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**Facts, Values, and Other Modern Myths: The Prospects of Postmodernism for Ethics**

**Introduction**

Yesterday, I discussed the prospects of ethics construed along naturalistic lines. I explored a modern construct, the fact-value split, which holds that the natural sciences (done naturalistically) uniquely give us knowledge of the “facts” of reality, whereas ethics and religion, and perhaps even the rest of the humanities, give us just personal opinions and preferences. I argued that this split is deeply mistaken, and even that on naturalism we cannot have any knowledge whatsoever. But, there are many things that indeed we do know, including in science *and* ethics, and I argued that there are some “core” morals that we all seem to know, such as justice is good, and murder is wrong. I explored ontologically what these morals are, for not just any explanation will preserve them, and I went on to explore several such options. I argued that these morals are best explained by being immaterial, objectively real, universal moral properties. Then I defended these claims against some objections, and I concluded 1) that to be able to have *any* knowledge, we too must be more than just physical stuff; and 2) that naturalism in science, ethics, or any discipline, must be false.

But naturalism is just one major branch of ethical views today. Postmodern approaches to ethics are being embraced deeply in religious studies, theology, and philosophy, though perhaps not quite as much in the latter as in the former two. Still, there are key philosophical influences that have helped “propel” the postmodern turn, but they are not the sole factors. There also has been the outworking of practical effects from the attitudes of modernity. So, if naturalistic ethics suffer from severe problems, what are the prospects of postmodern approaches?

To examine this question, first I will give some context: how and why did the postmodern turn arise? Second, I will explore some broad contours of that turn, and then I will focus on a key person’s views. Third, I will shift and assess these moves; to what extent, and why, should we accept their proposals?

**Situating the Postmodern Turn**

In the history of western philosophy, there have been some notable “turns” that have led us to our present mindsets. Several philosophers have offered a variety of views of how they have understood the mind’s relationship to the things it can know, whether in general or in ethics in particular. Two questions are of paramount importance. First, metaphysically, are those things (including persons, moral principles and virtues, and more) mind-independent and therefore unconstructed? Second, epistemologically, can we know them as such? While there had been a fairly consistent, longstanding tradition through Aquinas that held there are such objectively real things which can be known as such, things changed as we entered the modern era.

For example, Descartes and Locke focused upon *ideas* that could enable us to “match up” with reality. Descartes believed that *ideas* are constructions of the mind. However, he also thought that we could discover unconstructed ideas, such as of God. Such ideas are “clear” and “distinct.” Locke also appealed to ideas as the primary objects before the mind. While we make abstract ideas, we cannot create simple ideas. Instead, we work with simple ideas received by our senses from external objects.[[1]](#footnote-1) Importantly, simple ideas provide a way for us to know an unconstructed reality. Also, both believed an individual patches out objects from already *determinate* parts (i.e., things with precise qualities and relations).

But Hume was more consistent as an empiricist, and here we can observe the *turn* in philosophy to sense impressions. For Hume, all knowledge comes by the five senses. So, there are no essences we can know, contrary to what many of the ancients and medievals thought. What is before the mind is a flux of discrete sense impressions, and from “custom,” the mind projects the objects (persons, tables, trees) in the world. So, there are no objects that exist objectively in an unconstructed world. And, all things that seem to resemble each other really are not identical; everything really is particular. Thus, Hume is a nominalist. So, for him, there are no universal, immaterial moral principles or virtues; instead, these are matters of the sentiments.

In reply to Hume, Kant tried to save both the empirical phenomena and the supremacy of reason. He also tried to save morals from Hume, arguing that they are categorical, universal imperatives which are known by reason. But how he tried to accomplish these goals was complex. He was the first philosopher who held that things *in themselves* are metaphysically *indeterminate*. For Kant, we cannot know things as they truly are, in themselves, for they are postulates, but only as they apppear to us. Knowledge then seems to be limited to the phenomenal world, which seems to be in tension with his view of morals.

For him, there are real objects in the empirical world which are constructed by the *one* transcendent mind, which does the same constructive work in each of us. Thus, unlike Locke, a single empirical ego does the constructing. And, unlike Hume, objects are not projections of the imagination. Instead, the one transcendent mind synthesizes objects out of a manifold of sense experience that has been processed by the categories. Thus, the mind’s touching of the world is essentially making determinate out of the indeterminate.

But after Kant, Nietzsche denied his apppeal to the transcendent for the constructive act and instead located it in the conscious realm. As a naturalist and nominalist, he claimed we construct things by *taking* (conceiving of, interpreting) them to be identical, when they really are not. He also denied that there was any general character to reality. Reminiscent of Hume and foreshadowing Derrida, Nietzsche thought that there are no strict identities, essences, or universals (i.e., Platonic forms).[[2]](#footnote-2) Rather, we construct things by taking them to be identical, when in fact they are only similar. Nor there are any enduring substances (such as souls), and things like “cause, sequence, reciprocity, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose” are notions we have devised.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nor are there truths of reason, which would be so due to how the world is objectively.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Nietzsche introduces a role for language, since words are important to communicate our thoughts. Things like the will, being-in-itself, or even morals and so on are *words*. Furthermore, even our notion that we are subjects of our thoughts is something that is not simply a given. Indeed, while it may have seemed clear to Descartes to claim one thinks, Nietzsche counters that “even the ‘one’ contains an *interpretation* of the process, and does not belong to the process itself. One infers here according to the usual *grammatical* formula.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nietzsche helped set the stage for much of the mindset we encounter today. It should not surprise us when many today express suspicion about people’s claims about reality and truth, including in ethics and religion, for they have been influenced to believe that these too are but expressions of a will to power. Nietzsche also helped develop the view that knowledge is perspectival and provisional, for we cannot transcend all perspectives and know absolute truths. Further, there is no universal truth to be known because no universals exist metaphysically.

Nietzsche foreshadowed the “turn” to language, in which philosophers, such as those in the Vienna Circle, focused attention upon the meaningfulness of sentences in a naturalistic, empiricist framework. They championed the verifiability crterion of meaning: a sentence is meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable. On such a view, sentences that made claims about essences or universals, even in morals, were pseudo-sentences. And, without universals, language could not truly involve word *types* (for these would be universals), but only particular word *tokens*, which would be physical. Hence, nominalism would be true even about words and meanings, and not just other physical things in the world.

But then philosophers like the later Ludwig Wittgenstein shifted the focus onto *ordinary* language (or, language in *use*), and language as a *social* phenomenon. This shift, which we could call the “postmodern turn,” or the *turn to interpretation, or hermeneutics*, is not the same as the linguistic turn, although they both focus on language. We now seem to need to focus upon our interpretations, who makes them, how we make them, and what those say about us. As James K.A. Smith puts it, “Interpretation is not a series of hoops we jump through in order to eventually reach a realm of unmediated experience where I don’t have to interpret anymore. Rather, interpretation is an inescapable part of being human and experiencing the world.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

So, morally speaking, in this postmodern milieu we seemingly have an irreducible plurality of competing voices. Those that have been marginalized in the past need to be given expression, since they likely have been oppressed by others in powerful positions who may have claimed to be objective (or above question) in their knowledge of objective moral truths. But there also have been more sociohistorical factors that have helped to give rise the turn to interpretation. Here, I will just mention them. For instance, the modern era often emphasized rationalism, or a high confidence in human reason, apart from divine revelation, to know universal truths in all subject matters. But, postmodernism stresses the fallibility of human reason, as well as its biases and how all too often people use it to oppress others. Second, in the modern period, people tended to believe in the inevitability of progress from scientific discoveries, and in particular from the theory of evolution. This confidence resulted in a belief that humankind could get better and better. However, the twentieth century helped expose that myth, with two world wars, concentration and extermination camps, genocides, terrorist attacks, and many mass murders.

Third, we had tended to trust our political and religious leaders. Now we live in the light of various cover-ups, the accusations of molestation of parishioners by Catholic priests, and many scandals. In the place of trust, more and more attitudes of suspicion have grown from the fallout of betrayals of our trust.

Fourth, a key difference we now experience as part of daily life is the emphasis upon pluralism. In the modern view of the world, we thought we could find objective, universal truths that would be normative ways for all cultures. Now, however, that idea often seems oppressive and imperialistic. Instead, we now tend to think we should be tolerant of different cultures and their morals, for there is no universal standard we can know that is true for all people. Fifth, we now have deep suspicions of hierarchies, whether religious, political, or corporate.

Now let’s shift to some more contours of the postmodern turn, and a key example in ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre.

**More Contours of the Postmodern Turn, and Some Ethics Examples**

Two of the main philosophical “fountainheads” of postmodern thought were the later Wittgenstein, who is associated with the Anglo-American variety, and Jacques Derrida, who is an example of the continental branch. For the later Wittgenstein, meaning is basically a matter of how language is used in a given, particular form of life, with its particular language. For him, meanings are not what individuals intended or “had in mind” when they said or wrote something; rather, it is largely how those words were *used* in their context, which is a language-game. Language-games are settings in which we *do* things with language, such as engage in ontological talk, make ethical or religious assertions, buy and sell in commerce, play the game of football, etc., all of which are set within the context of a community with its given language and grammatical rules. As such, language use is largely behavioral, and would include not just verbal “moves,” but non-verbal ones (such as gestures) as well.

Part of Wittgenstein’s reasons for focusing on particular forms of life and their respective languages was to avoid metaphysical theorizing. According to Brad Kallenberg, the later Wittgenstein realized that theorizing bifurcates language and world, and this causes the chief philosophical confusion that Wittgenstein aims to clear up. Theorizing is the attempt to satisfy philosophical cravings for general claims of how things *really* are, and so we invent essences. Wittgenstein demonstrates this position in regard to language:

Someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but nowhere have said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language ... .” And this is true.--Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,--but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or relationships, that we call them all “language.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Such metaphysical theories muddy the waters under the guise of offering a “totalizing,” theoretical explanation. In their place, Wittgenstein proposes we replace explanation with description against a “bewitching” metaphysics, with its many historical variations in claims as to what really exists. [[8]](#footnote-8) As he put it,

. . . There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them…. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This same urge to know objective, metaphysical truths displays itself in epistemology as the attempt to provide foundations for all knowledge. But foundationalism ignores the particularity of knowing persons in the attempt to provide universal truths that transcend their situatedness.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Derrida echoes similar themes. For him, *“there is nothing outside the text.”[[11]](#footnote-11)* According to Merold Westphal, epistemologically, this means “being must always already be conceptualized,” for we do not have access immediately to things as they really are.[[12]](#footnote-12) This parallels Heidegger’s claim that all experience exhibits an “as-structure.” Therefore, interpretation becomes inevitable and ubiquitous; to even have an experience requires interpretation. Metaphysically, things themselves are signs and not what is signified. Thus, they “essentially point beyond themselves,”[[13]](#footnote-13) so “there is no signified that ‘would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign’ by failing to refer beyond itself.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Also for Derrida, there always is an *absence* ‘to’ things, which somehow is *present to us in our awarenesses*. What is not present is somehow essential to what is present. For him, things like thoughts, facts, or linguistic utterances are not wholes; they are not complete in themselves. Rather, from one re-presentation to another, there always will be *differance*, for nothing has an identity that can be circumscribed, not even repetitions of a word.

From this, Westphal infers that our perspectives are “constituted to a significant degree by contingencies” of our situatedness – the particularities of our upbringing, language, sociohistorical location, religion, and more. As finite beings, we have limited perspectives. So, we cannot shed our particularity to gain a God’s-eye, unbiased viewpoint to know anything.

For Westphal, our finitude is an epistemological category.[[15]](#footnote-15) Along with our concepts and judgments, we are embedded in our sociohistorical context, and we cannot extricate ourselves completely from them by reflection. This does not mean that anything goes; he thinks we do have perspectives of the real world, but, we can achieve a “fusion of horizons” (i.e., perspectives), such that we can mutually understand each other in ways sufficient for life together, despite our different perspectives.[[16]](#footnote-16)

So, essences do not have a place for Derrida, Hediegger or the later Wittgenstein. At best, *essence-talk* would be just that - *words* we use in a particular language-game. And, notice their strong emphasis upon particularity. While Wittgenstein formally may eschew metaphysical theorizing, and Derrida focuses upon interpretation of texts (for even the world is a text for him), that does not mean their views do not presuppose an ontology. They both seem to be nominalists, in that everything is particular, and there are no essences (at least, that do any work for us). Still, we can engage in *essence-* or *property-talk.* But these are not ontologically committing.

How then are these kinds of views developed in ethical writers? For sake of time, I will focus upon Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosopher who is widely read in many other disciplines.

***MacIntyre***

For MacIntyre, the current problems in ethics are due primarily to a breakdown in our ability to talkacross different moral languages. His “disquieting suggestion” is that the *language* of morality is in disarray.[[17]](#footnote-17) We have lost much of our ability to dialogue ethically, being left in shouting matches. MacIntyre characterizes the present dilemma as follows:

[t]he most striking feature of contemporary moral *utterance* is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and [debates over these disagreements have an] … interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on – although they do – but also that … there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.[[18]](#footnote-18)

So, we have people making claims from emotivism, Kantian universalisability, Rawlsian rights, utility, relativism, feminism, liberationism, etc. But, according to him, there is no rational way to assess these rivals because they presuppose different evaluative concepts and frameworks. To lift them out of their contexts deprives them of their meanings. We talk past one another because literally we speak different moral languages.

Moreover, from the Enlightenment, these rival positions often presuppose “the existence, independently of the preferences of the speaker or hearer,” of impersonal, objective standards.[[19]](#footnote-19) Yet, these rivals have premises from “a wide variety of historical origins.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hume and Kant, removed the teleological nature of human beings that the ancients and medievals, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, had developed, and as a result we no longer had a normative basis by which we could adjudicate between different ethical views’ claims. Not only was this distastrous; the various Enlightenment-based answers all suffer from a common problem, i.e., the point of view of no one in particular. They appeal to universally valid prescriptions while purporting to not be historically situated in any particular community, or form of life. Additionally, they attempt to smuggle in terms that remain unspecified for that perspective from which they speak, like “good,” “rights” and “justice.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Furthermore, these rival conceptions of moral justification fail to provide a way to decide between their competing claims. For example, MacIntyre remarks that

[j]ust as Hume seeks to found morality on the passions because his arguments have excluded the possibility of founding it on reason, so Kant founds it on reason because *his* arguments have excluded the possibility of founding it on the passions, and Kierkegaard on criterionless fundamental choice because of what he takes to be the compelling nature of the considerations which excluded both reason and the passions.[[22]](#footnote-22)

So, each position cannot provide *independent* criteria for adjudicating between it and its rivals. As he claims, "there is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided."[[23]](#footnote-23) This conclusion provides him compelling evidence that rationality (morally or otherwise) is not some universal phenomenon.

But MacIntyre realizes that if we cannot find a way out of the present, Enlightenment-induced disaster, we will be left with Nietzsche’s conclusions, that moralty is all about power, and not rationality, after all. For him, this would be an unthinkable conclusion, so he sets out to see if there is some way to recover an older moral tradition that predates the Enlightenment’s effects, one that could recover a sense of a human *telos* and make sense of morality.

In his book, *After Virtue*, he hopes to recover Aristotle’s ethical tradition. In the subsequent book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* his newest hero is Aquinas. But he cannot just import their original views into today’s context, so he must modify their views in ways to reflect his own Wittgensteinian philosophical conclusions.

First, he rejects Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ notion of the soul. Perhaps this simply seems outdated to him, but it also fits with his Wittgensteinian views. If there is an essence to human beings, it would be something determinate apart from how we conceive and talk about it. It also would be counter to Wittgenstein’s intent to avoid metaphysical speculations. And, more recently, MacIntyre has written that “we do not merely have, *but are our bodies*.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Instead, he substitutes a narrative unity of the self in place of the soul, as the basis for our personal identity through time and change (including growth in virtue). And, narratives are fundamentally linguistic; they are told in the language of a particular people. They are not abstract entities.

Second, to help develop his concept of virtues, MacIntyre introduces his concept of *practices*. These are “forms of systematic human activity, each with goods internal to it.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Examples could include medicine, painting, music, farming, and others. Practices are progressive; they should extend our powers to achieve excellence. They also should extend our conceptions of the good(s) involved, and thus they are challenging. Kallenberg suggests the practice of medicine may be the best example of this quality.[[26]](#footnote-26) From striving over time to achieve excellence in medicine, standards have increased, and so have the abilities of practitioners to reach them. Engaging in a practice allows people to achieve internal and external goods. Internal goods, such as helping people, can be realized only by active participation in the practice, whereas external ones (such as wealth) are attached contingently to it.

In general, by participating in a practice, we observe how certain activities help promote human flourishing, and we extend our understanding of human needs. This is how practices connect with virtues, for in reference to practices, a moral virtue is "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices”; without those virtues, we cannot achieve those goods.[[27]](#footnote-27) Participation in practices involves experiences with other people, and the virtues are needed for pursuit of a common life with others. They also are needed to sustain a life as a whole. MacIntyre’s concept of practices also allows him to account for a *telos*, which is drawn from the goods of social practices of a tradition. But notice that a *telos* is not from a metaphysical essential nature. Rather, it is practice, community, and tradition-dependent, which of course also includes the language thereof. While a *telos* is normative, it is not a transcendent basis for humans *qua* human; it is so for those who embrace that tradition’s master story as normative for them.

But, practices alone are not sufficient to develop a rich concept of a *telos* because these internal goods and practices cannot provide an adequate basis to assess a whole life. What else is needed to develop such a concept of a *telos*?

For MacIntyre, this is what he calls a *tradition*, which is his corollary to Aristotle’s context, the Greek *polis*. MacIntyre thinks a tradition can serve as a different context in which we can reappropriate Aristotle’s ethcis today. A tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[[28]](#footnote-28) It provides the common narrative, or master story, for a community (or, form of life). Aristotelianism would be a tradition that unites different communities down through time due to its common commitment to the narrative of Aristotle’s ethcis. Similarly, Thomism would be the tradition of many Thomistic communities through time, with its own story.

Traditions also provide a basis for the *telos* of human life, which needs to be found in a community of shared values and beliefs, whose members may sustain a socially embodied argument about the good(s) for their lives. Traditions also can grow and progress in rationality through facing their conflicts, wthere internal or external with other traditions.

For MacIntyre, traditions are embodied by communities down through time which have embraced that way of interpreting reality. So, traditions have their own particular languages and standards of rationality. There is no rationality apart from traditions, MacIntyre stresses; to be outside a tradition is to be a stranger to rational inquiry. Rationality is not found from an ahistorical viewpoint, but it is tied to a Wittgensteinisn emphasis upon the interconnectedness of a form of life, language, and their way of understanding and interpreting life from that aspect.

Like rationality, MacIntyre denies that there is any such thing as language as such. For example, there is no such thing as English, Thomism, or Christianity for that matter; there is only Christian language as written and spoken in various, particular places and times. Just as in Wittgenstein and Derrida, there also is nominalism running through MacIntyre’s thought.

And, like Wittgenstein, meaning is not so much what someone intended (as a mental state in that person’s mind), but how someone used the language of that community within the “grammar” of a particular game. And use is basically behavioral, whether verbal or not. A referee’s raising both arms and hands straight up in a football game indicates the team with the ball scored a touchdown. But outside of that context, such a gesture could be meaningless.

In summary, then, on the postmodern turn, everything is interpretation. We cannot transcend our particularity, or situatedness, to gain a neutral, unbiased gaze directly into reality and know what would be universal, objectively real truths for all people. And this primary epistemological position does fit well with nominalism in metaphysics, for on it there are no identities, and everything is particular.

What then should we think about these core ideas?

**Assessing the Postmodern Turn in Ethics**

***Some Strengths***

But, in terms of strengths, there are several to note. First, the strong attention given to our situatedness, and how that impacts us, is well taken. Indeed, we are shaped by psychological, emotional, moral, religious, cultural, historical, philosophical, political, legal, and other factors, including family upbringing and life experiences. Second, there is much truth to the point that we do *understand* life, the world, etc., from the standpoint of some conceptual scheme.

Third, we need to be whole people, who live not just from the mind, but as embodied beings. This focus helps us contextualize our moral deliberations with real people who have to live with real effects of our decisions. That is, praxis, along with theory, matters deeply, and ethics never should be relegated *merely* to cognitive abstractions apart from their embodiments. Relatedly, the Enlightenment focus can make it easy to become skilled at living out of our “heads.” But that approach can feed knowledge above compassion, justice, love, and more.

***Some Potential Problems # 1: Is Everything Interpretation?***

But now let us examine some areas of concern. First, I will consider the central epistemological claim that everything is interpretation; we cannot have direct access to any aspect of reality and know something as it is in itself. Is this so? I will consider two arguments: one is a principled objection, while the other is a descriptive one, and I think on both counts, this widely embraced position (even assumption) is mistaken. But we then will need to see how this affects what I already have granted – namely, that there is much right about their attention to our situatedness.

In terms of a logical problem, per the theory, whenever we experience any aspect of reality, we do not experience that thing (or person) directly, but only as we interpret it. Notice that what is presuppposed here (and rightly so) is that we do experience something in reality – say, an animal. But, we cannot experinece the animal itself; so, somehow we must be experiencing it under some interpretive grid – that is, we experience the animal-as-we-interpret-it (maybe call it interpretation1). But, then, we cannot access that interpretation directly, but only as we interpret it – call that interpretation2. But, I also need to interpret that, which then results in interpretation3, interpretation4, and so on, without any way to stop the regress. In effect, the animal (and even any of our interpretations) are forever beyond our ability to know, for there would be an infinite regress of interpretations that we would have to traverse and know the animal. *In principle, then, knowledge (experience too) cannot get started*.

This result helps illustrates where Derrida’s claims lead. Recall that he claims things themselves are signs that always point beyond themselves. This is due to his metaphysical assumptions (but not necessarily phenomenological descriptions) because he thought things are not complete in themselves – i.e., they are not wholes. The absence that they all have (which somehow is present to us in our awarenesses) is somehow essential to what is present. This may seem mystifying, but I think we now can account for these phenomena. What is seemingly “absent” to these things is an *essence*. It seems absent because, as an immaterial entity, it would not be sense perceptible itself. But its absence is what renders things themselves to be indeterminate to us (according to his view). But that is not how we experience or encounter reality; we encounter things that seem to be wholes. Thus, what is “absent” also is “present,” and it is essential to the object that is present.

But without an essence, there always will be *differance* between re-presentations of some thing, because there are no essences to ground an identity. There is nothing that makes that entity the same thing through time and change, and circumscribes that entity as the kind of thing it is. It also is why there will be an infinite regress of interpretations, without a way to get started. This is the same, exact point that W.V.O. Quine and Daniel Dennett have made who (as naturalists) also are nominalists and reject essences. In regards to our interpretations, they realize that without essences, there are no “deeper facts” at all which would settle the question of what some action, verbal or nonverbal, *really* meant, or what some thought or experience was *really* about. On the contrary, this suggests that if there were essences, there would be determinacy to our mental states and other things in reality.

Now, we also can explore what is it about some “thing” that makes it appropriate for it to be conceptualized (or described) in one way rather than another. While surely we can agree on the appropriate use of some kind of terms, what makes it appropriate to use a color term in reference to it, as opposed to some other kind of term? Is there a deeper fact to anything? Are there deeper facts even to concepts? If not, it seems we could not have the same concept in mind. But then any attempts at teaching would be misguided.

Yet, descriptively, is it really accurate that we never can experience anything directly, as it is in itself? When we consider some cases from everyday life, do we find they are indeterminate after all, which we should expect if Derrida, Wittgenstein, and others are right? On the contrary, they are not indeterminate, and I think we actually can notice this if we pay close attention to what is before our minds in conscious awareness and not simply reject what we find due to our allegiance to a theory.

*Case # 1:* *How a toddler learns to identify an apple.* I enjoyed watching my daughter develop her understanding of apples. When she was quite young, my wife and I would show her a book that helped her learn what different fruits look like. There are about twenty-four pictures of various apples, oranges, grapes, and bananas on two adjacent pages. We would point to a picture of an apple on the left page, and we then would say “apple.” Then we would point to another apple picture and say “apple” again. We would repeat this through all the apple pictures. Later, we would return to this book and ask her, “Where are the apples?” She would point to one, and we would affirm her by saying “good!” Then I might ask, “Where is another apple?” As she grew, she developed the ability to identify all the other apples pictured there. She also would get to see real apples we had at home, not all of which were of the same kind.

What was going on? She had to see each apple picture (and actual apples) for *what they are*, hear the word “apple” uttered for *what it is*, learn to associate the apple with the word “apple,” and then develop a concept of what an apple is from many observations. She then could go into the grocery store’s produce section and be able to pick out as apples not just Red Delicious ones, but also Gala, Golden Delicious, Fuji, and even new varieties, even if she had never seen before a specific example of such an apple.

*Case # 2:* *The prescription refill example*. I use my telephone to refill my prescription medications. I bring the vial with me while I call, and the system prompts me to enter certain information, starting with my phone number. I have to look at the phone’s keypad, notice which keys are for which numbers, and then press the correct numbers in sequence. How can I (or anyone else) do that? I think of a number, I see which key is for that number, and then I direct my finger to that key and press it. After doing that for all the digits, I hear the number replayed back to me, which I verify. How do I do that? I listen to the digits and compare the numbers spoken back to me in a sequence with those of my phone number. I have to hear the numbers for what they are, compare them with what I know to be my number, and see if they match up.

The same happens when I enter the prescription number, which in turn is repeated back to me. Again, I have to be able to see each number on the vial as it really is, see which keys are for which numbers, and then direct my finger to press the right keys. If I make a mistake, I can know that because I can pay attention and observe that I pressed the wrong one. I must be able to see the numbers on the vial for what they are, do the same with the keypad, and then match up the audio feedback with the number as I read it on the vial.

*Case # 3:* *The example of reading a text aloud.*Suppose you are reading aloud a portion of Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* in a class. You read from page forty-eight as your students follow along in their copies of the book: “Let’s call something a *nonrigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Now, some people may look at you with puzzled looks, and you might wonder why. Then, maybe someone pulls you aside and, to your surprise, tells you read it wrong, that you substituted "nonrigid" for "rigid.”

How would the people know whether what you read was right or not? They have to hear the sounds you uttered for what they are, see what the words on the page actually are, compare the two, and then express their thoughts properly in language (for example, "you misspoke," not "great job!"). I have done this kind of exercise intentionally in philosophy classes, to get students to pay attention to what was before their minds in conscious awarenesses - what they heard, what they read, their comparison of the two, and their judgment. Indeed, how could we correct anyone if we do not have access to these things as they really are and can see what is actually the case?

And there are many other cases we could consider, such as what is involved in using a debit card to withdraw cash from an account; or what it takes to develop skill as a bowler. In each case, we were able to pay attention to something that was present before our minds us in conscious awareness. These were not present as being indeterminate in themselves; rather, they had specifiable qualities we could notice, if we paid attention. And, we could notice that our experiences and thoughts about these things did not change the things themselves.

***Some Potential Problems # 2: Reconsidering Situatedness***

However, as a second issue, from these findings perhaps we should reconsider the sense(s) in which we are situated. J.P. Moreland has distinguished three ways to understand our situatedness. One he calls *constructivism*; on it, whatever we are experiencing or thinking about is somehow made to be what it is by our experience (or thought) being directed upon it.[[30]](#footnote-30) However, this view is not true for all aspects of reality. We can pay attention to things in the world, as well as to our thoughts, words, or experiences for what they are. When we do that, we can notice that they do nothing to change the thing.[[31]](#footnote-31) For example, my thought about my cat Baby having red fur does nothing to change her fur’s actual black color.

A second sense of situatedness is *epistemic closure*, which is a denial that we have direct access to anything in reality. But if this belief were so, then we have the logical and descriptive, practical problems I just noted. This leads us to his third sense of situatedness: *attentive influence.* He maintains this phenomenon is what actually happens with humans. Like I just described in some cases, we have the abilities to compare our concepts with things as they are before us in experience and adjust our concepts as needed to better fit with reality. Moreover, we can know this to be so, *if* we pay careful attention to what is consciously before our minds.

However, over time, attentive influence often reflects a pattern, for “people fall into ruts and adopt ways of seeing things according to which certain features are noticed and others are neglected.”[[32]](#footnote-32) For instance, when I watch a movie for a second time, what I notice could largely be a reflection of what I noticed the first time. But Moreland goes on to suggest “situatedness functions as a set of habit forming background beliefs and concepts that direct our acts of noticing or failing to notice various features of reality.”[[33]](#footnote-33) If he is right, it provides more evidence that we can access reality directly.

Indeed, it seems to me that he is correct. For instance, my family background (both in terms of nurture and genetics) served to shape and habituate how I would tend to respond to people, and all too often with anxiety from a fear of rejection unless I was “perfect.” Genetically, the anxiety came from a predisposition passed on from my mother, who had obsessive-compulsive disorder, I believe, while the nurture aspect came from various family experiences. So, for many years I had learned to try to deal with my fears in certain ways.

But in my forties, I went through a lengthy, more challenging period of depression and anxiety. Through the counseling process, I began to see more of their roots, even something I had not realized before - that some key factors were from my relationship with my father. By recalling memories and experiencing associated, even new, feelings, I was able to grow and see change in how I tend to interpret peoples’ responses to me. Now I have *much* greater freedom from my former, habituated mindset, and I have developed new habits of paying attention to what is before me in conscious awareness.

So, it is true: our “situatedness” affects how we attend to reality. Nevertheless, with effort and sometimes help, we *can* change how we do that. We can adapt to reality. This may require forming new habits, but it can be done. If it could not, then things like therapy, or coming to see the extent to which language and culture influence us, would be impossible. Even postmoderns’ projects would become impossible.

**Conclusion**

So, not only does it seem we can access things as they are in reality, it also seems there are things we do know. Thus, something seems wrong with a crucial point of postmodernism. Does this mean then that we can know things exhaustively, pristinely, with utter certainty, and be blind-to-nothing, as though we can be God? Hardly; just because we can access reality directly, it does not mean that we can have exhaustive, certain knowledge. We are finite beings, and we are very prone to manipulate things to our own desired ends. Postmoderns are right to reject Cartesian certainty in knowledge; there seem to be precious few things about which we could not possibly be mistaken. But why should certainty be a requirement for having knowledge? As in these case studies, there are things we can know, and yet it still could be *possible* – however implausibly - that (say) we are just brains in a vat in a mad scientist’s laboratory.

As I conclude, this leads me to a brief consideration of whether we have access to and know any moral principles or virtues that might exist as objective features of reality. I know this runs counter to the train of western thought at least since the Enlightenment, but in light of my findings, perhaps we should consider this too.

Let’s consider a few “core” moral virtues and principles, such as justice is good; murder is wrong; rape is wrong; and love is a virtue. There seems to be widespread (if not universal) agreement on these principles and virtues. It also seems that once we understand the concepts expressed in these statements, I think we simply should see that these acts are wrong, and these virtues are good, even *necessarily* so. That is, due to *what* they are, these acts seem *intrinsically* wrong, and these virtues seem *intrinsically* good.

For example, consider *justice*. Despite many moral claims being advanced, often from the standpoint of personal autonomy and relativism, justice stands out to me as something that, everywhere, people recognize as good. For instance, in addition to its roots in relativism, the moral basis for the argument in favor of same-sex marriage is rooted in an appeal to equality, which is grounded in justice. Equal pay for equal work likewise presupposes justice as good, as do the concerns in the United States over “income inequality.” Regardless of what one thinks about how that issue should be settled, the concerns on all sides are rooted in appeals to justice. The same applies for legal cases, and equitable treatment of workers, immigrants, etc.

Now, let us consider a series of objections to my claim that these morals seem to intrinsically right (or good). With some variations within the general pattern, postmoderns likely will argue that these morals are a matter of how a given community conceives and talks of reality. That is, these morals are not objective, universal, or intrinsically wrong.

But if the general postmodern mindset is accurate, then these core morals could have turned out otherwise for any given group. If murder is wrong *because* it is part of our narrative, someone *might* instead find a story in which murder is permissible. But, could that really make murder right? Is it really just due to our situatedness that *we* know murder is wrong? Suppose we change how people talk in a culture. Can that really change murder from being wrong?

On relativism, someone might claim some morals have become settled by now. Over time, society has come to decide that these acts are wrong, and these virtues are good. *However, if the relativist is right, then they could have turned out otherwise.* But that result is so counter-intuitive that the burden of proof should be on the one making that claim. While it may seem at first glance that a people may reject (for instance) murder as wrong, actually I think we will find they do affirm it. The Sawi people in Irian Jaya valued treachery. They would invite a tribe to eat a meal together, but after the guests become sleepy, the Sawi would eat them.

So, it might seem they did not accept murder is being wrong. But, suppose a Sawi male decided he wanted another Sawi male’s wife for his own. To achieve that end, he killed that other male. I suspect we would see the Sawi people rise up and condemn him, and thus we would see that they too believe murder is wrong. They just did not see the other case *as* murder.

Once we form the concept of murder, I think we should see that it is a heinous act, a violation of the most repugnant sort, which simply is wrong. This reaction does not seem to be merely the product of socialization, for it seems to transcend cultures. Quite arguably, even Nazi soldiers or Japanese concentration camp guards in World War II, who were trained, desensitized killers, would have thought it wrong for a comrade to be murdered. However, they were trained not to see their killing of prisoners as murder.

So, how do we *best explain* what kind of thing these few “core” morals are? I already briefly considered a relativistic view; how about others that have been suggested? First, suppose morals are just physical things, like behaviors or motions. However, physical motions can be exhausted descriptively, but morality has a different quality – it is prescriptive. If morality is just an evolutionary adaptation, then justice, love, and murder and rape’s being wrong could have turned out otherwise. And, if naturalism is true, then everything is just our interpretation, precisely because there are no “deeper facts” (or essences) to anything. But that means these morals are just our interpretations too. Since each interpretation is particular, we cannot have the same interpretation for these core morals, which undermines them as universally wrong.

Second, suppose moral statements like “justice is good” are just emotive utterances, akin to “hurray, justice!” But, these moral claims are not just descriptive ones. And, if feelings change, so can the morality of an action. Is that really so with these morals?

Third, we might *will* for justice to be a universally valid maxim for all to follow. But if so, these are maxims *we* have constructed. They do not exist objectively and are true for all people. If we change our minds, then these morals also could change. Plus, for Kant and Rawls, both deny that we can have direct access to reality, so these morals have to be interpretations of *some* people developed from a *particular* standpoint. So, they would be subject to the human propensities to manipulate morals to some group’s own benefit.

Fourth, maybe what is moral is just how the consequences of some action add up. But, murder or rape’s wrongness could turn out otherwise, as it could for justice and love, too. Further, who gets to define what are “good” and “bad” consequences? On what basis?

So, all these options fail to do justice to, and cannot preserve these “core” morals. What then might be a better explanation for them? They seem to be intrinsically valid – just due to *what* they are, they seem necessarily wrong (in the case of murder, rape) or good (with justice and love). And, they seem to be universally so. *These findings have a significant implication*: these morals seem to be objectively real and have an essential nature to them. But, as we have seen earlier, they do not seem to be sense perceptible (though their instances seem to be).

Thus, while there are several key strengths to the various postmodern proposals for ethics, they cannot do justice to what morals are, or to knowledge, for that matter. For at least some (and perhaps more?) morals seem to be something quite other than is permissible on postmodern views. But if so, then the key postmodern contentions are mistaken.

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1976), p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Life, Knowledge, and Self-Consciousness,” selection from *The Joyful Wisdom*, in *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On substances, see Ibid., p. 324. For the quote, see “Prejudices of Philosophers,” selection from *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nietzsche, “Prejudices of Philosophers,” pp. 332, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 338 (my emphasis added to “grammatical”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James K.A. Smith, “Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? A Response to the ‘Biola School,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., ed. G.E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, transl. by G.E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), §65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar*, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also Kallenberg, “Changing the Subject in Postmodernity: Narrative Ethics and Philosophical Therapy in the Works of Stanley Hauerwas and Ludwig Wittgenstein.” Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999, p. 329. This work forms the basis of his subsequent book, *Ethics as Grammar*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1976), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Merold Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49, as quoted by Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. So is *fallenness* for him, for he writes as a Christian. That is, we do not only have blindness due to our limitations, but also due to perversity. See Merold Westphal, “Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics,” in *The Very Idea of Radical Hermeneutics*, ed. Roy Martinez (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed.(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 6 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kallenberg, “The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*,” p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 6 (emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Colors, Cultures, and Practices," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XVII: The Wittgenstein Legacy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard Wettstein (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kallenberg, “The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue,*” p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See J.P. Moreland, “Two Areas of Reflection and Dialogue with John Franke,” *Philosophia Christi* 8:2 (winter, 2006), 309-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. But, I could direct a recent thought upon another and change it in light of the newer one. But, to do that, I must pay attention to the two thoughts *as they are*, even to compare them. But in this section, I am addressing primarily objects and persons in the world that exist whether or not I ever think of them. Those exist mind-independently. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. J.P. Moreland, “Two Areas of Reflection and Dialogue with John Franke,” *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Moreland, “Two Areas of Reflection and Dialogue with John Franke,” 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)