes our many moral protests and shrill pronouncements futile.

***No Moral Qualities to Agents***

Second, let’s apply these findings to moral agents. According to virtue ethics, moral agents should cultivate virtues such as love and justice. On Aristotle’s account, these qualities can become acquired dispositions through habituation. Whether on MacIntyre’s view, in which a person’s unity is found in his or her narrative, or Aristotle, in which the soul is the basis for one’s personal unity and identity, the virtues are qualities we have acquired.[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, these views presuppose that there are qualitative aspects to the respective virtues; justice is not identical to love, though they should work together harmoniously.

But, if nominalism were true, then there simply would not be any qualitative aspects to these virtues. Accordingly, there would not be people who would *be* just, or loving, or have any of the other virtues. Indeed, pressing further, it would seem there would not be *moral* beings, or even *agents*, much less *human beings*. For these all involve qualities, which nominalism undermines.

Suppose, however, one embraces a metalinguistic view, on which our being moral amounts ontologically to a sentence being said appropriately about us due to the conventions of an ethics linguistic framework.[[24]](#footnote-24) Then, a further problem appears. Consider this sentence: “Dawn is a just person.” On a consistent nominalism, Dawn would not have the quality of justice. But, *the very sentence, as well as the individual words that constitute it, would not have qualities either*. It seems, then, that nominalism cannot make sense of being virtuous by appealing to properties (as in the case of a trope theorist), concrete particulars (as with austere nominalists), or even proper uses of sentences (as with metalinguistic nominalists).

Something has gone horribly wrong with an ontological view that makes impossible such a key dimension of life as ethics. It does violence to ethics, including the four core moral principles and virtues I listed previously. We could not *know* them to be true, because there would not be any conceptual content to the claims. And, these qualities would not exist at all. But, we *do* know them; and so nominalism in regards to morals should be rejected.

**Conclusion**

Thus, nominalism undermines ethics, including some core morals, and thereby it undermines moral knowledge. But, since there are some core morals we know to be true, nominalism is mistaken.

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. VI, XV. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction, I, trans. and ed. by Carl J. Friedrich, in *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant’s Moral and Political Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. P. Moreland, *Universals*, *Central Problems in Philosophy* series, ed. John Shand (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 95 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See this description in Richard Schacht, “Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 615 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On Armstrong’s view(s), see, e.g., his *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more, see his *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1936, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Simon Blackburn, Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. E.g., see J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 38. For Joyce, see “Projectivism and quasi-realism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism>, accessed March 21, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1977), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michael Ruse, “Evolution and Ethics: The Sociobiological Approach,” in *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman, 4th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 651. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 656. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 661 (insert mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 357-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I say “virtually” because someone could follow Armstrong’s immanent, physical universals and still be a naturalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See my *In Search of Moral Knowledge* (IVP, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. E.g., see my “Craig, Anti-Platonism, and Objective Morality,” *Philosophia Christi* 19:2 (2017): 336-37 (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 43. See also *Whose Justice?* 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1990), 23. There are many other deeply troubling issues with ER on either interpretation; see Pojman’s discussion thereof, or mine in *In Search of Moral Knowledge*, ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On MacIntyre’s view, virtues are bundled together with all the other properties that together constitute oneself. His is a bundle view of substance, whereas Aristotle roots the virtues as “accidental” properties that are rooted in our soul, which is our individual essence. See my chapters 9 and 11 on MacIntyre in my *In Search of Moral Knowledge*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. William Lane Craig seems to endorse a type of metalinguistic nominalism, since he draws extensively upon Rudolf Carnap’s linguistic frameworks. See Craig’s “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?” *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 360. See also Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 206, cited in Craig. See also my discussion in “Craig, Anti-Platonism, and Objective Morals,” 338-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)