

Wanting to Know What Cannot Be Known

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“All men naturally desire to know” : this is the celebrated assertion with which Aristotle begins the first book of his *Metaphysics*. According to him, human beings’ desire to know is as natural to them as their desires for food, rest, or amusement. These latter “natural” urges are responses to certain deficiencies—hunger, tiredness, and boredom; similarly, the desire to know is a response to a deficiency of knowledge. As Thomas Aquinas puts it, the urge to know (*libido sciendi*) is as much a characteristic of human beings as the urge to feel or to dominate (*libido sentiendi* and *libido dominandi*), and all three, essential though they may be to human nature, must be kept under control. My purpose here is to examine the limits of the desire to know: in what way may our desire to know go beyond the bounds of the “knowable”?

In order to maintain life, people must eat, drink, breathe, and procreate; they also have to know. From that point of view, curiosity, wonder, and inquisitiveness are characteristic features of human nature. In developing these reflections on the human desire for knowledge, I shall proceed from the foregoing hypothesis that such a desire is a natural one. I want to know because there is something I don’t know, I want to understand because something happens I don’t understand, some sequence of events I cannot follow. My desire for knowledge is my “natural” reaction to particular situations of “not knowing”, determined by what I am, what I already know, what I want, and what I can do.

Three Prerequisites of the Desire to Know

In order to want to know something, one has, firstly, not to know what one wants to know; secondly, to know that one does not

know it; and, thirdly, to be able to situate what one does not know within the context of what one does know.

What one wants to know must be something one does not know. The desire to know is not focused on the retention of knowledge already possessed but on the acquisition of knowledge not yet possessed. A person cannot want to know what he or she already knows. That being the case, the monotheists' omniscient God cannot experience the *libido sciendi* since He does not meet the first of the three conditions: knowing all, He has no desire to know. Omniscience rules out any lack of knowledge, and where knowledge is not lacking there is no desire to know. Humans' desire to know only makes sense in relation to a *deficiency* of knowledge: only those who do not know want to know, and they only want to know what they do not know.

This brings us to the second prerequisite: knowing that one does not know. The desire to know only makes sense in relation to a *conscious* deficiency of knowledge: it is because I am aware that I do not know something that I want to know it. Someone who is not aware of not knowing cannot want to know. This raises the question of awareness: how does one realize that one does not know something? By introspection only, each of us discovering individually within ourselves this desire to know that which we do not know, without being able to know anything of others' desire to know? Or by observing the way others behave or taking in what they tell us by way of the language at their command? According to the solipsist approach, I can only speak for myself, and if I want to attribute a desire to know to others, I have to gamble on our shared human nature. From a behaviorist perspective, it is difficult to distinguish human beings' cognitive behavior and language and the behavior and language of certain non-humans, such as primates and computers.

The paradox inherent in the desire to know is that one must know that one does not know in order to be able to want to know that which one does not know, while at the same time not knowing that which one does not know. This paradoxical situation of knowing and not knowing lies at the center of the set of problems relating to the desire to know: what is it that I know when I know that I don't know; and how, and in relation to what, can I localize

the areas of ignorance of which I am aware? This is the point where the third prerequisite of the desire to know comes in: being able to situate the unknown in relation to the known. I can only become aware of what I do not know against the background of what I do know. It is impossible for us to become aware of something of which we do not have the faintest idea. We are forever *in medias res*, fully involved in a world in relation to which we situate both what we know and what we do not know.

This prerequisite is an essential one: it is against the background of knowledge that we recognize our areas of ignorance, on the basis of what we know that we are able to satisfy our desires for knowledge. The desire to know engages with a pre-existing body of knowledge, enabling us to circumscribe the unknown within the frontiers of the known. In other words, both knowing and not knowing are relative, and refer one to the other: I know in relation to what I don't know. One cannot be aware of absolute ignorance, and God alone knows absolutely everything. An empty mind, a purely cognitive potentiality bereft of any cognitive content, would have no desire to know, since it would be unable to situate something it did not know except in relation to something else it did not know. No human being, not even a new-born child, is ever a *tabula rasa*: being *in medias res*, in a state of always "knowing already" and of always wanting to know more, is precisely what being human entails.

What I Would Like to Know

I would like to know a lot of things I don't know. I would like to know if it will be fine tomorrow; I would like to know how to repair my car when it breaks down; I would like to know quantum mechanics; I would like to know what is meant by "cognitive dissonance"; I would like to know how our universe came into being; I would like to know whether the Trojan war and the Second World War could have been avoided; I would like to know whether it is possible to build a just society; I would like to know whether my allotted span of life is nothing but the result of "material" chance operating under certain conditions, or whether there

is something else; I would like to know how to “live aright” and a number of other things, all of them representing questions I ask myself and to which I seek answers.

The things I want to know are of different kinds. When I want to know what the weather will be like tomorrow, how the engine of my car works, or how to distinguish between a white lie and a downright lie, my wishes are motivated by patently practical considerations: whether to take an umbrella with me or not, whether I can mend the car myself or need to call in a motor mechanic, or whether I can avoid some unpleasantness by telling an untruth. On the other hand, when I wonder whether the Trojan war could have been avoided, or want to know quantum mechanics or the meaning of a Sanskrit inscription, we are dealing, it seems to me, with a “theoretical” yearning to know, having no practical application. Thus we have, on the one hand, theoretical desires for knowledge that are an end in themselves and, on the other, practical desires of which the end in view is an action, whether on a technical or an ethical level, resulting therefrom.

The things I want to know are primarily distinguishable one from another as follows: some of the questions I raise can be given clear, straight answers; others may be given probable but nonetheless functional answers; yet others are susceptible of being given plausible answers, tentative replies that are meaningful only in relation to the ideaistic context in which they are worked out; and there are, lastly, some questions that I think cannot be answered at all. Furthermore, I can answer some of these questions myself, on the basis of what I know; in other cases, I call in experts who can provide me with authoritative answers; in yet other cases, no one seems to be especially competent to give authoritative answers and all I expect to get by way of answers are suggestions, of varying degrees of plausibility, that I accept or reject, depending on what I believe or expect and on my own receptivity.

Understanding how my car works, learning Sanskrit, and forecasting tomorrow’s weather are all cognitive undertakings I believe I can manage, even if I do not excel in them; but even were I to want it with all my heart and soul I will never know how to sing in tune or how the universe came into being. In short, there are, among the things I do not know and would like to know, some

that I think I could know now, like knowing how to mend my car or knowing Sanskrit; others that I could know later, like knowing what tomorrow's weather will be; and yet others that I shall never know—how to sing in tune or how the universe was formed. The point I am trying to make is that the notions of what I am capable of knowing, what I want to know, and what is knowable by me do not coincide.

The “Ability to Know,” the “Desire to Know” and “Knowability”

To throw some light on this point, I shall draw a distinction between these three aspects of cognition: the ability to know, the desire to know and the capability of being known, “knowability”. The ability to know relates to the cognitive capacities and talents of the cognizant individual, the “knower”; the desire to know relates to the knower's cognitive interests; knowability relates to the cognitive nature of things. The difference may be immediately remarked between ability and desire to know on the one hand, and, knowability on the other, a difference central to the nexus of problems concerning the desire to know the unknown: the former relate to the knower and the latter to the thing known.

The ability to know concerns the knower alone. I am equally capable of studying Sanskrit and of studying spiritualist doctrines that I believe to be untrue, or hockey championship results that I do not care about. On the other hand, I am incapable of learning how to sing because I have no aptitude for it, although I would very much have liked to be able to sing in tune, and many people can do just that. In other words, I am capable of knowing Sanskrit, spiritualist beliefs, or hockey results because I possess the necessary qualities for learning them; I am incapable of knowing how to sing since I am tone-deaf. This goes to show that the problems of the ability to know revolve around the question of learning; am I capable of learning what I am required (whether by myself or by someone else) to “know”, in the sense of assimilating the cognitive raw material presented to me? This is where gifts, aptitudes, methods, patience, intelligence—in short, everything that has to

do with learning to learn—come into the picture, to the exclusion of any value judgement as to whether the things learned are true or interesting.

“Desire to know” relates to the cognitive interests of the knower. I want to know Sanskrit, I want to know if it will be fine tomorrow, if the theory of evolution is “true,” if it describes what actually happened at the dawn of humanity. I want to know things that I don’t know and that interest me. The problem is, how can I want to know that which I do not know? What do I need to know in order for a cognitive interest in what I do not know to be awakened in me? This, it will be noted, has nothing to do with any cognitive capacities or with the “knowability” of what I want to know. There are things that I want to know that I do not possess the necessary cognitive capacities for learning; there are things that I want to know that sometimes seem even to myself unknowable. I want to know things for practical reasons, to manage my life better, or for theoretical reasons, so as to gain a better understanding of the world around me. Note that, from both the theoretical and practical point of view, the “desire to know” is meaningful only on the basis of pre-existing knowledge, which enables one to assess the value of knowing that which one does not know in the light of what one does know.

At first sight, it might seem as if there was no limit to what we want to know about that which we are aware of not knowing. In principle, it is possible to want to know everything one does not know, considering that any item of knowledge adds something to our understanding of the world and how we deal with it. In practice, this is not the case: there are things I do not know that I do not wish to know, simply because they do not interest me. I don’t want to know the number of hairs on my head or of teams competing in the Argentinian hockey championship, and there may be many other things that do not interest me, though other people may be fascinated by them. In fact, I want to know everything that interests me and only that which interests me.

This is where the trouble starts: I want to know everything that interests me, but among those things that interest me there are some I know it is possible for me to know and others I know it is not possible for me to know. It follows that I want to know some things it is

not possible for me to know—an irrational attitude to take. Why embark on an enterprise foredoomed to failure? Would it not be more reasonable for us not to want to know something we do not know, even if it interests us, when we know from the start it is not possible for us to know it—on the principle that the “desire to know” must be subordinate to “knowability.” In order to fully apprehend this point, let us examine what is meant by “knowability.”

Knowability is a property of the things known, not of the knower. I can know Sanskrit, because Sanskrit is susceptible of being learned, and people other than myself already know it: that being so, I say that, as concerns me, Sanskrit is unknown but knowable, whereas for those who actually know it is both knowable and known. We can know what the weather will be like tomorrow by just waiting to see: we may accordingly say that tomorrow’s weather is, for everyone, unknown but knowable. On the other hand, I cannot know the “true” origin of the human species, so I must regard the theory of evolution as plausible or probable but not as true, since I cannot go back into the past to observe how humanity originated and thus subject the theory to verification: hence, humanity’s origin is something both unknown and unknowable; and, since it deals with a matter both unknown and unknowable, the theory of evolution can be neither true nor false.

Wanting to Know the Unknowable

Why should we want to know things that we know in advance are not susceptible of being known by us? Would it not be sensible to want to know only that which is capable of being known, or should we concede that our reach, our “desire for knowledge,” may validly and in an interesting way exceed our grasp, the “knowable”? As a preliminary to answering these questions, we should first define what we mean when we say something is or is not knowable. We are, of course, in all cases referring to things so far unknown to us, among which I make a distinction between those that are knowable and those that are not.

Things unknown but knowable are, in theory at least, only unknown for the time being: the Sanskrit I have yet to learn, tomor-

row's weather, the make-up of the human genome, the number of electors who will vote for one or another party, whether or not there is life on other planets and many other questions to which it is believed scientific research and technology will ultimately provide answers. I am therefore fully justified in wanting to know that which it is possible for me to know: indeed, not wanting to know would be tantamount to defaulting on my natural desire to know.

As regards things unknown and unknowable, I propose to make a distinction between those that are empirically unknowable and those that are logically unknowable. The empirically unknowable ones are those that are unknowable to us but, in theory at least, have not always been unknown. Take, for instance, accounts of how things began, the Big Bang, the formation of the galaxies, the origins of life or of humankind: theoretically, a well-placed observer could have watched these phenomena taking place and come back to tell us the true story, what really happened. On the other hand, logically unknowable things are things unknowable in the absolute, things that could never have been known in the scientific sense of being observed and verified, and never will be. Examples here include Plato's dualism, the cosmobiology of the Stoics, the creationism of the monotheistic religions, and all those tales about the nature of being that we tell ourselves as a sop to our ignorance and our desire to know, and in order to draw lessons for living therefrom.

It is in relation to these three categories of the unknown that I wish to situate the "desire to know." As concerns what is unknown but knowable, the position is clear. Science and technology take care of these unknowns; that's what they are for. We are here in the domain of observation, experimentation, verification, and prediction, in the domain of scientific knowledge, knowledge in the strict sense of the term. People wishing to get to know things unknown but knowable position themselves from the start in that ideaistic context in which their research makes sense. They want to know that which is susceptible of being known, and they know in advance in which ideaistic context their research should be placed.

Many scientists, and all positivist philosophers, think that this is the point at which to draw the line, that the "desire to know" should yield to "knowability"—wanting to know should extend

only to what is knowable, i.e., that which can be known by the methods advocated by science. They reject any knowledge resulting from the use of scientific means to bring the "desire to know" to bear upon the "unknowable," since in their eyes it could only be pseudo-knowledge, an illusory form of knowledge. In their view, one should deliberately disregard that which is not knowable in accordance with scientific criteria and cannot become knowledge in the sense in which the natural sciences use the term.

This restrictive attitude presupposes that we are able in advance to recognize, among the various cognitive unknowns that our "desire to know" comes upon, those that are knowable and lend themselves to scientific treatment, and those that are not and do not. The result is a phenomenon fairly common among scientists, the rejection of whatever does not seem to them susceptible of being integrated into their own body of knowledge, which they regard as paradigmatic. As Max Planck so rightly said, a new scientific theory, one that involves a new way of looking at the world, gains recognition only when those who were not brought up on it have died off. In short, things unknown and unknowable are devoid of cognitive interest to such scientists or positivist philosophers, who indeed deny them any cognitive status.

In principle, one could indeed draw the line here, confining our "desire to know" to the "knowable" in the light of our "ability to know." Scientific method is there at hand, unshakeable, and provides a valid criterion for selecting what we are entitled to want to know. Only in and through science is anything knowable; and whatever will not yield to scientific method by that very fact falls outside the domain of the cognitive and into the realm of poetry, of flights of fancy, of things one may say without committing oneself and thus without being taken seriously.

This is where we hit a snag. We have taken it as self-evident that the criterion of "knowability" is scientific knowledge, that which is produced by the scientific method of observation, verification, and prediction—a method many scientists regard as the only one worthy of the name. We have accordingly postulated that only that which can be known by means of scientific method is knowable, in the strict sense. Is that really so, is that method really infallible, is it built on entirely solid foundations? Without

running through the whole list of skeptics' arguments, we need only think of the problems raised by scientific method itself—the nature of observation and experimentation, the relative character of verification, or the uncertain character of prediction—to realize that the foundations on which science rests do not seem to be indisputable. Furthermore, the basic concepts of science are not clear: what exactly are space, time, matter, cause, motion, force and many other problematical notions that scientists employ as if they were self-evident?

It is true that scientific method has undeniable advantages, such as the rigor, the interchangeability of researchers, or the fact that its findings are made public—and scientific knowledge, within the framework of scientific activity, best deserves the name of knowledge; but it should be remembered on what conceptual sand this house is built. However, one may object, even if we acknowledge that scientific knowledge is itself flawed, do its flaws give us any right to fly to cognitive methods and approaches that are even less sound than those upon which science is based? Should we not stick with scientific method, as being the least bad of the methods we know? Why should we endeavor to get to know that which we know we cannot get to know by scientific method, when that method, despite the weakness of its foundations, is the most rigorous and most solidly established one there is?

Here we arrive at the question of wanting to know that which is not susceptible of being known in the scientific sense. We want to know the foundations that underlie not only what we know but also what we do and what we experience; and since we cannot get to know them with scientific exactitude, we make do with less rigorous but no less interesting knowledge. The desire to know, in the broad sense, reaches beyond what is knowable, in the narrow sense; and where true knowledge is out of reach we make do with that which is plausible.

Questions about the nature of being and about origins fascinate us, despite the fact that we realize we are dealing, scientifically speaking, with the unknowable. It is because these matters are of concern to us and intrigue us that we make up stories about them, tales about being and origins. Here we enter into the realm of that which is not knowable in the scientific sense but is knowable inas-

much as it is of our human interest to suggest hypothetical foundations for all forms of knowledge, including observation and verification-based scientific knowledge. That which is “true” in scientific knowledge is based on that which is plausible, which in turn operates in an ideistic context that makes it meaningful. We make up stories about the world in order to hold on to the hard core of our world, what we see, believe, touch, do, hear, and want.

Those who want to know more than can be known, in the strict scientific sense, are obviously overstepping the bounds of the sober scientific approach. They want to know things for which, as they are aware from the start, there are no clear, straight answers. They want to know (taking “knowing” in the broad sense of being intellectually aware) more than can be known (in the restricted, scientific sense of knowing). If science were truly built upon rock-solid foundations, then one should clearly desire to know only that which is knowable. It is precisely because this is not the case that our “desire to know” in the broad sense goes beyond what is “knowable” in the narrow sense. We want to know more than we can know: this is how the question of metaphysics stands nowadays.