

Questioning Knowledge

Honors 320

Have you ever been afraid of punctuation? A period? A period just seems so declarative, doesn't it? Am I the only one who fears a period declaring I know the sentence it follows? Do I have anything to declare? What does it mean to declare something? What does it mean that I am so uncomfortable doing so? Is to declare to know? Is there anything that I know, that I could declare?

Do I know anything?

Does my confusion come from what I study? Does the lack of statements come from the impenetrable gap between archaeological past and modern present? What can we mere mortals confined to a linear timeline hope to know about the past? How can we ever know what actually happened when we are forever in our own time with our own perceptions? Or could the problem be distance, both in time and space? Could the problem be in knowing myself? If I knew myself, could I know the rest? If I knew God, could I know the world? Is there a key piece that if I knew, I could know everything else? What is knowing? What does that look like to know something? How is possible to know something at all? Are there things we can know, and things we cannot? How do I know when I know something? Why can't I write anything but questions? Am I the only one who feels this way?

I haven't been able to bring myself to write a declarative statement. The questions are familiar in their confusion and contradictions. It is so much more comfortable to stay in the uncertainties where I'm not wrong because I'm not right—I just am. But that existence is also precarious and ungrounded. Did you feel how lost I am, how lost we all should be? Was it frustrating to read a list of questions? I hope you are frustrated, because I'm frustrated with my

genuine inability to be able to say anything.¹ But questions are all I'm comfortable with. What could I declare?

I'll attempt a statement: people we now call (we have no idea what they called themselves) Ancestral Pueblo or Anasazi lived at one time (because there are problems with dating anything to a specific time, so maybe we don't know that). That's not a particularly helpful statement. It may also not be true—are we sure that these people were a unified group that could be called under one name? Maybe they lived, but we can't say anything about them. In fact, probably, the people we label Ancestral Pueblo wouldn't consider themselves a unified group. Maybe I could say that at the very least, we know that people today (the Hopi, Zuni, Taos and other Pueblo groups) are descended from them. Do we know this?

We could test the genetics, comparing both ribosomal and mitochondrial DNA to establish a genetic link (and we have). Genetics are not easy to read, however. 99.9% of human DNA is identical across the species, and that .1% that differs doesn't change as much as could be expected.² Beyond that, are the similarities noted in the DNA of ancient samples and modern people simply due to living in a similar environment? Epigenetics has become more and more vital, showing that the environment in which one lives changes their DNA, and the DNA of their children. A researcher also must consider that genetic material degrades over time, which means even the most pristine sample is not actually all that pristine. How can we trust DNA from a 900-year-old body? Can we trust the data we have? Even beyond the genetic relationship, do genetics

¹ Why is it frustrating to read so many questions in a row? I'm not sure, but I suspect that because questions are open-ended and force a reader to consider something. A statement can do the same thing of forcing a reader to think, but having question after question without an answer is exhausting, because the reader cannot take a break and let the author tell them what the answer is.

² "FAQ About Genetic And Genomic Science". 2019. National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI). Accessed February 25 2019.

matter? Or is it more important to establish a cultural link? And if the culture determines a relationship better than the genetics, how in the world do we establish that? Behaviors don't join the archaeological record, only materials. This very basic statement—that these people lived, and we know about them from their descendants is not something that we know.

Despite the lack of certainty, archaeological research continues. It must! If we had to answer every question to the point of absolute knowledge, nothing would ever happen, because that's impossible. We move forward with the understanding that the things we thought were true may become untrue with more research and different perspectives. We can have a pretty good idea and be willing to base conclusions off of it without ever saying that we know it. I myself did an excavation in Southern Utah a year ago at an Ancestral Pueblo site. I held arrowheads, pots, figurines and more. I spent hours painstakingly collecting shell beads that once formed a necklace worn by a person I have never and can never meet. I dug through charred firepits full of remnants of meals shared by a family. I'm currently doing research on the chemical make-up of paint on ceramic sherds from Ancestral Puebloan excavations in order to help establish a less subjective timeline. If we can't say who these people were, how do I even begin to try to ask what the presence of lead in red paint on ceramic pieces means? I have the physical materials I'm analyzing but meaning isn't in the archaeological record. I guess I still can't make a statement at all, at least not one I can really say I know.

If the problem with knowing is the problem of the impenetrable divide between past and present, do historians also not know anything? Maybe. A historiographic approach to the past includes interrogating the written sources as biased documents; in other words, we must ask questions about the author. Who were they? What was their purpose in writing? What life experience did they have that led to their biases? What information was available to them? This

list could go on forever. Take for an example the Mongol Empire. Think about what you know about the Mongols and Genghis Khan. Was Genghis Khan a tyrant filled with bloodlust and an unending sexual appetite? Or was he a successful ruler who followed the patterns of other nomadic and sedentary leaders? Was he a little of both? In fact, Genghis Khan was born Temujin, and later named Chinggis Khan when he formed a confederation to retrieve his kidnapped wife, Borté. Perhaps it would surprise you to learn that seven of his nine main wives were Christian. Perhaps it would surprise you even more to know that when he would conquer a city, killing all of the elite, he would often distribute food to the poor in the same city. In the interest of full disclosure, maybe these things I am composing as statements, as declarations, are wrong. It's entirely possible, and I guess I might never know.

Let's go back to trying to study the Mongol Empire. Say we want to research conceptions of masculinity and femininity in the early days of the Empire. We would begin with Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, Juwaini's *History of the World Conqueror*, and Rashid al-Din's *Collection of Histories*. The three authors were Persian men, but with very different biases. Juzjani fled to India and hated the Mongols, while Juwaini worked in the Mongol court. Rashid al-Din also worked in the court but was not as closely connected to the rulers as Juwaini. All of these things must be considered. The biases we are considering might also be wrong.³ What then? We must also contend with the lack of information, especially about women.⁴ All of this adds up to the

³ In the interest of getting anywhere, I'm not going to continue to point out that every statement I write has the possibility of being wrong, because every single statement has that possibility. Just assume that everything I say is, at best, something I feel confident in presenting as maybe true to the best of my experience as a twenty-year-old college student.

⁴ If we are talking about knowing historical figures, women have suffered from erasure more than any. In "The Blessed Circle and Tales of Woe", Susan Pickett talked about how the Blessed Circle, the recognized greats of composition, did not include a single woman. When she researched, she found hundreds of prolific, celebrated women composers who were not remembered after their own lifetime. "The music of women composers is sucked into the black hole for more than one reason. Still, the overarching theme here is that they are women, women aren't

same problem: a historian can have strong ideas about the way things were, but there is never a way to know for sure that what we think is correct.⁵

I would have liked to talk about the problem of historical sources in the context of the Ancestral Pueblo, but there are no historical sources about the Ancestral Pueblo. What then? Well, archaeology, but even the questions we can approach are very different. Conceptions of masculinity and femininity in Mongol culture are not directly addressed by the texts, but things can be gleaned, like the treatment of a woman who was Queen, or the clothing worn by court officials. But this doesn't exist at all for the Ancestral Pueblo, and so any meaning of masculinity and femininity has to come from material objects, like women being buried with potters tools.

There is another aspect of history that makes knowledge problematic, and that is the inevitable march of time proving (as far as proof goes) things wrong. Ibn Khaldun, a brilliant historian and scholar from 14th century Arabia that also wrote about nomadic conquerors like the Mongols, was one of the first to write about how to take a historiographic approach to reading sources. His example of disbelieving a source was another historian's Al-Mas'ûdî stories about Alexander the Great. This included sea monsters that caused delays in building Alexandria, causing Alexander to dive to the bottom of the sea in a glass box to see the monsters and recreate them in metal, scaring the monsters away. A modern audience is as doubtful of the truth of this story as Ibn Khaldun, but perhaps not in the way you would expect. He says "the jinn are not known to have specific forms and effigies" to refute the sea monsters.⁶ His strongest argument,

supposed to compose, so once they die, their music dies with them". This is not exclusive to composers. Women are continuously breaking the same barrier, not knowing that there could be a role model for them, who did what they did. Not only do women face more barriers, the same barriers are constructed every generation. Because a woman doesn't know that she can, she often has a harder time than a man who knows that his goals are an option for him.

⁵ Until time travel is figured out, which I eagerly await.

⁶ Khaldun, Ibn (1904). *Al-Muqaddimah*. Al-Matba Ah Al-Sharafiyah.

however, the one “more convincing than all the other arguments” is that if someone was to “go down deep into the water, even in a box, one would have too little air for natural breathing. Because of that, one’s spirit would quickly become hot. Such a man would lack cold air necessary to maintain a well-balanced humour of the lung and vital spirit. He would perish on the spot. This is the reason why people perish in hot baths when cold air is denied to them”.⁷ Khaldun further asserts this is why fish die out of water—the air is too cold for a warm fish.

These days, we *know* why fish die out of water. It’s because their gills are suited to extracting oxygen from water, not from air. Of course, seven centuries from now, that explanation may sound as wrong as hot and cold air. The problem of science and history both is that there is no endpoint where we can say that we have found the truth. We believe things now, but we don’t really know them. In the 1940s the most common prescription for asthma was cigarettes.⁸ Science is a tower of mistaken ideas, as wrong as cigarettes being good for the lungs.⁹ (Unless, years from now, there is a study published on the miraculous health benefits of smoking). These wrong ideas are the basis of what we know now. We don’t throw out ideas, we build off them to create that tower. I guess archaeology isn’t alone in our shaky foundations, although archaeologists may be more aware of their implicit lack of certainty than others. I’m

⁷ Khaldun, Ibn (1904). *Al-Muqaddimah*. Al-Matba Ah Al-Sharafiyah.

⁸ "When Cigarettes Were Medicine: Looking Back On A Popular Asthma Treatment". 2019. *Pharmacytimes.Com*. Accessed February 25 2019.

Many of the asthma cigarettes included ingredients like chestnut leaves, kola nuts, and stramonium leaves along with tobacco. The stramonium leaves in particular probably did provide superficial relief to coughing and asthma.

⁹ Interestingly, when a link was first established between lung cancer and tobacco, many scientists thought this link was due to people who had bad lungs were predisposed to like cigarettes. If it was common to prescribe cigarettes to cure asthma and other lung problems, this hypothesis that seems so ridiculous suddenly become a lot more believable.

facing the same problem I usually am, in that any statement I write cannot be firm. What science says now is no more certain than a question.

Any 20-something today has intimate experience with science giving, and science taking away. When Pluto was reclassified as a dwarf planet instead of a planet in 2006, I distinctly remember feeling like I had lost a friend. I *knew* that there were nine planets—I had made paper-mache models of them in second grade! While I didn't have strong feelings before the International Astronomical Union (IAU), who control astronomical nomenclature, changed Pluto's designation, I suddenly felt like I knew Pluto itself. The anthropomorphizing was not alone to me, either. Articles popped up about how Pluto would feel about the decision, as if a mass hurling through space would 1) have feelings 2) care what earth scientists think and 3) somehow hear about the decision. Still, despite the absurdity, we knew Pluto and we wanted it back. The debate has continued for over a decade now, and people are still angry.

Pluto's diameter is about 2,300 km. In comparison, the United States is over 4,300 km long from the West to the East coast. Diameter is different than length, of course. What about area? Pluto has a surface area of (probably, considering it is 7.5 billion km away) about 16,600,000 square km, while Russia has a surface area of about 17,000,000 km. Beyond the difficulties of size, Pluto also follows a strangely elliptical orbit instead of the circular planetary orbits. In astronomical classification systems, the important characteristics to consider are mass, radius, and orbit (along with a few others). Compared to the other eight planets, both the rocky planets like Earth and the gas giants like Mars, Pluto has a vastly different mass and radius, and the orbit is strange as well. All of this too say that from what we know about Pluto, a planetary formation was not the best explanation for its behavior, and so that classification was never right,

but our experience with it still made it the most correct answer in mine, and a lot of other's minds.

There are better explanations for Pluto's behavior, but scientists don't agree on those either. Maybe Pluto belongs to the family of trans-Neptunian objects, or TNO.¹⁰ Some of the over 500 presently classified TNOs have orbits similar to Pluto, as well as a smaller mass. While Pluto is now classified as a dwarf ice planet, some astronomers think it should be considered TNO-1, or the first TNO with a calculated orbit. Others say it should just be labeled a TNO, and let's all move on. Still other scientists are publishing articles today saying that in literature, Pluto has always been referred to as a planet, and so by historical precedent, should still be considered a planet.¹¹

All of this argument, remember, is about an object 7.5 billion km away, where humans have never stepped foot. It is so far away that what we can observe is light emitted 5 hours ago. We can never observe Pluto as it exists, only it's past. Beyond the fact I (and apparently everyone else) still can't figure out exactly what Pluto is, how do we actually know that Pluto *is*? In Pluto, we see not only the progression of science disproving itself over time but also that the knowledge we assume scientists have is fragmentary and complicated. The top knowledge producers in any field are not producing the same knowledge. In fact, they rarely agree. If people who are extremely educated in the same field, such as astrophysics, don't agree on what they know, such as what Pluto is, what hope does a student like me have? Professionals who have dedicated their careers and summers to excavating and understanding the Ancestral Pueblo rarely

¹⁰ Schilling, Govert. "Pluto: The Planet That Never Was." *Science* 283, no. 5399 (1999): 157. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2897376>.

¹¹ This argument ignores that almost everything in space, up to and including the sun, has been discussed as a planet.

agree on anything. Did the Pueblo II period start in 900 AD? 850 AD? Should we even be splitting the timeline into periods? Experts disagree. In my experience, those with the most knowledge on a topic are the ones who also have the most problems with the current body of knowledge.

What exactly is knowledge? What is a body of knowledge? Perhaps I should have addressed this earlier, but a definition is only as useful as the context it is used in. There are also various ways of defining something. The Oxford English Dictionary says knowledge is “facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject”, which is boring and vague. It also privileges knowledge from “experience or education”, which is a Eurocentric idea of what knowledge is. Knowledge of God, for instance, doesn’t easily fit under this definition if the person who knows has not had a personal experience with the god they worship. I prefer the same organization’s philosophical definition of “true, justified belief; certain understanding, as opposed to opinion”. True and justified! That’s hard criteria to match. We could also define this through synonyms, such as information, lore, wisdom, substance, and awareness, but defining something by its synonyms loses the nuances that make the original word necessary in the first place. Knowledge and information do not mean the same thing, no more than the suggested synonym of “culture.” Even more definitions are found in translations.

Latin has two nouns that pertain to knowledge, *sapiens* and *sciens*. *Sapiens* is more specific, meaning philosophical wisdom, while *sciens* is knowledge gained through education. There are also two verb versions of “to know”, *cognition* (knowledge as understanding, getting to know) or *percipio* (knowledge as mindset, knowledge possessed). We also can’t ignore *artis*, meaning skill, craft, science, or *agnitio*, meaning recognition or perception of identity. That is six

words that pertain to or mean knowledge. It's also not just Latin that has a proliferation of meanings and words.

When translating knowledge into Punjabi, you can choose between 14 words.¹² Some of these words, such as ਗਿਆਨ ਨੂੰ (gi'āna nū), mean wisdom in a similar way to *sapiens*, while others are more about the process of gaining knowledge. ਸੁਝ (sūjha) connotes insight or discernment, a judgment in process, and ਗਿਆਨ (gi'āna) is comprehension, and the ability to do so. Nouns ਵਿਗਿਆਨ (vigi' āna) and ਇਲਮ (ilama) refer to education, science in particular. Others seem bizarre, such as ਬੁਝ (būjha) which can mean brawn if masculine and knowledge if feminine. Is knowledge therefore inherently feminine? We associate brawniness with masculinity as an inherent aspect of a male body. Does this same inherency extend to the female body and knowledge? Perhaps the best description for me is ਵਿਦਵਤਾ (vidavatā), encyclopedism and eruditeness.

Tamil has words for carnal knowledge (காமச் சேர்க்கை), domain knowledge (கள அறிவு), knowledge base (அறிவுத் தளம்), fair knowledge (நல்ல அறிவு), expert knowledge (தேர்ந்த சிறப்பறிவு), self-knowledge (ஆத்ம ஞானம் or சுய அறிவு), abstract knowledge (கருத்துநிலை அறிவு), general knowledge (பொது அறிவு), and knowledge domain (அறிவுக் களம்).¹³ We could do this same exercise with multiple other languages. There two types of knowledge in Spanish, three in Urdu and Hindi, and it goes on.

¹² "Knowledge - Meaning In Punjabi - Knowledge In Punjabi - Shabdkosh | ਸਬਦ-ਕੋਸ਼ : English Punjabi Dictionary". 2019. *Shabdkosh.Com*. <https://www.shabdkosh.com/pa/translate/knowledge/knowledge-meaning-in-Punjabi-English>.

¹³ "English Tamil Dictionary Tamildict.Com". 2019. *Tamildict.Com*. <http://www.tamildict.com/>.

Knowledge is not just one unified yet nebulous thing. It is split into types, and not only by languages.

Business theorists have also tried to split knowledge. There's no official classification system, but some normal terms are a posteriori (from experience), a priori (deduced from principles- proving a theory), dispersed (fragmented, like a fast-moving news situation or the financial market), domain (experts in a particular field), empirical (quantitative and qualitative observations), encoded (represented as data), procedural (how to do something), and tacit (hard to articulate- either general, or innate ability).¹⁴ Some of these categories mean the same thing as a specific word, like a priori and ਸੁੱਯ (sūjha), or domain knowledge and தேர்ந்த சிறப்பறிவு. Others are not represented in Tamil or Punjabi, like encoded knowledge. There are also those, like विदवता (vidavatā), that are not represented in these categories that likely should be. காமச் சேர்க்கை, carnal knowledge, is used in the Bible. To “know” someone in that context is to have had sex. If this is also a traditional use of knowledge in English, why is it not included in the categories that English speakers have devised?

We could endlessly create new categories of knowledge, but why? I'm unconvinced that categorizing knowledge into different types is productive because I'm unconvinced that it is actually different things. Many (though not all) of these definitions are based on how the knowledge is received, or how the knowing process happens. Once that knowledge is possessed (if it can be possessed) is it still tagged with how it is learned? In other words, if I knew as others seem to, that God was real, would that knowledge be different than knowing that Ancestral

¹⁴ Hajric, Emil. 2019. "Types Of Knowledge". *Knowledge-Management-Tools.Net*. <https://www.knowledge-management-tools.net/different-types-of-knowledge.php>.

Pueblo people existed? If I have encoded knowledge in the form of data, can't that knowledge inform my choices in *artis* crafts? The categories and definitions help us understand all that knowledge encompasses, and the cultural connotations of it (like masculine meaning brawn and feminine knowledge), but I don't think knowledge actually is something so easily divided. So then what is it? I'm choosing to go forward with the philosophical definition from the Oxford English Dictionary of "true, justified belief; certain understanding, as opposed to opinion", because I think it is the only one that approaches knowledge as a noun to be possessed, instead of the process of knowing.

Consistency should also be part of this definition. If knowledge is not always true or certain, it isn't knowledge. When I asked friends, strangers, and professors if they knew things, what they knew always came down to direct observation and theoretical abstractions. This should stabilize my crumbling foundations. If nothing else, $2+2=4$. Unfortunately, math is not consistent. Perhaps that is unfair—math is consistent, within axioms, but not between the sets of axioms. Maybe math is just incomplete.

Kurt Gödel published a paper in 1931 creating a system of consistent symbol numbering, assigning symbols used in calculus a Gödel number. By converting to these numbers (calculus symbols), the symbols were found to have a consistent logic, where there is an infinite class of theorems that if used by this system shows an arithmetical truth, along with an infinite class of truths that if modified with the system, outputs a theorem. In other words, the classification system of draining the symbols of inherent meaning allowed for consistent logic and shows that

the symbols deserve the meaning they were previously drained of.¹⁵ It is a system of formally ‘numberizing’ calculus.

This doesn’t work as well when applied to meta-mathematics. This is mathematics about the equation. $x=x$ is math. The symbol of x is equal to x , and therefore, x is consistent; this sentence is an example of meta-mathematics. It is words describing mathematics. (Think of a word problem). Gödel showed that symbols can be discussed in a general but accurate method with meta-mathematics. When describing a claim that says, “the claim is not demonstrable using the rules”, this formula is demonstrable as true *if* the negation is demonstrable.¹⁶ In other words, it can only be proven if it cannot be proven. The explanation of this is much more involved and complicated than I feel capable of undertaking. The steps I demonstrated above are possibly 3% of what Gödel’s original paper goes through in his pains to prove his consistent logic. The point remains: the system of rules established by Gödel that describe the internal logic of mathematics is incomplete, in that it contains contradictions, but it is *essentially* incomplete because this contradiction cannot be solved without creating the same contradiction again. Any rule about math will either not be able to prove what we already know about math or contradict another rule. To be honest, I’m not sure if I understand what this actually means. I could just say that Gödel showed why math works, and then showed how it doesn’t. Being more general makes it easier to understand, but it also means we understand less. The more ‘knowledge’ I add, the more detailed the explanation, the harder it is to actually grasp. My explanation is much less

¹⁵ Baaz, Matthias, ed. Kurt Gödel and the Foundations of Mathematics. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011.

¹⁶ Baaz, Matthias, ed. Kurt Gödel and the Foundations of Mathematics. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011. 92.

complicated than Gödel's. yet still hard to understand. More knowledge leads to less, like with astronomers and Pluto and archaeologists and Ancestral Pueblo. Another contradiction.

Gödel is not alone in finding contradictions in what we think of as the firmest of sciences. Math is math is math, right? Everyone gets the same answer if she does it correctly. Well, no. Bertrand Russell is another mathematician who has published about inherent contradiction. For example, there are two types of set: “those which do not contain themselves as members, and those which do”.¹⁷ In this scenario, a set is named ‘normal’ if it does not contain itself; if it does, it is ‘non-normal’. If N is the class that contains all normal classes, the N is a normal class. But then N should belong to N, then by definition N is not normal, and cannot belong to N. If N does not belong to N, then N should belong to N. Does the set of all sets that do not contain themselves contain itself? Contradiction! Again!

The Cantor Diagonalization, first described by George Cantor, describes different sets of infinities.¹⁸ Natural numbers (1, 2, 3...) extend into infinity, and so do real numbers (...-1, 0, 1...). However, so do irrational and imaginary numbers. There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. Through complicated proofs, Cantor showed that because the infinite sets of natural and real numbers can be computed the same way, they belong to the same set of infinities. However, irrational and imaginary numbers cannot be computed the same way, and do not belong to the same set of infinities. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. Cantor came out with this in 1891 and was immediately put under censure for impinging on God. If there are multiple

¹⁷ Baaz, Matthias, ed. Kurt Gödel and the Foundations of Mathematics. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011. 23.

¹⁸ Tychonievich, Luther. 2019. "Cantor Diagonalization". *Cs.Virginia.Edu*. <https://www.cs.virginia.edu/luther/blog/posts/124.html>.

infinities, and God is infinite, are there multiple Gods? If some infinities are bigger than others, is there a bigger God?

Beyond problems that mathematicians have considered that the layman cannot truly understand, there are also problems with consistency. There are people who do not have the same number system as us, and so do not do math the same as us. The Pirahã tribe of the Amazon have no words for numbers beyond ‘a few’ or ‘many’, and so math is not only not a concept for them, but it is incompatible.¹⁹ I’m concerned that the implication here is that the Pirahã are stupid, and they are not. Concepts of numbers are not a part of their life. The language that they speak changes the way they perceive the world, including the inability to count objects in any way that current anthropologists can recognize. In the interest of not diverting into the linguistic relativity hypothesis, suffice it to say that language strongly affects how we perceive reality. If we can’t name something, or at least name what it is not, then we cannot know that thing. Because they cannot name numbers, numbers are not true for them. If numbers are not true for everyone, can they be true for anyone? Doesn’t truth demand universality in order to be consistent?

I desperately want to keep myself distant from this. In general, I have a hard time being vulnerable with anyone for anything. It feels particularly revealing to discuss my doubts and fears. It hurts to try and explain how little I know myself. It would be easy to avoid exposing the things I like to keep hidden, but ultimately, I can’t. Looking at what we consider synonyms to knowledge, the conflation of science and knowledge jumps out. Beyond science, education and

¹⁹ Kramer, Sarah. 2019. "A Remote Amazonian Tribe Could Fundamentally Change Our Understanding Of Language". *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/brazil-piraha-language-recursion-controversy-linguistics-2016-3>.

academia are other synonyms of knowledge, but that's not fair. Knowledge also involves ourselves, physically and mentally. This question of knowledge has not plagued me because of the shaky foundations of archaeology or any other academic discipline. I turned to those to try and support me in knowing anything, and they crumbled, but they are not what crumbled first. Other people told me they knew themselves, and so they knew, but I don't feel like I know myself at all. I don't know who I am. If I don't know who I am, where does that leave me?

When I'm asking if it is possible to know things, I'm asking if *I* know anything. Do I know who I am, or even who I want to be? I certainly believe things to be true. How far is belief from knowledge? How far is uncertainty from knowledge? Is it telling that in an attempt to explore this subject I can only seem to write questions? It isn't a gimmick or put-upon. I genuinely have so many questions and no answers. If it is all I can do, is it better to stay in the questions? At some point, I would like some answers, but I can't see them approaching. I don't know myself, and so I am back to theoretical abstractions. I no longer trust math to be a consistent truth, but mathematics does raise a point about God. How many Gods are there? Is there always a bigger God? Do I know that the Church I was raised in is true, that there is a God above who cares about His mortal children, that anyone is listening when I pray? If God is out there, then He is an eternal, true and justified belief. I could know Him.

Plato's allegory of The Cave seems appropriate here, with the men who only see shadows on a cave wall and so believe (know?) that shadows are all that exist.²⁰ When one breaks free and sees the three-dimensional world, what he knows is fundamentally changed, and he must now account for the three-dimensional world. His knowledge before was incomplete and untrue. Here

²⁰ Biffle, Christopher, and Plato. 2001. *A Guided Tour Of Five Works By Plato*. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co.

the anthropologist comes in and asks if his knowledge of the shadow world is actually untrue. Couldn't it be possible that the reality he was living in, created by fire and cave walls, was a reality nonetheless? Who is to say that the world we think we know, of three-dimensional splendor and color is not just a shadow of something we cannot comprehend?

This leads to relativity, another topic I find myself incapable of really answering. If the world the men first inhabited was what they knew, and I know something else, can't we both know things? When Ibn Khaldun wrote about hot and cold air, he knew what he was talking about, even if we know differently now. Is this my answer? We all know things, so the fact that there are contradictions and distance doesn't disqualify the knowledge an individual has. This is tempting. If I can just wave my hand and say that it's all relative, that we live in a pluralistic world and that's fine, then I don't have to question this any further. Unfortunately, I don't think it's that easy, and I don't think that relativity is the answer. The philosophical definition of knowledge from Oxford of knowledge requires truth. There are certainly those who have argued that truth itself is relative,²¹ but I have to disagree. I don't think truth is a concept that allows for relativity. If something is true, it cannot be untrue, regardless of the circumstances.²²

The question of knowledge fundamentally becomes the question of truth. To know something, that something must be true. Otherwise, knowledge is useless. Is this true? Can I get around this problem of relativity? I throw out the trite line to my students²³ that cultural relativity isn't moral relativity, but isn't it? Cultures determine morals and values. If I accept that my

²¹ Usually anthropologists—dang anthropologists. Richard Schweder is an excellent writer who has discussed this idea.

²² This is not to discount cultural relativity, in that being a member of one culture makes an individual experience the same thing differently than another individual from another culture. I'm arguing against the relativity of truth, not of experience.

²³ I teach a section of Anthropology 101 as a TA

culture is not greater or lesser, more true or less true, than any other, how can I say that my morals are more true than any other? Maybe God. If God is real, then what he says is the ultimate moral truth. But I don't know if God is real, and I don't know if there is truth.

In a Nazi concentration camp, Simon Wiesenthal also didn't know if he did or did not believe in God. He wrote about the occasion:

I was lying in my bunk half asleep. My back hurt. I felt dizzy as I listened to the voices which seemed to come from far away. I heard something about a piece of news from the BBC in London—or from Radio Moscow.

Suddenly, Arthur gripped my shoulder and shook me.

“Simon, do you hear?” he cried.

“Yes,” I murmured, “I hear”.

“I hope you are listening with your ears, for your eyes are half closed, and you really must hear what the old woman said.”

“Which old woman?” I asked. “I thought you were talking about what you heard from the BBC?”

“That was earlier. You must have dozed off. The old woman was saying . . .”

“What could she have said? Does she know when we will get out of here” Or when they are going to slaughter us?”

“Nobody knows the answers to those questions. But she said something else, something that we should perhaps think about in times like these. She thought God was on leave.” Arthur paused for a moment in order to let the words sink in.

“What do you think of that, Simon?” he asked. “God is on leave.”

“Let me sleep,” I replied. “Tell me when He gets back.”

For the first time since we had been living in the stable I heard my friends laughing, or had I merely dreamt it?²⁴

²⁴ Wiesenthal, Simon, Harry J. Cargas, and Bonny V. Fetterman. 1997. *The sunflower: on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness*. New York: Schocken Books. 12-13.

This story that Wiesenthal tells of grappling with his faith in a God who allowed him, his family, and his people to be tortured and killed resonated with me in a manner I've not really experienced before.²⁵ It was on a Sunday this past summer, during the excavation of Ancestral Pueblo artifacts. Laying in a camping chair in the shade, trying to escape the 100° sunshine, reading about the freezing death of both soldiers and Jews, I realized I didn't know if God existed. How can you believe in a perfect God with such an imperfect world? Perhaps He is on leave.

I've never been tortured or seen my family killed. I've never faced hate like that. Despite not seeing it myself, I still grapple with this question: how can I know God watches over humanity when there is no evidence of a loving God in the Holocaust, the modern slave trade, in rape? Where is He, and how could I possibly know something—someone—so far removed from my experience? I keep going back to those I love professing their knowledge to me. How does my father know God is real? He was raised by a single mother in a trailer park after she kicked her husband out for threatening my father (who was a toddler at the time) with a knife. Why would God allow my grandmother to be abused? Why would God allow any woman to be beaten, raped, or killed? The God that created me surely could not also create a slaver. The God of the Jews could not create the camp overseer. "Were we truly all made of the same stuff? If so, why were some murderers and other victims? Was there in fact any personal relationship between us, between the murderers and their victims, between our camp commandment,

²⁵ I highly recommend this book to anyone; in addition to the personal story, Wiesenthal had leaders from religion, philosophy, history and more to discuss what he should have done when asked for forgiveness. This is a prime example of very smart people unable to know what they would have or should have done. Morals, perhaps more than anything else, are unknowable.

Wilhaus, and a tortured Jew?”.²⁶ How can I believe that I was created by God if everything else was too?

I also don't know that God isn't real. If I can't prove Him, I also can't disprove him. There is an infinity. There're too many infinities. I've heard too many stories of miracles to go with stories of atrocities to completely discount the possibility. I don't know. I don't think I'll ever know. I grew up in a religious house, and God was my certainty. If I questioned everything else, then God and his existence, and more importantly, his love for me, was something I could not question.²⁷ If I know God is true, then I can know that religion is true, that some answers have a right and wrong answer. Instead, I don't know if there are any answers, let alone the right ones.

Maybe it's wrong to demand God to materialize to solve my crisis. I feel like a toddler gleefully knocking over towers of blocks until all the towers are gone and I'm left with nothing but scattered blocks where my foundations once were. I guess that if all the towers have crumbled, I'm left with one avenue: myself. I asked this question earlier, but it's one even stickier than the question of God. Do I know myself? I don't think I do. How then could I come to know who I am?

When I googled the question, I was delighted to find an article entitled “How to Get to Know Yourself in 5 Fool-Proof Steps”.²⁸ How easy was that? The steps are: (1) get to know your

²⁶ Wiesenthal, Simon, Harry J. Cargas, and Bonny V. Fetterman. 1997. *The sunflower: on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness*. New York: Schocken Books. 12-13.

²⁷ The “could not” of this sentence is positive and negative. It's positive, in that God was the one thing free from questioning, but also negative, in that I still feel incapable of talking to my parents about question His existence.

²⁸ Brock, Farnoosh. 2014. "How To Get To Know Yourself In 5 Fool-Proof Steps | Prolific Living". *Prolific Living*. Accessed February 27 2019.

personality, (2) get to know your core values, (3) get to know your body, (4) get to know your dreams, and (5) get to know your likes and dislikes. Unfortunately, that's not helpful. How can I get to know *anything* if I know nothing? What does it even mean to “get to know” something? To learn that, I would have to buy the author's book and affirmations tape.

If I'm unwilling to pay \$30 to know myself, what other methods could I use? I've always felt that if I were an artist, then I would feel things so deeply I would have no choice but to know who I was and what I stood for. That's a common perception of an artist, someone who is so aware of themselves that they put their very soul on a canvas, in a composition, in a film. Of course, it is this self-awareness that leads to the tortured artist—she is aware of herself, including her flaws and contradictions. Art comes from the Latin *artis*, but I think a better description is the Tamil ஆத்ம ஞானம், for self-knowledge. In particular, the self-portrait is a deep examination of one's self, and I think that's why they are so interesting. It's the view of the artist from the eyes of the artist.

William Utermohlen died in 2007, but his widow says he died in 2000 when he became unable to draw or paint due to his progressive Alzheimer's disease. Between his diagnoses in 1995 and 2000, he painted a series of self-portraits, “desperately trying to understand what was happening to his mind”.²⁹

²⁹ Williamutermohlen.Org, 2019, <http://www.williamutermohlen.org/>.



This series of paintings and drawings show a man trying to figure out who he is.³⁰ Was his actual face warped over this period?³¹ No, but his understanding of who he was warped. The second to last painting, from 1999, was titled erased self-portrait. His being was being erased as he lost his memory, and these visuals represent his experience better than a photograph of his physical body. What’s most interesting to me is that this is him chronicling losing his knowledge of himself. Even as he is showing what he knows and understands about who he is, he is showing how he no longer really knows.³² The last drawing, from 2000, does not look like a typical human, because Utermohlen did not feel typically human. Even an artist, someone who is

³⁰ Williamutermohlen.Org, 2019, <http://www.williamutermohlen.org/>.

³¹ Is actual the right word to use here? What it is the actual face—the physical or the mental?

³² Maybe that’s knowing, knowing that you don’t know. Socrates comes to mind, he that said he knew nothing and therefore was the wisest of all men. But I can’t guarantee I know something, and I also can’t guarantee the opposite. Maybe what I suspect is true and justified, but I don’t know that!

expected to show in a self-portrait their understanding of themselves, does not really know one's self. Not all artists are suffering with a degenerative disease, but no artist can so fully encapsulate himself in a self-portrait that that *is* him, either. It is eternally a static moment of the process that is life and being. It's still a representation, if a poignant one. If the self-portrait is how I could come to know myself, it is not the actual self I would come to know. It is only how I see myself.

It all comes down to the physical body. Surely, if I can feel my laptop sitting on my lap, then that means I know the laptop is real. René Descartes famously said in "Discourse on Method" that he could not know that his physical body existed, but he could think, and therefore he knew he existed.³³ But why did he discount the physical body? For me, I can't find any way to prove that physical sensations are happening if the rest of the world doesn't exist. Perhaps it is unlikely, but it is a possibility that I'm imagining everything and everyone. Am I actually typing? Is there anyone to read this essay? If I can't prove that I have a certain and justified belief in the existence of both others and my body, then I don't know that they exist. Beyond that, I'm not sure a body can be a person. When does a baby stop being part of the mother? If I drink water, is that water part of me? Humans are 70% water, but that water does not belong to a body. What about the microbes living on my skin, in my stomach? There is more genetic material belonging to microbes than to humans in a human body, so if a body is measured by the DNA it possesses, I am nothing more than a collection of microscopic organisms.³⁴ I can't trust or know that my body is me, or even that my body exists. How can I know my physical sensations then?

³³ Descartes, René, and John Veitch. 1953. *A Discourse On Method*. London: Dent.

³⁴ "The Human Microbiome". 2019. *Learn.Genetics.Utah.Edu*. <https://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/microbiome/>.

Descartes solves this dilemma with “I think therefore I am”. Maybe I don’t know my body, but I do know that I am having these thoughts. Do I know that? One problem I’m having with this is I’m not convinced that the mind and body are as separated as Cartesian philosophy suggests. A more modern philosopher, Bruno Latour, suggests that it is this divide between the mind and body that causes such confusion and division in the modern world.³⁵ Further, it’s almost impossible to actually find anywhere beyond our speech that the two are actually divided. Where exactly is the mind? If it’s in the brain, is the brain not part of my body? What happens if it is not in the brain? If you have ever meditated, a common method is to feel what different parts of your body are feeling. This involves projecting the mind to those spaces to feel the air brush against my hand, feel the keys under my fingers. If I can do that, is my mind in my hands? We say body parts have a mind of their own. Beyond just my body, I can use my mind to feel what others are feeling, and if I couldn’t, I would be a sociopath. I just can’t accept that the mind is divorced from my body entirely.

If my mind and body are inexorably connected, what does it mean that I’m not sure my body exists? I’m desperately trying to think of a way to prove that my mind exists without a body. I have to be thinking right now. My mind is racing, and so it exists. Unless it’s not, and it doesn’t. With all this doubt, how could I genuinely say I know that I am?

My frustration with this is genuine. I want an answer. I want to know things. I want to not be going through a crisis every time I speak. I just can’t seem to find anything that is certain, that is true. The question of knowledge comes down to truth, and I cannot find any. Where is the truth of me? Where does this leave *me*? What can I do with myself, with my life, if I don’t ever

³⁵ Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harlow: Longman.

feel I know? I'm back to questions, but I never really left. Without knowledge, everything must be a question. I'm not even sure what question I started with. When everything is a question, trying to find a single answer inevitably multiplies into thousands until the original thought is obscured in the proliferation of subsets and new ideas and wonderings.

Rainer Maria Rilke tries to offer comfort:

“You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. Perhaps you do carry within you the possibility of creating and forming, as an especially blessed and pure way of living; train yourself for that -- but take whatever comes, with great trust, and as long as it comes out of your will, out of some need of your innermost self, then take it upon yourself”³⁶

Rilke leaves us with this: if I can't know anything, even myself, there's also nothing I can do about it. There is no choice but to live with questions now because I can't find the answers. I also cannot discount the possibility that answers could come in the future, because, as I have found, I can't really prove anything, and so I can't discount anything. I'll continue living, with the faint possibility of answers in the process of life. If the answers never come I'll do the same. Living with the questions may not be easy, but it's also the only possibility.

³⁶ "Live The Questions Now, By Rainer Maria Rilke". 2019. Awakin.Org. Accessed March 26 2019. <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=747>.

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