

Chapter 4:

More Questions Than Answers

About the limitations of being Human...

To begin this discussion about why there are more questions than answers let us be confident about a few things. Though humans are biological creatures, they are more than just their biology. Whether created uniquely by God or the result of the emergence of life from the universe itself is not a question that can be answered with certainty here. It may be that the universe produced life in the way science says because God made the universe capable of doing that. That is my preferred view. We can't know at this time with the information we have. But, as biological beings, we can say that there are certain constraints on anything we might do because of that. Let us discuss those constraints.

First, from a commonsense point of view, none of us comes into the world without parents. We are something of a mix of the characteristics of our mother and father. Some of our attributes are like our mothers and fathers, and it turns out, that even if we are brought up by someone else besides them, we still have those attributes. We say that those attributes are hard-wired. They are a fixture of the way we were constructed. To leave common sense for science, we learn that these attributes are a feature of the genetic code, the blueprint by which we were constructed. At this moment there is little we can do to change our genetic code,¹¹⁵ those features that are hardwired into us. That means that the strengths and weaknesses of our parents are part

¹¹⁵ There is an abundance of scientific research at the moment that might enable us to change the genetic code in the future. Whether we *should do so or not* is a question that has been posed but perhaps not adequately answered. It is an ethical question that requires a good deal of thinking and experiment.

of the constraints we have to live with. Also as a unique combination between two streams of human civilization we are individuals, something entirely new. So, though we can predict with some accuracy on the basis of our genetic inheritance what we will become, there are surprises in every individual, strengths or weaknesses that could not have been predicted on the basis of the history of our families, or any knowledge of our genetic code. Some of these features come from the interaction of our basic genetic code and our environment.

No one currently knows with any high level of certainty precisely what our genetic code implies about us. Many particular details are known, like genetic markers for some diseases, or markers for hair or eye color. And though we are now proficient enough with cloning technologies to reproduce a variety of animals, we still can't predict their coloring patterns or exact form with the knowledge we have of their donor's cells. Because, though we know how the blueprint maps the final product, we also know that the self-forming features of the genetic code are still hidden from us, so we don't know how the new creature will emerge in its final form. Identical twins still have differences, even though perhaps it is only their parents who can distinguish between them.

These are biological constraints, that at the moment we have no ability to sidestep, and there are problems with thinking we ought to. They are the basic structure with which we live. The second feature, alongside the genetic code is the environment. The environment creates challenges to our beings. Humans respond to the environment by coding their own biology through a mode called epigenetics. That is, the genome that is the basic layer of our biology responds to the environment and provides its best guess of how to manage it. This feature of our biology is passed down to our children in some form, that is, the way our gametes (male sperm

and female egg reproductive cells) are constructed reflects the epigenetic response to the environment in which we reproduce.¹¹⁶

After that, we all grow in a particular and unique environment. In fact, it may be very difficult to control the environment enough to be able to say with certainty what the best environment is for any individual, even though we know the basic blueprints. Where your mother lives when she is pregnant with you sets up a variety of constraints: what she eats or doesn't eat; whether she is under stress of a certain kind; whether there are threats to her life; whether she has an accident or sickness; whether she is exhausted because of work; whether she has your siblings to take care of while she is pregnant. The list is long. All these features of your environment make the time of your mother's pregnancy an important feature of your formation. The father's input during pregnancy is more subtle but significant, mostly influencing the mother's wellbeing or lack of it.

At birth, the process of acclimatization to the family and diet, language or languages begins. The infant is formed by the relations they have with parents, guardians, siblings, keepers. Their brain and body get to know each other and experience the world, after which the infant begins to grasp the elements of life in the air. It is not the purpose of this work to discuss human development, but let these remarks be a reminder that the human being is formed partly by their genetic code and partly by their environment.

So, genetics and environment are the chief constraints under which a child is formed. Add to environmental factors the training that any ordinary human goes through and you have a rich explanatory background that highly determines the behavior and attitudes that shape a

¹¹⁶ This feature of epigenetic response is not a good reason to reinvigorate Lamarckian evolutionary theory. The genetic constraints of this feature are strong. So there are limits to what this feature can accomplish.

person. The puzzle before us must first take this context into account. Then, through the growth and emergence of personhood, an individual takes shape. It is at this point that the predictive success of any scientific apparatus begins to fail, or at least loses its grasp of probable outcomes.

At the point of self-recognition, self-determination, self-will, freedom, the spiritual side of a person emerges. This spirituality is not necessarily something related to religion, and though it is not contrary to native religious impulses, this is a movement toward the human becoming different from the material world they have emerged from, even possibly transcending the constraints of their genetics and environment. The internal structure of the human mind gains ascendancy and the developing person becomes hidden from their surroundings and society. The life of the mind is a secret that even persons themselves cannot translate fully to their environment. The complexity and impenetrability of this state of affairs has been the focus historically of a large variety of efforts both theoretical and practical, religious, and scientific. In fact, the whole project of philosophy, even to the ancient past is partly a concern to rightly understand and therefore guide individuals through an exploration and management of this state of being they find themselves in.

It is in this sense that this book characterizes the process of philosophy as a *way of life*, a mode of navigation through the corridors of life. This is where a person is motivated to seek the right path for their life, to become responsible, at least in part, for the outcome of their efforts. This is the weight of the reality of personhood that is the subject of much literature, philosophy, tradition, religious practices and texts, and the almost universal rites of passage into adulthood.

This is where the great questions come from. Looking into the past of one's formation, one cannot but be baffled by the sheer complexity of the path one has taken that leads to the moment of transition, the phase shift into full personhood. Fortunately for most of us this

transition does not take place all at once. It is the process of many years of learning to take on the responsibility for oneself, for self-care, responsibility for one's actions, for the consequences of one's action and interaction with the world and its people. But becoming a biological adult does not solve the riddles of being a human person. This is why even from the ancients there is a recognition that philosophy as a way of life is a process that takes all of one's lifetime.

Though much of the modern state of the Western mind¹¹⁷ is concerned to shut down these puzzles, to answer them as if they have been solved, to reduce the world to some form of strict cause and effect, the puzzles remain. Reality keeps impinging on the fixtures of human thought so that they do not turn to stone as a monument of human accomplishment. A major theme in Aztec philosophy defines itself by attempting to answer the following question: "How can we maintain our balance while walking upon the slippery earth?"¹¹⁸ We ask then what is it that makes the earth slippery? It is precisely the problem of personhood announced here. It defies definition, hints at something larger than itself, has intentions and motives that escape the categories supplied for it by society, presents ordinary life with risk and danger at the interface between the self and reality. It can't be answered by simple adherence to a rule, to religion, philosophy, ideology, or creed, or even an escape from these. The secret of its truth lies in the relation between the self and the external world, even though the self is also part of that world.

And if, as many believe, there is a creator who is interested in the welfare of human beings, then the truth also lies in the relation between the self in the world and that creator. Modern Western philosophy has a reputation for leaving God out of the equation because the idea of God seems to minimize the responsibility of people, and adds to the already present

¹¹⁷ The social imaginary of the modern culture.

¹¹⁸ Retrieved from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Aztec Philosophy," accessed 1/24/2012, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec/>>.

problem an impossible theological puzzle that can't resolve itself because it transcends us as well as the world. It has been easier to just eliminate the *God hypothesis* from the equation instead of answering it. But in the spirit of inquiry, the God hypothesis has not been a foreign element and has been taken on by almost all of the great thinkers of the past. Some have collapsed the three-way problem of God, the world, and the self, into the world and the self by saying that God is the entirety of the universe. Benedict de Spinoza in the Age of Reason suggested this solution. Albert Einstein adopted that variety of explanation. Others have suggested that God lives within the universe, and there are a variety of theological issues associated with this belief. An alternate explanation given by many is that God is an invention of human religious need.

The Islamic, Christian, and Jewish belief is that God transcends the universe. That is, he is not the same as or purely a subject to the universe itself, but is the self-existing creator of the universe. Since humans are part of the universe, then God and the universe are the only two beings. Islam does not provide any relation to this God, but both Christianity and Judaism do. Of the two, Christianity is more concerned with the individual's relation to God, and speaks at length of that relation and the person's necessity of participation in that relation. Judaism, at least from the ancient biblical record is more concerned with the Jews as a society and God's relation to that culture. But as well, Christianity has many social features, and Judaism many personal ones. This goes as well for Islam, though perhaps through the process of enculturation and as a process of following the Hadith, not the Qu'ran.

To conclude this section, humans must acknowledge that they don't know everything. In fact they can't even declare an absolute successfully. Though on the other end of the spectrum, the relativist can't declare that there is no truth (that would be an absolute), and that everything is

relative, because those beliefs themselves rely on truth being consistent and not relative.

Relativism fails the test of logic it relies on to promote its argument. We can conclude that relativism is not sound on that account, even though we cannot also declare precisely what the truth is. Remember the scatter plot in the Introduction. As a model of knowledge it retrieves the useful sense that human perception and human knowledge can get close to what it perceives to be true, but it cannot declare it in certain terms.

Being unable to declare the truth in more than probabilistic terms is not a problem for the philosopher who recognizes that philosophical knowledge is something more than the logic of sentences applied to the data of observation. The life transformed by the exercise of learning and seeking the truth has a morally substantial quality to it. When people enter a field with the intent of finding the truth, a process of transformation begins on the person in relation to their object of study. The end product of research is some knowledge and a person transformed by the work itself, not the identical person that went into the project.

The reader should not be needlessly distressed by a sense of the impossibility of the task of absolute knowledge. Much that we count as knowledge is ready at hand for us, and that sense should settle the psychological tremors about what we cannot know at the limits of possible knowledge. First, the reader should recount past success at acquiring knowledge, whether it is mastering the basics of one's mother tongue, or navigating the difficulties of their social circumstance. Second, when the reader understands that knowledge comes in many forms, they can maximize the form that is most useful for them at the time.

New Models of Knowledge

Within limitations knowledge is possible. One acquires knowledge in the course of daily life. Recognizing regularities in the world or people counts as knowledge. The best of us can make use of our observations and come to useful conclusions about them. This sort of knowledge is not to be taken lightly, and most of us are good enough at it to get along. And though the tools acquired in this book will not specifically assist a person in the acquisition of this basic knowledge, they will give the student the ability to test claims made by people about ordinary life. In other words, the reader will know that they know these things and be able to evaluate their own virtues and vices while others will take these things for granted without knowing why they are or are not so. The other advantage for the reader is that one may learn to go beyond common sense to evaluate claims people make. That is, since common sense is at best incomplete and can be deeply flawed, students will have additional tools to make their evaluations by.

Michel Foucault described the Ancients' view of the task of living. On the one hand they treated the process of living as a series of tests for truth, and on the other hand as the process of navigating a ship on a river. In this sense knowledge is a skill, discerning the differences between silver, gold, and their imitators, and avoiding shallow places in the river that could ground the boat.

Knowledge that helps us avoid being deceived should be immediately helpful. But the process is not that simple. Os Guinness¹¹⁹ described a problem with living in the world. When we are brought up believing something that contradicts what we observe, we become mystified.

¹¹⁹ Guinness, Os, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture and the Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1973).

If our training and experience contradict each other, then we are lost in a very serious sense. If we cannot tell the difference between what is true and false, or when someone is telling the truth or lying then we cannot navigate the difficulties of life successfully. Recall from Chapter 1 Francis Bacon's remarks about the four idols. We can relate these idols with those beliefs in our thoughts, families, and society that are contrary to truth and will hinder our full development because they prevent knowledge and cause mystification. How can we be rescued from these inevitable mistakes, from the traps of our ordinary worldviews and commonsense ways of thinking?

You'll recall the modes of knowing from Chapter 3 that helped us understand some of the methods and limits of human knowing. The methods themselves are very useful. Skepticism is a test of knowledge claims. It helps to sort out inconsistencies in the way we justify our beliefs. It is therefore a necessary tool when we are attempting to sort out the truth of our lives. Descartes used this method to eliminate from his thought processes every single belief that could be doubtful so he could discover that which was not doubtful, if indeed there was one. Well, he succeeded in his persistence to discover that human beings are real and that we are thinking beings. He discovered the necessity of mathematical and logical truths. His persistence gave him the sort of certainty that allowed him to categorize the rest of the objects in his worldview.¹²⁰ In this sense we can actually rely on the product of our mental exercises, of course, allowing the skeptical tests that Descartes did. This will help us weed out many doubtful beliefs. But that's not the whole story.

¹²⁰ Unfortunately his certainty, though very strong, led him to some mistakes. We can avoid these. Just because we can be certain that we are thinking beings, does not mean that we are not bodies embedded in the universe. We are as much bodies as we are thinking beings, and that is certain. Just because our bodies can deceive us doesn't mean that they are somehow not part of us, or a separate part of us from our minds. Our minds can also deceive us. They are not necessarily truth machines.

David Hume placed his faith in the reality of the external world, and not so much in our ability to reason about it. He claimed that our passions drove the majority of our decisions, and that reasoning played only a secondary part. This observation agrees with many of the ancient texts that describe the unreliability of our decision-making processes. But realizing that we are deeply affected by our passions is a warning we should take heed of. Aristotle said that “When mistress pleasure is on her trial, we the jury have been tampered with.”¹²¹ We are inclined to go the way of our desires, but the nature of a free person is that they can choose to do something else, especially when they are aware of their inclination to do something harmful to themselves and others. This helps us to caution our commonsense intuitions about the way the world is and the direction we should take. You can see that this knowledge about human inclinations will help us navigate around obstacles that may cause trouble.

Immanuel Kant helped us to recognize that the process of understanding the world and ourselves must of necessity involve both our reason and our observations. Take the remark earlier in this lesson about our training. We don’t choose our training. Culture is impressed into us without our choosing it. And transcending that training is a matter of consideration after the fact of us being lost in it and subsequently recognizing it. Our minds, our passions, and our bodies must all be involved in navigating this life, and testing the truth of things. Becoming adept at navigation and truth-testing is a long-term process that takes many years even though we may master the elements of those skills fairly soon in our journey.

What is defective in these accounts is that they all reduce human choices to some small part of human capacity, and though they lend some help, are ultimately unsatisfying in that they require us to leave part of our perception, reasoning, or intuition behind. None of these modes

¹²¹ Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics* ().

treat humans with any more than a reduced set of skills, skills that force one to abandon parts of character that humans have come to rely on. All of these views fail to comprehend the social character of people. In their own ways they are individualistic. Each, however, is valuable, but limited. The defects in the forgoing accounts are well known, but not always acknowledged. But it is in our best interests to address these limitations.

In the twentieth century, a scientist, Michael Polanyi rejected the idea that we could know about the cosmos, as many had assumed, merely as a mechanism that could be understood purely in terms of cause and effect. He rejected also the associated idea that science was the project of discovering the origin of the causes that led to the current universe. Polanyi was of the opinion that one couldn't understand the complex characteristics of life just by understanding the underlying physical and chemical laws that lay beneath it. Life must be understood on its own terms with its own non-reducible characteristics. In Chapter 1 it was explained in terms of the great chain of being. Life emerged from non-life, consciousness and rationality from life, etc. But the causes for that emergence are not known explicitly and may not ever be known well enough to draw the conclusion that more complex elements in reality are caused by less complex elements.

In terms of how we come to know, Polanyi became convinced that knowledge was not limited to the austere philosophical realm suggested by the players in the previous chapter. But rather, all knowledge was personal, that is, tied inextricably to the way we encounter the real world. Using Michael Polanyi's intuition about our encounter with the real world being personal, the next section will guide the student into a way of knowledge that substantially reflects both our experience and remains consistent with both the real world and the best theories about knowledge.

An Alternate Way: Recommended

Using a model given to us by Esther Meek, this will guide the reader into a more holistic way of knowing, avoiding some of the limitations of the modes of knowing recounted in previous chapters. Remember that the modes of knowledge in Chapter 3 are not false on their account of the world, but incomplete, incapable of managing our relationship with knowledge adequately.

The first distinction that Meek makes in *A Little Manual for Knowing*,¹²² is that modern society, has provided a defective default way of knowing. The default presupposition is that knowledge is information, and acquiring it is a process of accumulating facts about the world and the reality that is represented in those facts. The model for acquiring this information is the scientific enterprise. Its presuppositions include the rejection of what we have described as metaphysics, a view of being that does not disallow spirituality and mental events as real things in the universe. Even though this view of the separation of physics and metaphysics is beginning to crumble in the best formulations of the real world, for the most part it holds sway in the majority of universities in the West, and those universities in the non-western world that have adopted a scientific worldview.

But just because Meek rejects the presuppositions of a supposedly scientific worldview, doesn't mean she rejects its results. As we have explored in previous lessons, the scientific worldview is very productive. It has given the modern world a wide variety of technologies in medicine, computation, construction, materials science, and a wide variety of other valuable contributions. It can't be ignored, and shouldn't be. But Meek's assertion is that the reality revealed by this techno-scientific worldview is divorced from our ordinary ways of knowing, and

¹²² Meek, Esther Lightcap, *A Little Manual for Knowing* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

in fact, leaves us in a quandary. That quandary consists in the mystification of human knowing and fails to leave humans a way out of that mystification. The first critique she provides is that knowledge cannot and does not begin with observation, but with love.

Before we explore this avenue, a little background should be provided. The study of knowledge is formally known as *epistemology*. It comes from two Greek words: *pistis*, for belief and *logos* for word. So epistemology is literally the word about belief. But the word is more complicated than that. Plato describes knowledge as justified true belief. That is, if one has knowledge, one is making the claim to a few things besides the facts about what one knows. First, what we know is a belief. Second, we have good warrant for that belief. We have proof of some sort that leads us to believe what we do. Now, the proof we have may not grant us certainty, but at least eliminates the probability that we have gotten it far wrong. If we have knowledge then, we are confident that we have gotten it right, but still remain open to the possibility that though we are on the right track we may still learn something more.

So the belief we have is true, that is, it is not certain but we have good reason to believe it. The question that both the default epistemology found in a scientific worldview and Esther Meek's worldview (Covenant Epistemology) want to resolve is how we actually get that warrant, how we become confident that what we believe is true. This is the crucial point. We have seen some of the limitations of the scientific worldview as portrayed by Descartes, Hume, and Kant. What we know is separated from who and what we are, our mind from our bodies, our reason from our emotion, our morals from our beliefs. But Meek, starting with love moves us in another direction, that is, toward a thorough integration between what we know and who we are in reality. That is why she begins with love.

Love

Let's not reduce love purely to a feeling of wellbeing, but allow that love includes desire, curiosity, and the hope of wellbeing. If knowledge begins with desire, then immediately our emotional state is engaged in the process of knowing. And if we didn't want to know something, would we even approach it in the first place? Contrast going to class because you have to and going to class because you want to. Are you just collecting facts because you need to pass a test, or do you really want to understand what the class provides? Is the class just a list of facts, or the promise of a skill you want to master? Even if there is drudgery in the acquisition of that skill or knowledge, you realize that mastery of it requires work, engagement, and movement onto unfamiliar ground. But it is all driven by that desire to learn, to master the skill, to improve yourself. So knowledge is not just a series of facts in a book. More is involved, desire and curiosity are the beginning, but engagement must follow.

Pledge

The second step toward knowledge is the promise to carry out the examination. Meek describes this as a pledge. This is a commitment to go beyond the mere hope of knowledge to a commitment of one's person in a visceral engagement with the project. You should be able to see the beginnings of a relationship with the object of your desire. Not to get too far ahead of ourselves at this point, but the truth itself is this relationship. And the truth itself invites our engagement.

Let's back up to an illustration Meek gives for the knowledge project. Did you ever want to know how to ride a bicycle?¹²³ I think it's true that most of us did. But even if you didn't it should not be difficult to understand this illustration. Watching somebody ride a bike is

¹²³ Meek, Esther Lightcap, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Cascade, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), loc. 1613 Kindle.

fascinating. Somehow, they remain upright and move forward. We all know what it is to balance ourselves. We do it all the time, but being on a bicycle is different, our feet don't touch the ground. Meek's description of the event of learning to ride catches the anxiety of learning with the desire to know in a few breaths. She was unprepared as her father took her to the top of a hill placed her on the bike and let her go saying "Balance!" hoping that at the bottom of the hill she would get it. So with terror and trying to comprehend what it meant to balance at the same time, an engagement with reality in a very primal way, Esther learned to ride a bike, something she knows how to do today.

But recognize that this knowledge is not knowledge about bicycle riding, but the knowhow of riding. It is an experience that gets internalized until one doesn't have to balance consciously while experiencing terror as in the process of learning. It is taken for granted as a ground of new experiences of similar kinds. One doesn't have to go through the same lesson once one has internalized it. What once one had to focus on in the learning process now becomes a part of who we are as knowers. And every learning experience after that is compared to what has become tacit, integrated, a substantial and transformed element of our character. Knowledge has become personal.

I used this illustration to capture your imagination. When we observe a skill, whether it is in the social sphere, or in cooking, being a student, driving a car, or making a web page, we test ourselves against that and wonder whether we could do that, whether we could know that. Any particular skill or knowledge we see attracts us and we decide whether we are going to take the risk and make the effort to have it for ourselves. It is at this point that we decide whether to take the pledge, and commit to the internalization of that skill.

Invitation

But at this point we don't know how to start, and the invitation presented to us is a matter of the relationship we have with those who are already skilled, those who know about the skill, and the skill itself. In this way knowing is, as Meek says, **interpersonlike**.¹²⁴ What we know and how we know it is more like relationships between people than a collection of socks in a drawer. It is not thing-like but people-like. Here you might be reflecting about how the narratives in the previous lessons are very thing-like. In general, the worlds of traditional epistemology contain objects, not relationships. That doesn't mean we should reject the objects of the scientific epistemologies, but we should examine their fit to reality in a way that interrogates their underlying presuppositions. So, how do we start knowing? We respond to the loving invitation of the sought for knowledge. We allow our curiosity to take space in our will, and follow the trail of our desire.

This is dangerous, risky, and failure is one possible outcome. But we shouldn't think of failing as a problem. It is another route to knowledge. We learn which pathways are unfruitful. And very few of us get this right the first time, and sometimes our common-sense intuitions drive us down the wrong pathways. But when we learned something we wanted to do, the risk and danger seemed worth taking. "Just think," we tell ourselves, "how it will be when I have achieved my goal." So failure teaches us our limitations, but helps us focus on the possible desirable ventures still ahead of us. And we learn about our relationship to the world and the constraints we are all inevitably encompassed by, that every relationship has inherent risks and benefits that exploration only can reveal.

Indwelling

¹²⁴ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 32.

So you have taken the pledge and responded to the invitation. You are on your way to making the knowledge personal. The next stage of Meek's process is indwelling.¹²⁵ It may help us to look at her first few remarks:

Indwelling involves empathetically putting yourself inside the thing you want to know, and taking it inside you. Indwelling is a strategy to invite the real. Indwelling is what it looks like to give oneself in love in an effort to know. It is part of what welcome looks like, what trust looks like, and caring attentiveness.¹²⁶

You might notice how all this looks like a relationship, interpersonal, and not object like. Knowledge in this mode is again personal. That is precisely the temper Meek wishes to introduce to this conversation. That means you already know how to manage the process, because you have done it before. Happily, it also means that knowledge of other sorts, like the ones discussed in this course are available to you. The objects of science are also available to you. In fact, nothing that humans can know is forbidden, if indeed love has laid out the invitation.

It is here that we intersect with a view of philosophical knowledge exposed by Plato in his Seventh Letter.¹²⁷ What we discover is that alongside the names for things and their properties, what we would call the scientific understanding of things, a further requirement for knowledge is presented. Roughly, it is a moral requirement. We are called to spend time relating to the object of our affectionate inquiry, what Meek calls here indwelling. That means we will be changed to conform to the requirements of the reality the object lives in. But without going this additional step past the science no philosophical knowledge will be available to us. So it requires

¹²⁵ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 48.

¹²⁶ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 48.

¹²⁷ Plato, *The Seventh Letter*, trans. by J. Harward, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter.html>.

a real commitment, something we take to be a moral requirement. But besides the expenditure of time and effort, we are rewarded with a fragment of reality that we will not easily forget. In fact, having been transformed by it, we will be different people. There is a risk involved that requires commitment, what Meek has called a pledge. On the other side of this issue, Plato cuts no corners criticizing those who would not advance beyond science, pretending to be philosophers on the basis of books they had written about philosophy. For Plato, knowing something about an object is not equal to the spark of insight and the transformation granted after the moral commitment and indwelling of the object itself. For him, however, knowing the truth of the thing itself does not give one the ability to explain it. In fact, philosophical knowledge is something beyond mere description. It is not that philosophical knowledge is available only to the elect few, but that few will ever make the effort to know in this way. The truth of philosophical knowledge always lies in the relationship between the knower and what is known. Let's return to Esther Meek's views.

How, you may ask will we be able to indwell knowledge and allow it to indwell us. Meek helps us here. Think again that knowledge is a relationship between what and who we are and what we observe, what we focus on. This encompasses the whole world of philosophical insights about knowing. What knowledge as information fails at is understanding how exactly we come to know in the first place. Somehow we need to integrate the new into the experience we already have. That knowledge which we already have incorporated into our lives, like the foundation of a house, remains below the surface of our consciousness and allows the possibility of building the house. Meek calls this, following Michael Polanyi, the subsidiary that is made up of our already integrated knowledge of the world.

It is here that we discover the insight of twentieth-century science that recognized all observations made by people actually influence the things we observe. This can't be helped, and if what we already know, the subsidiary, is mistaken or distorted in some way, the influence on things we observe damages or distorts our possible knowledge of it. You can see here why it is more than just a good idea to get things right in the knowledge project, because everything we eventually know will be built out of the blocks that make up the foundation of our thinking, and our relationship to reality is the structure that allows our life to flourish. Don't worry for the moment if some of Bacon's idols have distorted your subsidiary. If you keep at this work, slowly you will weed out the misunderstanding and make way for better, more substantial growth.

Coming to know is the process of integrating your subsidiary and what you are focusing on right now. Let's look at an example from astronomy to see how one's worldview determines whether they can understand what they focus on or not. Paul Feyerabend¹²⁸ recounts the struggles Galileo had trying to convince his contemporaries (including Francis Bacon), that the telescope showed them that there were moons around Jupiter which he had himself observed over and over. Galileo thought it would convince them. One reason they remained unconvinced after observing Jupiter and its moons for a few nights, is that moons around Jupiter can't be seen by the naked eye, therefore, whatever those things were near Jupiter couldn't be moons like our moon. It is as if the observers were unable to see what their commonsense knowledge had no place for.

So their subsidiaries were incapable of comprehending the new data given by the telescope. But today, no modern person would have any difficulty comprehending moons around Jupiter the first time they saw them in a telescope. Why? Because they had heard there were

¹²⁸ Feyerabend, Paul, *Against Method* (London, UK, 1984).

moons, had seen pictures of those moons, and had grown up knowing these things. This knowledge was part of the fabric that made their subsidiaries function as they did. Today, though a small minority of people understand how it is that we can observe planets around other stars, the thought that there are planets around other stars is not too farfetched. It is a natural progression from knowledge that we are already related to. So we integrate knowledge of planets around other stars into our already broad knowledge subsidiary about how the universe operates. We don't even have to puzzle the issue very hard, though the ancients would have thought it absurd, and never, except speculatively, would have believed it.

The same sort of relationship with reality exists when we discuss galaxies millions of light years beyond our own galaxy. That belief was never more than speculation in the eighteenth century, but now our belief has been substantiated by much observation and effort. It is almost trivial to integrate new knowledge about the universe after the arduous work to discover the truth of these things in the early twentieth century. Though what's easy for us today, would have been nearly impossible even a few centuries ago, even if we had all the evidence in the world on display.

So why does Meek's project offer us help? Because she gives us a method of understanding how our observations become integrated into our subsidiary knowledge through "a responsible human reach outward toward the world."¹²⁹ The advantage this approach provides is that we are able to not only add new data through our relationship with reality, but that we can improve our relationship with reality by allowing thoroughly integrated observations to continually transform our ability to observe reality at each new step. Galileo's compatriots, over the course of a few days could not recognize the planetary bodies around Jupiter as moons. Once

¹²⁹ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 52.

they had incorporated the knowledge Galileo had by constant observation and study, logic and reasoning, mathematics and analysis, they would have been able to integrate their observations into a view of the real world that was consistent and coherent, and their relationship with reality would have flourished. History tells us that in fact, some of them did incorporate this knowledge.

Let us not lull ourselves, however, into believing that this process takes place in some smooth automatic way, but that some parts of our belief system are often mistaken. We may have arrived at the right conclusion, but by means that will mislead us otherwise in subtle and unpredictable ways. Certainly no one can know what turns out to be false, but human belief is not so straightforward that one cannot be mistaken. Meek's process allows that the integration between our observations and our subsidiary experience takes place in terms of trials and the elimination of errors. That is, to grow in our knowledge of reality takes time and effort, discrimination and careful evaluation.

Encounter

We have fallen in love with the possibility of knowledge; have taken the pledge; reality has invited us; and finally we have begun to indwell it's clues. But this is not enough. There is no guarantee that we will be able to integrate the new and desired focus into our inborn knowledge and experience with reality. But when we make the effort of indwelling, the chances for that *Encounter with reality* in insight and understanding is greatly increased. The struggle, the effort is an invitation to reality to break through into us by insight and understanding. Part of the reason Meek characterizes knowing as being more interpersonlike than objective thinglike, is that our relationship with reality is more like a relationship with a person than it ever is with a thing. Without love there is no desire; without commitment there will be no payoff; the clues provided by attention and focus on that reality can't be integrated at all unless we maintain a relationship

with them. But playing out the clues to the possibility of insight and understanding requires the kind of determination that goes beyond mere commitment into a working relationship of equals.¹³⁰

That insight, the “AHA!” moment, the encounter with reality acts “less like it answers our question and more like it reshapes subsequent questions and previous answers. It changes our reality more than fitting into it.”¹³¹ The encounter is transformative.

A mathematician friend of mine talks about insight in the way that lends it more mystery than resolution. She said that resolving a problem seemed more like a revelation than the obvious next step in a series of steps. For her, it wasn’t just a rule governed method, but a new landing place, a new world. Mathematicians often talk about their discoveries as elegant, or beautiful. Most of us would be familiar with Albert Einstein’s familiar equation “ $E = Mc^2$ ” that defines the relationship between energy and matter. It is a simplification of the very elegant mathematics that went into it, but it illustrates the power of genuine insight, the product of years of indwelling the problem of physical reality. As we now know, this equation is not the whole story, but it was in its day a significant step forward for physics, and still adds insight into the problems we face.

Transformation

Beyond the actual encounter, we have the transformation both in our person, and in the world we observe. Our relationship with the world is changed. It has increased in wonder in precision, in beauty. “We become better at knowing and at embracing the real.”¹³² But, we are not quite the same persons as we were before, and so the old methods no longer work with the

¹³⁰ This is why scientists like Alister E. McGrath insists that Christianity is the best mode of both comprehending reality and living with God. God in Christ has called us friends if we do what he commands. We are in a relationship with God that is so obviously unequal, yet we have been adopted as family, and heirs of the promises. So, as unlikely a companionship as this may seem, it is the best mode for living in a covenant with reality and its creator.

¹³¹ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 67.

¹³² Meek, *A Little Manual*, 70.

same reliability. We are exploring a new horizon, a new field enriched but also loaded with mysteries. Meek tells us that a new hunger has arisen because the old self, living in a two-dimensional world no longer grasps the wide open spaces of what reality has gifted us with. A third dimension of being human is emptiness, a hunger she calls the **void**. It is a new dimension of being human as subject to the knowledge project. We are no longer in charge as we once imagined ourselves to be. “Out of our need, our sense of what we do not yet understand, we reach forward to embrace the knowing venture.” What we do not know becomes part of that relationship with reality and a longing for more of that relationship.

In addition a fourth dimension of being human, responding to the great gift reality has bestowed on us is that we become “the self that responds to and gives love. ... Every moment of insight is growing the fourth dimension of our humanness.”¹³³

Another part of the transformation from the encounter is that we begin to understand how knowledge becomes part of us. Our comprehension opens us up to the subsidiary knowledge that has up to this point functioned largely as the background of our knowledge venture. We also learn how it is that we learn, how we interact with reality and how we are transformed. So knowledge becomes something more than just knowledge about something, (even if that something is reality itself), and it becomes knowing how to know. I mentioned at the end of Chapter 2 that this is the way Michel Foucault perceived of knowledge [*savoir*]. It is **knowhow**. It is also how Gregory Bateson in the twentieth century thought about the learning experience.¹³⁴

For Bateson, learning things was the base level of learning. Learning arithmetic, spelling, reading, and writing were all forms of that sort of learning, the sort of knowledge Foucault would

¹³³ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 72-73.

¹³⁴ Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1972).

have called [*connaissance*] or knowledge by acquaintance, a technical collection of things, lists of stuff. Bateson suggested that the higher form of knowledge was learning how to learn. This is what most college students acquire during their years in some institution. Learning to learn is part of what Meek is making available to us in her *Little Manual* and it is the movement of our being toward a full betrothal with reality. “The real now can trust our ongoing, responsible, covenant faithfulness to it. We betroth ourselves to stewarding it with integrity, faithful to its dignity and cultivation.”¹³⁵ The knowhow that we acquire in our encounters with reality makes us better knowers, enriches us, and we realize more of our part in reality itself. “The idea of reality as gift is uniquely at home in the Christian vision. But seeing reality this way makes anybody better at knowing ventures.”¹³⁶

Encounter with reality transforms us, what we know, and how we know. Reality takes on larger dimensions as we move forward, and enriches our desire as we embrace that transformation with the void it wakes in us and the wholeness of our interrelationship with that unfolding reality. The images of knowledge waked in us by the encounters with reality begin to look more like a dance than a study session. We become fully involved and deeply entrenched in the process of our growing relationship with reality. It is no wonder that Meek and others offer the narrative of dance and play as the mode of continued encounter.

Dance and Play

¹³⁵ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 75.

¹³⁶ Meek, *A Little Manual*, 75.