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Limits of Knowledge and the Human Person

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Hugh MacDonald

Limits of Knowledge and the Human Person

I intend to treat the question of forbidden knowledge under the aspect of the ontological perfection of the human person. In the first case, I will consider the individual person as such. A person as an individual substance of a rational nature is actualized by knowledge. To know is to be in a qualified way, over and above the mere fact of existing. In addition, to know is to exist in relation to another. This discussion will be in the confines of a perfectionistic and ontological ethics. It is perfectionistic in that I suppose that the defining factor in human action is the perfection of the person himself. It is ontological in that perfection means some kind of fullness of being, some kind of realization of what might be. When I attentively know something, then in a sense I am more, or at least I am changed. This approach is different from a blind deontology, the hypostasis of duty. It is also distinct from consequentialism, in that in acting itself I am also existing in a different way. The act, as my act, is consequence enough: the act itself is an actualization of myself that deserves ethical examination. Consequentialism, as I understand it, is concerned with consequences that come after the act in time, and can be separated from the act. While a perfection or realization at the cognitive level involves an element of feeling, of pleasure or displeasure, the approach here is not that of utilitarianism. I cannot hypostasize the pleasure itself or displeasure, but must view knowledge as a relation. The minute that I conceive of knowledge merely as a state of believing that something is so, I can no longer hold to it as knowledge. Not every attentive act of knowing

makes me more in the same way, so I shall examine knowledge with respect to various objects. From this point of view, I am considering an individual as being mindful of whether it is right for him to pay attention to something or not. I am not going to go into depth about knowledge as power. The power over things that knowledge gives is accidental to knowledge. I am more concerned with knowledge as a way of being. Can knowing (attentively knowing) some things be a step backward in the full development of the human being as an intellectual being?

The second case is that of a community. In that case, we will consider an act of prohibition. The person in authority knows, or knows about, that which he is forbidding. In what cases will he deem it for the common good that some people should not know? The question of practical knowledge is perhaps easy enough, but what about knowledge for the sake of knowledge? I propose that out of a recognition of the goodness of knowledge as such, the authority might decide that some people at certain times should not know some things.

The third case is that of the universe as a whole, and in this case we will consider briefly God as the one who would forbid us to know. In what ways would He prohibit us? If God is the prohibitor, then either the prohibition would be expressed in a command (a positive law), or simply by making the discovery of the truth in certain areas beyond the reach of mere mortals.

Why would an individual person deem some knowledge to be detrimental to his well-being? Philosophers put great store on knowledge, and they forgo all sorts of immediate pleasures for the sake of knowledge. Classical philosophy certainly puts a premium on knowledge, as we read in the first line of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. If we desire to know for the sake of knowing, then is there some knowledge that is in itself unwanted? I mean, is there knowledge that is undesirable for its own sake, or is the value of knowledge for the sake of knowledge an absolute value. The primary fact about knowledge is that it is a state of being. Man largely defines himself as a knower. He is an animal that can pay attention both to himself and to the world. Attentive knowledge most properly changes us. A sleeping man may be said to know, in so far as the same man upon waking may recall what he

learned, but the attentive man is attentive to something other than himself, and so has a particular relation to something, and that thing defines him as a knower. We may speculate on what it would be like to be a pure spirit, what such an experience of knowledge would be. As an animal, however, man has a limited fund of attention. In English, we use the expression "to pay attention", and attention is always paid from a limited fund. There is also a temporary limit, indicated by the term "attention span". To be attentive to one thing is to be asleep to another. Given the limitations of attention, how can we "get the best value for our money"? What is most worth knowing?

I would be doing violence to my own nature to wish the cessation of all attention. Suppose that the thought of being comatose brings me a longing and delectation. It is still a picture that I am entertaining, and any happiness that I may derive from this picture is a happiness still bound to the fact that I am attentive. Anything that is, persists in being. I as a man, as a heap of organized matter, persist in being. The matter resists annihilation. As a living being, even without my volitional involvement, my organism takes steps to maintain its unity as this organism. When I am involved at the volitional level, there are two aspects involved in my inclination to persist in being. First, I do not wish to be harmed organically, second, I have the concomitant wish not to know that I am being harmed organically. There is a third concomitant wish, that I do not wish at the same time to have the sensation of "knowing" that which is not true. I cannot wish to be harmed organically, with the conviction that I am not being so harmed. I deem it evil to suffer bodily injury, but I would prefer the truth about it, if it should occur, over an illusion. I do not wish for overwhelming pain, but I deem that it is a good thing to have enough pain to let me know how my body is. Bodily injury is unwanted, the death of those close to me is unwanted, yet if these evils should come to pass, the truth about evil is desirable over an illusion. The only sense that a truth is undesirable, is that the state of affairs itself is undesirable. If it is undesirable that a certain state of affairs should exist, then it is undesirable that a mental judgment that "it is so" should be true. It is impossible for me to want to know truth as falsehood, and falsehood as truth.

These are two possibilities: that I should deem that what is so is true, and that I should deem that what is so is not so. The second, falsehood in the intellect, is simply absurd as an object of will. Yet perhaps the first is also undesirable. There are other possibilities. First, I may see complete ignorance as a good thing. After the fact, however, ignorance is difficult to achieve. It is very difficult to unlearn things. Otherwise, I may simply seek to be numb or inattentive. Some states of affairs may be so overwhelming that I cannot deal with them. I may prefer to remain asleep rather than to wake and face it. As a habitual approach to reality as a whole, this approach is escapism, and it would probably draw censure from any ethical point of view. A person who cuts himself off from reality as such is falling short of what it is to be fully human. Yet, for all that, I as an animal must do something similar to this merely to survive. The cultivation of numbness and inattention may be appropriate in some circumstances, in regard to some objects. I do not have in mind extraordinary situations where a person faces constant horror, in which he is faced on every side with threats to his existence about which he can do nothing. Certainly, in these cases, survivors tell us that they found it necessary to develop a sort of insensitivity. What I have in mind is a far more common situation. As an animal, my attention can only be drawn to one object of interest at a time. It cannot switch too quickly from one thing to another. I can no more cope with a flood of information from every side than I can eat ten loaves of bread in one minute. If I tried, I would be overwhelmed to the point of paralysis. The trick is to decide what I wish to attend to, and deliberately numb myself to all else. Certainly, the classical tradition sees education as a sort of intellectual midwifery. This exalted description might cover the best moments of learning, but most of education is a deliberate numbing of the senses. In order to read a book, I must become numb for a time to all else, with my attention fixed upon those letters in the center of my field of vision. In order to drive a car, I must be attentive to the motions of other cars and the intentions of drivers, while numb to all else that is not related. The numbness of the sense here is obviously necessary to perform the activity, and all the more necessary if the activity itself is not optional.

The traditional treatment of numbness of the senses (*hebetudo sensus*) treats it as a vice.¹ It is related to habitual immersion in sexual pleasure (*luxuria*). By extension, habitual immersion in any pleasure will cause a certain dullness of mind. By further extension, any focusing of attention, any immersion in an object of appetite and cognition, will lead to a habitual deficit in other areas. When I am immersed in pleasure, then very spontaneously I become inattentive or numb to all else. The immediacy of pleasure may overwhelm my awareness. The memory of pleasure may draw my attention from whatever I was thinking about, from the situation here and now, and may make sustained reasoning difficult. For this reason, luxury (in the broad and current sense of the word) breeds a sort of narcosis and lack of knowledge that is considered a vice.

It belongs to the fullness of being human that one should be in touch with reality, not alienated from reality whether by vivid sensual memories or compelling anticipation. While a sort of numbness may come upon me as the result of a flood of pleasure, or a retrieved memory of a pleasure, I may find it desirable or even necessary to cultivate a habitual numbness. This is especially true in an artificial environment, the technological and electronically enhanced environment in which we presently live. If I remain attentive and open to all the information that comes my way, I will be lost in a sea of meaninglessness. Information in-forms me. Every time I am attentive to something, my mind takes on that thing, becomes that thing, and so in a media environment, a normal or enhanced state of attention makes me into an unwilling Proteus: I become nothing but an endless series of trivial forms. The key to dealing with this sort of environment is to become numb in such a way as not to be enchanted by the ripples in the river of information. In this way, by numbness to compelling details, I may become aware of larger patterns of meaning that would otherwise elude me. A common metaphor in the English language is that one is not able to see the forest for the trees. Occasionally, in order to see a large image, it is necessary to slightly unfocus one's

eyes. An analogous habit must be developed with regard to the artificially enhanced information environment.²

Love has a dual relation to knowledge. The first relation is that we love nothing unless we know it, at least in a vague and circumscriptive way.³ The second relation is that we seek to know things in a more than casual manner because we are attracted by them. The English term "interest" (*inter + esse*) indicates a sort of love. Attentive knowledge involves interest. Interest also implies a way of existing. The inherent metaphor is that the knower is in the midst of the thing, penetrating its "noumenon", or that the thing is in the knower (a more classical metaphor). The object of knowledge attracts me and evokes within me a strong desire to know it, and so it becomes my attention itself. In another way, I seek to penetrate its depths and to know its intimate details. Of all the senses, it is perhaps touch that culminates knowledge. We may peer through lenses mounted on machines at the strange coasts and valleys of other planets, but ultimately we wish to place our feet and our hands on the land that we see. The object of interest may reveal only a few superficial layers of appearances, and in a way there may not be very much to it. Even so, an object such as a pebble or a tapeworm may draw the attention of the student of nature for his entire life. Any real thing may become an object of interest and thus of love.

The most common experience of the relation of love and knowledge is a relation with another human person. What could it mean that a friend is another self? Strictly speaking, it is impossible that one person may become another, yet there is a universal experience that is very close to that. The love of another human person causes me to desire to know the innerness of that person. The other person remains an island, a noumenon, but their words and other signs of their thoughts and internal events serve me to re-create them within myself. These words are in the context of a dialogue, so the process goes both

M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Mentor Books, NY, 1964; M. McLuhan and B. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, Oxford Press, NY, 1989, p. 13, 19-20.

³ Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, x.

ways. The love of another brings about a very high level of information within me, such that it fundamentally changes me. This change affects who and how I am. For this reason, friendship is a very rare occurrence. There are many people that I may love in the sense that I would wish them to be the sort of person that I would want to know intimately, yet I suspect that they are not, and a profound sharing of interiority (or our "noumena", if you prefer) would be painful to me, as if it were a disintegration of my own being, rather than an increase. By the same token, I would not want to be known when it is a question of something within myself which I would think would be abhorrent to others. The thoughts that arise at the edge of awareness, where our volitional control is minimal, are a private domain. There are organic conditions where a person has no control, where they verbalize whatever occurs at the edge of awareness. Perhaps of all pathological conditions, this would be the most dreadful. If two persons were to relate in such a manner, if they were to make each other privy to the entire range of noise that occurs at the edge of awareness, they would diminish themselves. The raising of the subconscious to the conscious level by inducing a condition where the person is relaxing the usual control over verbalization has been standard psychiatry. The psychiatrist himself bears a tremendous burden. Sigmund Freud proclaimed "*movebo Acheronta*": that which lies below is brought to the surface. In order to allow the subject to liberate the stream of verbalization, the psychiatrist must become invisible, a mere suggestive voice. Yet, it seems that this unearthing process is not unlike rape.

I may deem that something within myself is off limits to another, or something within another is off limits to myself because it is vile. I would become that vile thing by knowing it. A psychopathology, or a deep moral flaw, might be a fit object of knowledge in a purely scientific sense, but in that case we are distancing ourselves from it, not knowing it in a vital way as connected intimately with the very existence of a person. At the same time, while we may humbly admit our own flaws, we do not wish to be known for them, that they should be the object of the intense and interested gaze of others. On the other hand, there is an analogous situation with that which is sublime within us. We do not easily put on the table what we hold most dear. A cheri-

shed insight or dream, a vision of beauty, could be trampled on by others. For others to understand something of this sort, they must in a manner enter into me and become me. On the one hand, my thoughts and ultimate desires transcend my ability to verbalize them. I realize that by verbalization they are diminished. By words alone, I cannot assuredly lead another to them. If I present them to another, and the other does not understand, I have trivialized them and myself. For this reason, the work of the artist is a work of agony. Starting with a cherished vision, he must wrestle with the expression, knowing that this expression may open up his vision, and by extension open up his very self, to the intense scrutiny of others who do not understand.

Suppose that it is something of great importance to me. It has in some sense made me how I am in a manner that I think perfects me as a human being. I deem that if you had it, you would be more as well. I do not want you to stop half way, at some inadequate verbal formula. There may be a miscarriage in the process. To introduce anything prematurely would be to ruin it. Thus, an important communication must go on in stages. The ground must be prepared. To introduce anything prematurely would be to ruin it. For this reason, I may wrap new concepts in new words.⁴ I may also use new words to make certain that others are not privy to the communication. If it is the case of a private conversation, I may choose to reveal or conceal by my use of silence, but in public forms of expression, as in writing a book, I must take into account that the verbal formulae may be received by anyone. The same words can be used both to reveal and to conceal. The process whereby I arrived at what I mean by a word is the very process of living, and it involves all my sensations and the inductions whereby I fixed in unities the meanings of words.⁵ Every word that I use in communication relies for its efficacy upon your complex of experiences, both sensual and inductive. By verbalizing, I must make an act of faith that somehow you may re-create a reason-

⁴ Boethius, *De Trinitate*; Thomas Aquinas, *In Boethium de Trinitate*, preface.

For a comparison of induction as stabilization of experiential objects (Aristotle) and as argumentation (J.S. Mill) see K. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, D. Reidel, Holland, p. 6, 14. Induction here refers to induction as cognitive stabilization.

ble facsimile of what I have in mind out of the stuff of your life. For this reason, the transmission of what we consider to be of highest value does not, strictly speaking, concern forbidden knowledge, but there will be many gates along the way, which I will not or cannot unlock until the other is ready. It is forbidden knowledge in a qualified sense.

I think that the experience of self-revelation is universal enough that the reader may be able to instantiate it from his own life. Self-revelation is a part of loving knowledge. Permit me to draw some theological parallels. If the reader does not accept my theological context, the best I can do is ask for a temporary suspension of disbelief. This is not polemics, and I ask for understanding rather than agreement. When I have something within me that I hold highly, it is with trepidation that I let another have access to it. The other may or may not succeed. If we fail, we are both hurt. Now, the beatific vision, the vision of the Absolute Being as a person, would be far distant from the discursive process whereby two human friends come to know one another. To have Absolute Being as the center of our attention would be to change in a much more fundamental way than in a human relationship. It would not happen unless both parties were ready. Human relationships at the personal level have many buffers and safeguards. The persons involved are each a historical continuum, and are at various moments along that continuum. They are not revealed to themselves all at once, because their existence is stretched over time. A personal relation that was not mediated by words and the senses, that was not attenuated by a history and a succession of moments, in which the other party had no limits, would be something for which one would have to be prepared. The other person in this relation perhaps could be conceived as being "shy" in a way that far transcends any human shyness. The intimate knowledge of the other would be outside of the limits of a casual inquiry, a merely curious mind that wishes to dissect things and abandon them. It would be in some sense forbidden knowledge.

In a family or a political community, and I do not mean a dysfunctional one, knowledge may be forbidden in a qualified sense. A parent may deem that a child is unprepared to learn something. Of course, in

learning there is a certain necessary order. One must learn the written symbols for numbers before learning how to add and subtract on paper. Euclid's proofs must be presented in a certain order. There is also a sense in which someone is not yet mature enough to accept something which has vital meaning. Many family secrets wait for years before they are passed on. There is an order in putting knowledge off limits that is actually for the sake of knowledge, and on account of the goodness of knowledge itself.

What is true in the family, is *mutatis mutandis*, true in the state.⁶ The state is responsible for the common good. The common good requires that the people know what pertains to the common good, and knowing it, love it. While "good" implies a practical end, there is something about knowing the common good and being attentive to it that has an element of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In order to develop the sense of the common good, examples of virtue are set forth. Some historical figures serve as examples that clearly indicate what it is to love one's community. An adult may understand that real people have faults, and should not be surprised when exemplary people have theirs. A real love for the truth (for the sake of the truth) leads historians to dig deep into the lives of illustrious persons. What is the effect of presenting the historical and demythologized hero to children? The whole reason for presenting them at all is to make concrete the difficult conception of the common good. If the picture is cluttered with all the details that do not teach this lesson, some minor truths may have been respected, but a major truth has been compromised and brought into disrepute. In one sense truth is "out there", but it is of little importance if the truth is not "in here". Truth is a relation, and so it cannot be completely abstracted from the person who holds it as truth, and in its presentation, it must be remembered that whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the receiver.

What applies to historical and mythic figures, also applies to the private lives of political leaders. The press has an obligation to report

⁶ J.M. Bocheński, "O patriotyzmie" (On Patriotism), in: *Chrześcijańska myśl społeczna na Emigracji* (Christian social thought in the Emigrant community), Lublin, 1991, p. 312-331

on the political activities of those in authority, in order that when citizens are called upon to make political decisions, these may be informed. However, it may be detrimental to the good of the community that the press should be closely reporting on the private life of political leaders. What is actually done goes far beyond the obligation of the press to inform the public. At the same time, it is difficult to determine whether or how much the press should be restricted in what it can report and what it cannot report. What is off limits would have to be defined, and any such definition in law would be very precarious, and overturned easily in practice. Rather, it is a case of something being forbidden by a sense of decorum and civility. The most important truth is that the political process and political authority are for the common good, and this is balanced by the truth that the only persons that can be found to do the job are mere mortals and sometimes, even inevitably, they will do the wrong thing. Yet, like Noah's nakedness, the personal failings of political leaders should not be unveiled before the general public.

Finally, there is the more comprehensive community called the universe, the community of all that exists. The universe comprises the merely natural, the domain of human action, and possibly domains of which we know nothing. Again, I must beg the indulgence of those who do not agree with my theological context. If nothing else, then perhaps my analogies may be applied to instances of "forbidden knowledge" closer to home. As far as I understand it, God has not laid down any positive law that I can clearly interpret as saying that knowledge of some particular thing or domain is off limits. The simplest way to forbid knowledge is to make it impossible. If I could make a perfect safe or an impregnable fortress, I would need no positive law forbidding my subjects to enter. If I wished them to enter only when prepared, I could simply carry out my will by making it difficult. What, then are the things which by their nature are off limits to human knowledge? First of all, if there are any things the knowledge of which is forbidden in the simple sense, like the impregnable fortress, we do not need to concern ourselves with them. They are simply unknowable. A directive against seeking to know the unknowable may still be of value, in the sense that it warns me not to waste my time in a futile

pursuit. Other things are not knowable because of their complexity. It is impossible, for example, to predict the weather in detail. We could not even simulate it, because the simulation would depend on gathering all possible data, and the simulation, if adequate, would simply be another weather system with all the inscrutably many factors of the first. For the same reason, Newtonian mechanics will not tell us who will win the lottery. Quantum mechanics places definite limits on what we can know.

In conclusion, some knowledge is undesirable because it is untimely. The teleology of human knowledge and learning is not towards acquiring a permanent mass of facts. In order to learn and order our knowledge, we quite spontaneously forget things. We throw away the ladders of knowledge, the fact that our knowledge is aspective and abstract places a natural limit on what we can know, and on what we can foresee. Our very nature forbids knowledge that exceeds our nature. In turn, the choice to know some things excludes the knowledge of others. Positive directives that we should know things such as the common good, the meaning of life, that we should know friends, imply prohibitions against being immersed in a curiosity that would render this impossible.