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What is Knowledge?

J.P. Moreland

Do we, the disciples of Jesus, possess through Scripture and other means a reliable source of knowledge of reality or do we not? We have seen that this is an important question. The possession of knowledge—especially religious and moral knowledge—is essential for a life of flourishing. To answer this question we must, first, answer another question: What exactly is knowledge and what does it mean to say Christian teaching provides it? Let's begin in earnest and see if we can find an answer to this second query.

Knowledge Defined

Here's a simple definition of knowledge: It is *to represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds*. To know something (the nature of cancer, forgiveness, God) is to think of or experience it as it really is on a solid basis of evidence, experience, intuition, and so forth. Little can be said in general about what counts as "adequate grounds." The best one can do is to start with specific cases of knowledge and its absence in art, chemistry, memory, scripture, logic, and formulate helpful descriptions of "adequate grounds" accordingly.

Three Important Clarifications about Knowledge

Please note three important things. First, *knowledge has nothing to do with certainty or an anxious quest for it*. One can know something without being certain about it and in the presence of doubt or the admission that one might be wrong. Recently, I know that God spoke to me about a specific matter but I admit it is possible I am wrong about this (though, so far, I have no good reason to think I am wrong). When Paul says, "This you know with certainty" (Ephesians 5:5), he clearly implies that one can know without certainty; otherwise, the statement would be redundant. Why? If I say, "Give me a burger with pickles on it," I imply that it is possible to have a burger without pickles. If, contrary to fact, pickles were simply essential ingredients of burgers, it would be redundant to ask for burgers with pickles. The parallel to "knowledge with certainty" should be easy to see. When Christians claim to have knowledge of this or that, for example, that God is real, that Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is the word of God, they are not saying that there is no possibility that they could be wrong, that they have no doubts, or that they have answers to every question raised against them. They are simply saying that these and other claims satisfy the definition given above.

Second, *one can know something without knowing how one knows it*. If one always has to know how one knows something before one can know it, one would also have to know how one knows how one knows something, and so on to infinity. Life is too short for such lengthy regresses and, thankfully, we often just know things without having any idea how we do. Thus, a person could know he or she has experienced the presence of God without being able to tell a skeptic how he/she knows this. When Christians claim to know this or that, they are not saying that they always know how they know the things they do. For example, many Christians have had experiences in which

they *knew* that God was guiding them in a certain way, but they may not have been able to say exactly how they knew this. Now, it is often the case that some in the Christian community—for example, experts in New Testament studies or philosophy—do, in fact, know how we Christians know certain things. But it is not necessary for the average believer to have this information before they are within their rights to claim to know God is real and so forth.

Finally, *one can know without knowing that one knows*. Consider Joe, an insecure yet dedicated high school student, who is about to take his history final. He has studied thoroughly and knows the material, but when a friend asks him if he is prepared for the test, he says, “no.” In this case, Joe actually knows the material, but he doesn’t know he knows it. Thus, he lacks confidence. Today, cultural elites in the media and university tell us that we cannot know that God is real, etc. As a result, while many Christians actually do know various things relevant to Christianity, they lack confidence because they do not know that they have this knowledge.

Three Kinds of Knowledge

In addition to these three observations about knowledge, there are three different kinds of knowledge. : 1) ***Knowledge by acquaintance***: This happens when we are directly aware of something, e.g., when I see an apple directly before me or pay attention to my inner feelings, I know these things by acquaintance. One does not need a concept of an apple or knowledge of how to use the word “apple” in English to have knowledge by acquaintance with an apple. A baby can see an apple without having the relevant concept or linguistic skills. *Knowledge by acquaintance is sometimes called “simple seeing,” being directly aware of something.* Sometimes Christians know God by directly experiencing His presence, forgiveness, and so on. 2) ***Propositional knowledge***: This is knowledge that an entire proposition is true. For example, knowledge that “the object there is an apple” requires having a concept of an apple and knowing that the object under consideration satisfies the concept. ***Propositional knowledge is justified true belief; it is believing something that is true on the basis of adequate grounds.*** The Bible is our ultimate, final source of propositional knowledge about the doctrines of Christianity. 3) ***Know-how***: *This is the ability to do certain things*, e.g., to use apples for certain purposes. We may distinguish mere know-how from genuine know-how or skill. The latter is know-how based on knowledge and insight and is characteristic of skilled-practitioners in some field. Mere know-how is the ability to engage in the correct behavioral movements, say by following the steps in a manual, with little or no knowledge of why one is performing these movements. Biblical know-how directed at living life well is called wisdom.

Because knowledge by acquaintance is so important, let me elaborate on it a bit further. This sort of knowledge is knowledge by simple seeing—when one directly experiences something. One can think of a tree, God, or whether or not one is angry, but these are all different from directly being aware of the tree, God, or one’s inner state of anger. Knowledge by acquaintance is an important foundation for all knowledge, and in an important sense, experience or direct awareness of reality is the basis for everything we know. *Experience is more basic than ultimate worldview presuppositions and, in*

fact, the evidence of experience provides data for evaluating rival worldviews or interpretations of some event.

One should not limit what one can see or directly be aware of to the five senses. One can also be directly aware of one's own soul and inner states of thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs and so forth by introspective awareness of one's inner life. One can be directly aware of God and His presence in religious experience, of His speaking to one in guidance, of the Spirit's testimony to various things, and so forth. From Plato to the present, many philosophers have believed, correctly in my view, in what is called *rational awareness*, the soul's ability to directly be aware of aesthetic and moral values, numbers and the laws of mathematics, the laws of logic, and various abstract objects such as humanness, wisdom and so forth. *The important thing to note is that we humans have the power to "see," to be directly aware of, to directly experience a wide range of things, many of which are not subject to sensory awareness with the five senses.*

To "**simply** see" an apple (or experience God in contemplative prayer) is to be directly aware of it. To *see something as* an apple (or God) requires that one has acquired the concept of being an apple (perhaps from repeated exposure to simply seeing apples) and applies it to the object before one. To *see that* an object is an apple (or God), one must have the entire thought in one's mind "The object before me is an apple" and judge that the object genuinely corresponds to that thought. All three have relevance to mystical experience and awareness of God.

Given the reality and nature of knowledge by acquaintance, it follows that knowledge does not begin with presuppositions, language, concepts, one's cultural standpoint, worldview or anything else. It starts with awareness of reality. *Seeing as* and *seeing that* do require that one has presuppositions, concepts, and so forth. One's presuppositions and so forth will *influence* how we see things *as such and such*, e.g., as a healing from God, and one's worldview will *influence* our *seeing that* or *judging that such and such*, e.g., seeing/judging that this event is a miraculous healing. But one's worldview does not *determine* the way we see or judge things. That's far too strong. Influence is one thing; determination is another. Failure to make this distinction has contributed to confusions I will address later.

And because we have direct acquaintance with the world itself prior to *seeing as* (applying a concept to something) or *seeing that* (judging that an entire proposition is true), we can compare the way we see things or judge things with the things themselves and thereby we can adjust our worldview. For example, because we actually see the person get well, we can verify or disconfirm that we are right to see the event or judge that it was a miracle from God. Knowledge by acquaintance gives us direct access to reality as it is in itself, and we actually know this to be the case in our daily lives.

In closing, I suggest that you ponder the three sorts of knowledge we have discussed and reflect on how it is that you have each sort in relation to your Christian faith. As you do, please keep in mind the three clarifications about knowledge to ensure that you reflect accurately on the role that knowledge plays in your own Christian pilgrimage.