

# A Note on Knowing

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## Introduction

This short paper has but one point to make. It is that we should no longer talk of knowledge, but of knowing. If you already agree with this assertion, you need read no further: just go out and practise what you preach.

The argument that sustains this assertion is equally simple: there is nothing known without a knower. Or, rather, there is nothing we can know without us knowing it. It is possible that something might be known without a knower (an agent), but we could not know this. It is certainly possible that there might be something, even some knowledge, without a knower: but in that case we would never know it, and so it could not possibly matter to us. Therefore, whether there might be such knowns cannot be decided and can only be speculation. We may chose to believe it, or not, but we cannot know it. If you already agree with this argument, you need read no further: just go out and practise what you preach.

The body of this piece introduces and develops arguments in support of a view in which we think of knowing (an agent dependant act) rather than knowledge (which is agent free), and shows, in principle, how this may relate to the world we live in and benefit from, of technological marvels (and dangers).

## Uncertainty in the Background

This argument is not new: it goes back to the farthest reaches of (western) philosophy. Ever since man began asking about his condition, and leaving traceable results, there has been the double question of what we can know and how we can know it. Behind this, the subject area of epistemology, lies the whole field of uncertainty. If we could be sure of what we knew we would not have to ask these questions. Perhaps the biggest uncertainty in our experiences has been the relationship between the status of the knower and of knowledge: can there be knowledge without a knower?

There have been two types of answer.

One answer is that there is knowledge without a knower, and that the knower's task is to discover (what he can of) that knowledge. In one well-known form, the universe, and its guiding principles the Laws of Nature, exist waiting to be discovered

The other answer is that there is nothing without the knower: all we know is a product of our knowing. In its extreme form, this is solipsism. Less extreme forms may attempt to bridge the gap between the knower's invention of his universe and the existence of this universe per se by invoking higher powers, for instance God.

(Away from western cultures there are, of course, other views. One is that there is nothing other than what the moment contains, and that all pattern finding is illusory: that is to say, reality, the universe to be known, exists at and in each moment, and that our placing on it of pattern (such as we need for recognition, explanation etc.) distorts and is illusory. This view is also held by certain western (Christian) mystics. Such views should not be, but are, outside our scope in this short piece.)

There is an alternative route open to us. It is frequently confused with solipsism, and also thought of as having a short history and little backing. Several scholars who favour this view have expended considerable effort demonstrating a long, but little-known history: and explaining that the view has more substance and support than is often thought. The view I refer to is the constructivist view. I shall write about this briefly and in my own style: there are better sources. The interested reader may consult (von Glasersfeld 1987, Muller 2000).

### **Constructivism (According to Me)**

The constructivist view, in my understanding, is less absolute and perhaps less ambitious than the other two (western) views. In some ways, it also builds bridges. What distinguishes it is its willingness to be less certain about the status of the knowledge it generates.

The key understanding behind the constructivist position, at least as I use it, is that we can only know what we can know, and that whether there is or is not a universe beyond this is beyond our sensing and our examination. Thus, what we can know about, what we can know, and what we can hold as knowable is limited by us: we limit our knowledge. There is no argument supporting the view of a real world out there for us to discover, nor is there an insistence that there is no such world. Only the assertion that what we know, we know: it is known—by us. Insofar as we talk of a world, it is a world of our knowing.

I cannot emphasise this difference too strongly. Constructivism, in my interpretation (and I can have no other), restricts the scope of discussion by acknowledging the limitations to our competence. And it places responsibility where it belongs: with the knower.

So constructivism skirts around the issue of absolutism. If it has an absolute, that absolute is a relative point of reference, the knower. Everything that is known is referred back to and in reference to a knower. And it is difficult to make sense of knowledge without there being a knower both to know the piece of knowledge and to know that it is knowledge.

If what is known depends on the knower, then it is in some sense an expression of that knower, and is generated by him. Thus, if we talk of some object of attention (to be indicated as “Object”, with an upper case initial letter), we are left wondering how we can know that there is such an Object apart from our knowing: that is, how can we know there is some Object without knowing it, except by knowing it? From my point of view, as knower, I cannot assume this Object existed or exists apart from and/or before I made my knowing of it (I came to know it). So (my knowing) the Object is intimately tied up with me (knowing), and with me knowing me. And all I can do further than this is chose to believe that there is, or there was not, this Object before and separate from my knowing.

Some will say that there is prior knowledge shared by society. But this does not answer the question. For how do I know what society knows (or that there is a society) without myself knowing. When I learn something (come to know it), even though it is believed that others have known this before, I still have to learn, I still have to come to know. Only I can do that. (It is a fallacy that a teacher can learn for his students, or even that a teacher need know what his students need learn.) This argument holds, equally, with recorded and formalised knowledge (such as we find in text books and encyclopaedias) and with knowledge we derive through machines and instruments; as well as knowledge that is developed theoretically, as an extension, and in some abstracted framework such as logic

(A fascinating example of this is the generation of a so-called understanding of the structure and geology of the surface of Triton following image enhancement of flyby photographs, a case of the self-fulfilling demonstration of beliefs, if ever there was one. See also Glanville in press b.)

Thus, in my constructivist view, not only can I not distinguish myself from what I know, but

I cannot distinguish the Object of my knowing from my knowing. In coming to know I bring into being, for myself, both myself and that Object. What I have, of that Object, is (in my way of speaking) not knowledge, but is knowing.

### **Understanding and Reality**

In this view, my understanding of the universe (including myself) is based in my knowing. I believe I exist through knowing myself. I know the universe (and that there is a universe) through my knowing, and, through that knowing, I also know myself. Knowing brings into my universe both the Objects I know (the universe is one of them) and myself as knower. It also brings in (recursive) knowing about knowing: I know through knowing (Glanville 1990).

In some respects this is tautological. In others, it is hard to get the head around. There are also aspects that are explicitly beyond our ability to consider, such as how did I come to be if there was no I, which is the question of who is the agent that first makes the (first) agent. I will not pursue this argument further here because I have already introduced most of its content in the previous section and it does not need further development to sustain the theme of this piece. (Glanville 1990, in press b)

We in the west have, I suppose, mostly grown up faced with a very materialist based view of our universes. Our role in these universes has been that of the neutralised observer (and then the actor). The way we have, recently in the west, talked of our universes is in terms of absolutes of knowledge (perhaps only approached, but nevertheless present as ideals and ultimates and against which we measure) and the triumph of our technologies in transforming what is available to us in a material form according to rules that are denoted by names such as Laws of Nature.

Given that we have grown up in this social construction, it is hardly surprising that we live in a world determined as material-realist. And I, at least, would not deny the benefits I gain from this view. For instance, as I write this piece I am happy to have flown from London to Helsinki to visit my son, in his heated apartment 4 storeys up with lift service, and to write this on my PowerBook using a charming Mac-only wordprocessor called Nisus! I enjoy this way of looking, which is just as well since I grew up—being a little more precis—thinking that this was the only conceivable universe and was not open to question. Well, actually, since it was not open to question, the question of whether this was the only conceivable universe, or there might be others, never cropped up.

But I now find it is open to question. I find that I can ask such questions as “What is the relationship between me, knowing, the act of knowing per se, and what I think I know?” And the material-realist position I grew up with has no answer for this question: it has beliefs, assertions, and what it calls the obvious (meaning not open to question), but it has no answers because the question is not answerable in any absolute sense. When pushed, the answer given is that this account of the world is too right too much of the time for us to consider it coincidence. But it is not too right too much of the time for us to consider it formed in this way, or filtered according to these criteria. If we do our knowing, we form what we learn to see as we form our knowing. And we then take it that our knowing is connected with the constructs of our knowing. That is, as we construct, for instance, an Object, we also give it an independence, for the act of constructing, the act of knowing, brings into our knowing both ourselves and what is known, together with our knowing, and knowing there is a difference. In treating these knowns as Objects, we give them a distinction, that is we give them an independence, a self-ness, and hence we look on them as if they existed as separate from us. And as we repeat this, we re-inforce their separateness and their stability; that is, we treat them as existing free from us. (Piaget 1972)

It is not so difficult, then to account for the basics of a view (such as I, and I believe you,

grew up with) that is apparently contradictory to a constructivist view, when we consider what we can and might do with our knowing. We can, indeed, construct, in principle, that constant and real world that we have been brought up to accept, a universe that we can treat as materialist-realist and which performs according to our technology and science and in which, being populated by Objects we have given self-ness, of course is not entirely subject to our rulings and predictions, for that is what self-ness means..

## Sharing

If each of us does our own knowing, there is no basis for assuming we see the same or that we share the same understandings. We simply cannot say that we understand in the same way, that our understandings are the same. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any circumstance other than direct encoded communication (which may explain why such a view is so popular (Turing 1950, Glanville in press a) under which we can claim that our understandings are the same, since they are never directly available to an other, being always mediated by some form representation; and since each of us has to have our own understanding. That is to say, I can make my understanding of what I believe is your understanding, but that is not the same as having your understanding, which only you can have.

For us to share other than by what one of Ian Flemming's villains calls happenstance, to work together on projects (to collaborate) we generally assume we must share understandings. Not necessarily that we must agree (we can agree to disagree) but we must at least be able to take into account how (we understand) the other understands.

But if they understand quite differently (that is, their understanding is theirs, and mine is mine, and both are constructed) it might seem we have problems.

In the recent past, we have dealt with this by making two assumptions. The first is that we can somehow "encode" our understandings onto language structures. But, in the view I have been arguing here, this doesn't help: we cannot assume we hear the "same" words (this is the second assumption, the assumption of reference, which we will come to shortly), or that they have the same meanings or even that we encode the same way, for each of us understands these ourselves, and, as we have argued, their understanding is theirs, and mine is mine.

In contrast, if we consider that communication is not by passing meanings but by negotiation through some medium (language), we can avoid these difficulties. Accepting that the best I can do is to develop my understanding of your understanding (rather than sharing your understanding), I may tell you of my understanding of your understanding: and you may make your understanding (of my understanding of your understanding), and, act thus: if you think your (original) understanding and your understanding (of my understanding of your understanding) are close enough, you may believe I have understood you. And if not, you may try to help me correct my understanding of your understanding, in a feedback loop. This is a negotiation, and I may change your understanding just as you may change mine. It is an embodiment of an error reduction mechanism. Such a form of communication is called a conversation. It has the added advantage that, if you and I converse for some time, we may establish a convention of encodement: that is, conversation may lead to an agreed regularity of use that is, in effect, similar to a coding. Thus, we may develop a language from conversational interaction that begins to take form recognisable as being of the "real" languages we share. (Pask 1975, Glanville 1996)

The adoption of a conversational means of communication as the starting point effectively deals with that other assumption: that we refer to the same Object. This actually matters not only for the reference of an utterance, but also, and equally, for the language components themselves. Dissolve one, and you have dissolved the other. When there is negotiation in conversation we do not need to worry whether the Objects of concern are the same (if we are

concerned, we can resort to the extended study of Objects, which are designed to cope with these concerns): we just build understandings (of understandings...) that in the mind of each participant map well onto each other. (For a discussion of Objects, see Glanville 1975.)

The organisational device of the conversation (understandings of understandings) does not merely permit, it encourages sharing. Indeed, that is what it is for. By taking seriously the view of the dependent relationship between the knower and the knowing, we arrive at a system that supports and even promotes sharing, and the development of mutually usable (yet unique) understandings.

Thus, this constructivist view of our universe works neither against sharing understandings, nor against us having powerful tools and explanations such as the technologies we so depend on and enjoy. But it does retain the key notion that we are centrally and crucially involved in our knowing. In this manner it better helps us live with that old and unanswerable philosophical question which concerns all aspects of the status of our knowing.

### **Knowing: the Union of the Knower and the Known**

When we have dealt with what we know, as it now seems our tradition has recently dealt with it, we have divided the knower from the known. That which is known thus becomes agent free, that is, knowledge. In this view, knowledge is longlived, maybe eternal and unpolluted. It exists outside the human (frail humans who are allowed access to it), both outside the mind and the observation, and outside the understanding. Humans, understanding it, either are in some sort of direct encoded communication with the knowledge (they receive the knowledge, pure, unadulterated and correct, without human intervention or interpretation, via some sort of encoded transmission), or they only understand it partially, they misunderstand.

We have placed knowledge on a pedestal. We present it as if it were beyond the vagaries of the agent who knows. Thus, it becomes a sort of theological assertion: knowledge is certain: absolute knowledge is absolutely certain. It is in this way that knowledge can be looked at as beyond the human: a transcendent phenomenon, the word of a God or the word of an atheistic God, such as science has become. (Not, of course, science in its Latin root, *scientia*: nor science as in its best practice.)

I have argued against this position. I find the division between knowledge and the knower based in an unacceptable assumption. The divided dual does not give me satisfaction, any more than the solipsist unity does, especially when there is an alternative—constructivism—which I believe I have shown gives me an way out.

The return to the union of the knower and the known (to knowing as opposed to knowledge), has many epistemological consequences, some of which I have discussed above, and which are developed extensively in the fields of radical constructivism and second order cybernetics. What I have not mentioned is the ethical consequences of the involved knower which are both profound and, in my view, charming and desirable.

The key to the ethical implications is the concept of responsibility. When we accept that our knowing depends on us, when we accept that we do the knowing and without us there would be no knowing, we can no longer deny our responsibility and ownership. It is our knowing (this is why I chose to propose the change from the notion of knowledge to that of knowing). I have it, and I act on it, and that is a definition of ownership. Responsibility arises because, without my knowing and my acting, nothing would happen and no one would be affected. By knowing, I create just as I deny options; these are mine, and what happens as a result of them is down to me. I am responsible.

In today's culture of blame (associated with the notion that everything is a machine and can be explained with reference to chains of simple and linear causes), this notion may seem

strange. But, in truth, it is empowering and enabling: and it stops a lot of rot (Glanville 1995).

The inability to accept responsibility is an alienating experience: we become mere channels, unfeeling. The involvement that leads to responsibility, is wonderful: it lets us feel we are alive.

## **Conclusion**

I know this account is a cartoon and a caricature, and, as such, may cause offence or anger: the distortions may not be appealing, or they may not be the ones others would have chosen. But much truth lies in such so-called distortions. And who, if there is not this absolute, or if such an absolute is denied us, is to judge the distortion?

I know it is a simplification, but every (re-)presentation is a simplification, and every pattern is a distortion through which we place order on the world we make. For some, this may be so simple that it is an offence to be presented with it. I do not apologise: we live in a culture that has learnt to value simplicity. I am not trying to be learned, but to be clear. I am not trying to cover every eventuality, but to convey the spirit of a way of looking and, hence, of understanding. If this does not suit, or does not appeal, then so be it.

I also know it may appear obvious, especially to those who have already studied this position and may, even, have taken it on board, being perhaps true experts in it. I do not apologise to them, either, if they are offended. The key to a constructivist understanding, and its Achilles' heel, is that it is explicitly open to interpretation. (It also has great difficulty dealing with the absolutist argument, such as "my opinion is that you are wrong, and I am absolutely right": i.e., the dictator's argument.)

But I do not set out to cause offence, and am troubled if I do. I set out simply to remind us that it is we who know, and hence we are involved in knowing and what we produce is (when expressed linguistically) knowing rather than knowledge—for when we know we are always the subject of our verb. And then to consider this position.

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I will use the term western, and the term in the west, as a shortcut knowing it is inaccurate and insensitive. There are many subtle arguments that can be brought to bear. My wish is to avoid most of these and to concentrate on the central concern, the difference between knowledge and knowing.

This does not exclude us from using instruments to aid us, including those instruments of sense we construct ourselves as having, such as eyes!