



# Ethics in Brief

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## Knowing God and Loving Others: a biblical account of Christian knowing Justin Thacker

*On the dominant modern view of knowledge, derived from the Enlightenment, knowledge is seen as objective and detached from the knower. It is possible to 'know' something without being in any way engaged with or committed to it. The model here is of scientific knowing. A biblical view of knowing is profoundly different: to know something is to experience it. The first part of the article shows how, in Scripture, to know God is not first of all to have an accurate concept of God as an objective reality but to be in a relationship of love and obedience with him. It shows how obedience to God also necessarily involves loving our fellow human beings. Ethics is not a separate, second act after coming to know God. The second part explores the theme further in relation to the ethical concept of knowing developed by contemporary 'virtue epistemology'.*

### Introduction

*It is impossible to be truly converted to God without being thereby converted to our neighbour (John Stott).<sup>1</sup>*

Oftentimes, loving those within the church is far harder than loving those outside. We make all kinds of allowances for the personal foibles of those outside – presumably out of a desire to reach them, but for those inside the church our tolerance thresholds are remarkably low. Yet in his first letter, John is uncompromising on what is required of us. 'If anyone says, "I love God", yet hates his brother, he is a liar' (1 John 4:20). What is the 'lie' such a person has told? There is only one possibility – that he loves God. In other words, if we do not love our brethren, we do not love God. If that were not difficult enough, earlier in his letter John has made the demands on us even harder. 'We know that we have come to know him, if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him", but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him' (1 John 2: 3, 4 see also 1 John 3:16-18). The connection here is not just between love of God and love of our brethren, but knowing God and our ethical obedience. The stark message seems to be that 'if we do not love others, then we do not know God'.

Yet why is there this intimate connection in Scripture between Christian knowledge and Christian ethics? Why is it that knowing God and loving others are so closely related? Taken at face value, John's words indicate that it is impossible to separate our knowledge of God and our love for our brethren. The problem for us is that our usual conceptions of knowledge cannot accommodate such a close connection between epistemology and ethics. The reigning paradigm for knowledge that we have imbibed from the Enlightenment is the modern scientific one of objective, detached, speculative knowledge. According to this paradigm, we know something when we see it as it really is, separated from our own prejudices and ideas, and in isolation from all other things. But is that conception appropriate for our knowledge of God? Or is it the case that the Bible presents us not only with the means by which we gain knowledge of God, but also an entirely different paradigm for knowledge itself? And if the Bible does present us with a wholly different account, does that explain why John can draw such a close connection between Christian knowing and Christian ethics? Clearly, the place to begin in order to answer these questions is the biblical text itself.

## The Biblical Concept of Knowledge

Despite the fact that the Bible does not present us with a fully worked out epistemology, most scholars are agreed that a distinct epistemological approach is evident in the text, and that this conception is significantly different from the merely intellectual approach that the Enlightenment has bequeathed to us. Johannes Botterweck notes that the Old Testament concept of knowledge includes 'practical, emotional, and volitional' aspects.<sup>2</sup> As an example he cites Genesis 39:6 where a literal translation would read that Potiphar 'did not know anything' in regard to his house, where the actual meaning is that 'he had no concern for anything'.<sup>3</sup> The implication of this is that the Hebraic concept of knowledge at play here is one that involves our emotions and is more than a mere intellectual grasp. A similar conception is evident when we consider the range of phenomena that, in the Bible, it is appropriate to consider as knowledge. Sexual relations are frequently described as a form of knowing (Genesis 4:1; Judges 21:12), but beyond that the Scriptures also describe childlessness (Isaiah 47:8), disease (Isaiah 53:3), and divine punishment (Jeremiah 16:21) as objects of knowledge. The significance of this is that it points to an aspect of the biblical conception of knowledge that is absent from much contemporary epistemological discourse. To know childlessness does not mean to have an adequate intellectual grasp of the idea; rather it means to be acquainted with it existentially, emotionally, socially and cognitively.

What we are observing here is a concept of knowledge that involves the whole person. In relation to knowing God, this means that it is impossible to know him objectively or theoretically in the sense that we can know him as an object to be examined rather than a person who summons us. Rather, knowledge of God necessarily involves a transformation of our whole being in worship and obedience.<sup>4</sup> One Old Testament commentator has written:

*Knowledge of God in the OT is not concerned with the speculative question of the being of God, but with the God who, working in grace and judgement, has turned to men. To know him means to enter into the personal relationship which he himself makes possible.*<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely for this reason that Paul in Galatians 4:9 brings in a stunning reversal of the usual subject-object distinction. 'Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God....' To the contemporary epistemologist, to

know something, or even to know someone, does not necessarily have any implications for their knowledge of you. But to the Hebrew Paul, this is precisely the implication he can draw. This is because knowledge represents a mode of relating such that to know God implies a reciprocal knowledge by God toward us. In fact, our knowledge of God is only found in his knowledge of us, just as our relating to him is only grounded in his relating to us. Karl Barth writes:

*Knowledge in the biblical sense directly includes, indeed, it is itself at root, metanoia, conversion, the transformation of the nou", and therefore of the whole man, in accordance with the One known by him....To know him...is to receive and have the nou" of Jesus Christ himself, and thus to know in fellowship with the One who is known.*<sup>6</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn is that the biblical concept of knowledge is one that involves a transformation of the whole self, and it involves such a transformation because it consists in a deep personal encounter with that which is known. In biblical knowledge there is neither an internal separation nor an isolation from that which is known.

## Knowing Sin and Knowing God

The relevance of this biblical epistemology to Christian ethics is clear when we consider our cognitive relationship to sin and to God. According to the biblical paradigm, knowledge of sin is not merely a matter of holding specific beliefs concerning sin, but is rather to be existentially engaged with it. An appreciation of this gives us insight into the otherwise paradoxical description in Genesis 2:17 of 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil', and God's prohibition against eating it. To eat of the tree of knowledge of evil is not just to gain some new piece of information, as if all that happened was that Adam and Eve now knew what it was to sin whereas before they did not. No, rather, to eat of the tree of knowledge of evil is to partake in that knowledge, which means to partake of evil. Eating of the fruit does not just make sin possible, it was in itself sin, as the biblical account indicates: 'for in the day you eat of it you shall die'.<sup>7</sup>

If, then, our knowledge of sin or evil demonstrates the close connection between our epistemology and our ethics, then this is even more evident in terms of our relationship with God. For in this respect to know God is synonymous with obeying him, and not to know him equates with sin. Thus in Jeremiah

22:16 Yahweh declares: 'He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD'. And Judges 2:10ff. indicates the reverse of this: to abandon God's ways and to turn against him is to 'not know the LORD'.<sup>8</sup> Botterweck sums this up by commenting that knowledge of God and fear of Yahweh are interchangeable concepts and then adds: "'To know Yahweh" refers to a practical, religio-ethical relationship.... All who are upright of heart know him".<sup>9</sup> Hence, Barth can conclude:

*Knowledge of God is obedience to God. Observe that we do not say that knowledge may also be obedience, or that of necessity it has obedience attached to it, or that it is followed by obedience. No; knowledge of God as knowledge of faith is in itself and of essential necessity obedience.<sup>10</sup>*

### **Virtue Epistemology**

As I have already suggested, the scriptural witness does not indicate to us precisely how it is that our knowledge of God and obedient response to him are intertwined, but it does make it clear that they are. To know God means to live in a right relationship with him, which includes loving him and loving others. If, however, we are to find a way to understand this connection then some recent work on virtue theory may prove useful.

Ever since Ernest Sosa coined the term in 1985,<sup>11</sup> there has been an increasing interest in what he termed 'virtue epistemology'. The essence of such virtue approaches is that the focus of evaluation is no longer on belief or belief-states, but rather the person holding the belief. Linda Zagzebski, who has arguably developed the most thoroughly worked-out virtue epistemology, identifies a series of parallels between approaches to epistemology and moral theories. Just as deontological and consequentialist approaches in ethics focus on the moral 'act', so traditional epistemologies focus on the belief. In contrast, both virtue ethics and virtue epistemologies focus on the person performing the act, or holding the belief, and construct their evaluation around them, rather than the detached act or belief.<sup>12</sup> Zagzebski defines a virtue epistemology in these terms: 'Knowledge is a state of cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue'.<sup>13</sup> Examples of such intellectual virtues would include open-mindedness, fairness, humility, diligence, care, and insight.<sup>14</sup>

One consequence of this approach is that a close link is made between the so-called intellectual and moral

virtues. This link is brought home by Zagzebski when she draws a series of parallels noting how some moral virtues, such as honesty, require intellectual virtues for their operation; how some intellectual virtues require moral virtues for their operation: patience, for example, is necessary for thoroughness; and finally how some moral and intellectual virtues are essentially the same virtue in operation, such as humility. The point of her analysis is to demonstrate that no sharp dividing line can be drawn between these different types of virtue. Zagzebski thinks that we should consider the intellectual virtues as simply a 'subset' of the moral ones.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between the moral and intellectual virtues, furthermore, is no more significant than the distinction between one moral virtue and another.<sup>16</sup>

The significance of this approach for understanding the biblical connection between knowledge and ethics is particularly evident if we consider the virtue of humility.<sup>17</sup> In respect of knowing God, the first point to note is that no distinction can be drawn between humility as an intellectual virtue and humility as a moral virtue. Humility expresses itself in the recognition that we do not fully know God - that however much we are acquainted with the Scriptures and Traditions of the church, there is always more for us to learn regarding God. In fact, more than this, it is the recognition that much of what we think we know is in error and needs revision. This process of epistemic self-denial in our knowledge of God is ongoing. It never ceases, for we never know God perfectly, at least not this side of the eschaton. All of this has both intellectual and moral implications.

In addition, it is not as if this single virtue can be displayed towards God without also displaying it towards others. The fundamental reason for this is that humility reflects one's attitude towards oneself in relation to the Other. It is an attitude in which one realises one's limitations and acknowledges them. Now in relation to God, such an attitude issues forth in the conclusion that one has nothing of ultimate salvific value to offer, and in relation to others that what one has to offer is limited, but the fundamental attitude is the same: an attitude of a right appreciation of one's own gifts and abilities in relation to others. As a virtue then no fundamental distinction can be drawn between humility before God and humility before others. Of course, how the virtue is worked out in practice will differ, but the virtue behind the action, the virtue that motivates the action, is essentially the same.

This is why John can rightly acknowledge that it is impossible for us to know God and yet fail to love others. The same virtue that is involved in our knowledge of God is also demonstrated in our concern for others. Both stem from a right appreciation of ourselves in relation to the Other – whether God, or our brothers and sisters. It is unlikely that a virtue approach answers all the questions we might have regarding the intimate biblical relationship between knowledge and ethics. Yet what remains indisputable is that the Bible does recognise such an intimate connection in a way that is significantly different from our modern conceptions of knowledge. In thinking of our knowledge of God, we need to do more than just appropriate the truth of God that is revealed in Scripture. We also need to recognise the unique epistemology that is embedded there, an epistemology that demands obedience as much as faith.

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## End notes

1. John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 53.)
2. G. Johannes Botterweck, 'ud<sup>y</sup>', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Volume V* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 464.
3. *Ibid.*, 464.
4. For a similar conception see James H. Olthuis, *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 5, 6. See also Hendrik Hart, 'Conceptual Understanding and Knowing Other-Wise: Reflections on Rationality and Spirituality in Philosophy', in Olthuis, *Knowing*, 41ff.
5. E. Schütz, 'Knowledge', in C. Schütz, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume 2, G-Pre* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1976), 396.
6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3:i* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 185.
7. God's knowledge of 'evil' in Genesis 3:22 would have to be seen as an exception to this general paradigm in which knowledge equates to participation.
8. See Schütz, 'Knowledge', 396 for a discussion of this point.
9. Botterweck, 'ud<sup>y</sup>', 469.
10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 26.
11. E. Sosa, 'Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue', *The Monist* 68 (1985), 226-45.
12. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-8.
13. *Ibid.*, 270.
14. *Ibid.*, 114.
15. *Ibid.*, 139.
16. *Ibid.*, 158ff.
17. For a similar discussion of humility as an epistemic virtue see Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, 'Humility and Epistemic Goods', in Michael DePaul & Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 257-279.

## For further reading

- James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Westminster Press, 1975).
- Mary Healy & Robin Parry, *The Bible and Epistemology* (Paternoster Press, 2007).
- Douglas Knight, *The Eschatological Economy* (Eerdmans, 2006).
- James H. Olthuis, ed., *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality* (Fordham University Press, 1997).
- Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- W. J. Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Apollos, 1998).

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