

The Perpetuation of Knowledge

What is knowledge?

Do you know what shape an oak leaf has?
Do you know my middle name?
Do you know where God lives?
Do you know what the square root of 441 is?
Do you know yourself?
Do you know why the sky is blue?
Do you know Tim Passingham?
Do you know what knowledge is?

Many uses of the word. Most of them factual - do you know a particular fact. How do we 'know'? We observe and remember - the shape of a leaf; We are told and remember - people's names, faces; we learn and remember theories - why the sky is blue; we use rules to work things out - the square root of 441. Perpetuating this kind of knowledge is easy - write it down, teach it.

When you let go of an apple, it falls to the ground. Why?
The force of gravity.
What is the force of gravity?
It is a force which acts between any two masses.
Why does this force arise?
It just does!

The limitations of facts. We stand on an island of facts, surrounded by the unknown. Go too near the edge, and what happens? "There is nothing out there!", "Stay here on the land!", "watch out for the undertow!", "Leave it to the professionals!", "Hey, let's go surfing!"

Where does new knowledge come from? The sea of the unknown. On the land you find only the facts that can be taught, facts that were once knowledge. We know why the sky is blue? Well, we've been told why, and maybe we can even show the theory and calculations which support the explanation. But do we *know* why? To say we really know why, we have to visit the beach. Real knowledge is only present in our contact with the unknown. Knowledge is found on the beach, and how do we get there? By asking questions.

The Wise King

There is a story about a wise King who was pondering what gift to leave his people with when he died.

"Shall I leave them with rich goods and a good surplus of food? That will keep them well for a while, but all too soon, the benefits will disappear."

"Shall I teach them the knowledge of mining silver and gold, and raising corn and cattle? That is better, but all things change, and one day my people will need

different skills.”

“I shall show them where knowledge lies’, he decided, ‘so that they may go there when they need new knowledge. So long as they remember where knowledge lies, they will always be rich and well.”

The perpetuation of knowledge is to do with passing on and using the ability to go to where knowledge lies - at the edge of the unknown.

Knowledge and the Three Faculties

Knowledge is not thinking, feeling or doing as such, but it can be given a form of thought, feelings or action. It can also be approached through these faculties.

The **Devotional** approach knowledge through the emotional faculties. For example, here is a quotation from *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

“But now you will ask me, ‘How am I to think of God himself, and what is he?’ and I cannot answer you except to say ‘I do not know!’ For with this question you have brought me into the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want you to be! For though we through the grace of God can know fully about all other matters, and think about them - yes, even the very works of God himself - yet of God himself can no man think. Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think, and choose for my love that thing which I cannot think! Why? Because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never. Therefore, though it may be good sometimes to think particularly about God’s kindness and worth, and though it may be enlightening too, and a part of contemplation, yet in the work now before us it must be put down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you are to step over it resolutely and eagerly, with a devout and kindling love, and try to penetrate that darkness above you. Strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love, and on no account whatever think of giving up.”

How close is knowledge to faith? Not faith as belief in dogma, but faith as ‘the faculty by which we realise unseen things’

The **Philosophical** approach knowledge through the intellect. They must first perfect the intellect, so that they can reason clearly. But then they go beyond the intellect, asking questions that it cannot answer. Scientists and mathematicians perhaps are today’s prime exponent of this approach. Science is a discipline which deals in facts, but it is primarily concerned with the interface between the unknown and the known. By codifying the known it clears a path to the unknown. Exploring scientific cosmology, for example, can take you right into a state of wonder.

The **Practical** approach knowledge through actions, without thinking about it particularly. Examples might be Zen masters, artists, healers, warriors, athletes even. In a sense, they perfect what they can do, and then push beyond this.

The common element seems to be the will to push beyond limits, to go into the

unknown. In order to be able to do this and to bring something back, there needs to be a perfection of the particular approach. An artist needs to train on forms before the truly creative can arise. A scientist must study hard before a breakthrough can be made. Mystics must purify themselves.

I don't think you have to focus on any of these to the exclusion of the others. I think my direction is philosophical, but I can sense the faith aspect of knowledge.

The Entropy of Knowledge

When knowledge is formulated, it takes a particular form, but the form is not the knowledge itself, just an interpretation. Knowledge itself is very simple - you just know. But the formulations can be complex, and as time goes on the formulations are developed and changed. They can become very complex and can lose direction. There seems to be a form of entropy of knowledge, which makes all formulations tend toward maximum chaos. Knowledge leaks out of the formulation over time.

This is caused by all kinds of effects, such as simplification during teaching, elaboration by those interested in a particular point or a particular view, changes of emphasis and the meaning of language. Quite often, knowledge is formulated for a particular time and place, and the formulation doesn't travel well. Some examples -

In the religious field, the Christian church has its roots in the life and the teachings of Christ, such as those presented in the new testament. Consider the history of the Church - the persecuted early Church, the Crusading Church, the authoritarian Church of the middle ages, and today's different sects and schisms, ranging from fundamentalists to the 'swinging' Church of England. Christ's simple message shattered into different facets, with various threads being taken up - or even twisted into contradictions (was burning heretics part of Christ's message?).

In philosophy, the tradition of the Ancient Greeks is now reduced to formalistic logic-chopping. Our philosophers today don't ask so much about the meaning of life, but the meaning of words.

In the field of art, what meaning do we derive from the paintings of the renaissance painters? Some of their paintings seem to have embodied particular meanings which are difficult for us to see, simply because their culture was different, with a different understanding of the world. We can read analyses of the symbolism used in Botticelli's *Primavera*, but does the meaning come through?

As well as seeing this entropic effect in the long term, we can see it occurring in a smaller way all the time around us. How many times have you had a conversation which starts off very meaningful, but ends up quibbling over details? I notice this particularly on the Internet. Someone might post a message on the necessity for greater awareness, someone follows this up by picking on a particular side issue, and after a while, the messages are all slanging each other off about spelling and grammatical mistakes!

This is why the perpetuation of knowledge is important. It is only by constantly going

back to the source, by refreshing, reformulating and starting new traditions, that knowledge can remain in the world. The perpetuation of knowledge is the fight against the entropy of knowledge, just as the biological processes of living beings are the fight against physical entropy.

Knowledge is an iconoclast!

By its nature, knowledge breaks old forms. We cannot reach into knowledge if we are unwilling to give up our preconceptions. It is necessary to make a space in ourselves for knowledge to arise. This is one of the roles of questioning. If you don't ask a question, you won't get an answer!

When we reach into knowledge, we leave behind our thoughts, feelings, images and words. We just watch and listen. Maybe something will remain with us when we come back. If we are lucky it will be something that will change our world.

This disruptive effect of knowledge is not unopposed, both individually and socially. We are all aware of the difficulties faced by iconoclasts such as Christ, Galileo, and the modern arts movements. People have invested in particular formulations, and they don't want to be told that what they've thought, felt or done is wrong. There is a fear of change.

Personally, it is even more difficult. If we cannot really let go of our preconceptions, how can we open ourselves to knowledge? This is not just an intellectual exercise of 'keeping an open mind', it is much more frightening and subtle. Can we let go of our certainties, of our understanding so painfully built up over the years? Are we even aware of our preconceptions? Can we let go of all that seems to give meaning?

Again, it is not just once that we have to do this, but continuously. The new insight is not the end - there is more behind that. There is no end to knowledge, no formulation which is perfect, absolute and final. There is always further to go. The encounter with knowledge itself is perhaps an absolute, but this can never be held onto.

'The Palace' - Kipling

When I was a King and a Mason, a Master proven and skilled,
I cleared me ground for a Palace such as a King should build.
I decreed and dug down to my levels. Presently, under the silt,
I came on the wreck of a Palace such as a King had built.

There was no worth in the fashion - there was no wit in the plan -
Hither and thither, aimless, the ruined footings ran -
Masonry, brute, mishandled, but carven on every stone:
"After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I too have known."

Swift to my use in my trenches, where my well-planned ground-works grew,
I tumbled his quoins and his ashlar, and cut and reset them anew.
Lime I milled of his marbles; burned it, slacked it, and spread;
Taking and leaving at pleasure the gifts of the humble dead.

Yet I despised not nor gloried; yet as we wrenched them apart,
I read in the razed foundations the heart of that builder's heart.
As he had written and pleaded, so did I understand
The form of the dream he had followed in the face of the thing he had planned.

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When I was a King and a Mason, in the open noon of my pride,
They sent me a Word from the Darkness. They whispered and called me aside.
They said, "The end is forbidden." They said, "Thy use is fulfilled."
"Thy palace shall stand as that other's - the spoil of a King who shall build."

I called my men from my trenches, my quarries, my wharves, and my shears.
All I had wrought I abandoned to the faith of the faithless years.
Only I cut on the timber - only I carved on the stone:
"After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I too have known!"

The Way of Knowledge

How do you teach someone to access knowledge? I've been talking a lot of fancy stuff about letting go of preconceptions, questioning, moving into the unknown, but how can you actually do this? Well, here's my four-point plan:

1. Learn how to examine and loosen preconceptions
2. Learn how to watch and listen
3. Learn how to question and formulate
4. Work with others

Working with preconceptions (as I've called them) involves finding out what you are, what you've been taught, what you think and feel. It is a task of self observation. It clears the decks for knowledge.

Contact with knowledge is a mix of passive and active. It is necessary to actively pursue it (the questioning), but also necessary to wait upon it - making a space and then listening to the quiet voice in the void. Meditation, and using the senses properly are perhaps part of the training for listening. Contemplation, which seems to me to be to do with a meditative kind of use of the senses, might be particularly useful.

Questioning is the active aspect, the pursuit of knowledge. Not enough of this and you will get lazy! Our nature is to make things fit, so that our known world appears seamless and all-encompassing. We have to discover the pasted over holes - what is gravity *really*? Then we can pursue the questions, and perhaps formulate answers. This makes it sound as if we only pursue knowledge intellectually, but really what is a question? Simply an acknowledgment that we *don't know*. This is not just an intellectual exercise. There is a story - of Moses I think, when someone was criticising him. The text read that 'he paused, and then denied it.' The gloss on this was that he paused to look within, to see whether what they said was true, before responding. This is a form of living with questioning, interrupting the reactive mechanisms in us, and

questioning instead of reacting.

As well as questioning, we have to attempt to formulate knowledge, because if we don't, we cannot go back for more. 'I've seen the answer, but I can't explain it' - Oh, OK then, let's change the subject! This stifles enquiry. Trying to formulate something brings more knowledge through. This is why I think the study of 'theory' is important. Theory, such as the octave, the three forces and so on, should not be taught, but be posed as questions: 'Here is a really strange idea - investigate it'. If you think you understand it, think again!

Why is working with others important? Firstly, knowledge seems to be catching. If someone in a group hits that level, then they can bring everyone with them, or at least give them a taste. Also, there seems to be an effect that a group of people can form a kind of group being which sometimes finds it easier to work with knowledge - or perhaps we tune in with the group being's mind.

Finally, don't forget that teaching is the best way of learning. Your lack of knowledge is never going to be exposed so much as when you try to teach, so use it! Make the most of it!

Knowledge in Our Times

So far, I've spoken in general about the perpetuation of knowledge. Do conditions change with time and place, and if so, what is needed in our age and civilisation?

One way of looking at civilisations is via the octave of man. In early times, primitive groupings of people were dominated by instinct, bound together primarily by bonds of family, the same kind of groupings we find in the animal kingdom at large. As things develop, people meet, and begin to cooperate and compete - a kind of wild frontier, where people join together for specific tasks, and then maybe go back to competition or isolation. Eventually custom and law is introduced, and a solid civilisation grows, based on a common formulation of laws. The characteristics of this type of civilisation is a common view of the world, and low tolerance of different views. In time there may develop a certain amount of tolerance and freedom, and a society centred around individual freedom develops. I'm not sure what any further development might bring.

Perhaps on this scale, we are at a time of flowering of an age of the associative mind. The characteristics seem to be the possibility of lots of different views, with no one view indisputably right. Individuals and groups skip from one way of seeing things to another, and the quality is change, uncertainty and fickleness. This is in contrast to a hundred years ago, or even less, an age of 'conditioning', when there was an agreed view of things, and the quality was one of absolute law, closed minds and smugness. I don't want to put across an evolutionary approach here, because we've seen these kind of stages before - the Athens of Plato, the Renaissance in Europe. There is no guarantee that we'll progress to the next stage, which in theory would be an age of 'meaning', whatever that might be.

Another way of looking at this is to see the process as an externalisation of different

faculties of the mind. In earlier times society externalised our internal faculty of conditioning, to develop a common conditioning - law. Today we are beginning to externalise our associative faculty, to develop shared information networks. Information Technology is perhaps the most obvious concrete form of this, with the internet and its search engines all accessible pretty much anywhere we go from our phones. As this technology develops, it is becoming a real extension to our associative minds.

The need for knowledge and the way it is reached is different in each age. In a 'conditioning' age, knowledge is a dangerous thing. The spirit of the age doesn't want to know about new formulations, and knowledge is, as it were, locked away behind closed doors. The unknown is denied, because the prevailing view of the world is considered to be all-encompassing.

In the 'associative' age, knowledge is hard to come by, lost in a maze of ideas and information. For example, people try to reach knowledge by mixing a lot of formulations together rather than enquiring as to what lies behind them. Questioning leads to a search for a different formulation which fits the needs of the moment, not to an inward search. The unknown is not denied, but is considered to be 'known somewhere else' - 'I might not know what gravity really is, but I bet there is a book about it somewhere'.

In an age of conditioning, the role of knowledge is to introduce change, to prevent the civilisation crumbling through its own fixity. In an age of association, it seems to me, the role of knowledge is to provide fixed points in a sea of change. We live in an information age, surrounded by more facts than we can absorb, an age of changes, where what was accepted yesterday is old fashioned today. In these times, knowledge is very important to the individual - we cannot rely on learning skills and facts which will soon be superseded, we have to try and discriminate between the mass of different ideas and views we're faced with daily. The obvious solution to these problems is to revert to conditioning - to deny change, but perhaps with knowledge there is another way. Instead of a closed mind or a fickle mind, we can develop a poised mind and help introduce an age of 'meaning'.