

Knowing about Right and Wrong: Why Is It Wrong to Kill Innocent People?

W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz

Abstract: In this article I challenge the positivist view that ethical statements are merely an expression of our emotions or preferences. I consider a moral statement, “Killing innocent civilians is wrong,” and argue that such a statement is a truthful moral norm. I show that what is fundamental to agreement in the realm of both facts and morals is a commonly shared attitude that determines human relatedness to the world. Scientific knowledge is a partial knowledge based on indifference, the state of mind that constitutes scientific attitude. However, knowledge in morals does not presuppose indifference, but love. Once we accept that our thoughts and feelings are not incommunicable, we can arrive at inter-subjective and non-objective moral knowledge which results from our recognition of others as persons and our affective engagement with the world.

One of the key characteristics of modern science is objectivity. Scientific knowledge is held to be independent of attitudes, beliefs, and other subjective states of mind of individual scientists. However, just as scientific knowledge, derived from observation, presupposes the “scientific attitude” of being a detached, objective observer, so also its verification and sharing with other members of the scientific community requires the same attitude. Without this attitude, science would neither be

objective nor inter-subjective.⁶⁴ Objectivity and “scientific attitude” are thus interrelated. If this is the case, objective scientific knowledge is not independent of the human mind as is commonly believed. It is dependent upon the states of mind which constitute scientific attitude: on being indifferent, disinterested, neutral and impartial.

Being a disinterested, objective observer can be contrasted with being engaged. Once we engage in something, we are no longer indifferent or neutral. We take a personal stand on something. Taking a stand on different issues, holding beliefs, being emotionally and personally involved in many life situations are all characteristic of everyday life. Scientific attitude, which can best be described by the words “neutrality” or “indifference,” thus lies in direct opposition to the everyday human attitude based on preferences and feelings. But indifference, a lack of feeling, is a state of mind as well. Once we comprehend that objectivity in science presupposes scientific attitude as its foundation, we can no longer accept the view that objective scientific knowledge is free from subjectivity. There is subjectivity in scientific objectivity, namely, indifference.

Looking at the world indifferently as if it were an object, which is the view of a detached, objective observer, is a way of relating to it from a certain perspective. The pursuit of objectivity leads to abstraction from the individual scientist’s personal position in the world. Thomas Nagel goes so far as to assert that “objectivity involves not only a departure from one’s individual viewpoint, but also as far as possible, departure from specifically

⁶⁴ The way in which empirical scientists look at the world is sometimes described as ‘scientific attitude.’ In order to be objective observers, they must be disinterested, neutral, and impartial. See W. Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), p. 10.

human or even mammalian viewpoint”⁶⁵ and allows us to look at the world “not from a place within it, but from nowhere in particular”.⁶⁶ The move toward objectivity, he claims, reveals things as they are in themselves, and not as they appear to be. Objective knowledge, thus obtained, is a true account of the actual world. Is this view justified?

Firstly, one can make an objection and argue that there is no knowledge without the knower. The “view from nowhere” must always be a “view from somewhere.”⁶⁷ An individual scientist can abstract from his or her position in the world, his or her preferences and feelings, but cannot go beyond his or her subjectivity in the form of scientific attitude. A complete abstraction from human personality so as to transcend subjectivity and a specifically human or even mammalian viewpoint cannot be conceived of and hence is impossible.

The form of subjectivity which refers to scientific attitude has been described by the word “indifference.” Empirical scientists look at the world “objectively,” indifferently, as if it were an object. Ideally speaking, they do not enter into personal relationships with the objects of their inquiry. Yet, as I will argue further, by looking at the world in this way, one can learn about them only from a certain viewpoint. An objective account will

⁶⁵ Thomas Nagel, “Subjective and Objective” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶⁷ The phrase “view from nowhere” alludes to Thomas Nagel’s book, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). It was coined by Lorraine Code to describe the epistemological position of a detached observer. See Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

omit something.⁶⁸ Therefore, scientific knowledge can give us only a partial and not a complete picture of the actual world. Moreover, if objective, scientific knowledge is a partial one, it cannot claim to reveal what things are like in themselves. It cannot know things as they are themselves, but only as objects.

Our knowledge is not independent from our state of mind. Objective knowledge is impossible without the scientific attitude of being a detached, neutral observer. The basic emotional states of mind are indifference, love and hate. Indifference can be defined as suspension of feeling, or a lack of feeling towards something. It is the form of subjectivity which is necessary condition for a disinterested process of inquiry and objective knowledge. By contrast, love and hate are two opposing feelings, expressing respectively inclination and disinclination towards something. I shall now analyze the influence of these on our knowledge.

The most striking example of hate can be found in the situation of war. In war, both sides, driven by antagonistic interests, do violence to each other. This gives rise to the passion of hatred: disinclination towards the other side. If I am disinclined towards something, I do not wish to have anything to do with it, and particularly, to know it as it is. Hence, hate does not result in knowledge. It produces and reinforces prejudices that disfigure facts and contribute to false beliefs. To be sure, in the situation of war we can also find some objective knowledge that is instrumental in the destruction of the enemy. Soldiers, trained into instruments of war, may learn how to destroy their enemies effectively. They are not interested in them as persons,

⁶⁸ Nagel, "Subjective and Objective," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, p. 45. Nagel notices that the pursuit of objectivity is not an effective method of reaching truth about everything, but he does not draw from this point appropriate consequences.

but as objects of possible annihilation. In short, indifference may give rise to objective knowledge which is a partial knowledge, but hatred does not give rise to any knowledge at all.

If hate results in separation in strife, love brings about unity. Perhaps the simplest example of love can be found in motherhood. The way in which a loving mother knows her child goes beyond knowing objective properties such as the child's weight or height. Taking care of the child's growth, she cherishes the way in which the child speaks, smiles, walks. Her knowledge requires constant learning: how to respond to and act towards her child in diverse situations. It cannot be reduced to simple, observational propositions. Now, could it be that what the mother knows is unjustified? Is her knowledge nothing more but a collection of illusions, prejudices, emotions and preferences? Can we truly know a person in any other way than as an object or a collection of facts?

How is it possible to know another person? Positivist epistemology which is dominant in today's social sciences denies that we can know another person in a different way than as a physical object. Human beings are assumed to be egoistic, self-interested, pleasure-seeking, rational individuals.⁶⁹ We can learn about them only by observing their behavior. What happens in their minds is neither publicly available nor even considered important.

The basic assumption which underlies the epistemology of positivist social science can be traced to the thesis of physicalism. In the words of A. J. Ayer, the thesis is that "to say anything about a person's thoughts, or feelings, or sensations, or private experiences of any kind, is always equivalent to saying something about his physical conditions or behaviour."⁷⁰ The ground

⁶⁹ Neuman, p. 72.

⁷⁰ A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 210.

for this thesis is the belief in the privacy of experience. Mental states, such as our thoughts, feelings, or sensations are considered private. They are things to which we alone have access. The possibility of their communication is denied. By contrast, physical objects: material things and their behaviour, belong to the public world. They are held to be public because of conjecture that different people can perceive them in a like manner. Consequently, only observational statements, statements about physical objects, can be verifiable and produce knowledge. Knowledge is observational. Thus, according to the positivistic view, when we speak about our mental states, we can refer to our own experiences; but when we speak about the mental states of others, we can refer only to other persons' observational behaviour which corresponds to their mental states.⁷¹ Our talk about minds is translated into talk about bodies.

There is, however, a difficulty with the belief in the privacy of experience which supports the thesis of physicalism. It is inconsistent with everyday practice. Firstly, as a matter of fact both in science and in everyday discourse we communicate our thoughts to others. It is difficult to imagine how, without communication of thoughts and ideas, there could be accumulation of knowledge, and how education and science could be possible. Further, we can communicate not only our thoughts to others, but also our attitudes and feelings. If scientific attitude, based on indifference, is a part of proper scholarly conduct and is learned and internalized during many years of schooling,⁷² it is because it can be communicated and plays a vital role in scientific activity. It must be shared by scientists to ensure the objectivity and inter-subjectivity of research.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 215.

⁷² Neuman, p. 9.

If thoughts and feelings are declared incommunicable, then we can know other persons only as physical objects, by observing them. However, even if, as Ayer maintains, “different people can share the same thoughts and feelings, but they are not literally the same,”⁷³ and thus a possibility for misunderstanding is open, it does not mean that communication between humans is impossible. Hence, as I will show below, the distinction between private experiences and public objects is ill founded. The objective limitation set on the knowledge of other persons must be declared erroneous.

Our inability to have direct access to the thoughts and feelings of others stems from our being separated individuals. Our separation imparts also our ability to communicate with other people. Speaking about communication, there is always a question as to whether or not the words which we use to describe our private experiences have the same meaning for us and for others. Ayer claims that there is no possible adjustment of our situation as humans by which our separateness could be overcome.⁷⁴

It is true that from the point of view of our bodies, we are distinct, separated individuals. As a physical object, one is clearly not somebody else. But it is not so obvious that we are always separated with respect to our minds. Our mental separateness is a dynamic process. Sharing the same vocabulary and the same values connects people more closely to one another, and makes them less separated in their minds. On the other hand, antagonistic interests and hatred divide people and set them apart. Even some strictly private experiences like our childhood memories, dreams, or concerns can either be shared

⁷³ Ayer, p. 199.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 217.

with other persons of our choice, eventually thus creating a mutual understanding and a sense of emotional unity, or be kept secret.

In each human being there is a deeply rooted need to overcome his or her separateness from others.⁷⁵ We fulfil this need in various ways when we seek the attention, acceptance or admiration of others. But the real adjustment of our situation as humans by which separateness is overcome is love. It is the feeling which brings us together. Further, as I will attempt now to show, just like objective scientific knowledge presupposes a scientific attitude, so non-objective but inter-subjective moral knowledge needs a loving attitude as its foundation.

Let us consider a moral statement: "Killing innocent civilians is wrong."⁷⁶ Such a statement would probably be true for most rational beings, but not for everyone, as examples taken from wars can show. It is neither tautological, true solely because of the meaning of its terms, nor empirical because it does not make an assertion about any physical object and cannot be verifiable by sense-experience. Since, in light of positivistic epistemology, statements have meanings only if they are either tautological or empirically verifiable, it follows that the statement "Killing innocent civilians is wrong" is meaningless.⁷⁷ Still, is this correct? Is the statement "Killing innocent civilians is wrong" merely an expression of feelings and preferences and not a truthful norm based on knowledge? We know that something is

⁷⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, Harper & Row, 1974), p. 8.

⁷⁶ Ayer's example of a moral statement was: "Stealing is wrong." I believe that my statement provides a more clear case of a moral norm.

⁷⁷ This is exactly what Ayer asserted about his "Stealing is wrong."

the case if we have reasons believe that it can not be otherwise. What are the possible reasons to believe that the statement, "Killing innocent civilians is wrong," is true; whereas its opposite, "Killing innocent civilians is right," is false?

Most of us have never seen face-to-face the actual killing of civilians. However, once we accept that human experiences are not incommunicable, we can understand the meaning of the phrase "killing innocent civilians." It refers to depriving of life and often subjecting to extreme suffering people who are not legitimate military targets, who, being neither combatants nor criminals, are not guilty of anything. Killing innocent civilians is a crime committed in war.⁷⁸ If this is so, killing innocent civilians must surely be wrong. Yet, how do we know this? Instances of such a crime still occur. As some people say, in war anything goes. The killing of civilians is explained by the circumstances of war in which the opposing sides, moved by their own interests and zeal for victory, are impatient with all restraint. There are thus individuals who believe that killing innocent civilians is right. Why are they wrong?

There are disagreements about moral issues. For people who hate others or are indifferent towards them, a moral norm that obstructs the pursuit their interests cannot possibly be anything more than mere words. It will refer to no experiences which they can assimilate as their own and to no value that they can share with others. What is fundamental to an agreement in the realm of both facts and morals is a commonly shared attitude that determines human relatedness to the world. My claim is that in science it is the scientific attitude of being an objective,

⁷⁸ The deliberate killing of civilians is crime and military commanders who order, encourage or tolerate such murder are fully responsible for it. They must take steps to avoid and limit even unintended civilian deaths. But in war killing innocent civilians may sometimes be unavoidable. See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 316-325.

detached observer, but in ethics it is the loving attitude, the attitude of affective engagement. Without this attitude rational consensus in morals is impossible.

The moral statement, "Killing innocent civilians is wrong," is neither a tautology nor an empirical statement. However, the statement is not just a meaningless expression of feelings. It is not factually, but morally meaningful. Its meaningfulness does not depend upon verifiable facts, but upon its being a true norm which all rational beings whose attitude is love will accept. This statement is both meaningful and true because, once we understand, in the context of reciprocal communication of our experiences, what killing innocent civilians means and what it implies, we can say with full conviction that it is morally wrong and it can never be right.

"The only way to full knowledge lies in the act of love."⁷⁹ But what kind of status does such a moral knowledge have? Once we accept that our experiences, thoughts and feelings, are not incommunicable, we can arrive at inter-subjective and non-objective knowledge which is derived from a rational consensus between individuals who exchange, share and debate their experiences; who can say, "we know that something is the case and have good reasons to be sure." There is thus a moral universal knowledge which goes beyond scientific objectivity: knowledge which results from our recognition of others as persons and our affective engagement with the world.

⁷⁹ Fromm, p. 26.