



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Spring/Summer 1995 | Vol. XXI, Nos. 1, 2

---

---

## THE SPLENDOR OF KNOWLEDGE

*John Young*

---

---



ARISTOTLE SAYS THAT IN KNOWING “THE SOUL IS IN A CERTAIN MANNER ALL EXISTING things.”<sup>1</sup> This seemingly obscure statement is the key to understanding the nature and wonder of knowledge, and of answering the problem of objectivity which so plagues modern philosophy. It also enables us to refute the anti-intellectualism so often encountered, which sees the intellect as a blunt instrument where the higher things of life are concerned, preferring will and emotion as a guide instead of what is derided as “abstract ideas.”

### THE KNOWER BECOMES THE KNOWN

The union found in knowledge is so perfect that the knower becomes the known! This is not a metaphor, but of course it has to be correctly understood. We can start by noting that when two things are united, either one becomes the other or a third arises. When I digest a piece of bread, it becomes part of my substance: the bread becomes me. But when oxygen and hydrogen unite, a third arises: namely, water. What happens in knowledge? Clearly, the thing known doesn't become the person who knows it. When I see a tree it doesn't become me. Some philosophers, notably Immanuel Kant, say a third arises which is neither the external thing nor the knower. However, the consequences of saying this are quite appalling, as we will show.

The only other possibility is that the knower becomes the known. In clarification of this apparent paradox, it must be stressed that we are speaking of a knower precisely as a knower. I am not suggesting I turn into a landscape when I see one! But what happens to my power of vision? Suppose I have my eyes closed. I am not seeing anything; I am in potentiality to vision, or more precisely, my power of sight is in potentiality to vision: it can see, but is not seeing. Now I open my eyes. The potentiality for vision has been actualized, and the actuality is a landscape. The green hillside, the silver stream, the white clouds in a blue sky: these are not only out there in the external world. My potentiality for sight has become this scene.

The same applies to any knowledge. When I wake up in the morning, my intellect passes from potentiality-to-thought into the object being thought about; the potentiality becomes the object. If I begin to think of the nature of *triangle*, my intellect passes from potentiality into act, and the actuality is the *nature of triangle*.

St. Thomas Aquinas points out that the perfection of each created thing is incomplete and that knowing things have a remedy for this incompleteness because “there is found another mode of perfection in created things, according as the perfection which is proper to one thing is found in another thing; and this is the perfection of a knower inasmuch as it is a knower.”<sup>2</sup> This explains man's deep urge to know, especially to know the noblest things. He is one individual, limited by space and time. However, through knowledge he transcends the confines of his human nature and becomes many things. And he bursts the limits of space and time by knowing things existing outside the

small area in which his body subsists, and in times other than the present.

We know only imperfectly. But to the extent that we know, we have become the known. The potentiality to know has become actual knowledge, and this knowledge is the reality, so far as it is known.

To return to the theory that knowledge does consist in a third something, other than knower and external reality, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) taught that a reality outside us initiates our knowledge, but that the objects known are only in us, and are constructed by our faculties of sensibility and understanding. We don't know what things are in themselves.

“What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us.”<sup>23</sup> Not only sensibility, but the intellect also, is so constructed that it confers meaning on the things presented to it. “However exaggerated and absurd it may sound, to say that the understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature, and so of its formal unity, such an assertion is none the less correct, and is in keeping with the object to which it refers, namely, experience.”<sup>24</sup> Drops of rain are mere appearances in our consciousness; “. . . even their round shape, nay even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves, but merely modifications or fundamental forms of our sensible intuition...”<sup>25</sup>

Kant's doctrine cuts us off from the world. We know things exist, he says, but we know nothing of their nature. This conclusion follows if we assume that knowledge is the formation of a third something, distinct from knower and reality. The ground for Kant's position was prepared by Descartes, who said we know directly only our own ideas, not things. This would imprison us in our own minds, for if I am not in direct touch with things I cannot know there are things. The logical result is solipsism, that is, the claim that I alone exist, or at least that I can't know whether anything else exists; which is a doctrine so absurd and inhu-

man that it cannot be seriously held. Many years back a letter, written tongue in cheek, no doubt, appeared in *The Times*, London, and said: “I am a solipsist, and I cannot understand why there are not more followers of this philosophy.”

We'll look more closely at the union in knowledge by comparing it with physical appropriation.

Suppose a piece of plasticine is molded into a spherical shape. The form received, that is, the shape, is received by the plasticine as its own shape; is appropriated by the plasticine. The plasticine is the subject of that determination. Similarly, heat received in water is the heat of that water, not of the fire that caused it, or of any other subject. *This is subjective reception of a determination or form.*

Secondly, the reception of the new determination is by way of physical alteration in the receiving subject. The plasticine undergoes a physical reconstruction, which means loss of the previous shape and acquisition of the new shape. Likewise, the water gains heat through the physical alterations that occur in it. *This is physical reception of a determination or form.*

Thirdly, when the plasticine becomes round, there are not just plasticine and roundness, there is round plasticine. When the water becomes hot, there are not just

water and heat; there is hot water. A third reality has come into being. *This is composite reception of a determination or form.*

The reception just illustrated is that found in physical (as opposed to psychic) being. The reception of knowledge is quite different.

The knower sees or imagines or understands the spherical plasticine without receiving it subjectively. It is received objectively; that is, it remains the form of something else.

Nor is the reception of knowledge physical, in the sense explained. When the roundness of



Immanuel Kant

a ball of plasticine is observed, the observer's power of vision doesn't become round. When he understands or senses that water is hot, his power of knowledge does not physically acquire heat. The reception in knowledge is not physical, but rather supra-physical: the act of knowledge does not consist in gaining a new physical constitution.

Finally, the union of knower with known is not a composite union of the kind just described. Such a union excludes objectivity, because from it a third arises; a compound of, for instance, plasticine and roundness which is round plasticine. If that composition occurred in knowledge, objectivity would be impossible; the knower would be apprehending the compound from knower and the form received, which would exclude all knowledge of external reality. As we have said, Kant taught a composite union, holding that man confers meaning on the raw material presented to him; and he was consistent in maintaining as a consequence that we cannot know things-in-themselves. The same subjective trap awaits every philosopher who posits a composite union in knowledge, which includes all those who proceed in a way proper to physics and physiology, failing to see that a higher kind of union is required to explain knowledge.

To sum up: Knowledge is a reception of forms or determinations, but it is different from the material way of receiving them. Materially received forms are had subjectively, physically and compositely. Those received in knowledge are had objectively, supra-physically and incompositely. That manner of reception, and it alone, explains the evident fact that external reality is known. Also, as St. Thomas points out, if it sufficed for knowledge "that the known thing existed materially in the knower, there would be no reason why things which materially subsist outside the soul should lack knowledge."<sup>6</sup> Lifeless things and plants have forms materially, but they lack knowledge.

The level of being a thing has determines what it can do. A tree is far enough above the lowest level of material things to be able to convert other beings into itself by nutrition. A dog can do more: it can have other things in itself, by sense knowledge, without destroying them. A human being can do more still: can know intellectually. But for even the most basic level of knowledge, that of the senses, a being must be free from the necessity of having determinations only subjectively, physically and compositely. It must be able to have them objectively, supra-physically and incompositely. Therefore knowledge

can be defined: The immaterial or objective possession of form.<sup>7</sup>

Failure to see the unique way in which things are possessed in knowledge results in the notion, very common among philosophers since Descartes, that we directly apprehend only our own ideas (in the loose sense of cognitive representations, whether sensitive or intellectual), and that we then infer extramental things resembling the ideas. But if knowledge were essentially and primarily of ideas - if it were enclosed in a world of ideas - we would have no way of knowing whether any real world existed. Solipsism would follow logically. Yet we do know through ideas. What, then, is the nature of these ideas? How can they present reality to us?



#### THE IDEA: A SIGN PAR EXCELLENCE

They are signs of things, but signs in the purest possible sense of the word. Any sign manifests something else, but other signs do so secondarily, whereas the idea does so primarily. Take smoke as an instance of a secondary sign. It is first of all a reality in its own right, but functions in a secondary respect as a sign because it manifests fire. Similarly, a pallid complexion is primarily a reality (a quality), but secondarily a sign of illness. Again, a photograph is firstly a thing, but secondarily a sign of the person represented.

But the sign we are discussing (the idea) is primarily a sign and only secondarily a thing. I could not see a tree unless a representation of it were in me; yet it is the tree I see. So the representation must be of a very special and perfect kind, since it shows me primarily the thing itself. It is certainly not equivalent to a photograph, for a photograph I look at is the thing my vision attains, and the person pictured there is only inferred, not seen. The cognitive representation presents something else without intruding itself; it is not *that which is* known, but that through which something else is known. Certainly we can think about our ideas, making them that which is known, but this is by a second operation of the mind, a reflection.

Following Descartes, John Locke (1632-1704)

declares: “It is evident the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.”<sup>8</sup> He next puts the crucial question: “How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?” He cannot give a satisfactory answer because he fails to see that the idea is not that which is known (except by reflection), but that wherein other things are known.

Most modern philosophers have the same problem. In his book *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, published in 1984, Barry Stroud writes: “It was clear from Descartes’s reflections that the epistemic priority of ideas or appearances or perceptions over external physical objects has fatal consequences. Once some such distinction is in place, we will inevitably find ourselves cut off forever from sensory knowledge of the world around us.”<sup>9</sup> He notes, rightly: “I think many philosophers who show little interest in skepticism are in fact committed to it by their own theories of knowledge..”<sup>10</sup> But in 274 pages he does not solve the question, nor does he claim to have reached a satisfactory answer. Significantly, the index contains no reference to either Aristotle or St. Thomas.

Another recent work, *Open Questions, An Introduction to Philosophy*, by Emmett Barcalow, says: “Whether skepticism should be rejected remains an open question.”<sup>11</sup> He had earlier explained that skeptics claim “. . . we don’t know anything about the nature or even existence of the physical world.”<sup>12</sup>

Neglect of the Thomistic analysis, developed from Aristotle, has led to the prevailing situation where philosophers are unable to defend the reliability of our knowledge.

The splendor of knowledge is seen more clearly when we ponder God’s knowledge of himself. Compare it with my knowledge of myself. An obvious difference is that I know myself imperfectly, whereas God knows himself perfectly. But even if I had perfect knowledge of myself, it would still be only an accident in me - a quality; it would not be my very substance. But in God there are no accidents, so his knowledge is identical with his being.

We know from Revelation that God the Father generates a Word which is consubstantial with himself. St. John tells us: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>13</sup> The

Epistle to the Hebrews says that the Son “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature.”<sup>14</sup> The Nicene Creed proclaims him “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” In God the Infinite is perfectly knowing himself, which means that the divine Word - the divine Idea - is all that the knower is. The infinite knower generates a perfect idea of himself. Unlike my idea of myself, it does not fall short. And unlike my thought it is not a quality, but the very same substance as the Father. All knowledge requires an identity between knower and known; in God alone is this identity perfect. But our knowledge bears a resemblance to the divine knowledge, and a consideration of the resemblance shows more clearly the greatness of knowledge. Not only does all fatherhood take its title from the divine Fatherhood;<sup>15</sup> all knowledge takes its title from the divine knowledge.

## SOME COROLLARIES

Now to glance at some corollaries of our discussion, beginning with its bearing on the tendency to skepticism so widespread today. The inability of so many philosophers to defend the objectivity of knowledge has led to a lack of confidence in the power of reason. In association with a rejection of metaphysics, due to causes we cannot pursue here, a mood has been generated which sees the intellect as pretty useless for investigating ultimate questions. Today’s prevalent mentality takes it for granted that we can’t know whether we have a soul that will live on after death, we can’t know whether God exists, we can’t say there are any moral laws that always bind. This prevailing attitude can be overcome only by a true understanding of the nature of our cognitive faculties, especially the intellect.

Secondly, the greatness of knowledge appears clearly when we see that it means we become the object apprehended. We are able to possess other realities without destroying them, to enlarge ourselves by having other things within us. It follows that those are wrong who speak of knowledge as something remote from reality. Knowledge of reality is reality, present in the mind! Admittedly there is always a remoteness about it in the sense that what we know falls short of the thing known, a fact particularly pertinent to apprehension of the highest things. For our understanding of things comes through abstraction from sense knowledge and not from direct intellectual contact with the realities understood. But we see them more vividly as we meditate intently on them.

Where religious knowledge is concerned, the virtue of faith wonderfully enhances the ability to make reality live more vitally in the intellect. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.”<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, it is more fitting to become, cognitively, higher things in the scale of being, rather than lower ones. The soul is a better object of knowledge than the body; and knowledge of God is better than that of created beings.

Fourthly, the words of Christ, “the truth will make you free,”<sup>17</sup> are more profoundly understood if we see the realism of knowledge. As Frank Sheed insisted, we must educate ourselves to live mentally in the real world, “knowing its reality and its laws, knowing how to conduct ourselves in it.” It must become “a kind of landscape in which the mind habitually lives.”<sup>18</sup>

Fifthly, knowledge is a condition of love. Sometimes people sharply contrast the two, as though love alone is important. But unless we have a reality in our mind, it is impossible to love it, for love is a response to what is known, and cannot exist without knowledge. If we know nothing about someone, not even their existence, no basis exists for love.

Sixthly, since knowledge is not extrinsic, like a suit of clothes, but something we are, when we are in error that error is something of us. We have, in a sense, become error by embracing it. Where matters of faith are involved, the presence of error means having, to that

extent, what has been called an unsaved intellect. God’s truth is absent and falsity dwells there instead.

In this connection, it is possible to become over-preoccupied with the prevalence of error. One finds orthodox Catholics who are so keenly aware of the ravages of warped thinking in today’s Church that they have become obsessed with it. They seem more zealous in pondering heresy so as to combat it than in nourishing themselves with the truth. Error has partially succeeded in crowding the truth out of their minds, even though they firmly believe the truth - paradoxically, their strong faith has led to this unfortunate situation. I’m not suggesting we should ignore the errors surrounding us; rather we should make ourselves familiar with them so as to oppose them. But we should never allow them to dominate our minds, to become an obsession that prevents us from meditating on the truth and allowing it to permeate our consciousness.

Finally, an understanding of the nature of knowledge gives us a clearer appreciation of the wonder of the Beatific Vision, which is the destiny to which we are called. It consists in seeing God face to face. All knowledge means becoming the known, but since this is the highest knowledge, it consists in becoming its object in the most sublime way possible to a creature. In heaven we will become God in the sense that our capacity to know him will be actuated by his direct presence. As St. John says: “. . . when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”<sup>19</sup>



# NOTES

1*De Anima*, III, 8,421b 20.

2*De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2.

3Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 59, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (London, 1963), p. 82. (In these references, A refers to the first edition, B to the second.)

4Kant, A 127.

5Kant, B 63.

6*Summa Theol.* I, q. 84, a. 2.

7Cf. St. Thomas, *In Librum de Causis*, lect. 18.

8John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. IV, ch. 4, sec. 3.

9Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford, 1984), p. 255.

10*Ibid.*, p. viii.

11Barcalow, *Open Questions* (California, 1992), p. 149. 12*Ibid.*, p. 128.

13John 1:1.

14Hebrews 1:3.

15Ephesians 3:15.

16Heb. 11:1

17John 8:32

18F. J. Sheed, *Theology and Sanity* (London, 1948), p. 309

19I John 3:2.