

How We Know What We Know

Dr Chuck McGowen

May

Epistemology is that part of philosophy which deals with the **origin, nature and limits** of knowledge. Knowledge can be divided into two main categories; the innate and the learned. Learned knowledge may be further subdivided into the worldly, the spiritual and the heavenly. Innate knowledge has to do with such automatic physical acts as breathing, crying, sucking, chewing, eliminating waste from the body, reaching for a desired object, etc. One quite readily sees this knowledge acted out in a new born child that has had no time to acquire such traits by observation. Since innate knowledge is entirely out of one's control this essay will only deal with learned knowledge. There is also a knowledge that is beyond the grasp of finite humans, a knowledge that is possessed only by the infinite God; it is called divine knowledge. That will also be discussed.

Worldly Knowledge

The **origin** or attainment of worldly knowledge depends upon the environment in which one has been raised. Those reared in the venue of an urban setting obtain one kind of information while those reared in suburban or rural locations have an entirely separate exposure. We gain the information to which we are exposed through the five senses and relate any given information to previous experiences. For example, if while driving down a highway one becomes aware of a particular odor, one may or may not realize that it is silage; the decomposing contents in the silo of a nearby barn. Urban dwellers would only know that smell from past exposure and having had an informative person explain its origin. A rural inhabitant would know the familiar smell almost by instinct having grown up on a farm.

Other sources of information come from books, the radio, newspapers, periodicals, television, the internet, formal education in K-12, college, graduate school, technical schools, on the job training, from simply listening to other people and finally from viewing the created world around us; the latter is called “general revelation” because its design, purpose and order point a general audience to the Creator. These sources, for the most part determine the **nature** of the information one garners.

Books are able to be re-read so that one may correct an initial misinterpretation of the facts, while the electronic media offer only “sound bites” of information which are usually taken out of the context or construct of the “real story.” Newspapers and periodicals, while purporting to be balanced, too often present the political position of the editorial board and thus the information contained therein tends to incline either to the political right or left. Formal education too may be skewed toward political correctness, and certainly with the expulsion of God from the forum of public education the information offered in those schools is vastly incomplete.

The **limits** of one’s worldly knowledge base are determined by two factors; a capacity to learn and one’s exposure to a learning process. Capacity entails the intelligent quotient (IQ). This is a measure of the ratio of one’s chronological age compared to one’s intellectual age. For example, a 10 year old boy with the intelligence of a 10 year-old (I.e. 4th grader) would have an IQ of 100. On the other hand a 10 year-old girl with the intelligence of a 14 year-old (I.e. 8th grader) would have an IQ of 140. One should never be held accountable for attaining more information than one has been afforded the capacity to do so.

Exposure in our country is easily attainable through the public or private K-12 system or by way of home schooling. Thus the literacy rate for inhabitants of the United States of America and other developed nations is higher than that of third world countries. Furthermore those who can afford the venues of higher education or technical training will gain more knowledge than those who cannot avail themselves of such opportunities.

Some folks have even become quite knowledgeable in a variety of subject matters apart from formal training but merely through the simple act of self-teaching. That however, requires a tenacity and discipline coupled with an intellectual curiosity that few people possess.

Worldly knowledge, (a.k.a. “human wisdom”, see I Corinthians 2:13) to one degree or another is potentially available to anyone that takes advantage of the various sources available. Spiritual knowledge on the other hand is available **only** to those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Knowledge

When a person is born again and crosses the threshold of faith, that individual brings along a great deal of philosophical baggage, to one degree or another: some good and some not so good. Collectively it represents a world-view, that for the most part is decidedly non-Christian. That is why the apostle Paul urges believers to become . . . *transformed by the renewing of your minds*. . . (Romans 12:2); that renewal of the mind and world view comes about with the attainment of spiritual knowledge. The capacity for that attainment is immediate and inevitable upon conversion but it is never complete. The capacity for this kind of knowledge is beyond the reach of non-Christians. No one has expressed this better than 20th Century, Anglican, theologian J.I. Packer, who said; “There is a total inability of the fallen human to think correctly about God, and gain true knowledge about Him, apart from the instruction of the Holy Scripture mediated by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”

The **origin** of all spiritual knowledge is from God the Father as He is presented in the Word_ the Holy Bible_ and understood through the leading and instruction of the Holy

Spirit. All spiritual knowledge originates with the Father, is communicated to believers by the Son and is comprehended through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.*(John 12:49) Later He said, *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*(John 14:26) The things that Jesus said, He said to the Spirit inspired writers of the Bible and they have been preserved for the benefit of believers for all time. Jesus promised us that His Word would never pass away.

The **nature** of spiritual knowledge is only to be found in the Bible. There was a time when God spoke through visions and dreams to the prophets of old, but in these times He has spoken only through Christ. (See Hebrews 1:1-2) Some people believe that the Holy Spirit speaks directly to them with new revelation, but that cannot be. Jesus warned about such notions when He said, *But when He, the Spirit of truth , comes, He will guide you into all truth. **He will not speak on His own**; He will speak only what He hears. . .* (John 16:13, emphasis added) The “Truth” of which Jesus spoke is the revealed word of God. In John 17:17 Jesus prayer to the Father, *Sanctify them by the truth, Thy word is truth.* The sanctification of which He spoke is progressive growth in the knowledge and will of God and obedience thereto.

The “truth” of which Christ speaks includes the knowledge of who God is in His triune nature, His plan of redemption for fallen mankind, the knowledge of each Person of the Godhead_ Father, Son and Holy Spirit_ and the role that each one plays in creation and salvation, the roll of angels and a prudent knowledge of the forces of evil. Many other spiritual truths are available to God’s chosen ones.

As Dr. Packer so aptly put it, spiritual knowledge is **limited** to those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is what the apostle Paul taught concerning that. *We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human*

wisdom, but in words taught by the spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (I Corinthians 2:12-14) Notice the limit here; the man without the Spirit “cannot” understand the Bible and is thus unable to gain spiritual knowledge.

Even Christians are limited in the amount of spiritual knowledge that they have; those limits are self imposed. If one does not take the time to do an in-depth study of God’s Word one remains spiritually illiterate. There is only one way to gain spiritual knowledge and the Holy Spirit revealed this to Solomon. *My son if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for a hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.* (Proverbs 2:1-5) That’s it in a nutshell. We must first “accept” the fact that God’s Word is inerrant, infallible and inspired Truth. Then we must be teachable and through a prayerful and diligent searching through the Bible we must cry out for understanding and insight.

The limit of one’s spiritual knowledge is also determined by the degree to which one is, or is not filled with God’s Spirit. That subject has been touched upon in a previous article entitled, *God’s Grace, Pneumatics and The Infilling of the Holy Spirit*; thus I won’t belabor the point here. We are also limited by our fallen nature, no matter how much we are filled with God’s spirit. One day however, when we have left these earthly tents (i.e. bodies) behind and have entered heaven and have become glorified like Christ (See Philippians 3:20-21), we will have the capacity for spiritual knowledge manifestly increased; that is what we will address in the next section.

Believers are always in danger of having their spiritual; knowledge questioned by unbelievers. This is especially true of young Christians who leave home to attend a secular college or university. Some under such pressures have abandoned their

spiritually gained knowledge in favor of a non-Christian world view. The apostle Paul warned such people with the following caveat: *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.* (Colossians 2:8)

Heavenly Knowledge

The Scriptures are relatively silent on this matter of heavenly knowledge, that is, one is not specifically told how much one will know as one lives eternally in Heaven. That relative silence is probably based on the fact that our fallen and finite minds could not possibly comprehend the depth of knowledge that will accrue to the saints of God. The most profound summary of heavenly knowledge is found in the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. There one reads, *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. . . Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.* (I Corinthians 13:9-10, 12)

The "perfection" of which Paul speaks is the glorification of the believer after one's physical death and the resurrection of one's body. That state of glorification is ensured (See Romans 8:29-30) and is described by Paul as Christ transforming *our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* (Philippians 3:21) The "poor reflection" and "in part" knowledge refers to that spiritual understanding that one obtains from Scripture. The good news is that one day each believer will "know fully" the great spiritual truths that have remained so mysterious even though one has sought through prayer and study to understand the profound revelations of God's Word. Thus the **origin** of heavenly knowledge is from the One who glorifies the believer's resurrected body. It's **nature** is best described in Paul's encouraging letter to the church at Philippi, *Therefore*

brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable_if anything is excellent or praiseworthy_think about such things. (Philippians 4:8) Thus the information that one will receive in heaven will have **limits**, that is it will not be false, ignoble, wrong, impure, unlovely, unadmirable, imperfect or unworthy of praise. Additionally one's knowledge base in heaven will contain no memories of earthly events or those persons who are not with us in heaven. God's Word clearly teaches that fact. . . .*The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever. . .* (Isaiah 65:17-18) Finally the heavenly saints, though glorified, will still be finite creatures and thus limited in some knowledge, unlike God who is omniscient; all knowing. Thus, as full and complete as that heavenly knowledge will be, it will still pale when compared to Divine knowledge.

Divine Knowledge

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? (Romans 11:33-34)

God has many attributes, not the least of which is His omniscience. That word is compound, comprised of two Latin words_*omnis*, meaning all_ and *scientia*, meaning knowledge. Thus God possesses all knowledge of past, present and future events, and a complete knowledge of thoughts and information contained in the entire universe and the transcendent third heaven. Furthermore He knows everything that could have occurred but didn't and might occur but won't. As theologian/ apologist R.C.Sproul puts it, "God knows every contingency, but not contingently."

God warns us not to try to figure Him out and that's not surprising since the finite can

never fully comprehend the infinite. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.*(Isaiah 55:8-9) At the last astronomical measurement the third heaven, which is outside of the created universe, was at least 15 billions of light years away from planet Earth; one light year being the distance that light travels in one year at the rate of 186,000 miles per second. God's thoughts and ways, though highly incomprehensible now, will become more understandable in heaven; yet not thoroughly.

The **origin** of all knowledge, even God's divine knowledge is to be found within Himself. It's **nature** is infinitely pure, true, inerrant, infallible, righteous, just, complete and holy. Lastly, God's knowledge has no **limits** for He is limitless, eternal and infinite in every way.

Conclusion

It has been said that "The mind is a terrible thing to waste." Neil Postman, in his award winning book *Amusing Ourselves To Death* has pointed out the sad fact that our hedonistic society is leading most people, especially young folks, to do just that; waste their minds. The word amusement is compound. To "muse" is to think, ponder, wonder, reflect, ruminate or meditate on. The prefix "a" serves to cancel the verb or noun which follows it, as in a-theist or a-gnostic (i.e. no God or no knowledge, respectively). The suffix "ment" implies a state. Thus the word a-muse-ment implies a state of not thinking.

As good stewards of the mind that God has graciously given to each of us, we should use it to gain as much worldly and spiritual knowledge as we are capable of, and as our time on Earth allows, then the eventual attainment of that vast amount of heavenly knowledge will produce much less of a degree of culture shock.

Soli Deo Gloria