

Longing *to* Know

THE PHILOSOPHY
OF KNOWLEDGE FOR



ORDINARY
PEOPLE

Esther Lightcap Meek

Longing *to* Know

Esther Lightcap Meek



Contents

Foreword 7

Part I: Knowing . . .

1. "Show Your Work" 15
2. Let's Talk about Knowing 20
3. The Dangling Carrot of Certainty 26
4. Let Me Introduce You to My Auto Mechanic 37
5. Knowing God Is Like Knowing Your Auto Mechanic 41
6. Oh! I See It! 46

Part II: . . . Is the Responsible Human Struggle . . .

7. Laying Out for a Frisbee 55
8. Lewis and Clark Did It Best 62
9. The Struggle That Makes Us Human 69
10. Integration, Not Deduction 75

Part III: . . . To Rely on Clues . . .

11. The Clues in Our World 83
12. The Clues in My Body 90
13. The Clues in the Directions 97
14. Integration Transforms the Clues 107

Contents

Part IV: . . . To Focus on a Coherent Pattern and Submit to Its Reality

- 15. Patterns—the Surprising Fruit of Our Struggle 117
- 16. Contact with Reality 124
- 17. Truth: Contact, Not Correspondence; Confidence,
Not Certainty 135
- 18. Engaging and Unlocking the World 141
- 19. The Power of the Pattern 146

Part V: Loving the Longing

- 20. Getting It Wrong 155
- 21. “Are You the One Who Was to Come, or Should We Expect Some-
one Else?” 166
- 22. The Ethics of Knowing 175
- 23. Confidence and Hope 181
- 24. The Rest of Michael’s Story 188
- 25. Known by God 192

Notes 199

Foreword

This is a book about knowing. Knowing is an activity that all of us are involved in, all of the time. Usually knowing happens without our taking great thought to the process. But sometimes we stop and think about what we're doing. When we stop and think, what we were doing without much thought becomes murky indeed.

It's good and useful to stop and think about knowing, even if it means tackling something murky. For one thing, the circumstances of our lives at times force us into the cellar, so to speak, to examine the foundations of our beliefs. For another, the exercise serves to enhance and extend our everyday knowing, as well as give us fresh confidence in our efforts.

■ Who Needs to Read This Book, and Why

This book is written for all knowers. But it in particular targets knowers propelled into the cellar of their beliefs by one or more of the following circumstances of life.

First, I have in mind people who wrestle with questions concerning truth and the possibility of knowledge as a result our culture's recent consensus shift from modernism to postmodernism. Philosophically, the shift has been centuries in the making, but it has only in recent decades reached the street. We

Foreword

have gone from struggling to conform to stringent criteria to shore up our claims to absolute, objective truth to outright rejection of the entire enterprise—from absolute truth to no truth. Affirming no truth is not always a comfortable position for a human being. It leaves nagging questions. This book deals with those questions.

A second huge “circumstance” of life is growing up—moving from adolescence to adulthood. This changeover, in our day and age, quite frankly takes a long time. People who are middle aged like me can feel as if they are still growing up. I have first-hand experience! At the other end of the age spectrum, we often comment, young people are forced to grow up sooner than they used to. Your particular age doesn’t qualify you for or disqualify you from this category. What qualifies you is that you deal with questions about what is really real and good and how you know, questions to which you were presuming someone else’s answers but now are faced with deciding for yourself. As we grow up, we often have to take that trip to the cellar to scrutinize the foundations of our beliefs. This book aids that foray.

Third, this book is written for people who are considering questions about truth and how we know because they are considering Christianity. Christianity is the belief that what the Holy Bible says about God and his relationship to the world is true, and that trusting Jesus is the only way to be right with God. It involves, in short, affirming that certain claims are *true*. People considering Christianity includes people who have not yet embraced it, as well as people who have, but want or need to think it through more deeply.

Affirming the claims of Christianity has always involved people in thinking about why those claims are not *wrong*. This is how things were when I was a child. Later, affirming Christianity involved people in defending why those claims were not *meaningless*. I felt this in my late teens and early twenties, as I encountered philosophies that argued that only sense perception–based scientific claims were meaningful, and the rest—religious, psychological, ethical, artistic, and historical—were more like gibberish. But in the postmodern era, affirming Christian claims as true involves people in defending, often in the face of tremendous wrath, why those claims are not *morally outrageous*. A claim that something is universally true is something akin to Hitler’s concentration camps, a huge and damaging imposition on others’ freedom. People considering Christianity, then, simply cannot avoid the more foundational questions concerning truth. To these people, I very much want this book to bring direction and hope.

■ My Debt to Michael Polanyi, and Others

In these pages I develop a proposal concerning how knowing works. I believe that many questions can be answered at least preliminarily, and many puzzles solved, and personal hope of truth restored, by appropriating this model of how we know. I believe the model is confirmed by the ordinary day-to-day experiences of every human being.

The model of knowing I use belongs first to scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi. A Hungarian who died in 1976, Polanyi published books and essays from the 1940s to the 1960s that at the time were not widely known or received. His message was revolutionary and consequently inflammatory. Recent shifts in philosophical outlook, I believe, have had the result that more people are taking notice of what he had to say.

I have chosen not to say, “Polanyi says . . .” at every turn in this book, although I could have! I have done this, first of all, because I want this book not to read like a textbook, but rather like a personal meditation.

Second, I have thought about Polanyi’s model for at least twenty years. For my doctorate I wrote a dissertation on his work. Recently I have looked back and recognized a gradual movement in my life from describing his work to taking it as a personal working hypothesis in thinking about knowing, to downright appropriating it. I commend it to you now as very much my own conviction. You will see that it shapes my understanding of many aspects of my life. In fact, I try to live his model, and I try to help the reader do that too. I have applied it in fresh ways. Polanyi never knew popular postmodernism. I believe that his model nevertheless contains within it a profound response. Polanyi’s model was not developed primarily to accommodate theism; it is my claim that it aptly suits what Scripture indicates about human knowing. Polanyi’s environment, as a scientist, was the research lab; mine, as a teacher and mom, has been, so to speak, the kitchen table (that wonderful place where teaching and parenting intersect!).

And third, in the process of appropriating Polanyi, I have also adapted the model, especially in light of the contributions of theologian John Frame, whose work I take to represent accurately the stipulations about human knowing indicated by Scripture. One very helpful feature of Frame’s approach is his consistent delineation of three dimensions of human knowing. In this book I refer to them as the world, the self, and the word, or directions. I unpack Polanyi’s model in reference to these three dimensions.

So please do not take my avoiding reference to his name as discredit to Polanyi! If you want to get the model from the horse’s mouth, in its pristine and

Foreword

authoritative statement, read his works. See especially his *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966).

The application of this model to knowing auto mechanics and God, with critical reliance on the Holy Bible and the compelling insights additionally of John Calvin, C. S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin, Annie Dillard, and numerous others, is my own personal, risky, and responsible submission in pursuit of reality.

My auto mechanic, featured in this book's "driving" illustration, merits my gratitude. I am grateful for his reliable character, skill, and service. I include in my gratitude not only Jeff, but his entire staff at the Kirkwood Citgo. Not many people enjoy such confidence in their auto mechanics. But Jeff has no idea how he will serve to expedite many people's understanding of knowing, and knowing God. This, as a surprising manifestation of unanticipated consequences, is indeed a confirmation of his reality.

My children, Starr, Stacey, and Stephanie, have also proven fruitful sources of illustrations. They have made me both a mom and a philosopher, and have dwelt graciously with the blend.

I dedicate this book to my first philosophy teacher, mentor, and inspiration for my pursuits, Jim Grier, most recently dean at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary. I switched colleges and majors to study with him on the strength of a description given by one of his students. I sensed the possibility of indeterminate future manifestations, and the risky choice has shaped everything wonderful about my life since then.

I dedicate it, second, to my colleague and friend-of-my-mind, theologian Mike Williams, with whom I teach epistemology at Covenant Seminary, and whose theological and philosophical insights regularly engage me and prompt me to worship God.

This book is dedicated, third, to the stellar students of Epistemology 2000. Adding hours of enthusiastic after-class discussion to the requisite class time, they bought into my vision, and responded to my efforts with encouragement and love. This is the book they asked for. In particular, Michael Gordon and Jon Dunning have loyally cheered me on. Michael's story I describe in these pages.

■ Tips for Reading This Book

Finally, I want to advise you concerning how to read this book. Philosophical questions, questions about how we know and what is really real, are inher-

ently difficult questions. I have wanted very much in this book to deal with them in a popular and accessible way. I have often wondered if this goal was oxymoronic, inherently contradictory! But I profoundly believe that it is or must be possible, because I believe that every human being, not just the philosophy majors, wrestles with the BHQs, as I call them—the Big Hairy Questions of what is true, what is good, and what is real. Thus, philosophy should be written in a way that will help everybody.

But you very likely will find this book dense at places, and you may feel often that you do not entirely grasp what is being said. Please hear my encouragement: the problem isn't you. And I hope—I have striven to make it so that—the problem isn't entirely me. The problem is the enterprise itself. Philosophy is difficult. The questions are “hairy.” Philosophy is difficult, like looking directly at the tip of your nose is difficult! We rely in every act of knowing on foundational philosophical beliefs. It takes an effort to put into words the convictions we know usually only in our relying on them. It takes a huge effort to put into words what lies at the border of, and perhaps beyond, articulation. But please press on—even gaining partial understanding is an act of personal integrity and very much worth the effort.

To compensate for the density of the subject, you may find it helps to follow this advice. First, read one chapter per sitting. I have purposely made each chapter short. We are busy people. I can conceive of you reading one chapter a week, then thinking about it as you drive to work or school, cook, shower, garden, or watch your baby play. I hope you might be able to discuss it with a soul mate. You may want to refer to the chapter throughout your ruminations. You can use the questions at the end of each chapter to direct your thought and personal application.

Second, read “through your eyelashes.” By this I mean, don't strive necessarily to understand every word precisely. You can get the gist or the feel of the thing even if you don't get every single word. Be patient, for your grasp, I promise, will grow as you continue to read through the chapters. You will see that this advice grows consistently out of my convictions concerning how coming to know happens. I have tried to write the book in a way that matches these convictions. I have only words at my disposal. So I have wanted to use the words not only to represent but also to evoke your felt sense of your own knowing.

Third, try to apply what you read to your own experience. I have in writing this book told numerous stories and offered many examples from my own life. Please match my stories with your own. My heartfelt longing for this book is that it will lend significance to your own longing for reality and for truth, that it will guide your search, and that it will give you hope.

■ For Further Thought and Discussion

Get a journal. At the end of each chapter in this book, you will find questions and activities that you can use to prompt your own thinking, to engage you more fully with the concerns raised on these pages. You can use a journal, if you like, to write responses to the end-of-chapter questions. Your main goal is for you to figure out where you are, so to speak, and for you to take the next step. That is, figure out where your burning questions lie, and take some steps toward dealing with them. Merely reading a book will not do this for you. Nor will keeping a journal. These are tools to prompt your own initiative. Your initiative is the thing. But the tools are valuable means to that end. A journal can be both an invitation to and a diary of a trip. But the trip is yours.

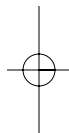
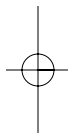
Get a companion. The best kind of trip is one you take with a friend. I think that is true of the kind of questions you will be addressing in the book. End-of-chapter questions have been written with the idea that you and another might tackle them together, each hearing the other's insights and concerns, encouraging each other in the journey. You may already have someone who is friend-of-your-mind, first hearer of your questions and ideas. You are blessed. It is fine to invite someone whom you have yet to know well to join you in reading this book together. Through it you may gain a friend-of-your-mind that you did not have before. You may choose to converse with a friend or even two, rather than keep a journal.

PART I

Knowing . . .

Knowing

*is the responsible human struggle
to rely on clues
to focus on a coherent pattern
and submit to its reality.*



1

“Show Your Work”

The Nagging Question: Can We Know God?

“Show your work.” Thus read the directions on countless math and chemistry tests. Now that I teach logic, I make tests with the same directions. What does it mean? It means that you get little credit simply for having the right answer.

Can we know God? Many people ask this question. It seems it would be a simple one to answer. Four one-syllable words, not exactly stretching our vocabulary, a question calling for a simple yes or no answer. I could give you a one-word answer to the question *Can we know God?* My answer is yes.

But we all know that the question only appears to be a simple one. In reality it is complex and provocative, and much is at stake in its answer. Answering it calls for a book (and a lifetime!), not a bumper sticker.

This book is my showing my work, accounting for my affirmative answer to the question *Can we know God?* This book is written for people who are asking the question and, for whatever reason, desperately need more than the one-word response. Askers of such a question include people who want to know God, as well as people who thought they knew him already. All of us at times can desperately want to know him while feeling unsure of whether or how.

A simple answer can for some people be enough. People who know God and live their lives before him with confidence in his knowing them can and should answer the question with a simple yes, without out feeling that they

Knowing . . .

need to demonstrate their claim. The fact that they have not “shown their work”—reasoned their way through definitions and evidence to conclusions—does not discredit their lived experience. The person who knows God would rightly feel it inappropriate to say that their knowledge of him rests on a reasoned argument. This is not because knowing God is irrational, but because what’s rational, on further examination, is different from what we may have expected. That’s one of the things I hope to show in this book.

But people confident about their knowing God still benefit from thinking through the basis for their confidence. It is a rich experience to know God. The same experience is enriched further by knowing how you know. The golfer who gets a hole-in-one enjoys a rich experience. The golfer who gets a hole-in-one as a result of well-honed skill has a deeper one, and one upon which he or she can rely with confident hope for the future.

And people confident about knowing God at times lose that confidence and must go back to the basics. (As do golfers!) Crises of one sort or another prompt us to stop and scrutinize what we thought we were confident of. A death or betrayal, a new learning situation, a shift in the philosophical outlook of our culture—these things and others can move us to ask the question again with fresh urgency. In these times, people who ordinarily say they know God can benefit from someone “showing the work” that supports their answer. People who know God and people who know God but struggle with doubt, I hope, will both find this book helpful.

Another group of people settle for a simple answer to the question, Can we know God? They are people who want to blow off the question. Bumper stickers sometimes so trivialize important issues that they let us off the hook. They let us keep living our lives on the surface, dismissing with a breezy “Whatever!” deeper issues about ourselves and the world. Perhaps as you pick this book up you find yourself in the “Whatever!” category, happy to pass by the question. Why, you might be saying, should I bother to ask it?

But let me tantalize you. I’d like to suggest that, no matter who you are and no matter how breezy your “Whatever!” somewhere a quiet voice within you counterpoints with another question, “What if—?” What if there really is more to life? What if a reality outside the reality I make really has the last word? What if that reality includes a God I am responsible to know? If God exists, and I don’t know him, I am in big trouble. I am like the villain at the end of the James Bond movie: something I didn’t know or plan on finally does me in. If you are a member of the human race, I suggest, the question about God persistently resurfaces in your life. This book, I hope, will heighten your longing to know and help you think it through.

So this book is for people thoughtfully considering the question *Can we know God?* What is at stake in its answer? And what makes it so complex and provocative? Why do we feel the question with rising anxiety?

So much is at stake in the answer because, if people can know God, the next obvious question is what in fact we know about him. If God is, what he is has far-reaching consequences for our lives—who we are, how we live, and what happens after death. Perhaps the simplest way to say it is this: If God is, and he is master of all, then he is master of you and your world. If he isn't, then you are. You might see one or the other alternative as the preferable one. But it's impossible to be indifferent about the choice; it hits just too close to home for comfort.

What makes the question so complex? The question is deceptively simple. It's complex because its simple words have been used to refer to a range of meanings so wide that the alternatives contradict each other. It is impossible to do justice to the question without considering first what *know* means, and what we mean by *God*. Our response to the question will be shaped profoundly by our definition of these terms.

What makes the question *Can we know God?* so provocative? To begin with, there's hardly a consensus on the answer, either for the affirmative or for the negative. And within the camp of those who say yes, no clear consensus can be found concerning the nature of the God we claim to know.

So much seems to challenge an affirmative answer. We're talking, after all, about knowing a being who isn't seen, touched, or heard. If someone reports in our hearing that he or she *did* see, touch, or hear God, we're likely to wonder about the legitimacy of their experience. The philosophical legacy of our times disposes people generally to discredit religious experience in contrast to sense experience, science, and ordinary rationality. In fact, it is quite common these days to discredit all claims to confident knowledge of any sort.

Saying *no* to the question, by the way, requires as much work to be shown as saying *yes*. A general disposition to discredit religious experience rests on just as many answers to other questions. Plus, it is even more difficult to “show the work” if you can't even see what work needs to be shown.

But we can't just blame our difficulties in saying yes to the question on the philosophical legacy of our time. If you will grant for a moment that God exists and that the Bible accurately describes him, then the problem of knowing God is deeper than philosophical. It has to do with something that went wrong that warped our thinking. Human knowing is bent by human rebellion against God. It's like having to show your work on a calculus exam when you've spent your life hiding from math. In addition to talking about what we mean by *God* and what we mean by *know*, the Bible says we also have to consider what we mean by *can*!

Knowing . . .

If you feel as if you'd really rather duck the question, the way you feel isn't just because the question is complex and provocative. It isn't just because it's downright hard to answer. It's also that you're up against some brokenness or bentness in your life, as am I. The bentness makes you want to run from dealing with the question.

Can we simply avoid answering the question? Can we just suspend judgment on whether we can know God, or whether he exists? Many people try to do this. In fact for centuries now philosophers have touted this approach as the road to tolerance, the one way to avoid frightfully damaging religious wars. But the question refuses to go away. We seem connected to God, in much the same way that we are connected to our parents—the family systems therapists call it emotional fusion. Some people try to deny the connectedness, but the very denial reveals how stuck to their parents they are. (This may be why questions relating to God inflame our emotions.)

That's the negative side of it. The positive side of this question's obstinacy is our very human longing for transcendent reality. We may be bent, but the bentness has not snuffed out our sense of glory. We don't know exactly what we long for; that doesn't seem to stop us from longing for something ultimate. Again, if the Bible is right about who God is and who we are, about how we were made by him but because of our bentness do not recognize him, the fact that we all run in different directions propelled by the same longing for transcendence makes perfect sense.

And that is why the question *Can we know God?* persistently resurfaces in our lives. To live with integrity requires that you and I consider it seriously and offer something more than a bumper-sticker response. I offer this book to prompt and aid your thoughtful effort.

For Further Thought and Discussion

Locate yourself, your beliefs and longings, in light of the alternatives presented in this chapter and in the Foreword. Choose the statements that represent what you think. How does what you think compare to what others around you think? Add any explanation you think is important:

- ☐ I have big questions about whether people can access truth.
- ☐ I don't have any such questions.
- ☐ I think asking such questions is dangerous.
- ☐ I think asking such questions is unnecessary.

“Show Your Work”

- ☐ I am not a Christian.
- ☐ I am considering Christianity.
- ☐ I am a Christian, but I have questions and doubts about knowing God.
- ☐ I am a Christian, and I am confident in knowing and being known by God.
- ☐ I don't care about knowing God.
- ☐ I want to know God.
- ☐ I am still growing up on the outside.
- ☐ I am still growing up on the inside.

There are some circumstances in my life that have prompted me to raise questions about knowing truth and knowing God, such as:

Here is what I think right now about *God*:

Here is what I think right now about *knowing*:

Here is what I think right now about *knowing God*:

Identify your questions. List the questions whose answers you feel you are longing to know. List the things you think people you know are longing to know. Do you think these are questions that this book may help you to address?