

The Abyss of Faith

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Humans need knowledge to thrive—physically, emotionally, and intellectually. We need knowledge of all forms, such as the knowledge that the sky is blue, the knowledge that our families love us, and knowledge of the existence (or lack thereof) of a god. Because of the breadth of the definition of what we call knowledge, we must draw some key distinctions. There are two fundamental types of knowledge. First, we have practical knowledge—the knowledge of the everyday world that we apply readily (both consciously and unconsciously) to our lives. The theory of gravity and mathematical properties of addition and subtraction exemplify this first type. We derive this kind of knowledge either inductively or deductively, and its reliability makes our everyday lives easier. Second, we have purely philosophical knowledge—the knowledge of the intangible and metaphysical realm. The knowledge of the existence of a soul or a supernatural power fits this category. When considering how to go about acquiring knowledge, it is essential to consider and distinguish between the significances of these two types.

Various philosophical traditions offer countless ways of acquiring knowledge. Hard Skepticism claims that knowledge is unattainable. Buddhists seek not to desire knowledge in the first place. Pragmatists only bother themselves with trying to attain practical knowledge. Empiricists (scientists) seek knowledge based on observed evidence. And supernaturalists claim knowledge based on faith. Nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is famous for claiming that all of these ways of attaining knowledge require some degree of a “leap of faith.” For example, a scientist cannot know for certain that the law of gravity will work for the one hundred trillionth time when he performs his experiment; assuming that it will thus requires some degree of faith. Kierkegaard used this theory to defend his belief in the supernatural. He thought that because all belief systems require some leap of faith, no way of attaining knowledge is superior to any

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other; the leap to faith in God is no different than the leap to faith in gravity. Despite using the very clever theory of the inevitable leap of faith as his premise, Kierkegaard erred in his conclusion. He failed to accurately evaluate a crucial part of the leaping game that is the quest for knowledge: the size of leap. Although all philosophers, regardless of their beliefs, must make some leap to attain knowledge, that does not mean that all of their knowledge-claims are equal; the size of the leap of faith determines the strength of a belief system. Ergo, because empiricism requires the smallest leaps of faith to knowledge, it is the surest way to acquire it.

Empiricism dominates in the quest for knowledge because it has led to countless examples of the first kind of knowledge—practical knowledge that has objectively led to the betterment of mankind; supernaturalism (and all other belief systems) has led to no such knowledge. Without the knowledge gained by empiricism, humans (if still in existence at all) would remain bestial. We would still walk around barefoot and naked, fully exposed to the pain that our environment can bring. We would only be able to communicate on the most primitive and inefficient of levels, utterly ignorant of the empirical knowledge of electricity and sound waves. The same would be true of travel. Ignorant of all knowledge of science, we would lack planes, trains, boats, and automobiles; we would walk on foot, totally isolated by geography. The very lifespan of humans might be one quarter of today's in the absence of modern medicine and basic scientific knowledge. The evidence is endless, and, frankly, quite obvious. True, this sort of knowledge may be considered merely practical, mundane, and useless in answering life's "bigger" questions, but it is knowledge that requires a negligible leap of faith. Practically speaking, this leap is nonexistent. Even the most impractical philosopher must admit that this mundane knowledge has a level of objectivity and can be proven and put to use. In this objective, shrewd frame of mind, what does supernaturalism have to offer? Nothing. In this way, empiricism is objectively superior to supernaturalism and all other forms of acquiring knowledge, in accordance with Kierkegaard's leap of faith argument, because it offers at the very least some degree of progress in one of the two fundamental types of knowledge.

Philosophy is known, to some extent, as the study of life's unanswered questions. Such questions as "How did life on earth start?" and "Is there a god?" come to mind in this category. Philosophically speaking, these questions are essential. People can lead intellectually interesting lives dedicated to finding the answers to such questions. And many have. The common supernaturalist answer to the question of existence is that God created everything, which warrants the irrefutable retort, who created Him? Empiricists haven't even agreed on an answer. In essence, after thousands of years thinking about these sorts of questions, nobody has come up with acceptable answers. Whether or not we are closer to the truth than we were a couple of thousand years ago remains up for debate, but nobody—not a supernaturalist, not an empiricist, not a Buddhist—can answer the question of existence with certainty. Therefore, it is illogical to choose a method of knowledge-seeking based on this category of knowledge. It is impossible for one bogus answer to be any more valid than another: a bogus answer is a bogus answer. This is not to say that we should abandon the hope of finding answers to these pressing questions, but simply to choose a way to find knowledge based on knowledge that is actually possible to attain. Thus, empiricism is the best way of acquiring knowledge when taking into account this second type of knowledge as well; it is objectively superior to supernaturalism in acquiring practical knowledge, and equally unsatisfactory in acquiring the second type. Why not take one form of knowledge as opposed to none?

It is important to note how much the category of purely philosophical knowledge has decreased since the invention and gradually improved application of science. In other words, many things that used to be considered explicable only through myths and metaphysics—things that require massive leaps of faith—can now be explained with science. For example, thousands of years ago each culture had a different myth to explain why the sun rose each morning. These cultures invented such myths because they lacked the science to prove anything else. Of course, science now easily reconciles such issues. This phenomenon is common: science repeatedly disproves supernatural explanations, and the opposite has yet to occur. The conclusion that can be drawn from this example is that science has changed what we used to call unattain-

able knowledge into common knowledge. Who is to say science won't save the day again and answer the question of existence?

A final argument in favor of empiricism over supernaturalism is that of the pragmatist: only practical knowledge matters. While I differ from pragmatists in that I still strive to find the second type of knowledge (I have yet to give up the hope of finding answers to life's supposedly unanswerable questions), I align with them in that I deem practical knowledge more important. Practical knowledge has a far greater impact on our daily lives. Practical knowledge allows me to travel to work in a car or a train, while purely philosophical knowledge merely changes how I think as I sit in those respective vehicles as I ride. Practical knowledge allows me to communicate with my friends in the first place, while purely philosophical knowledge just changes what we talk about. Humans are, in nature, practical beings. Practically speaking, the first type of knowledge is all that matters; the fruits of empiricism perfectly align with the requirements of human nature.

Before concluding, I will address a worthy counterargument. Modern American philosopher Thomas Nagel opposes empiricism and objectivism as means of acquiring absolute truth. He believes that those pursuits take humans farther away from the understanding of what he refers to as "subjective mental states." The example he uses to support this claim is that of a bat—a creature whose mental processes are so different from our own that, he claims, we can never understand what it is like to "be a bat." He contends that science, in its effort to find truth about the bat, strays further away from the truth by trying to claim objective facts about the bat. To this argument I have two retorts. First, how can any degree of objective knowledge about anything—including subjective things—take us farther away from understanding it? How can knowing the mechanism of sonar and the chemical processes of a bat brain not lead to greater understanding of the bat's state of being? Anyone who believes in the use of science at all must admit the value of empirical knowledge of the bat. Granted, we may not ever fully understand its subjective aspects, but objective knowledge is part of the truth. Second, even if the first retort were shown to be false, that would mean that empiricism does as much for man as any other belief system because no other belief system has anything better. In other

words (pace Nagel), if this explanation doesn't take us any closer to the truth, what do you propose will do so? Perhaps we should write a poem about the mental state of the bat and attempt to understand it through ephemeral feelings, highfalutin' language and pure imagination—certainly that would get us closer to the truth than science. ...

Kierkegaard was right to the extent that it takes a leap of faith to reach any form of knowledge. He was wrong to the extent that some forms of knowledge require much larger leaps of faith than others. But sometimes the leap of faith is simply too large. Supernaturalists, among others, are overzealous in their quest for knowledge, and they overestimate their abilities. They try to make huge, glorious leaps to the most sought-after knowledge, but the conclusion is dire as they all too often miss their mark. Empiricists stay safe as they gently yet confidently leap—or perhaps step—from one stepping-stone of knowledge to another. Supernaturalists attempt the big leaps, and fail to land on terra firma; they fall off the path of knowledge into an eternally deep, dark place—the abyss of faith.

Works Cited

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