

What is Knowledge? - Epistemology Across My Life

"The chicken showed me where the chickens are getting out," said my son. We soon fixed that hole in the fence. (Unfortunately, there were more.) What stuck with me were the words "the chicken showed me". Those words indicate observation and attentiveness. And, perhaps I push the point too far, openness to learning from the chicken.

Philosophizing about knowing (i.e. epistemology) may seem arcane or excessively technical. However, what increasingly strikes me is that our mindset toward knowing and the way we think about knowledge ties into our overall stance toward life. Whether or not we study formal epistemology, we all have a functional epistemology: our conception of what knowing is, our ideas about what (and who!) it is worthwhile to know, and ideas about how we can gain knowledge. The first part of this essay highlights epistemological thinkers and themes that I find helpful. The second part notes thinkers and themes I have encountered in various parts of my life that exemplify the approach to knowing outlined in part one.

What Is Knowing and What's Worth Knowing?

Steven Brubaker's delightful essay, "A Mennonite Thinks about Knowing," introduces key themes.¹ What is worth knowing? God, first and foremost. God's creation is also important and worth knowing. Humans are a key part of creation we should know and love. As humans, we also exercise creativity through our work, which results in what Brubaker calls "creation's creation." If we study history, or writings, or architecture, or carpentry, or any host of other things we are dealing largely with creation's creation.

In order to discuss the nature of knowing, Brubaker starts with the nature of truth. Usually, we think of truth as true statements that someone makes. However, Jesus said that He is the truth. Obviously, Jesus is a person and not a statement. There are lots of true statements we could make about Jesus such as that He is kind or divine. But Brubaker makes the point that truth is, first of all, Jesus Himself and secondly, true statements that describe Him. For Brubaker, this is a general point that applies not only to Jesus, but also to other people and

even to plants or inanimate objects. Truth is first substance and second description. Lots of true statements may describe an oak tree, that it is tall, leafy, strong, etc. But first of all, the truth of the oak tree is the tree itself.

This means that knowledge is not limited to knowing true descriptions. One can know lots of truths about God without truly knowing God. One can know lots of truths about a fellow human without really knowing them personally. Knowing God or people takes relationship and love, and sometimes commitment and obedience. Brubaker sees this as the pattern for all knowing.

For me, it comes relatively naturally to think about knowing God or humans as first relationship and second description. But when we talk about knowing the rest of creation, or of knowing creation's creation, it seems less natural. What is it, after all, to have a relationship with an oak tree or a bar of steel? We talk easily of knowing that an oak tree is tall, or that a bar of steel is heavy. On the other hand, to speak of knowing the oak tree itself, or the bar of steel itself, sounds strange. But if Brubaker and other writers I have come to respect are correct, knowing persons is the model that shows us what it is like to know any reality.

One way that I make sense of relational knowledge of trees or steel is by thinking about what it is like to work with them. Moving something, cutting something, or trying to shape it to fit our purposes are all modes of interaction. In physical work, I am trying to accomplish something, but to do so, I have to participate with those physical entities. That hard board or heavy bar becomes painfully well known when I break a drill bit or smash my toe. My dissertation explores how we know various realities through participating with them in skilled physical work.²

Does how we think about knowing matter.? Esther Meek is convinced that it matters for how we comport ourselves toward reality and ultimately toward God. In fact, she says most of us need epistemological therapy and proposes an epistemological etiquette for how we should conduct ourselves, if we want to know the world aright. Her very long book, *Loving to Know*, has helped me see that knowing creation has personal and relational dimensions, which is grounded in the fact that it is created by God.

Implications for Action

Thinkers I have encountered in various dimensions of my life have confirmed the relevance of a philosophy of knowledge.

First, I have developed an approach for the permaculture approach to agriculture and our physical surroundings. The permaculture movement emphasizes knowing the particularities of our homesteads and environment with the aim of working with nature instead of against nature. The first permaculture principle is “Observe and Interact.” Watch and learn with patience and then try something and participate. Work with nature and cultivate it to produce flourishing. While I am more of a reader than a practitioner, I have begun to find the permaculture mindset helpful, not only in gardening, but across my life.³

Second, thinking about knowing should affect how we think about learning. Our children’s school classes are based on a model which we sometimes call relational education. The term relational does not refer to relationships between child and teacher, but to relationships between students and what they study. In other words, the teacher’s goal is to facilitate students developing the kind of knowledge that Brubaker and Meek point us to. A speaker at a recent event explained that we measure the success of education by the number and quality of relations that the child develops with a range of realities, whether nature, art, the beautiful structures of mathematics, or the “living ideas” of worthwhile books.⁴

Finally, issues related to our approach to knowing keep coming up in my reading about missions, church life, and alleviating poverty. If we want to help a community or culture, we first have to understand it. The arrogant outsider who comes in with nothing but dreams and an education is likely to do more harm than good. The helper must first be a learner, who uses humility and respect to not only learn what is wrong but also to cultivate an appreciation of what is right and of the potentials for good. These principles apply to our work in our own communities, as well as cross cultural efforts. A recent article by Kyle Stoltzfus brought this home to me with a call to exercise “vigorous love” for the people of our church communities

rather than indulging in fantasies of what we wish our church was like.⁵ If we want to facilitate healing and flourishing, we must come as a humble, appreciative, relational learner.

So, in summary, epistemology matters because our comportment to reality matters. I find it exciting to see a convergence between philosophers thinking about knowing and thinkers writing about more “practical” subjects. I find it exciting to seek to know, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but with my whole person and life. Most of all I am thankful that God allows us to know Him, and that knowing His creation can be part of that.

ENDNOTES

¹ Steven Brubaker. “A Mennonite Thinks about Knowing.” 2015 <https://www.fbep.org/sites/default/files/A%20Mennonite%20Thinks%20About%20Knowing.pdf> Return to context↵

² Marlin Sommers. *Participating with the Known and the Value of Craft as Knowing*. Doctoral Dissertation. The University of Tennessee Knoxville. 2018. See more info at <https://marlin.work/knowning/> Return to context↵

³ While some practitioners work without the knowledge of God, Christians can recognize deep insight in much of their work. On the principle, “Observe and Interact” see, for example, https://permacultureprinciples.com/principles/_1/ Return to context↵

⁴ See, for example, the mission statement of the tutorial our children attend. <https://www.bluewillowtutorial.com/mission-statement> Return to context↵

⁵ Kyle Stoltzfus. Faith Builders Newsletter, Fall 2021 “That I May Know Him: In a world of information & opinion, what does it mean to know?” <https://www.fbep.org/sites/default/files/FB%20Newsletter%20C%20fall%202021.pdf> Return to context↵

