

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

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Introduction: This area of study is known as “epistemology” and has a relationship to our area of study in apologetics. “Epistemology” means “the division of philosophy that investigates the nature and origin of knowledge; a theory of the nature of knowledge,”
(Christian Theology by Millard Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, page 227).

We are not going to get very technical in this area or explore all the philosophies of learning. Before we look into “knowing what we know” we must understand the limitations within epistemology. “The epistemological question is simply, How do we know? Some assertions in the Bible are at least potentially susceptible to independent verification or falsification. That is to say, the references to historical and scientific matters and of the data available, be found to be true or false. Certain other matters, such as doctrinal statements about the nature of God and the atonement, transcend the realm of our sensory experience. We cannot test their truth or validity empirically.”
(Erickson, page 227).

Man has some limitations when it comes to “knowing” certain things.

Some important facts to consider that go beyond epistemological philosophy are:

A. Humans have a high responsibility as being the only “knowing” creature of the natural order.

B. Human's means of “knowing” are determined by the very fact of their special creation by God (“ontological” structure, ontology is the study of “being” or “what is”).

C. Humans exist in and deal with a world designed and created by God, “
(Both/And: A Balanced Apologetic by Ronald B. Mayers, Chicago: Moody, 1984, page 36).

On a human level, there are three observable ways of “knowing” things.

1. WE KNOW THROUGH REASON (some times thought of a logic)

A. Definition:

“to calculate; to think; the power of comprehending, thinking, or inferring,”

(Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield: Merriam-Webster, page 981).

Often recognizable when someone says, “makes good sense to me.”

B. Importance:

Reason helps us to discern various aspects of our daily lives.

“If it were not for logic, God's revelation could not differentiate between meaning this and not that. Even worse, we could not distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of the devil without logic, If contradiction is eliminated, then good may be evil and evil good. We use logic to differentiate truth from error, fact from fantasy, in everyday life,”

(Mayers, page 39-40).

When approaching a problem or something new reason “encourages us to think it through...,”
(Understanding People by Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., Winona Lake: BMH, 1987, page 31).

C. Development:

“Logic, as has been implied if not explicitly stated, was discovered and elucidated by Aristotle, not invented. Aristotle made into an explicit science the tacit working of man's logical mind. He enumerated three basic laws:

the Law of Identity-if any statement is true, then it is true,

the Law of Noncontradiction-no statement can be both true and false,

the Law of Excluded Middle-any statement is either true or false.”

(Mayers, page 39).

D. Biblical insight:

Isaiah 55:8-9 (6-11) =

Misunderstanding of this verse: “that God's reasoning or logic is different in kind from our reasoning and logic. It is most readily referred to in regard to logical difficulties relating to the problem of evil, the divine prerogative, the incarnation, and the doctrine of biblical inspiration.”
(Mayers, page 37).

Proper understanding: “God is desirous that the wicked would forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts for the way and thought of God Himself.” (Mayers, page 37).

Evil and sin are not rational expressions. God's reasoning and logic are pure and righteous.

Isaiah 1:18=

E. Limitations:

We can become too reductionistic in our view both of man and God. In some philosophers' minds reason has become the sole “...distinguishing characteristic of mankind. It is in his cognitive, cerebral aspect that man is most like God; therefore, it is to be emphasized and developed.” The danger in overstressing this fact is that they have “isolated but one aspect of human nature for consideration, but they have also concentrated their attention upon but one facet of God's nature.”
(Erickson, page 499).

We can fall into a works related righteousness. Natural theology also comes into view through Thomas Aquinas (Roman Catholic Theology). “He held that our thinking ability remains uncorrupted and intact in spite of our sinfulness. It was from this premise that he argued for a natural theology, a way to God through human reason.”
(Crabb, page 31).

We can become our own authority. Some have held to the fact that, “unaided reason is capable of understanding all that is true.” This belief is called “rationalism.” “Reason has an appropriate and vital place in forming our convictions. But rationalists go further. They own no authority beyond their reason. Rather than simply trying to reasonably understand what may be going on, they require all data to fit within their framework of logic or they summarily reject them.” (Crabb, page 31).

This could lead to “irreconcilable differences of opinion.”

2. WE KNOW THROUGH EXPERIENCE

A. Definition:

“The direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge; the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality.”

(Webster, page 437).

Often recognizable when some says, “I did it this way and it worked,” or “what your saying sounds good but can you prove it.”

B. Importance:

Some older folks used to say, “experience is the best teacher.” “...We do gain real knowledge of the created order by observation and sense experience. Revelatory events of the past were empirically knowable by both the first-hand witness (John) and the second-hand witness (Luke).” (Mayers, page 48).

When something takes place it is experience that “challenges us to look at the results....” (Crabb, page 34).

C. Development:

This area has been developed partly under “empiricism.” “Empiricism is a philosophy of knowing which suggests that the hard data of observable and measurable experience provides the needed authority.”

(Crabb, page 32).

D. Biblical insight:

Matthew 11:4-5=

Luke 24:39; John 20:27=

Philippians 4:9=

1 John 1:1-4=

E. Limitations:

We can have a problem with excepting things we haven't experienced. Those who rely on experience will not accept anything until they have seen the results or the issue will remain unresolved.

We can live in a world of uncertainty. Until one has experienced the fact in question, they can never say anything with certainty. They must wait for the results before making a judgment call.

We can develop problems with discernment. I can only work with or recognize things I have personally experienced.

We can become result oriented. Only try or deal with what works or what I have know someone I trust has experienced.

3. WE KNOW THROUGH INTUITION

A. Definition:

“Immediate apprehension or cognition; the power or faculty of attaining to direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference.”

(Webster, page 635).

Often recognizable when someone says, “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

B. Importance:

There are times when we sense something is wrong. There are other times when we sense that the timing is not right for a course of action. There are times when we are promoted to do something because we sense it is the right thing to do. “...Intuition is a process in which an idea emerges within one's mind with a certainty that seems to depend on undefined internal rather than external course.”

(Crabb, page 30).

Since this is true, the Holy Spirit of God could be behind some of our internal promptings.

C. Development:

“The roots of intuition are of course complex. John Calvin held that certain concepts are underived givens which every human being believes as part of his God-given humanness. Others argue that intuition is nothing more than the product of years of experience and reflection which comes together for a person in a moment of understanding.”

(Crabb, page 30).

The New Age has really developed this area in recent years through holistic health. “To devotees reality is a seamless web of vibrant, pulsating energy. Putting together an intuitive means of knowing, a feminine spirituality derived from a new nurturing image of the deity, and a wide variety of techniques for applying enlightenment to everything from business decisions to nutrition....”

(Disarming The Secular Gods by Peter C. Moore, Downers Grove: IVP, 1989, page 52).

D. Biblical insight:

Romans 1:18=

Romans 2:15=

E. Limitations:

One can be sincerely wrong in this area. "Intuition requires us to wait for subjective certainty to emerge." (Crabb, page 34).

We can believe something is right inside and later find out we were wrong. Feelings can lead us astray.

This area is not a stable method for which to base one's decisions. Intuition "...follows no discernible pattern and is therefore completely unpredictable...." (Crabb, page 30).

Conclusion:

A. Why does it seem that man is unreachable?

"If all men are made in God's image, and all men have the same logic, why do not all men accept the reality of God and His definitive revelation?"

(Mayers, page 37)

There are some limitations to reaching man.

1. Man has an incorrect starting point:

"Man should reason with God as his ultimate reference point, but beginning with Adam man makes himself the final and ultimate reference point. The very heart of the initial temptation was that man might be like God (Gen. 3:5)." (Mayers, page 44).

2. Man has replaced God with himself:

"Man was initially made to have a relationship with God; to obey the Creator... Man, however, is now born (Rom. 5:12) on his own autonomous path in complete alienation and estrangement from God." Therefore, his logic may be the same, but the actual content of his reasoning begins with man's will and reason, not with God's will and Word. It is not that man's logic functions improperly, but that it now functions apart from, and therefore really against God." (Mayers, page 44). Man will try to understand God in reference to himself.

3. Man's process for knowing is tainted:

"To claim that all men have the same logic does not mean that all men have the same reasoning process. Ephesians 2:1 portrays man as dead in his transgressions and sin. Man, in theological language, is totally depraved. He is consciously godless and wicked, suppressing the innate truth of God's reality that lies within his person. Total depravity, therefore, affects the reasoning process if not the very ability to reason.... Therefore his will is bent away from God to self-rule." (Mayers, page 44-45).

B. How do we reach man with his limitations?

Man's need of the new birth is one of our highest priorities. The Word of God with the Holy Spirit's ministry is the process of reaching man.

We can use epistemology in apologetics to a limited extent through three means.

1. Point to the facts.

We should be able to answer the questions unsaved man has from the Scriptures. We should also be able to let the historical facts from Scripture speak for themselves. "If revelatory events provide real and true knowledge of God's reality and nature manifested through His relationship with His people, something must be knowable by sensation for the Bible to assert such knowledge through historical events."(Mayers, page 48).

2. Reveal the broken relationship.

There is something missing in every individual. We must remember the "...fact of man's inherent restlessness without the divine relationship." (Mayers, page 56).

3. Make an appeal.

Response to the Gospel message is important. "...We may sometimes reach the unconverted heart by appealing to the nature of man's being, because as Christian apologists we know that the knowledge of God is engraven indelibly on that heart." (Mayers, page 57).