



Socratic Happy Hour

Friends don't let friends live unexamined lives

Can We Know More Than We Can Prove?: A Conversation on Faith, Science, and Other Ways of Knowing

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

– **David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding***

To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

– **W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief***

We each exist for but a short time, and in that time explore but a small part of the whole universe. But humans are a curious species. We wonder, we seek answers. Living in this vast world that is by turns kind and cruel, and gazing at the immense heavens above, people have always asked a multitude of questions: How can we understand the world in which we find ourselves? How does the universe behave? What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator? Most of us do not spend most of our time worrying about these questions, but almost all of us worry about them some of the time.

Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.

– **Stephen Hawking, *The Grand Design***

It is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening custom and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, or a rich country inhabited by starving people... Who indeed could afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid... The future belongs to science and those who make friends with science.

– **Jawaharlal Nehru**

Supposing we were to ask Nehru: can you really rely on science alone? Aren't you also going to need good laws, effective administrators, honest and intelligent politicians, good new customs to replace the old ones, perhaps even a sensitive understanding of the traditions that you mean to sweep away? Might you not even need to know a good deal of history and anthropology before you start on your destructive cleansing of tradition? Now Nehru knows of course, that he is going to need all of these things. But he is assuming that all are included in what he means by science. He includes in "science" the whole world-view which he takes to lie behind it, namely,



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the decent, humane, liberal attitude out of which it has actually grown.... He expects that the scientific spirit will include within it wise and benevolent use of those discoveries. He is certainly not thinking of science as something likely to produce industrial pollution, or refined methods of torture, or opportunities for profiteering, or a concentration on weaponry, or overuse of chemicals on farms, or computer-viruses, or irresponsible currency speculation made possible by the latest computers, or the wholesale waste of resources on gadgetry.

– **Mary Midgley**

It is important to realize that science does not make assertions about ultimate questions—about the riddles of existence, or about man's task in this world. This has often been well understood. But some great scientists, and many lesser ones, have misunderstood the situation. The fact that science cannot make any pronouncement about ethical principles has been misinterpreted as indicating that there are no such principles while in fact the search for truth presupposes ethics.

– **Karl Popper, *Dialectica* 32:342**

...we know more than we can tell. This fact seems obvious enough; but it is not easy to say exactly what it means....

...The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this ideal is accepted only as a temporary imperfection, which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge. The ideal of exact science would turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies.

– **Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension***

If a 'religion' is defined to be a system of ideas that contains unprovable statements, then Gödel taught us that mathematics is not only a religion, it is the only religion that can prove itself to be one.

– **John D. Barrow, *The Artful Universe***

It would be possible to describe everything scientifically, but it would make no sense; it would be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure.

– **Albert Einstein**