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Knowledge: Is It Ever Forbidden Fruit?

Arthur J. Dyck

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We are so accustomed to thinking of knowledge, and the gathering of it, as unqualifiedly good, that even faithful Christians and Jews are prone to forget that their scriptures depict the quest for knowledge as a source of tragic separation from God. For Christians, the human choice for the unqualified pursuit of knowledge is what required God's repair of creation through the saving power of Christ.

The reminder of our tragic relation to the quest to know everything is graphically portrayed in the second and third chapters of Genesis. Here is the account of the creation of man and woman and of a wonderful garden. Of its lovely fruit they may freely eat, but not of one tree — the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To eat of that tree means death. But Adam and Eve, beguiled by the charming serpent, did eat of it and the results are with us still. Our earthly life is not a perfect paradise without pain and sweat. Above all, they and we are separated from the tree of life and are mortal, not able on our own power to live eternally.

But is knowledge really to be regarded as forbidden fruit? How can a good such as knowledge be so regarded? Is knowledge, often seen as a good in itself, ever to be seen as evil in itself, and the desire for it, no less evil?

What has prompted me to dare consider any knowledge, that sacred fruit of scholars' treasured labors, as, in any sense, to be forbidden? What fool would attack a growth industry like research? Government spending for medical research alone soared from 18 million dollars in 1940, to 240 million dollars in 1950, and from there to more than three billion dollars in 1979. The lure of forbidden fruit is rather strong as even Eden's owner and manager soon discovered. Nevertheless, on the assumption that David really beat Goliath, I will fashion

my small slingshot and aim it at that rich and industrious giant, knowledge.

Now do not misunderstand me. I have always been a conscientious member of the knowledge business. I work hard to justify my salary by gathering and sharing knowledge. I have slept peacefully believing that knowledge and the pursuit of it are good. But these dogmatic slumbers have been disturbed by the roaring waves of research, bad dreams, and nightmarish events.

First, Daniel Callahan, commenting upon what he called "The Moral Career of Genetic Engineering," noted that there appear to be no "culturally persuasive" arguments against each next wave of genetic research being proposed.¹ On the one hand, there is genetic research of the very kind essential to creating the worlds dramatized in Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Virtually everyone shrinks from these worlds. Yet, on the other hand, every new genetic research proposal promises beneficial results, ranging from the cure of cancer to increased food production beyond belief. And, at the same time, the genuine risks of entering the worlds depicted by Orwell and Huxley are discounted as obscurantist fear of the new. And so, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a virtually uncontested good. Indeed, scientists argue for the freedom to do research unimpeded.

'Haunting' Ideal Observer Theory

Aroused by this, only for a time, I fell asleep again. But by now I was vulnerable to a bad dream. The Ideal Observer Theory, a longtime source of comfort, began to haunt my sleep.² The Ideal Observer Theory depicts knowledge as logically and practically necessary for discerning right and wrong. Furthermore, there is no limit to the amount necessary. Nothing less than omniscience guarantees our ability to discover moral truths. Should we not therefore, regard the quest for knowledge not only as a good, but also as a sacred duty? Really, though, how far do we think we can move down the road to omniscience? Only God can know everything. Note, however, the problem is not that we are limited to something short of omniscience. It is rather that we set as our goal to become as much like God as possible. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil emerged in this dream with the disturbing thought that we, in ethics, are embarked on the ancient venture to become like God, knowing good and evil. Yet, this idolatrous activity comes clothed in an argument from necessity, against which an appeal to Eden's disaster appears hopelessly quixotic.

Even such bad dreams failed to arouse me. Finally, it required nightmares. There are always those who have argued that you should not and cannot stop the curiosity which fuels the gathering of knowledge. I have always regarded such arguments as disingenuous. After all,

even though we have seen what shocking experiments were perpetrated by Nazi physicians, those atrocities were declared to be criminal under the Nuremberg Code. And, even though Henry Beecher in 1966 found 22 American studies in violation of that code, the government has responded by regulating the research it funds.³ If someone would assert, nevertheless, that gross violations will continue because people will do whatever can be done, I had a standard reply: People do not do whatever can be done. For example, research scientists do not chop up people systematically to discover what happens. That is what triggered the nightmare. Recently, it was revealed that the Japanese, during World War II, systematically removed the organs of prisoners to learn exactly what occurs as this is done, and how vital each organ is to life. That ended my dogmatic slumbers. I am now well aware that there is a serpent in our midst, pushing research in genetics toward the realization of our worst fears, while beguiling us in the belief that the need for knowledge is necessarily limitless and good, a veritable path to Eden. And, at the same time, the most unthinkable brutalities have already been done in the context of research, placing us well outside of Eden.

I believe we are compelled by logical and practical necessity to limit knowledge and the gathering of it. The usual arguments for limiting knowledge are that only bad results, bad usages, bad applications, and evil concomitants of research, such as injury to humans, may block what is otherwise good to find out and to be in the business of finding out. I want to argue, to the contrary, that some knowledge and some pursuits of it are evil as such. For us, as humans, there is evil knowledge and quests for knowledge that ought to be forbidden.

For my purpose, it is not important to argue for some definitive conception of knowledge, if such there even be. I will dwell on specific instances of knowledge for the sake of each argument. In general, what will count as knowledge are claims that are tested, or capable of being tested, by methods of observation, experiment, and conceptual analysis which people are persuaded will count for or against the claims being put forth. Knowledge, on this understanding, is neither totally certain nor totally complete. New claims and new methods may or may not discredit past claims and past methods, and the observations and concepts on which these are based. This view of knowledge includes religious knowledge.

First then, is knowledge ever evil in itself? In one sense, there is knowledge that is always good to have. For example, the more non-ethical facts I know, the better I can decide what is right. Hence, an ideal observer had best be omniscient, and God, Who is omniscient, is a better moral judge than I can ever be.

But what about the "knowledge" obtained about non-ethical facts through criminal acts, such as murder, rape, or torture? Here the paradox begins. Given the fact that crime in Boston was down in

Spring 1983 and yet rape was up by more than 30 per cent, a study of why these rapes occur might help us prevent them. The knowledge of rape events would seem to be beneficial. Nevertheless, the rapes which yield such knowledge are terribly evil in themselves. In the best of all possible worlds, we would have no rapes to study. Some things we should never experience and yet these same experiences, when they occur, should be well studied, and the results well known and well used to prevent the knowledge gained from the experience of rape. The paradox here can only be resolved if we make use of a distinction once made by Bertrand Russell, namely the distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. Descriptions of events, past, present and future, whether these events are good or evil, can be seen as always good, insofar as these descriptions assist us in choosing what is right, and in increasing our choices.

Lack of Knowledge Sometimes Good

Take the knowledge of what happened at Hiroshima. In this case the tree of knowledge as descriptive knowledge can be used to yield the same fruit as the tree of life, for the sake of preventing deaths, at least in the context of earthly life. Yet, it is better still never to find out precisely what happens when atomic weapons are used. It is knowledge, like rape, with which one ideally should never become acquainted, just as Cain should never have found out what it is like, and what occurs, during and after one murders one's brother.

Interestingly enough, Gerhard Von Rad, when discussing the biblical account (in Genesis, Chapters 2 and 3) of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, distinguishes "intellectual knowing" from "experiencing" or a "becoming acquainted with."⁵ It is this latter kind of knowing, i.e., "experiencing," which is the meaning of the Hebrew word (yd) that describes the "knowledge" Adam and Eve would and did obtain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They experienced, became acquainted with evil not simply as something to be described, but as something which happened in an activity they chose to do, and yet could have chosen not to do.

At this point, we see the difference between human beings and an omniscient being. An omniscient being knows everything, and that includes any evil that has come about, is coming about, will come about, and might come about "if." All of this can be known purely descriptively without choosing to sanction, engage in, or cause a single evil event. Evil occasioned by human choices can only become known descriptively to human beings, if and only if and when, at least one person actively engages in perpetrating the evil. Only once the evil has been done or is being done, does knowledge describable by that person and others become available.

The person who is responsible for some evil knowledge by acquaintance need not be the object of the descriptive knowledge generated. The Japanese scientists who systematically removed organs from World War II prisoners were doing what is forbidden, namely generating evil events, and making the observations and analyses that provided them and us with evil knowledge. Not only is what they did evil, but it is also evil that anyone should experience, know by acquaintance, what these scientists were learning. Knowledge of what happened to those prisoners is, as knowledge by acquaintance, evil knowledge. However, given that the experiments have been done, descriptive knowledge of them may be viewed as good to have, use, teach, and analyze. That descriptive knowledge might hopefully help prevent any future experiments like them. Also, there may indeed be medical benefits to learn. Even so, sheer curiosity about exactly what took place need not be viewed as in the slightest evil in itself. But, the point is, the experience of those events is an evil experience and choosing such experiences should be regarded as seeking knowledge which is evil and should be forbidden. Scientific knowledge of this kind is evil in the same way and for the same reason that carnal knowledge which constitutes rape is evil. No desire or alleged need for such knowledge makes it good.

Some knowledge is evil, but it is evil as knowledge by acquaintance, not as knowledge described by someone who bears no responsibility for initiating, observing, permitting, or otherwise making possible firsthand acquaintance with such evil.

The failure to recognize in what sense knowledge may in itself be evil is surely one very important reason for our inability to see that some knowledge should not be sought at all. Consider research using humans and control groups whose members are unaware that they are not receiving either the standard treatment or the new treatment being tested. When the question was raised at a conference as to when to stop an experiment in which some of these untreated people were about to die, some American scientists contended that the experiment should not be stopped, even if some people died, until there were enough cases to obtain statistically significant results. To do otherwise, they argued, was to render the results of the experiment worthless. If completed, the experiment would be good! I and others present spoke against the sacrifice of innocent lives to achieve such a good. No one argued that the very knowledge of what happens when people whose lives could be saved are allowed to die is evil. In other words, knowing what happens to someone while dying, whose dying I can prevent, is knowing something that should be forbidden. The scientists would be right in arguing that the results of a controlled experiment, even one which causes preventable deaths, is valuable once the results are in, and right even in arguing that such results should be used, taught, and not withheld from any curious scrutiny. Descriptive, intel-

lectual knowledge of such an experiment may indeed be viewed as good in itself even though the experiment is evil, and all knowledge being experienced by those who can be held responsible for what is happening is also evil.

I have argued so far that some knowledge is evil because the experience of it is evil in itself and avoidable. At the same time, everything that has already happened, good or evil, may be considered good and even necessary as knowledge for being as moral as it is possible for us to be. Omniscience as an ideal state does not require one to generate any evil. As Peter Martin, a Harvard Divinity School student, so astutely called to my attention, an omniscient being is not involved in any process of gathering knowledge or choosing what to do. All of reality and all of what "might happen if" and "might have happened if" is present to one who knows everything. An omniscient being is different from an ordinary mortal in this very important respect, and there is no necessity for such a being to generate evil in order to know everything. Humans ought not to know everything, because some knowing is evil to choose as we have indicated. Yet such avoided evil is known, at least as a possibility by an omniscient being. God, then, can be both good, and know all good and all evil. Finite human beings, however, ought not to seek the evil to be borne by the tree of the knowledge of all actual, and all possible, good and evil.

So far, I have set no limit to the knowledge of any good or evil state of affairs which already exists, provided that it is known, generated, used, and taught in otherwise moral ways. However, there is another kind of limit to all knowledge, good knowledge as well. We are not, and cannot be, omniscient. This, I wish to argue, means not only that we cannot realistically work to become omniscient, but also that we ought not to do so. This may seem like a strange, even quite unnecessary point to make. I wish to show that it is very necessary consciously to opt against seeking omniscience.

The fact is people do treat omniscience as an ideal and actually make use of what cannot be known. This takes place in at least two ways: in the use of certain consequentialist forms of reasoning to decide what is right or wrong; and in certain proposals setting forth the ideal cognitive processes for deciding what is right or wrong.

To Operate or Not

First, let us look at trying to make god-like moral decisions. I was once presented with the following case. A woman, a drug addict and pusher, came to a hospital needing a heart operation urgently to save her life. The prospect was that she would probably live considerably longer with the operation and die soon without it. Should one operate? I maintained one should. The doctor presenting the case, how-

ever, replied, "Wait a minute. The eminent ethicist, Joseph Fletcher, counseled us not to treat this woman unless she agreed to stop taking drugs and pushing them; think of all the young people this woman may injure or even kill," he argued. "When asked, she would not agree, however, to give up drugs or give up pushing them. Now, would you still recommend treatment?"

I then asked this physician whether drug addiction is a medical problem. He replied that it is. Then I asked whether he, as a doctor, is a minister of hope. He said he was. "Well then," I said, "treat this woman to save her life and overcome her problems." As it turned out, this woman was treated and her life saved. Furthermore, she gave up her drug addiction and drug pushing, but she soon died. In fact, not a single prediction used by Fletcher to counsel non-treatment was correct.

That Fletcher's predictions actually were incorrect is not my present concern. My contention is rather that one cannot, and ought not, make use of the predictions based on this woman's drug-related behavior. It is simply true that no one *can* or should predict that she will always use and sell drugs. There is no way of knowing this, and one should not lock her into this as an inevitable, or even likely, permanent condition of her life. Indeed, one should work to change her life for the better, and that requires her to be saved, as does also the sheer value of her life as such.

Joseph Fletcher is trying to inject into moral decision-making something that does not at all belong there, namely predictions of individual behavior based on the probability that the individual will do what is likely or typical of some aggregate pattern in which the individual can, at least temporarily, be located. Even worse in this case, there was no scientific basis for assuming that drug addicts and pushers, who profess to find that what they do is desirable, are likely to continue their activities. But decisions regarding the fate of individuals all too often take the form exhibited here by Fletcher.

Take judgments as to whether to use a scarce medical resource for someone 65 or someone 40. At the time a hospital in England posted a sign not to resuscitate anyone over 65, what to do was clear — rescue the person who is 40, forget the person who is 65. (The sign came down, by the way, after much publicity, and one doctor was quoted as saying that we should not have made the policy public by posting the sign.) When it is argued, and it frequently is, that persons at 40 have, on average, a higher remaining life expectancy than someone 65, that is true. But it is not relevant for deciding whether to save a specific individual who is 65.

It is interesting to note that Winston Churchill was in the 65th year of his life in 1939. Throughout World War II, Britain and its allies benefited from the masterful leadership of someone over 65 who, if that brief policy of that English hospital were to be followed, would

not be a candidate for resuscitation had he needed it prior to his leadership role. Many people live much longer after 65 than some people after 40 and they certainly may live very well. Amos Wilder, professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, continues to publish, though he has lived more than 80 years. At a recent gathering honoring him as a teacher, he remarked wryly, "If I had known I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself." The knowledge of how long and how well a specific individual will live is not available to us to use. Why some insist on claiming and using such "knowledge" is beyond me. But it is immoral.

Von Rad explicitly notes that the expression "knowing good and evil" as applied to the tree of knowledge, refers to knowing everything.⁶ Desiring the fruit of this tree, he claims, is a desire for omniscience, to be like God in this respect. Apparently, we are sorely tempted still, as much as ever, not only to aspire to unobtainable omniscience, but even to act as if we had already obtained

Conclusion

I wish now to conclude with one additional brief consideration. Omniscience is an ideal condition for judging correctly what is right or wrong. We cannot attain it, but should we not aspire to come ever closer to this idea? Clearly, there is no logical limit to the amount of knowledge which is needed to yield absolutely, certain moral knowledge. Therefore, we shall have to settle for something less, but surely for something as close to omniscience as possible. If one means making use of all knowledge without seeking to generate evil knowledge, or evil of any other kind, that is harmless enough. But one should not emulate the actual standpoint of being omniscient. An omniscient being needs no enlightenment from others, no dialogues, and no process over time of learning from the insights and mistakes of others as we do in all of the sciences. Therefore, we should not think that we can derive from an ideal observer theory how best to increase our knowledge: that we ought to seek such knowledge, yes, exactly how we ought to gain more knowledge, no. It is essential that individuals actually build into their efforts to improve their moral cognition, the explicit recognition that individual efforts to maximize knowledge are as limited here as they would be in any knowledge-gathering endeavors. Knowledge accumulates, becomes disseminated and corrected by a dialogue among many groups and individuals over time spanning beyond the lifetime of individuals. Omniscience is a logically ideal condition for knowing what is moral. As something no individual can attain, it is not a goal for individual effort over time and by oneself. To be omniscient, one must also be eternal. Humans, approximating omniscience, that is, knowing as much as it is possible to know by

this-worldly human effort, will necessarily benefit from the work of others, and from their work over time.

I leave for another essay and another occasion the fascinating topic of what processes are ideal for improving moral knowledge. Suffice it for now that I have suggested why some knowledge, some knowledge gained by direct acquaintance, should be regarded as evil, and hence evil to seek; and why some "knowledge," insofar as it is unattainable and requires omniscience, should be regarded as evil to use or strive to possess. I have convinced at least myself that there is a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God has rightly ordained that we should not eat of it.

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