



*In Search of Moral Knowledge:
Overcoming the Fact-Value
Dichotomy*
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R. Scott Smith (PhD, University of Southern California) is associate professor of ethics and Christian apologetics at Biola University. He is the author of *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language After MacIntyre and Hauerwas*, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* and *Naturalism and our Knowledge of Reality*.

Do you need moral knowledge to live a moral life?

Why did you decide to write *In Search of Moral Knowledge*?

R. Scott Smith: While in graduate school, I studied ethics from philosophical, biblical, theological and religious studies perspectives. I came to realize that in today's predominant mind-sets, most people have come to accept that there are no objectively valid moral truths, that what is moral is up to us in some sense. Or, even if they grant that such morals could exist, we could not know them as such, thereby still leaving them as being up to us (perhaps as our interpretation, without a way to directly access the objective morals).

This general mind-set reflects the depth to which the fact-value split has become entrenched, namely, that naturalistic science gives us knowledge of the facts of reality, but ethics (and religion) give us just preferences and opinions. We have experienced, as Dallas Willard liked to say, a loss of moral *knowledge*. But, what I tended to see was that there were key moves, especially in metaphysics but also in epistemology, that had been made in the past that people today do not realize have shaped and influenced how we perceive ethics. I think these key moves should be reconsidered, to test them for their rational acceptability.

I argue that these major shifts should be rejected. Moreover, there are some core morals we *know* to be true (e.g., justice and love are good; murder and rape are wrong). The best explanation for what they are is that morals exist objectively and are grounded in the character of the *Christian* God. So, my book not only defends moral knowledge, but also is an extended moral argument for the Christian God's existence.

Briefly summarize the central thesis of your book. What is distinctive about this idea and/or your approach or methodology?

Smith: I aim to show that, contrary to our received wisdom, morals are best explained as being (a) metaphysically objective and universal; (b) something which we can know as such; and (c) grounded in the Christian God. We can have *moral knowledge*, and we need to reject the many false views that have led us to conceive of morality as being just a human construct.

1. I wrote this manuscript because for my teaching, I did not see any one book that helped people understand a number of crucial factors. In light of various historical roots, how and why have we arrived at our current moral impasse? How have various subjects (religion, theology, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and even philosophy of language) and their contributions, insights or even mistakes shaped our present moral mind-sets? And, based on these findings, what might this study be able to show us in terms of a moral argument for God's existence?
2. I also want to show powerfully that the received fact-value split (i.e., science uniquely gives us knowledge of reality, whereas religion and ethics are just opinions, preferences or our own constructs) is radically mistaken. We can have *knowledge* in science, theology

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“Over the years, Scott Smith has, time and time again, demonstrated deep insight into the underlying causes of our contemporary cultural chaos. In In Search of Moral Knowledge, he has, once again, put his finger on the pulse of the fount of society's moral ills. Smith rightly points out that moral knowledge, and not merely moral belief, is what is needed to live a proper life and form a virtuous society.”

—J. P. Moreland,
Distinguished Professor of
Philosophy, Talbot School of
Theology, Biola University,
and author of *Love Your God
With All Your Mind*

and religion, and ethics.

3. Though I have adapted the manuscript so that it will work well with mainly a Christian audience, originally I wrote it with religious studies and philosophy students in mind, from any university setting. Even after that adaptation, I have found that my students in our MA program in Christian apologetics get to read about major theological, religious, and philosophical ethicists from the standpoint of how those authors would explain their own views. Then I try to appraise them largely using reasoning that even secular university students could appreciate. So, I am able to use the manuscript as a way to help my apologetics students understand these views, as well as how to address them winsomely yet also cogently, so they can have confidence in their apologetic witness. It also helps strengthen their own faith and confidence in their belief in the truth of Christianity.

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

Smith:

- The fact-value split (that science uniquely gives us knowledge, whereas ethics and religion just give us inferior knowledge at best, or just personal preferences, opinions, and mere values) is false and must be rejected.
- Naturalism is demonstrably false (as are postmodern philosophical positions) and must be rejected, particularly in ethics.
- We can, and often do, have moral knowledge.
- Morals are best explained as existing objectively, and grounded in the character of the Christian God.