The Basis of Knowledge

Chapter 2: *Man in the Measure: A Cordial Invitation to the Central Problems of Philosophy, ,* Reuben Abel pgs. 18 –21 and 24 - 27

“The Basis of Knowledge”

IT IS CONVENIENT to pin the "problem of knowledge" on Plato, for he regarded knowledge as a mysterious kind of union between a knower and the known. Contemplation for Plato was a kind of love; and, just as the lover physically grasps his beloved, so does the knower spiritually apprehend the eternal Forms. The metaphor, of course, is older than Plato, for it was Adam who "knew Eve his wife," and the suggestive phrase "carnal knowledge" still recalls that ancient tradition. But if we take the metaphor too literally-if we ask how knowing involves grasping the immaterial-if we assume that Plato's Forms are quietly waiting out there to be seized-then we have allowed a poetic usage to create a philosophic problem. When a man gets to know something (as John Dewey remarks), the process is no more mysterious than when he gets to eat something. Man's curiosity is as natural to him as his hunger. But philosophers have usually been more puzzled by epistemology than by digestion.

Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description

Of course "knowledge" is not all that simple. We may begin here with Bertrand Russell's distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description" Acquaintance is direct and immediate; it consist of “raw feels.” We are acquainted with a person , or with a place, or with a food. Russell calls it “the kind of knowledge a dog lover has of his dog. “ We may have degrees of acquaintance, but acquaintance as such is neither true nor false; that is, although I may be wrong is saying that the man across the street is my friend Bert, it is my inference that is erroneous, and not the acquaintance. Acquaintance is indeed the sort of knowledge a lover often has, or a teacher, or a physician, or an animal trainer. Martin Buber claims he knows God by direct acquaintance. But acquaintance is knowledge only in a preliminary or inarticulate sense. Organized scientific and philosophic knowledge, by contrast, is knowing *that* such and such is the case; it is descriptive of fact: it is couched in propositions. [1]

1 The English word *know* blurs the distinction between having descriptive knowledge of a fact and being acquainted with a person: compare, though, the Latin *scire* and *cognoscere,* the French *savoir* and *connaitre,* the Spanish *saber* and *conocer*, the German *wissen* and *kennen.*

Knowing That and Knowing How

Second, knowing that, which is propositional, must also be distinguished from knowing how. One may know how to swim, for example, or how to tie a bowtie, without being able to describe exactly how one does these things. This is often true of skills and crafts, of wine tasting and puzzle solving, of being able to identify a literary style and to compose a melody. Most of us know how to recognize a face, for example, or an accent, without being fully able to state that knowledge in propositions. Michael Polanyi points out that to know how to balance on a bicycle does not entail knowing that "for a given angle of unbalance, the curvature of each winding is inverse y proportional to t e square of the speed:"'

Can *knowing how* theoretically always be reduced to *knowing that?* Knowing how to play tic-tac-toe can be articulated precisely in propositions, and formulated as a computer program. It remains a serious open question, however, whether or not, for example, the diagnosis of disease by a physician, or the translation of natural languages, or the taxonomy of animal and plant species, or the recognition of patterns, can be computerized. *Knowing how* to do these things perhaps cannot be fully specified in propositional *knowing that.*

We see in Chapter 19 how this distinction bears on some problems of language. It is apparently not possible to state fully the rules for some ordinary English usages which we all know how to employ, such as the order of adjectives. We say "it is a long metal rod," not "a metal long rod." The substitutability of *very* for *highly* is similarly complex. Something may be “very difficult" or "highly difficult"; but not "very hard" or "highly hard."

Some philosophers (Henri Bergson, for example) belittle science because science cannot capture the peculiarly ineffable quality of so many of our experiences. William James makes this point well in *The Varieties of Religious Experience:*

> Something forever exceeds, escapes from statement, withdraws from definition, must be glimpsed and felt, not told. No one knows this like your genuine professor of philosophy. For what glimmers and twinkles like a bird's wing in the sunshine it is his business to snatch and fix... . Life defies our phrases .. it is .infinitely continuous and subtle and shaded, whilst our verbal terms are discrete, rude, and few .. there is something in life .. entirely unparalleled by anything in verbal thought... .

Can you describe the aroma of coffee? or the taste of cold water? No one can quarrel with Louis Armstrong's reply upon being asked what jazz is: "Man if you gotta ask what it is, you ain't never gonna get to know." Nor with the Zen Buddhist nun Ryo-Nen, who thus describes the experience of silence:

> Sixty-six times have these eyes beheld the changing scenes
> of Autumn.
> I have said enough about moonlight,
> Ask me no more.
> Only listen to the voices of pines and cedars, when no wind
> stirs.

But there is no problem here unless one confuses two very different concepts: experience and propositional knowledge. Experience is a very wide philosophical term: it includes everything we do and everything that happen to us; it encompasses sensations, and emotions, and pains and aesthetic experiences and mystical transports. None of these should be confounded with propositional knowledge. It is not the function of knowledge to duplicate experience, but to describe it; not to reproduce what occurs, but to explain it. Knowing what anger is, for example, is not the same as being angry. To have tasted wine is not to know its chemical composition. In its specificity and concreteness, life often has qualitative aspects that defy representation in general descriptive terms. Not every encounter with the world results in knowledge, or it may become the object of knowledge with the experience. The physician who has himself had an operation is likely to be more sympathetic to the patient with a ruptured appendix, but the physician does not thereby know any more about appendicitis. The male obstetrician does not ipso facto know less about menstruation and childbirth than the female doctor does. Experience and knowledge by acquaintance are of enormous intrinsic significance, but they are never a substitute for, now a rival to, descriptive knowledge.

A conversation with Albert Einstein, reported by Rudolf Carnap, is revealing:

> Once Einstein said that the problem of the Now worried him. He explained that the experience of the Now means something special for man, something essentially different form past and future, but that this important difference does not and cannot occur within physics. . . I remarked that all that occurs objectively can be described in science . . . the temporal sequence of events in physics and . . . the peculiarities of man's experience with respect to time, including his different attitudes toward past, present, and future can be . . . in principle explained in psychology. But Einstein thought . . . there is something essential about the Now which is just outside the realm of science. We agreed that this was no a defect for which science could be blamed, as Bergson thought.

The experiences of now and here ('indexical particulars") are known to us by acquaintance; they are what propositional knowledge describes.
(We examine in Chapter 21 the claim of poetry and art to communicate knowledge. It is often the hallmark of the great literary artist that he finds the words to describe what the rest of us have inarticulately experienced or felt.)

[Here I have left out pages 22-24 dealing with Propositional Knowledge in more detail. I resume typing with "Good Reasons" on the bottom of page 24]

Good Reasons

Epistemology is largely concerned with the third requirement of propositional knowledge, that is, with appraising the kinds of evidence or good reasons which are the basis of knowledge. Let us list them:

1. I know that grass is green, because I can see it. ***Sense perception*** is the evidence for our knowledge about the world.
2. I know that the sum of any two odd numbers is always an even number, because I can prove it. ***Logic*** is the basis of our analytic knowledge.
3. I know that it is wicked to torture a person, because my ***intuition*** tells me so. Knowledge of right and wrong is often based on such inner conviction of certainty. "Yet I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs, " writes Tennyson. Mystics and transcendentalists rely on this sort of reason.

4. I know that I have a headache, because I can feel it. ***Self-Awareness***, or introspection, is the basis for knowing one's own "self-presenting" states. If I were to say to you, I wish it would rain; or, I feel drowsy, you would not ask me, how do you know? One's wishes, feelings, thoughts, hopes, and so on seem to be self-evident; they do not have to be inferred from something else in order to be known. But there are some problems.
5. I know that I walked home yesterday, because I remember it. Knowledge of the past begins on the basis of ***memory.*** But memory is of course no guarantee of truth. David Hume long preceded Sigmund Freud in claiming that remembered events differ form imagined events only in being more vivid. To verify a memory, one can compare it only with another memory: the past event cannot be hauled forth and compared with the present recollection. So there is no way to avoid a certain skepticism. Descartes said that our memories may all have been breathed into us by a malicious demon; and Russell, in a well-known passage in *The Analysis of Mind,* asserts:

   > Everything constituting a memory-belief is happening now. . . .It is not logically necessary . . . that the event remembered should have occurred, or even that the past should have existed at all. There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that "remembered" a wholly unreal past. . . nothing that is happening now . . . can disprove [that] hypothesis. . .

   But a totally delusive memory is not what is meant by memory at all; just as there can be no "counterfeit coins" unless at least some coins are genuine, so a memory can be "erroneous" only if at least some memories are truthful. Undoubtedly we do in fact recall our past selectively; under hypnosis we recover forgotten experiences; we edit our memories, more or less deliberately. But all empirical knowledge. . . is likewise selected and edited. Indeed, what is meant by "the present"? Literally, it is a dimensionless mathematical point, constantly vanishing. James called it "specious" and estimated that one can actually attend to a "present" time span of about twelve seconds. In this phenomenological sense, one may perceive as a unit a sentence, or a melody, or a chain of reasoning. A work of art likewise focuses the observer's attention on an extensive complex of sights or sound so composed that it is experienced in a timeless present.
6. I know that the velocity of light is 186, 000 mils per second, because the physicists say so. We often rely on ***authority*** (Bacon's "idols of the theatre"). Of course, we

should accept someone as an authority only if he can himself produce other types of good reasons, which we all can in principle examine. Authority as a justification for knowledge is worthless if it cannot be dissolved into its ingredients.

7. I know that the number thirteen is unlucky, because everybody says so. Before we discard the justification of knowledge by ***consensus gentium*** we must examine Peirce's criterion of truth (chapter 8). *He defined the truth as "that opinion "to which the community ultimately settles down. . . "*
8. Joan of Arc knew that she would lead the French army, because God revealed this to her. ***Revelation*** as a justification for knowledge seems to me (unless I receive one) unverifiable and unreliable.
9. St. Thomas knew that he would be resurrected after his death, because he had faith. Let no one make the disastrous error of confusing ***faith*** with knowledge, or relying upon faith as a reason for knowledge. The attitude of belief, as I have said, is necessary for knowledge, but not a guarantee of it. To call belief "faith" does not improve it, whether that faith be in God, or in Jupiter, or in Destiny, or in human nature.

To recapitulate this chapter: descriptive knowledge (as contrasted with experience, knowledge by acquaintance, and knowing how) consists of propositions believed to be true for uncontroverted adequate reasons. Five of these reasons warrant further careful examination: sense perception, logic, intuition, self-awareness, and memory. It seems to me safe to deny the thorough-going skepticism of Gorgias, who argued that nothing existed; and if it did, it could not be apprehended; and if it could be apprehended, that apprehension could not be communicated. If he could tell us all that, how can knowledge not be communicated?

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