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Christianity and Non-Empirical Knowledge

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Last time we looked at the nature of knowledge and we defined it in this way: It is *to represent (i.e., experience or think about) reality the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds, on a solid basis of evidence, experience, intuition, testimony and so forth.* We also saw that 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. 2) **Propositional knowledge**: This is knowledge that an entire proposition is true. Propositional knowledge is justified true belief; it is believing something that is true on the basis of adequate grounds. 3) **Know-how**: *This is the ability or skill, usually based on the other two sorts of knowledge, to do certain things, e.g., to use apples for certain purposes.*

However, we Christians are not just committed to knowledge, as important as that is. We are also committed to the idea that we can have various kinds of non-empirical knowledge, i.e., knowledge that does not require an appeal to what one can see, smell, taste, touch or hear in order to know it: knowledge of God, the soul, moral values, demons and angels, and so on. But is there really such a thing? The answer is “Yes, indeed!” and in what follows I will briefly dismiss the charge that all knowledge is empirical (i.e., must be testable by the five senses) and then present examples of knowledge that is non-empirical.

Asserting What Can't Be Said

People sometimes assert things that they are not rationally entitled to assert. “I can't speak a word of English,” “There are no truths,” “No sentence is longer than three words,” are all examples. Why? Because they are self-refuting. Each statement is an example of something that refutes the statement itself. Now the assertion “There is only empirical knowledge and truth” is not itself an example of an empirical knowledge or truth. There is absolutely nothing one could see, touch, taste, smell, or hear (and by “hear” I refer to a mere sound, not the meaning or content expressed by it, because meaning and content are themselves non-empirical; see below) that would provide the slightest evidence for this claim. If you disagree, ask yourself: What sight would confirm that we shouldn't believe or assert what we can't test with our five senses? What sound? Could a smell, taste or touch tell us that it is true? Obviously not. Because the statement of empiricism itself is not the sort of thing that can be tested by something that can be seen, smelled, tasted, touched or heard, it can't possibly be tested with the five senses. But this means that it fails to meet its own standard of acceptability and is, therefore, self-refuting.

Examples of Non-empirical Knowledge

Let me give some examples of non-empirical knowledge. (For brevity, I'll use “seeing” as a synonym for “testing something with the five senses.” “I can see the effects

of gravity” will mean the same thing as “I can test the effects of gravity with my five senses.”)

First, truth (the relation of matching or correspondence between a thought/proposition and reality) is not something we can see, so if we are limited to our five senses, we can have no grasp of it. If I believe that a book I ordered is at the bookstore, and then go to the bookstore and see the book, I know that my belief about the book is true. I can see the book there, but I cannot see my *belief* that the book was there, nor can I see the *correspondence relationship* between the book’s being there and my belief that it was there. In a case where my wife tells me I am angry and I’m not sure if she’s correct, I can introspect and decide the matter. If I take the thought “I am angry” and use it to search my inner feelings, when I experience my own anger, I come to know that my wife’s claim is true. But I cannot see my thought (“I am angry”), I cannot see the emotional state of anger itself and I cannot see the correspondence between the thought and my feeling of anger. Truth itself is not sense perceptible.

This last example surfaced another realm of non-empirical knowledge: One’s first-person awareness of one’s own conscious states. You know your own feelings, sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desires and so on but not by using your senses. In fact, you have never seen a feeling or thought, etc. in your life! These things are known through first-person introspection not through the senses. (Homework assignment: How do you know other people have minds, e.g., have thoughts, experiences of pain, etc.? Hint: Part of the answer does involve the senses—observing their body movements and hearing sounds from their mouths. But another part does not.)

Second, knowledge itself is not something we can have reasonable views about if we are limited to our five senses. To convince yourself of this, read my previous article in this series about knowledge and ask whether or not the definition of knowledge or my delineation of different kinds of knowledge could be done solely by appealing to one’s senses. Or do this: Consider the idea that knowledge is whatever our peers will let us believe. On this view, all that’s required for me to *know* that the earth is flat (for instance) is that my peers allow me to say that it is. The whole *point* of defining knowledge is to determine what sorts of things we should and shouldn’t believe; but how in the world are we going to evaluate this definition if we are limited to what we can test with the five senses? With space-travel, the statement “the earth is flat” is testable by the five senses, and it is false. The statement “you should not proclaim something that’s false,” however, is not testable by the five senses, and neither is the statement “you should not proclaim that the earth is flat, even if your peers let you.” But in spite of the fact that we can’t smell, taste, touch, hear or see that we shouldn’t proclaim that the earth is flat, we obviously *shouldn’t* proclaim that it’s flat! These observations make evident (and making something evident is also not something we can recognize by our senses) how absurd empiricism is as a guide about knowledge.

Third, normative knowledge (knowledge about what ought or ought not be the case is not based on the senses. We know a host of other things that are not testable by our five senses. I don’t gain normative knowledge by testing things with my five senses either. I know what sorts of things I should and should not believe (rational normativity), what sorts of things I should and should not do (moral normativity) and what sorts of things I should and should not regard as beautiful (aesthetic normativity). But I can’t test

any of these statements with my five senses. I can only test what is or is not the case with my senses; I can't similarly test what ought or ought not be the case.

Finally, even some things studied in the hard sciences cannot be known by the five senses. For example, we cannot see, touch, feel, hear or smell a magnetic field, but we know there are such things. We can see or feel the *effects* of such a field (for example, the iron filings falling into a particular pattern), but we cannot see the field itself. We infer that there must be such a field to explain the effects.

The senses are wonderful guides for providing us with empirical knowledge, but they are inadequate as guides for non-empirical knowledge. Both are genuine, both are important, and both are biblical.