IS "UNKNOWING" THE WAY TO TRUE KNOWLEDGE?
MCC PHILOSOPHY CLUB
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Introduction: Today we will define different ways we can think about what "unknowing" is or could be interpreted as, and then will consider whether each definition could be a way to gain true knowledge. We will assume that "true knowledge" is certain knowledge of important things to know, such as what exists (including God or not, if immaterial and/or material substance exist, etc.), what good and evil, right and wrong are (if they exist), what it's possible to know, and so on. Basically, true knowledge would be the height of human wisdom. As always, after reading these notes, we'll see what you think!

I. What is "Unknowing"?

A. Unknowing as having faith, and not questioning holy writings or the statements of the founder or head of a religion. In Hebrews 11.1, for instance, faith is said to be "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."[1] It can be viewed as a non-rational belief–not an *irrational* belief–because it is a cognitive state that wants or hopes something to be true, but currently does not have any objective evidence that could give anyone else a reason to believe in what one has faith in. Subjectively, a person with faith might believe they have a lot of evidence for what they believe, however. Some religious leaders state that one must not question any of their tenets, beliefs, practices or doctrines, but must surrender and trust that that will open the mind to understanding or a personal God.

1. Faith can lead to true knowledge:

a. **Religious Faith Being Rewarded:** If you have faith in a version of God that exists, and there is a reward such as heaven (Christianity), paradise (Islam), or enlightenment (Buddhism or Hinduism), then one would gain true knowledge either in the afterlife (heaven or paradise) or in this lifetime (Buddhism or Hinduism).

b. **William James** claims that, since science can only tell us what exists but not what we should value, we must/can only consult our hearts about matters of religion and ethics. So whatever works for us in the realms of religion and ethics just *are* true.

c. **Nicholas of Cusa** argues that wisdom quite literally comes from understanding the limits on what we can know. God is an absolute maximum, and human reason and understanding cannot capture this maximum. In order to go beyond these limitations, we needed to have faith.[2]

2. Faith cannot lead to true knowledge:

a. If you hope or trust that something is true and/or believe something is true without evidence, it is difficult to ascertain how one could go from that cognitive state and arrive at certain knowledge. The Biblical definition in Hebrews 11.1 of faith is basically stating that if you have faith in Jesus or the Christian version of God, you will be proven to be correct. But that merely assumes that that view of God is true without evidence.

b. **David Hume** argues that the surest foundation of matters of divinity is faith and divine revelation, but does not believe that that cognitive state or mystical experience leads to true knowledge.

c. **William James might be wrong:** We might be able to use our reason to figure out something about religion and ethics. For instance, some philosophers and theologians, such as Anselm, Aquinas, and Descartes are certain that they/we can prove God's existence. If that is true, then to claim that whatever works for you is true is questionable at least or wrong at most.

B. Unknowing as mystical non-discursive knowledge, which is knowledge not obtained by reasoning or using words or language. For instance, Plato and Plotinus believe that knowledge is of Forms, which are essential natures of what each kind of thing is, and when one obtains that knowledge, one does not gain knowledge of statements or propositions, one directly knows the nature of that idea, such as beauty, goodness, justice, etc. In their view, one should philosophize in the right way (first admit that you don't know anything, then investigate the nature of reality, initially assuming that non-physical substance exists), and at the end of that process, it may happen (that is, it is not guaranteed) that one will come to have certain knowledge of everything that exists, what we can know, and how we should live. One can also interpret Buddhism in this way as well: One meditates with different techniques, including trying to stop thoughts from occurring, or concentrating on a mental object, where one is not

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[1] King James version from Bible Gateway. Other translations: "faith is assurance of *things* hoped for, a conviction of things not seen." (ASV) "faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen." (CSB)

[2] From *On Learned Ignorance*; source here.

using words and reasoning through anything, but simply directly experiencing it, and perhaps enlightenment happens for that person.

1. **Mystical non-discursive practice can lead to true knowledge:**
   a. The best that can be said in favor of this method is that Plato, Buddha, and Plotinus state that they gained the knowledge for which they advocate. For instance: (i) Plato, through his Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of the *Republic*, describes that it is possible to come to have knowledge of the Good (his highest principle) and other Forms, and stating in his *Symposium* that one can have a vision and therefore knowledge of absolute Beauty. (ii) Buddha states in the earliest writings that, through enlightenment, he knows that God(s) exists, he has knowledge of the end of suffering (that is, is truly happy), knowledge of his past lives, and claims that it is the goal of the holy life to be enlightened. (iii) Plotinus states that even if a man were to own and run the world, if he has not come to know the Good or the One, he has failed utterly; and that "Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful." (*The Enneads* I.6.7) And each of these people came from different parts of the world at different times.
2. **Mystical non-discursive practice cannot lead to true knowledge:**
   a. We only have their word, even though it seems that they are being sincere. So this method of possibly gaining knowledge seems like it can only be proven if or once one has this experience, and can be questioned until that point.

C. **Unknowing as it appears in *The Cloud of Unknowing* - a book written by an anonymous Christian author in the 14th century.**[3] God cannot be understood through human reason, logic, or intellectual thought, because the divine transcends all created concepts. Instead of trying to *think* or *figure out* God, a person can only reach and experience God through love, will, and a deep, intuitive stirring of the heart ("what the mind cannot grasp, the will can embrace"). To experience this union with the divine, the author instructs the practitioner to cultivate these mental and spiritual states: **The Cloud of Unknowing:** A state of intellectual darkness or empty space that stands between the human mind and God. Rather than trying to fill this space with ideas, images, or rational definitions of God, you rest within the mystery itself. **The Cloud of Forgetting:** The active discipline of pushing aside and temporarily forgetting all created things, worldly concerns, sensory distractions, and even your own ego or thoughts about yourself. **Naked Intent:** The active discipline of pushing aside and temporarily forgetting all created things, worldly concerns, sensory distractions, and even your own ego or thoughts about yourself. This is a type of **Apophatic Theology:** The approach relies on "negative theology" (*via negativa*), which defines God by what He *cannot* be said to be, moving past words and forms into silence.

1. **The "Cloud of Unknowing" can lead to true knowledge:**
   a. Similar to the argument above, that if one practices this method and this version of God exists, then one will come to know God in the afterlife in heaven.
2. **The "Cloud of Unknowing" cannot lead to true knowledge:**
   a. "Resting in mystery itself" and/or attaining "union with a personal God" (see chart in the Bonus Stuff section below) is not the same thing as claiming to have true knowledge of God.
   b. Again, as above for section B, people have claimed to experience a union with God, but for whomever this has not happened, one can question that that experience is possible.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have any questions about anything we presented today?
2. Do you have another definition of true knowledge?
3. Do you think any of these definitions of unknowing are plausible?
4. Do you have any other definitions or ways of interpreting "unknowing"?
5. Do you think that any of these methods can lead to true knowledge, from what you understand about them?

[3] These descriptions come from Google Gemini AI summaries when "The Cloud of Unknowing concept" was searched.

BONUS STUFF

I. Here is a comparison of three types of mysticism:

Direct Comparison Overview

Feature	The Cloud of Unknowing (Western Christian)	Hesychasm (Eastern Orthodox Christian)	Zen Buddhism (Eastern / Buddhist)
Primary Goal	**Union with a personal God** (*Theosis*) through love.	**Experiencing the Divine Energies** of God; transforming the self.	**Enlightenment** (*Satori*); awakening to one's true nature and the emptiness of ego.
View of the Mind	**Surpassed.** Human reason is entirely incapable of knowing God.	**Integrated.** Mind (*nous*) is brought down into the physical heart center.	**Transcended / Dissolved.** Mental constructs are seen as an illusion (*maya* or *sunyata*).
The Primary Tool	A **single-syllable word** (e.g., "God" or "Love") used as a blind "dart of longing."	The **Jesus Prayer** ("Lord Jesus Christ... have mercy on me").	**Zazen** (just sitting) or **Koans** (paradoxical riddles to break the rational mind).
Physical Component	**Minimal.** Primarily a hidden, interior movement of the will.	**High.** Rhythmic breathing, physical stillness, and downward gaze.	**High.** Strict full/half-lotus postures, open eyes, and precise alignment.

II. Deleuze: Can true unknowing ever be achieved?

III. Philosophers who thought we have to first not know anything before we can truly know anything:

A. Rene Descartes doubted many things, including whether he could trust his senses, whether he can tell if at any given moment he is dreaming, if God exists, if 2 + 3 = 5, and he supposes that an evil demon is making Descartes think that everything else besides his mind, including his body, and the entire physical world around him is just an illusion, so he can never trust his senses. However and importantly, he proceeded from all this doubt to argue that he certainly exists, because if the evil demon is deceiving him, there must be something to him that exists in order for him to be deceived. Moreover, even if he doubts his own existence, that itself proves that he exists. So it took Descartes' doubt in order for him to be certain that he existed. (He also goes on in his *Meditations* to, at least in his mind, prove that God exists and the external world.)

B. Socratic ignorance: One has to admit that one does not know for certain what happens when we die, if God exists, if enlightenment is possible in this lifetime (if not that one does not know what the good is, and every other major philosophical question), in order to possibly advance to true knowledge. Why? Because if one believes one already knows X but does not know X, then how can they accept the truth about what X really is?