

WEEK 3 | BUILDING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW, PT 2

EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

I. WHAT ON EARTH IS EPISTEMOLOGY?

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, the investigation of what differentiates justified belief from opinion. It derives from two Greek words: *episteme*, which means “knowledge” or “understanding,” and *logos*, which means “account,” “argument,” or “reason.” Thus, epistemology is the account of knowledge or understanding. To put it more simply, epistemology is concerned with what is true and not true, and how we can know something is true or not true. It answers questions like:

- What do we know?
- How do we know what we know?
- What does it mean to say we ‘know’ something?
- What makes a justified belief justified?

Epistemology is usually divided into two categories. The first is propositional knowledge, or “knowledge that,” while the second is personal knowledge, or “knowledge how.” For example, in mathematics it is propositional knowledge that $1+1=2$. Involved in this, however, is the knowledge of how to perform the mathematical function of addition. While the first kind of knowledge is propositional, the second is personal knowledge gained from experience. As another example, theoretical knowledge about the physics of gravity and velocity involved in maintaining balance on a bicycle is different than the personal knowledge of how to ride a bike without falling down.

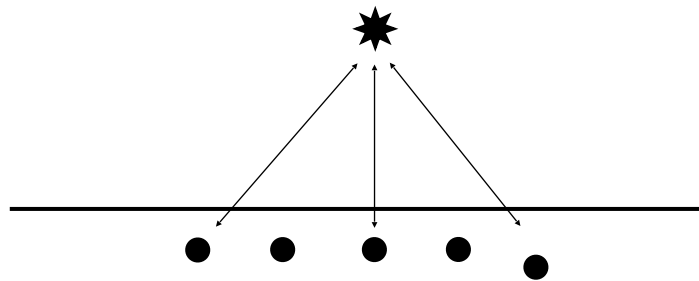
Epistemology is also concerned with statements of belief and their justifiability. Knowledge itself necessitates belief, so that what one believes cannot (or, at least, should not) conflict with one’s knowledge. Conversely, knowledge about a belief does not necessitate belief or an endorsement of the truth of that belief. For example, we could say that we have knowledge about the Mormon religion though we do not believe it. This statement is both rational and coherent. This is an important distinction to keep in mind because, historically, belief has been regarded as subjective while truth has been regarded as objective. In other words, ‘truth’ is true whether or not someone believes it to be true; whether or not I believe in gravity, if I jump off a chair I will fall to the ground. Over time and with the rise of post-modern relativism, this distinction has been lost so that ‘truth’ is what one believes—even if it stands in contradiction with someone else’s belief. This explains the modern refrain, “That might be true for you, but it’s not true for me.” Truth is no longer “out there” but “in me.”

II. A BIBLICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

First, let us identify the problem, then see how the God of Scripture provides the solution.

A. The Problem

Without God there is no epistemological foundation, no universal that gives meaning to the particulars. As the philosopher John Paul Sartre laid out, “no finite point has meaning without an infinite reference point.” In other words, without something transcendent, something (or someone) infinite and outside the universe that provides a reference point for meaning, purpose, value, truth, etc., nothing inside the universe can have meaning, purpose, or value, and nothing can be determined to be true or false. Nothing finite can be its own point of reference. We need an infinite reference point that can provide the standard against which all the particulars are measured.



In the realm of knowledge and truth, if the universe is a closed system—meaning the universe is all that there is, the random outcome of impersonal material plus time plus chance, without any infinite, transcendent point of reference—then we have no basis for explaining 1) why anything should be there and 2) why what is there should behave in a uniform, rational way. This leads to two further conclusions. First, if there is no reason why anything *should* be there, we have no guarantee that anything as we perceive it actually *is* there (because, why should it be?). We have no guarantee that there is any correspondence between the subject (us, the observer or “knower”) and the object (that which is observed, the thing to be “known”).

Without any confidence that the universe we perceive is actually there as we perceive it—because we have no justification for why it should be there as it is—we have no confidence that we can accumulate knowledge about it. That is, we have no confidence that we can know anything true about reality; if truth is out there, we cannot access it. Thus, since we have no confidence that we can know anything truly, we have no confidence that we can communicate anything truly and no reason to think that we are communicating anything true through language (since what we communicate in language is drawn from our perception which we have no certainty corresponds to reality).

Furthermore, even if we could know that what we perceive corresponds to reality, we have no confidence that we can come to know anything true about that reality because we have no basis on which to believe it will behave in a uniform and rational way. We have no confidence that the universe will operate the same way in one moment as it did in the previous moment or as it will in the next moment; what is “true” about the universe would be dynamic, not static or permanent.

What is the outcome of this line of thinking? Simply this: we have no reason to believe we can know anything truly or that we can communicate anything truly. We can only tell stories (what we “know,” our experience or perspective) through language, but that story cannot be checked against reality. All we can do is measure its utility. “We create truth as we construct languages that serve our purposes, though these very languages deconstruct upon analysis.”¹ Thus, truth becomes relative, with some “truths” being more useful than others for particular individuals or societies at a given time.

Now, if you think that the above is an absurd thought experiment that no one would ever believe or hold to, you should know that we just walked through what is essentially the post-modern position on truth and knowledge—a view that is becoming dominant in western thinking. It is the end of the epistemological road once we remove God as the source and standard of truth.

B. The Solution

The above discussion makes clear that truth and knowledge—being able to know something truly—depends upon the existence of an infinite point of reference against which all knowledge can be measured. We need a standard of truth, and in the Christian worldview the foundation for human knowledge is the existence and character of the creator God. As Francis Schaeffer would say, He is there and He is not silent.² God is there and He has spoken to us.

God is omniscient (Psalm 147:5; Hebrews 4:12-13; 1 John 3:20), meaning God knows everything about Himself, everything outside Himself, everything about the creation He has made, as well as all things that do not become reality. Being infinite, God cannot increase or decrease in knowledge—it is both infinite and perfect. He knows everything, and everything that He knows is true and the standard against which all truth is measured. He is the very nature of truth (John 14:6), and He is “the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, so that his ideas are always true.”³

Because we are made in God’s image and reflect something of His character, we, like God, can know truly (though not exhaustively like God). Not only do we have confidence that we can know truly, but God’s word tells us that God has made a universe that can be known. John the Apostle writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). The Greek *Logos*, translated “Word” in John 1, has the idea of logic, intelligence, rationality, and meaning, something John sees as inherent in God Himself. It is from this divine

¹ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 213.

² This is the basis for Schaeffer’s epistemological system as presented in Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

³ John Frame, “The Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence of God,” tgc.com, September 24th, 2021.

Intelligence that the world was created. Because the universe was made by a reasonable God, it can be investigated by reason and genuine knowledge about it can be discovered.⁴ Because God is actively operating within this system and sustaining the universe, we can have confidence that it will operate uniformly and rationally from one moment to the next.⁵

John goes on in verse 9 to say that “The true light. . . gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). In other words, God’s intelligence is the basis of our intelligence; His rationality is the basis of our ability to reason. As Sire summarizes, “Knowledge is possible because there is something to be known (God and His creation) and someone to know (the omniscient God and human beings made in His image).”⁶ Thus, we can know things truly about God and the universe, though as finite creatures we cannot know them exhaustively.

Clearly, it is important that God is there, that He exists (remember ontology??) as the infinite point of reference for truth. It is equally important, however, that He has spoken to us. God’s transcendence means that, if He so desired, He could remain hidden from us. He who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16) cannot be found but must reveal Himself. If we are to know Him, He must speak to us. Indeed, He has. Theologians refer to this as “revelation” and distinguish two types: 1) general revelation and 2) special revelation.

General revelation is God’s self-disclosure in His work of creation. David writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork” (Ps 19:1). David describes the cyclical nature of day and night as “speech” and “knowledge” (Ps 19:2) that testify to the Creator. This self-disclosure is universal, extending “through all the earth” and “to the end of the world” (Ps 19:4) so that its testimony is inescapable (Ps 19:3). It testifies to several realities about God:

- He is Creator (Job 38:4-11; Ps 8:3; Acts 14:15; 17:24-26)
- He is Sustainer (Job 38:12-15; Ps 29; Amos 9:5-6; Acts 14:17)
- He is great & mighty (Job 26:7-13; 37:5-13 Ps 93:1-2; Isa 40:26)
- All creation belongs to Him (Job 41:11)
- He is a good Provider for His creatures (Job 38:41; Matt 5:45; 6:26-28; Acts 14:17)
- He is glorious & worthy of worship (Ps 19:1; Acts 17:27, 29; Rom 1:21)

In addition to nature, God has revealed Himself internally through the conscience of man. This internal witness is to the extent that all men know God (Rom 1:21). The conscience is meant to testify to men of God’s universal moral standards and their accountability to Him as Creator and Judge (Rom 2:14-15).

⁴ Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 53.

⁵ This belief in an open system created and sustained by God was the foundation for modern science, as we will discuss more in our exploration of Deism and Naturalism. Alfred Whitehead, an English mathematician and philosopher, rightly recognized that only in the Christian milieu could modern science have been born (Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*).

⁶ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 24.

While it is true that we can know something of God truly through general revelation, only through special revelation can we know God personally and savingly. In fact, general revelation is only adequate to condemn us as it removes the possibility of complete ignorance towards God, so that “they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20b). Unlike natural revelation, special revelation is primarily communicated in human languages. Throughout history God has spoken through various supernatural means, including writings, visions, dreams, audible voice, theophanies, the nation of Israel, angels, and animals. The pinnacle of God’s special revelation is found in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God (John 1:1), the revealer—the exegete—of the Father (John 1:18), and His final and ultimate word (Hebrews 1:1-2).

In Scripture we have God’s special revelation in linguistic, propositional form. Because God is its ultimate source (2 Timothy 3:16) everything it says about everything is wholly true. We cannot create a disjunction between issues of faith and salvation versus issues of science and the natural world within Scripture. As a reflection and extension of God’s character, it is true in everything that it says. With God and His Word as our infinite point of reference—a fixed body of objective truth—we can know about Him, ourselves, others, history, and this universe truly (though not exhaustively).⁷

Further, because God has communicated truly (though not exhaustively) through language, we have confidence that we, too, can communicate truly (though not exhaustively) through language. Because God made this universe and placed us in it with the ability to know it, we have confidence that there is correspondence between our perception and reality. Thus, when we communicate through language, we are communicating something true and meaningful.

ETHICS: THE LAW AND THE LAWGIVER

Ethics describes a system of moral principles that govern a person’s or group of persons’ behavior. At its core ethics is concerned with morality—what is right and what is wrong.

A. The Problem

The problem in ethics is very similar to the problem of epistemology: there is a need for an infinite point of reference, a universal standard of right and wrong against which all actions can be judged.

Morality demands moral absolutes, universal ethical standards that apply to every situation no matter where or when they occur, standards that transcend time and space. However, in a closed system that excludes the infinite and transcendent, there is no rational basis for moral absolutes. There is no universal against which to judge the particulars. In such a case, morality is relative to the individual and society they are in, and ethical systems are merely social constructs meant to

⁷ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 117.

provide boundaries that will (or should) facilitate a prosperous society. Morals become a product of statistics, the average of what people are thinking and doing in a given place and time. When we begin with nothing but the impersonal universe, morals become just another form of metaphysics—there is no *ought*, there only *is*.⁸

The problem is that, in this sort of ethical system, there is no basis to make a true and consistent determination of what is “good.” Does this authority reside in society, or does it reside in the individual? Philosophers differ on the answer to this question. Without moral absolutes “we are left with hedonism (doing what I like) or some form of social contract theory (what is best for society as a whole is right).”⁹

Further, “good” is dynamic and transient, changing from place to place and in time. What is “good” today may not be “good” tomorrow; it may not even be “good” today depending on where you are (or who you are). Taken to its logical conclusion, in this sort of system there is no such thing as good or evil, right or wrong. There is no morality. As the character Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* famously said, “If there is no God, anything is permitted.”

B. The Solution

Like in the realm of epistemology, the Christian solution to the problem of ethics is found in the existence and character of the infinite personal God of Scripture. As Francis Schaeffer wrote,

There is no law behind God, because the furthest back is God. The moral absolutes rest upon God’s character. The creation as he originally made it conformed to his character. The moral commands he has given to men are an expression of his character. Men as created in his image are to live by choice on the basis of what God is. The standards of morality are determined by what conforms to his character, while those things which do not conform are immoral.¹⁰

In other words, God’s character is the universal moral standard against which all moral thoughts and actions are judged. His character defines what is right and “good,” and anything that does not conform to His character is necessarily evil and wrong. Further, God the Lawgiver has revealed His righteous moral standard to men in both conscience and Scripture. That is why ethics has been largely consistent across time and space. No matter when or where you are, it is generally recognized that murder, rape, theft, and lying are wrong. Because this fallen world is inhabited by sinners, there are aberrances from these moral norms, even on a societal level.

⁸ Ibid., *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 32-33.

⁹ Ibid., *The God Who Is There*, 133.

¹⁰ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 131.

Generally, however, mankind recognizes there is a clear distinction between right and wrong, good and evil.

This is significant. Without the existence of God as He is revealed in Scripture, there is no foundation for morality. There is no right and wrong and there is no way to establish *ought* from what *is*. Further, if there are revealed moral absolutes, a universal Law established by a transcendent Lawgiver, then violating those absolutes is a crime against that Lawgiver that entails guilt and requires judgment. This gives our actions moral significance and meaning.¹¹ What we think, say, and do actually matters because they have moral significance. This contrasts with the atheistic outlook which, in the grand scheme of history, reduces all actions to moral meaninglessness.

¹¹ Ibid.