

The Good in Knowing Something for Yourself

[work in progress - comments appreciated!]

Nearly everyone can agree that knowledge is valuable. Nietzsche didn't agree, since he thought that often there might be some survival advantage in false beliefs, and he also thought that an overzealous desire for truth might crimp aesthetic or creative maturation. But most of us at least in our humbler moments think that someone armed with true beliefs will do better than someone with false beliefs. For example, I will be more successful in running my errands today if I have true beliefs about the amount of gas in my car, the amount of money in my pocket, the locations of various stores and offices, the time of the day, etc. These are examples of truth's instrumental value: truth is valuable because having it allows you greater success in getting what you want. Truth might be intrinsically valuable, too -- it might be simply good to have true beliefs, regardless of what those true beliefs can get for you -- but defending this thesis would require establishing some fairly fancy metaphysical theses.

I wish to focus on the value of a particular kind of knowledge: **knowing something for myself**. Certainly there at least seems to be a distinction between beliefs that I hold in virtue of others' authority and beliefs I hold because I have worked them out myself. Moreover, I think we commonly value working out beliefs for ourselves over taking them on others' authority. In this essay I want to explore what it is to know something for myself and why it is valuable. I also will suggest that the pursuit of such knowledge is central to the philosophical enterprise.

A suggestive starting point for this exploration is a passage from "The Architectonic of Pure Reason" in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: In this passage, Kant contrasts historical knowledge -- that which is learned from

teachers and authors -- from knowledge which is in some way born of an individual's own reason. Someone, for example, who has learned the intricacies of Wolff's philosophical system through instruction,

knows and judges only what has been given him. If we dispute a definition, he does not know whence to obtain another. He has formed his mind on another's, and the imitative faculty is not itself productive. In other words, his knowledge has not in him arisen out of reason, and although, objectively considered, it is indeed knowledge due to reason, it is yet, in its subjective character, merely historical. He has grasped and kept; that is, he has learnt well, and is merely a plaster-cast of a living man. (*CPR*, B 864)

Kant's point, I take it, is to contrast two routes by which an individual may come to have knowledge of a particular set of propositions. One person could gain his belief by "forming his mind" around another person's persuasive (and perhaps even justified) declarations. A second person might gain knowledge of the same set of propositions, but through the exercise of his own reason. What is known is the same in both cases, and perhaps what is known is "due to reason", objectively. The difference is entirely subjective in the sense that the difference is in how the two subjects have come to know the same thing.

Kant's appellation, "a plaster-cast of a living man", suggests why he thinks it is valuable to come to know something for yourself. It is a matter of autonomy and dignity. In this particular section of the *Critique*, Kant is concerned especially with explaining the nature of human reason, its limits, and the connection it has with values and morality. As it turns out in his philosophical system of transcendental idealism, human reason is responsible for the objective nature of

experience, the laws of morality, the purposiveness in nature, and the beauty of art. All value derives from the nature or structure of human reason, and we are essentially nothing other than that human reason. Not to exercise that reason is, for Kant, consummate *bad faith*. It is to deny our own humanity, and -- at the same time -- to deny the ultimate source of all value. Understood in this way, the plaster-cast of a living man is, in Kant's eyes, not a genuine human being at all. In denying (or, at least, neglecting) his own reason, the plaster man abdicates his moral worth.

If we can agree that there is something to Kant's line of thought here -- even if we perhaps believe that it is exaggerated -- then one of the reasons why it is valuable to know something for yourself is that such knowledge is bound up with one's *authenticity*, in an existentialist's sense. To be authentic is to be genuine and honest and in touch with the deepest elements of one's being. The plaster man has knowledge that does not have this connection. In Kant's terms, the knowledge does not arise out of the knower's own reason, but has been molded on another's reason. The knowledge is superficial and artificial -- and hence the aptness of Kant's metaphor of the plaster cast. With this in mind, I shall call the state of possessing such genuine knowledge *epistemic authenticity*.

Of course, one can accept the existential value of epistemic authenticity without being committed to Kant's transcendental idealism. One merely has to believe that gaining knowledge for yourself demands considerable personal investment, not just in time and effort, but also in the personal identity that comes to be constructed through the endeavor. For when it comes to matters of great philosophical importance -- like belief in a god, the nature of moral obligation, one's view of reality, and so on -- then the self cannot be cleanly separated from the beliefs that are involved. Becoming an atheist, for example, is not a case in which Mr. Jones had one belief yesterday and a different one today. In a matter of

such potential magnitude, Mr. Jones is himself changed. His entire outlook is modified, and many of his beliefs may be altered. He is not an entirely distinct being from his formerly theistic self, but he has undergone significant change. Furthermore, the process of the change may be more affective than the net-result change in belief would suggest. In working through the issues, he has exercised his own reason and imagination, as well as perhaps his courage, his capacity for fear and trembling, and his own view of his own life's history. To view his struggle for belief merely as a change in belief would be akin to viewing a devout believer's religious fasting as just a weight-loss program.

We are invested in our beliefs in the straightforward sense that *we are those beliefs*, at least in large part. If you work through your most important beliefs, examining them critically and carefully, you have, in Nietzsche's sense, "become who you are." This means that you have sought to *authenticate* your beliefs, testing them against one another and against the world, and making deliberate choices where need be. It is not literally true, I believe, that there is some true self within you, seeking to get out by achieving epistemic authenticity - - though this might be a helpful metaphor to employ. Rather, your "true self" is formed and cultivated through the search for epistemic authenticity -- in a sense, the search itself determines the character of the object of the search. In Sartre's dictum, "existence precedes essence," which in our case means that the pursuit of epistemic authenticity is the process through which I determine my own essence. I develop a world view, and come to understand myself in its terms.

But what is it for knowledge to arise out of one's own reason, or to have epistemic authenticity? We might approach this problem by first considering what it is to know something *simpliciter*. Of course, this is a venerable question in the history of philosophy, but the generally-accepted answer is that I know something if and only if I believe it, it is true, and I have good reason for thinking

that it is true. This is the conclusion Socrates and Theatetus reach in Plato's *Theatetus* just before they realize that an adequate account of knowledge would have to explain how I can tell the difference between good reason and bad reason -- and Socrates observes that there is little hope of providing this explanation without recourse to *knowledge*, which is the thing we were trying to explain in the first place. So for now our account remains inadequate. The general idea is that when I know something, I have a model in mind which accurately reflects how things are, and I did not come by that model by fortuitous accident: there is "good reason" why that model should accurately reflect how things are.

What more is required for me to know *X for myself*? The guiding idea should be that the model I have in mind (according to which *X* is true) was constructed over time through my own efforts. Let's try to bring more detail to the guiding idea by spinning a simplistic tale of my own intellectual autobiography. I began my intellectual career, let us presume, with a much simpler model of what the world is. The simpler model was incomplete and wrong in many ways. Gradually the model took on different successive forms as I tested my beliefs against experience, rejecting some beliefs and incorporating others. But -- in order for the resultant knowledge to count as knowledge *for myself* -- the crucial feature of this process must be that my testing, rejecting, and incorporating was done in a careful, critical, honest attempt to get at the truth. Moreover, it was all done on my own, at my own instigation, and for no one's benefit but my own. Rather than simply accepting others' testimonies, I have actively sought out the truth or falsity of my beliefs in my own experience. In Kant's imagery, I have confronted my experience of the world "in the character of ... an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he has himself formulated" (*CPR*, B xiii). The contrasting image, I suggest, would

be of someone simply copying down what another person reports (much like the bulk of what goes on in our classrooms, incidentally).

As noble as that may sound, it can be only the guiding idea. In the course of our lives, all of us must accept others' testimony without testing it against experience. There simply isn't the time to critically evaluate all the beliefs which attach themselves to us along the way. Moreover, an adequate account of "knowing for myself" would have to explain exactly what all this means, exploring possible counterexamples along the way. But the fact remains, I believe, that this is approximately what we mean by knowing something for myself. Furthermore, the fact remains that we prize knowledge attained in this time-intensive way over knowledge that has merely attached itself to us in some way or other. The knowledge we have struggled for is more clearly *ours* than the knowledge we simply have not bothered to examine or test.

I want to turn now to my claim that the pursuit of epistemic authenticity is at the center of the philosophical enterprise. What I mean by this claim is that in the long tradition of the literature we identify as "philosophical," authors have commonly written about their own pursuits of epistemic authenticity, or have urged readers to try to gain their own epistemic authenticity. In many of Plato's dialogues, for instance, Socrates's interlocutor mentions some famous speaker's having said one thing or another, only to meet with Socrates's mild reproach that he is more interested in the interlocutor's own beliefs than in what he remembers someone else having said. There is also, of course, the doctrine of recollection as presented in both the *Meno* and the *Theatetus*, which at least recommends to us the belief that each one of us has knowledge buried deep within our souls, waiting only for the work of a midwife to assist in its delivery into the light of day. Descartes's *Discourse* and *Meditations* are together meant to describe the path to truth Descartes had discovered for himself. He urges his readers -- or, at least,

those readers capable of doing this without serious risk of unlawfulness or impiety -- of trying it out for themselves and seeing what they can determine for themselves to be true. In the beginning of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza turned his attention away from life's fleeting pleasures and toward his own discovery of whatever it is that can fill the mind with constant and unvarying satisfaction. We have seen already Kant's derision of the plaster man, and Nietzsche's injunction to "become who you are." We could equally well read the works of the ancient skeptics, the British empiricists, the German idealists, and even the logical positivists as attempts to break away from received tradition and discover for themselves what is true. This attempt, I believe, is at the core of every great philosophical work. Indeed, it is this concern for epistemic authenticity which has made constructive progress in philosophy all but impossible. Each thinker must begin anew and discover for himself what he thinks to be true.

Such a view of philosophical endeavor is starkly different from the received view of philosophy that has been inherited from the logical positivists, or even from Heidegger. The received view is that philosophy is like physics, chemistry, or economics. In all of these fields, there is an established core of accepted theories, laws, or doctrines. The beginning student in chemistry need not confirm for herself that Boyle's law holds. It is enough to memorize the law and learn how to apply it. Success for a student in any of these areas is to contribute some new theoretical or experimental extension of the existing body of knowledge. There are revolutions in these disciplines, of course, but they are abnormal -- if physics underwent revolution every generation, its reputed progress would be as dismal as philosophy's is thought to be. Philosophers in the twentieth century sought to make philosophy a genuine science, based either on a logico-mathematical structure or a science of phenomenology. It was believed, and is

still believed today, that philosophy is an organized research effort to discover a particular domain of truths -- in this case, neither physical, chemical, or economic, but philosophical.

But if epistemic authenticity is at the core of philosophy, then philosophy is not a search after truths in the way that the other disciplines are. It is instead an attempt on the part of an individual to gain epistemic authenticity. This means that philosophical progress occurs at the level of the individual, not on the level of the discipline as a whole. Philosophy, by its very nature, must undergo revolution with every generation -- indeed, again, with every authentic individual. Some of the revolutions may be profound while others amount to differences only in detail, but each revolution stems from an individual's attempt to figure things out for himself or herself.

There are practical pedagogic implications for this thesis. If to teach philosophy is to help students to cultivate epistemic authenticity, then efforts should be made to prompt students to cultivate original philosophy, and not merely critique the works of others. Of course, the standard written assignment in philosophy asks the student to rehearse and then criticize some essay or chapter written by some distinguished philosopher. This requires some originality, to be sure: the student is required to figure out for himself whether he agrees or disagrees with this other thinker. But students are very rarely encouraged to draft an original philosophical work on their own. They are taught to react, but not to create. Perhaps, if epistemic authenticity is the goal, a student's philosophical education, even at the undergraduate level, ought to culminate in a philosophical writing workshop, much like a creative workshop. In such a workshop, students would create original philosophical works and submit them to their peers for criticism and response. Each student would do what Descartes did when he wrote the *Meditations* and then circulated it among the learned men of Paris, soliciting

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objections and then providing replies. The student would employ others' intellects in the pursuit of his own epistemic authenticity.

In the end, if I am right, philosophy is not about the pursuit of truth so much as the pursuit of epistemic authenticity. Of course, as I pursue epistemic authenticity, I try to determine what I think is true, so truth does indeed play some role. But truth is not what makes knowing something for myself especially valuable. Coming to know something for myself forces me to cultivate my own humanity, as Kant would say, and that is where its value lies. This, I suggest, is what philosophy has been about all along, and what it should continue to be about.

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