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### On Knowing the Act of Knowing

There is a growing conviction among philosophers and others that the problems, paradoxes, and perplexities of philosophy stem mostly from an inadequate understanding of human knowing. Examples of some of these problems range from innate ideas and idealism, to realism, nominalism, relativism, and postmodern deconstruction. Thus, W. V. O. Quine (1969) has even suggested that philosophers leave the investigation of knowledge to the psychologists. He calls for a "naturalized epistemology" (72). Such a suggestion has value, and it might be the case that, henceforth, the psychologists' conclusions would be the *necessary* conditions for a philosophical analysis of human knowing.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is the thesis of this paper that such a *necessary* condition is *not sufficient*. Philosophy, and philosophy alone, especially classical metaphysics, is our only recourse to ascertain the *sufficient* conditions for our common experience of knowing. The reason is that knowing is, in itself, non-empirical, except in its expressions in speech and gesture. So, knowing must also be investigated in its non-empirical aspects. When this is done, philosophers may be able to solve at least some of their problems. Let me attempt to offer a starting point.<sup>2</sup>

Neither psychologists nor philosophers deny the intentionality of knowledge, i.e. that knowing is always knowing *something*, whether clearly, obscurely, or even erroneously! Yet, knowing *something* does not make to be present in the knower that *something* as it is in itself. Knowing apple, for example, does not make the apple, in its own reality, to be present in the knower. Nevertheless, knowing something happens *within* the knower, and it happens by way of some kind of similarity of the known *in* the knower. Terms for this similarity are manifold: similitude, form, concept, percept, species, representation, symbol, sign, etc. None of these terms, however, imply a tiny exact copy or a miniature mirroring.

For example, Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, explicitly denies that similitude ('likeness') means a copy or a 'mirror image'. In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas repudiates the theory of Democritus—that knowledge is caused by a discharge of images from the thing into the knower—because a material image cannot, by itself cause a non-material effect (1.84.6). There is required a non-material power, namely, intellect. Consequently, *intention* includes not only that knowing is knowing something, and that knowing is in the knower, but that *intention* is a sign or symbol, i.e., a representation of the *something*. That is, an intention is a mode of being, of which its nature is only that of a sign of something else. And this is true of perception as an intention as well as of intellection as an intention.

Now, to the oft-repeated falsehood that we know only our intentions (concepts, representations, signs, forms) but not the 'things' of which they are intentions, it must be replied: If we knew only our intentions, we would not know that there existed *something* outside our intentions to which they referred. Intentionality would be contradicted, and so would communication of knowledge be contradicted. On the contrary, we first know 'things',—first intentions—and then, upon reflection or

introspection, we know that we have cognitive signs of those things, which, as signs, are second intentions. In fact, what we first are conscious of (in a primordial, not temporal sense) is 'being', i.e. that there *is* something. Only secondarily do we begin to decipher *what* that being is and form specific representations (signs) of it. I will return to this later.

Consequently intentions are means by which we know things. Intentions are not that which we know, but are only like tools or instruments. An illustration may be of help here. When someone looks through a microscope at a specimen, that person is looking at the *specimen*, by way of the microscope. The person is not looking at the microscope, but is only using the microscope as an instrument to see the specimen. Turning one's attention, later, to the microscope, one could then see the microscope, but not the specimen. In like manner, we know *something* by means of our intention, which is a kind of mental tool or instrument that enables us to be cognitively united with the *something*, not the intention. Again, by our concept of 'tree' we don't know the concept of tree; we know the 'tree'. Put this in another way: The concept is neither the thing known nor the knower. The concept is an intentional instrument in the knowing. This avoids both idealism and exaggerated realism.

Let me turn now to the reflection upon our common human experience of knowing and note a second factor which can easily be ascertained in addition to that of intentionality. This factor is that the one knowing is not completely identical with one's knowing. For, if a knower were identified with one's knowing, one could neither be nor do anything else but knowing. Yet, we commonly experience that sometimes we know and sometimes we don't. Clearly we are different when we are knowing from when we are not knowing. Yet the difference, which is a distinction of knower from knowing (not a separation) demonstrates that actual knowing is an addition, an accretion, to a knower's own being. To deny that knowing is an actuating factor additional to the total substantial being of a knower is to contradict common human experience. Thus, knowing is a kind of transition that takes place from a state of not-knowing to one of knowing. Any such transition is an actuation of what is first only an ability (potency) to know into the positive state of knowing. It is our experience that we are in potentiality to know, for sometimes we know and sometimes we don't know or know only incompletely.

But the transition from the potency of not-knowing to the act of knowing is not that of a physical change or motion. For, the latter requires a loss of a previous state, as in cold water becoming hot. Rather, not-knowing expresses the simple absence of a perfection (quality). Not-knowing is something like 'darkness' in comparison to light. 'Darkness' is not actuality or perfection of the air, but a simple absence of light. Similarly, the transition from not-knowing to knowing is the simple acquiring of a perfection without the loss of a perfection previously possessed. Yet, knowing is a new perfection, and, since it is an addition (an Aristotelian 'accident') perfective of the knower, it is a quality. We refer here to knowing as such, not to operations which may be preliminary to knowing.

Thus, knowing is an 'act', not an 'action'. Knowing is *act*, i.e., an actuation, perfective of a *knower*, by possession of a *sign* of the *something* one knows. The knower

is a more complete (perfected) *being* when one is knowing than when one is not knowing. Knowing is a way of being for a knower, because it is a more complete way of being than when one is not-knowing. In short, to know is to *be*, in a distinctive way.

But, *coming to be* that way, i.e., *coming to know*, *becoming a knower*, is not the same as to know. Whereas, the perfection, which knowing is, can be compared to the category of *quality*, the perfection, which coming-to-know is, can be compared to the category of *action-passion*. It is in this latter aspect, i.e., the coming-to-know, that the use of terms like 'immanent action' or 'intentional existence' or 'intelligible esse' apply. With these clarifications, we are enabled to understand the locus for *causation* in the immanent *action*, and then to appreciate the consequences of causal action, namely, the *relation* of cause to effect. The culmination of this insight is to understand how we can speak of *knowing* as a *relation*.

Suffice it to recall briefly here that Aristotle and Aquinas characterize the interactive causality of the external sensible thing upon the human sense organ as "the sensible in act is the sense in act." They characterize, similarly, the interaction of the sensible image (phantasm) upon the agent intellect as "the intelligible in act is the intellect in act" (Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, 1.14.2 and 1.85.2, quoting Aristotle *De Anima* 3.8).

In both cases, it results from the progressive de-materialization of the external thing's physical causality upon the knower's sense organs and intellective powers. In other words, 'things', as beings in their own right, exercise proper causality upon the being of the knower. In origin, it is 'being'—manifold beings—that cause knowledge, and so, knowledge must be of beings because beings cause it.

Parenthetically, it is necessary to point out the impossible position of those who hold a so-called 'sense-datum' theory of knowledge in which they profess to find 'sense-data' as the basic objects of consciousness. This is simply false to common human experience and to the psychologists, because we do not discover neat and clear sounds, colors, tastes, etc. Rather, we discover in consciousness when we begin to know something, that it is difficult to distinguish sounds, colors, etc., to sense them precisely, to discriminate shapes, or other sensible properties. The latter come about only after much examination, close attention, deliberate deciphering of one property or characteristic from another.

Moreover, all scientific psychology on the learning in children shows how they must learn, because they do not naturally, see or hear or otherwise sense the characteristics of objects with any degree of discrimination. Rather, what a child experiences, and an adult does for some newly experienced encounter, is a vague, undifferentiated background which *is* 'other' than oneself. Within this background of being, of 'there *is* something here', there occurs a gradual, imperfect, and sometimes difficult discrimination of some one *thing* as distinct from some other *thing*, and either or both as distinct from some other *things*. Even when one thing is distinguished from other things, there is still the need to discriminate if there be a color or colors, if it has a discernible shape and depth, etc.

Consequently, the common human experience is that of encountering a vague 'other' first—an existing something—and then to distinguish, little by little, distinct sense data

about it. What's more, this learning of perceiving and conceiving our intentions about 'things' is culturally variable. Thus, I can only reject as false, together with the psychologists, that we experience, first, sense-data in consciousness, and then put together these sense-data into cognitive objects. There is not a single doubt as to the causal impact of 'things' upon the receptivity of the knower. Things cause our sensory experience of them, and we represent in multiple symbolic ways, by our intentions, their manifold causal actions upon us.

To return, now, to the immanent activity of the knower, not in knowing, but in coming-to-know. Since 'things' exercise a proper efficient causality upon our sensory receptor organs, their proper effects in us are automatically a *physical* union with them, whether we consciously represent them in perceptions or concepts or whether we are not attentively aware of their effects upon us. Thus, one can speak of having a broad 'union' with all beings in our total experience which have had any and all causal impact upon us. To say that we live a life of union with other beings in this sense is certainly an intelligible position. But this is a *physical* union by way of *physical* effects caused by beings upon us. This is not a *cognitive* union. A *cognitive* union results from the *reciprocal* causal action of the knower who forms *representations, signs, symbols*, which are likenesses of the things which caused those physical effects. And this *immanent* activity of forming these *signs* of things, is *coming-to-know*; it is not *knowing* because *knowing* is *being* those likenesses, those *signs*, which are the real relations in the knower to the things one knows.

Thus, the *immanent* action of coming-to-know is not knowing, nor is it a quality as knowing is. *Becoming* a knower is in the category of action; *knowing* is in the category of quality. Forming representations of the causal effects of 'things' upon us is an immanent *activity* (as in forming percepts and concepts); identity with the perfective act which those likenesses are in the knower is a *quality*.<sup>3</sup>

As noted in the beginning of this paper, knowing is not an identity of knower with knowing in 'knowing something'; yet, it is an identity of the knower with the 'something' in 'knowing something'. In this way, knowing is *being* the other by way of possessing it as a quality of the knower. This is not a physical union but a *cognitive* union. But it is a true union with the *other* because the cognitive union is based upon the real causal action of that *other*. It is the union which Aristotle and Aquinas called an identity of the sensible in act with the sense in act and the identity of the intelligible in act with the intellect in act.

Thus, cognitive union may seem to be less extensive than physical union, for the knower experiences a lot more things than one represents them in perceptions and concepts. But such is not the case. For, cognitive union can extend to all beings, not just those one encounters, since *representations* of beings can be communicated from one knower to another, even if the experience of those beings cannot be communicated.

On the other hand, coming-to-know, an immanent action, is neither an identity of knower and one's action, nor is it an identity with one's knowing, which is a state of one's being. Notice, in the following quotation from *De veritate*, the abrupt transition

Thomas makes from speaking of immanent activity, an action of a cognitive power, to knowledge, as a state of being:

No action of a cognitive power can be said to pass outside in the way in which acts of physical powers do, which go from the agent into the patient. For knowledge does not mean something flowing from the knower to the thing known, as happens in physical actions. It means, rather, the existence of the thing known in the knower. (Trans. Mulligan, 2.5)

Consequently, knowing is not an immanent activity. Instead, knowing is *being* those very likenesses of things which the immanent activity of representing formulates as constitutive of the knower precisely as knower. The immanent action of *coming-to-know* is not knowing because knowing is a way of *being* the known.

It might, then, be possible to refer this back again to the discussion of union, as resulting from causal activity. The physical union resulting from the causal impact of a thing upon a knower is a direct awareness of that thing without representing it. Cognitive union resulting from the representing of that causal impact is a making-present-again (re-present) in the knower the very thing which caused the impact. This re-presence is, of course, by way of 'likeness' and is that 'by which' the thing itself is present and becomes the very actuation of the knower.

Finally, from causal activity, there result relations. It remains, then, to state my last point, that of knowing as a relation. Knowing is a specific type of consciousness and a specific kind of interiorization of relationships. A knower is related to things causative of one's physical union with them differently from one's relation to the likenesses of those same things, i.e., to one's representations of them. In the former, one is a *term* of the relation; in the latter, one is the *subject* of the relation.<sup>4</sup> The knower receives the causal impact of things in one's receptor organs and is the *term* of the resultant relation. Contrariwise, the knower actively represents those things which exercised their causality upon oneself and is the *subject* of the resultant relation. One is really related to that thing which one *represents* and is.

This is the reason why, both psychologically and metaphysically, representations (likenesses) are that *by which* one knows things and are not *that which* one knows. Representations are one term of the relation; 'things' are the other term; whereas the knower is the subject (and the interpretant as Peirce says). Yet, the knower *is* one's representation of something. To know is to *be* the other; it is also to *be related* to the other. The special character of cognitive relation is that the knower *is* the very being (formally, not existentially) of that which causes one to be related to it.

Perhaps, now, it would be possible to offer a definition of knowing that can satisfy a 'natural epistemology' with its *necessary* condition of the transduction of energy from 'things' to 'knower' as well as the 'metaphysical' *sufficient* conditions of knowing as a way of *being* 'things' by way of making them present again (re-presenting them) in the knower. Thus, knowing is an act (not an action), i.e., it is a perfection (of the category of quality) of the very being of the knower, identical with one's representational union with some other being, and in a consequent cognitional relation with that being.

**Notes**

1. Consult contemporary introductory psychology textbooks (e.g., Feldman 1990), which hold that all percepts and concepts are learned from one's culture, thus eliminating innate ideas, a priori forms, primary vs. secondary qualities, identity of images with concepts, truth consisting in clear and distinct ideas, concepts as mirrors of reality, etc.
2. In addition, some simple logical procedures of (a) reduction to absurdity, and (b) self-evident false statements, can help both psychologists and philosophers. Some examples of (a) are: To question whether there is knowledge is already to imply knowledge of the question; and, to question whether we can know the truth already implies some knowledge of the terms 'know' and 'truth'. Some examples of (b) are: "There is no truth" contradicts itself because, if there is no truth, then that statement is not true either; and, "All truth is relative" becomes a relativity (uncertainty) about the statement itself; and "All truth is only interpretation" becomes only someone's interpretation rather than a truth.
3. The elaboration of immanence and transcendence of knowing is delineated in Flippen 1979.
4. "... the third element in the action of signs, the *Interpretant*, did not receive a proper name before Peirce assigned it one..." (Deely 1979, 187).

**References Cited**

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