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THE "PROBLEM" OF KNOWLEDGE IN "MODERN" PHILOSOPHY

"We thus come to one of those crucial issues in education that drive us into defining more explicitly what is *really* real and how we can know that it is. In other words, we are forced to make a foray (albeit a necessarily brief one) into metaphysics and epistemology respectively. If the reader is disposed to regard this chapter as a somewhat abstract digression from education, he may possibly be reconciled to it by the assurance that the problems of the curriculum, learning theory, and school organization have their theoretical roots in it."

Harry S. Broudy.

To the modern mind the paradox which is presented by the fact that the "... very existence of extensive and evergrowing knowledge (constituted) the source of the "problem" of how knowledge is possible anyway"¹ is a most interesting one. Randall explains this paradox by stating that the scientists were trying to discover a *kind* of knowledge which was

¹ John Dewey, "Common Sense and Science: their Respective Frames of Reference," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XLV, No. 8, April 8, 1948, p. 203.

impossible of attainment by their methods. They were trying to obtain a complete and permanent explanation of all things—their “ideal was still a *system of revelation*, though they had abandoned the *method* of revelation.”²

DESCARTES

Let us turn to a few of the “modern” philosophers and see what they made of the “problem” of knowledge. Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” is as well known as almost any quotation from philosophy and it is the key to his theory of knowledge. Knowledge, to Descartes, is subjective; and many of his followers made it even more so due to his making the primary observation “I think, therefore I am” the foundation of all knowledge. From this beginning he was able to obtain “certain” proof of the existence of God and the nature of all knowledge. Although Descartes was devoted to mathematics and science and considered himself a true advocate of scientific method his subjective criterion of truth and knowledge was far from scientific. Although he maintained that “. . . we should busy ourselves with no object about which we cannot attain a certitude equal to that of the demonstrations of Arithmetic and Geometry”³ he, at the same time, “. . . clearly recognized (that) the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends alone on the knowledge of the true God, in so much that, before I knew Him, I could not have a perfect knowledge of any other thing.”⁴

Anything which appears clearly and distinctly to Descartes’ mind must be true—God would not allow things to be presented clearly and distinctly to his mind if they were not true—further, “the nature of my mind is such that I could not prevent myself from holding them to be true so long as I conceive them clearly.”⁵

² John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, revised edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), p. 267.

³ René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* in Ralph M. Eaton, ed., *Descartes: Selections* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1927), p. 44.

⁴ Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

This ability of Descartes to know all things which appear clearly to him makes it difficult for him to appreciate criticism by those who do not seem to see clearly the same things. Many times he makes statements such as: "I have sufficiently well explained . . . for those who care to follow my meaning. . .";⁶ and, "Now all this is quite self-evident and needs no further explanation."⁷ and he thereby excuses himself from the necessity of adequately answering ticklish questions. The eternal truths *must* be obvious to the human mind and ". . . we cannot fail to recognize them when the occasion presents itself for us to do so, and if we have no prejudice to blind us."⁸ Thus he conveniently labels "blind" those who do not see as he does. There is no doubt that in Descartes' mathematical foundation there were many ideas which later would be developed into more radical outlooks than his before they were discovered to be totally inadequate. We must remember, however, that one of Descartes' main concerns seemed to be to vindicate his religious faith. As he says in the concluding section of *The Principles of Philosophy*: ". . . recalling my insignificance, I affirm nothing, but submit all these opinions to the authority of the Catholic Church."⁹

LOCKE

Any discussion of knowledge is, of course, incomplete without a reference to Locke, who stated that ". . . from experience . . . all our knowledge is founded." This experience is of two kinds: first, "Our senses . . . convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things . . . and thus we come by those ideas . . . which we call sensible qualities"; secondly, we perceive ". . . the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got"¹⁰ — this Locke calls reflec-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁸ Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁰ John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* in Sterling P. Lamprecht, ed., *Locke: Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), pp. 111, 112.

tion as compared to sensation. He outlines a rather thorough study of ideas and knowledge based on experience but admits that revelation is a supplementary source of knowledge. But in admitting revelation we must be careful, he says, for "... he that takes away reason, to make way for revelation, puts out the light of both" — reason must be used to test the truth of revelations to make sure "... by the testimony and proofs it gives, that they come from God."¹¹

Knowledge, to Locke, has to do with the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of our ideas. We cannot be certain of our knowledge, according to Locke, for it is only concerned with observable qualities and their relations. The true essences are unknowable for they are not within the realm of experience. Finally, says Locke, the only ways which we can use to enlarge our knowledge are: first, to gather ideas of things which we have sensed and experienced; secondly, to find out those intermediate ideas (and how to find them out is not explicit) which will show the agreement or repugnancy of our ideas which are not immediately comparable.

Although the quotation from Randall, given in the opening paragraph, had to do primarily with scientists, it is relevant to a considerable degree to the work of the philosophers. Starting from his clear and distinct ideas which would be above suspicion, Descartes felt that he could, if he had the time, finally arrive at a complete explanation of things. Even Locke's admission that there were some things which would most likely never be known was a means of gathering those unknowns into a complete system of knowledge. He also left the gate ajar in allowing for the possibility that anything could be given man to know if God saw fit to reveal it. Both of these men, as well as most of the other philosophers up to contemporary times, saw knowledge as finished, complete and, once attained, permanent.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

KANT

Kant too saw knowledge in a somewhat similar way. He divided the world into two segments: the phenomenal, or that which can be known by experience; and, the noumena, or those "things in themselves" which are beyond human knowledge. Within the realm of phenomena he was almost as empirical as Locke with the exception that he believed that the only basis for certainty of knowledge is *a priori* for "... whence should experience take its certainty, if all the rules which it follows were always again and again empirical, and therefore contingent and hardly fit to serve as first principles?"¹²

WOODBIDGE

When we come to the contemporary scene we find that many of the most recent philosophers are not concerned with the "problem" of knowledge as a problem. The authors whose writings are briefly discussed above, as well as many other "modern" philosophers, were not only concerned with obtaining knowledge but were, in many cases, primarily concerned with defining just what knowledge is and how it can be verified with certainty. Woodbridge asks the question "... why should a criterion for knowledge be ardently desired by anybody?"¹³ He continues with a discussion of natural knowledge and says that it quite obviously is knowledge of Nature.

If what we learn by exploring heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, is not knowledge, something else must be; and I look in vain for that something else. ... (I) am disgusted if asked whether that knowledge (that water boils at 212° Fahrenheit) is really *knowledge*. If it is not really knowledge, then I must ask for a sample of what real knowledge would be. Failing that I must do precisely what the chemist does, go to Nature, put questions to her, and accept her answers and refrain from

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* in Theodore Meyer Greene, ed., *Kant: Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 29.

¹³ Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, *An Essay on Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 11.

trying to imagine what knowledge should be like before any knowledge is acquired.¹⁴

While admitting that there are obvious limitations to the extent of knowledge, Woodbridge insists that "...there is no antecedent definition of knowledge which constrains us in considering limitations of knowledge."¹⁵ In his treatment of knowledge, Woodbridge tries to tie up the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of happiness. Either one is nothing without the other, he insists. He claims that the study of Nature is conducted in order to find out that which is — he has no use for the "...philosophical excitement of a few years ago known as 'pragmatism'"¹⁶ which insisted that truth is "that which works." To Woodbridge, "...all inquiry proceeds governed by the principle that there is a way of an eagle in the air, of a serpent on a rock, of a fish in the midst of the sea, of a man with a maid, quite irrespective of our understanding it. Wherever we are lost, there is a way home whether we find it or not."¹⁷ In connection with the empirical approach to knowledge our author maintains that for the purpose of the pursuit of happiness we need a faith in the supernatural. We cannot pursue happiness without sometimes questioning whether or not that pursuit is worth while. We question thus because we are made so that we must and a

... justification of Nature which she herself does not afford is demanded. She is justified by man's faith that the supernatural is justification, and that faith is that faith that justifies him ... His faith, simply confessed, is that with the supernatural there is salvation. His superstition (and it is very difficult to keep his faith free from superstition), simply expressed, is that the supernatural can be diverted by his faith in it and by the ceremonies emblematic of his faith.¹⁸

In spite of Woodbridge's plea that his use of "faith" and "superstition" and "supernatural" be used in his context one

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

can easily read into his position a reinstallation of the dualism of knowledge and faith which not only brings back most of its problems and difficulties but does not solve any of the problems which former adherents of the dualism managed to solve for themselves. He concludes his treatise with the remark that "A philosopher, presuming to make himself a mouthpiece for the judgment of his race, will have been a very superficial student of mankind if he does not discover the judgment that it is faith, not knowledge, that justifies."¹⁹

NEWTON

Perhaps the most significant points with regard to the conception of knowledge which was built up by modern science are: first, the experimental method; and, secondly, the tentativity of knowledge and the necessity of submitting all hypotheses to future and continuing verification in the light of new discoveries and experiments. Newton summed up these points by saying:

In experimental philosophy we are to look upon propositions collected by general induction from phenomena as accurately or very nearly true, notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses that may be imagined, till such time as other phenomena occur, by which they may be made more accurate, or liable to exceptions.²⁰

DEWEY

Perhaps we can best conclude this brief treatment of knowledge by attempting to sum up John Dewey's position. His conception of knowledge is tied up with his conception of experience. He throws out the "unreal" problem of the relation of immediate knowledge to reflective knowledge and claims that there are not two kinds of knowledge with differing objects, but rather, "There are two dimensions of experienced things: one, that of having them, and the other that of knowing about them so

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²⁰ Isaac Newton, *Principles*, Book III, "Fourth Rule of Reasoning in Philosophy."

that we can again have them in more meaningful and secure ways.”²¹ Scepticism can only be legitimate in specific situations. To doubt one’s existence (as Descartes tried or, perhaps, pretended to do) or to doubt that one can know anything is nonsense. Items of existence *are* —they cannot be doubted; not because they are known immediately, but rather because they are matters of existence, not of knowledge.

The error involved in most conceptions of knowledge, says Dewey, is that they assume existence which is prior to and apart from both inquiry and the results of inquiry. To Dewey, “. . . known objects exist as the consequences of directed operations, not because of conformity of thought or observation with something antecedent. . . the worth of any object that lays claim to being an object of knowledge is dependent upon the intelligence employed in reaching it.”²²

The work of science had, of course, a great effect upon Dewey’s conception of knowledge. The testing of the consequences of propositions was totally different from the classic philosophic treatment of theories of knowledge. Instead of looking to what was or is and trying to copy it, Dewey’s conception of knowledge looks to the future. It is concerned with evolving ideas which can be used to rearrange and reconstruct the world which former theories of knowledge were content to copy photographically. According to Dewey, then, knowledge is incomplete unless it is acted upon. “Knowledge cooped up in a private consciousness is a myth, and knowledge of social phenomena is peculiarly dependent upon dissemination, for only by distribution can such knowledge be either obtained or tested.”²³ To Dewey, knowledge is experimental, hypothetical and even enters into “. . . a perspective that is religious in quality.”²⁴ By ex-

²¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1925), p. 21.

²² John Dewey, *Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1929), p. 200.

²³ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1927), pp. 176-177.

²⁴ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 26.

perimental Dewey means just that — physical experimentation; by hypothetical he means that knowledge starts as hypotheses which must be tested by experiment before they become knowledge; by religious in quality he means that “Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation.”²⁵

CONCLUSION

The writer's views on the subject of knowledge are close to those of Dewey, as the reader has most likely gathered. That view of knowledge which depends not upon supposed ultimate realities or alleged supernatural revelation but which depends upon the ability to produce eventual universal consent by openly presenting hypotheses and permitting, indeed demanding, experimentation and verification or refutation, is to my mind the most valuable conception of knowledge yet arrived at by man. This conception alters our outlook from the past to the future. It is concerned with replacing, by regulation of conditions, absolute certainties with high predictive probabilities. The security that is desired and sought for is not that faith in the supernatural which Woodbridge seems to think a necessary condition of the pursuit of happiness but rather it is that security which comes with a probable regulation of change instead of a belief in the eternally unchangeable. With this alteration of viewpoint emphasis has been transferred from acceptance of an impotent dependence on the past or the present to an actual intelligent attempt to reconstruct the future.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.