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Disciplinary Brief

KNOWING IN LOVE

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One of the central theses of Professor O'Donovan's Theology Brief titled *The Sovereignty of Love* is that there is a strong and intimate connection between love and knowledge. This idea, which has a long history in Western thought, implies different interrelated affirmations: Firstly, there is a kind of love -the one which "ensures permanence"- that "allows a sober and affectionate grasp of reality". In other words, love makes possible a form of understanding of reality that cannot be reached by forms of research that not only exclude emotions, but also have no explicit grounding in love. Secondly, "The proximate end of our knowledge is to know in love". Thus, it is not at the end of our research, when we reach a final state of knowledge, that we will find love. Rather, the very aim of knowing requires a kind of transformation or movement oriented to include love to be deep and complete. Finally, given that love offers an irreducible way of knowing reality, truth, which is "the criterion for knowledge, is also the criterion of love".

These are very strong claims that raise an enormous challenge to the way in which we understand and practice scientific research and academic knowledge in general. If we take seriously the affirmation that love is not only a form of knowing reality, but that love – as Professor O'Donovan claimed in a previous version of the Brief – is "the highest way [of knowing] imaginable to human beings", then we need to ask ourselves how this would affect our understanding and practice of science and all academic disciplines, as well as our role at universities. In theological terms, the indissolubility between knowing and loving can be relatively easily understood insofar as knowing God can be conceived as the final and highest level of knowledge, and it cannot be separated from loving God. But, when it comes to thinking the connection between love and knowledge of "the world", in a way that can illuminate what we do and teach at our universities, a further elaboration of this connection is needed.

I would like to contribute here, outlining three dimensions of the relationship between love and knowledge, which can be formulated with the following questions: In what sense does love ground, make possible, or is necessary for knowledge? Can scientific and academic knowledge be a form of love of God and the world? And, what implications and transformations of our epistemic practices would be needed if we take seriously the intimate connection between knowing and loving? I will only be able here to point out some elements for further reflection on these questions.

Love as a Condition for Knowledge

In a very basic and everyday sense, Goethe's famous sentence "We don't get to know anything, but what we love" can be understood as pointing out the fact that knowledge, as any other of our activities, is motivated by passion and a strong personal interest. Scientific and academic research and study, as well as any search for learning, begin with our personal engagement born of wonder, curiosity, need, or even indignation. Our questions are attempts to formulate and address something that, in some sense or another, bothers us because it appears problematic and in need of a solution. Likewise, discovery, the systematic organization of the pieces of reality that require analysis, the creation of new forms of seeing, and reaching a deeper and better understanding of something, always come with a sense of joy and fulfillment. All these emotional components make research possible and constitute the love for what we do as scholars. As teachers, this love is also what we want to transmit and nourish in our students.

But the intimate connection between love and knowledge refers to something more essential: the former makes the latter possible not only as a motivation, but as its foundation. This idea has been specially developed in the tradition of Phenomenology. Scientific investigation starts from what Edmund Husserl (1970) called the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); that is, the world as we experience and live it, before any theorization and explanation, which always come, as abstractions, in a second place. Paraphrasing Marleau Point, we first play on the hills and swim in the river, which are part of our daily life experience and our familiar environment, and only afterwards, based on that form of relationship, emotionally constituted, we go to do geography, biology, or physics (2002, xi). Modern science has claimed to offer a pure, value-free insight into the laws and structures of reality, but this is always an abstraction that presupposes and needs to constantly go back to the lifeworld of daily experience, which determines the basic meaning of reality and what really matters both as humans and as scientists.

Accordingly, having a world in which we are able to find meaning and act in a constellation of interconnected phenomena that we can perceive, understand, and afterwards determine in theories, requires being emotionally open to reality. Martin Heidegger, and with stronger dedication Max Scheler, developed this image of our most basic form of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 2001, 172; Scheler 2010). An untainted epistemological relationship between a pure rational subject, disengaged from its gender, race, culture, emotions, and body, and an independent object is nowhere to be found. Intentionality, that is, the basic reference of our thought to objects, is first an emotional disposition (*Befindlinchkeit* in the terms of Heidegger) that makes it possible to grasp aspects of reality to which otherwise we would be blind: a dangerous situation, an astonishing regularity, a marvelous behavior in nature. Our basic form of understanding reality is thus emotionally and pragmatically shaped, and without it, no further analytical and systematic theorization is ever possible.

In a complementary philosophical endeavor, the dichotomy between facts and values, which seemed an unavoidable presupposition of modern science, has been strongly criticized in analytic philosophy (Putnam 1981). It is itself based on a set of values, such as objectivity, respect for reason and evidence, and

autonomy of thought against blind authority. All facts are the result of interpretations made possible by a certain set of concepts and procedures that respond to the interests, needs, and historical developments of a specific community of inquiry. They are not simply there waiting to be “objectively” grasped, but are rather grasped in a certain way and from a certain perspective, thanks to values such as objectivity and reasonableness, and principles that share an aesthetic component, such as simplicity and elegance. So, all rational inquiry requires value structures and aesthetic principles, instead of being a form in which we aseptically get rid of them.

But showing that our emotional disposition to reality makes it possible to find meaning in the world, and that rational research is based on values and emotionally loaded principles, is not yet a justification of the foundational role of love (not of the emotional in general) in knowledge. As Professor O’Donovan presents in this text, since Plato, *eros* has been conceived as the origin and motivating force of the epistemological quest that moves from the love of beauty towards universal wisdom. But modern science has gradually departed from the ideal of wisdom, moving towards that of specialized knowledge based on the mathematization of the world, causal explanation, experimentation, and predictive outcomes. Is there still something in our way of understanding knowledge that can be related to love?

Can Scientific Knowledge be a Form of Love?

We may begin by pointing out that knowledge is a form of discovery of “other” (objects, nature, a process, people, society, etc.) that demands to be appropriately understood; that is, grasped as “it is,” without deformation or falsification. Love implies a similar movement toward the other, based on attention, care, and respect for their particularities. In a certain way, this attention, care, and respect for the other can be related to the relation of c*orrespondence* between what we believe or claim about the world and the way the world is, which has traditionally been defined as truth (*adaequatio res et intelectum*). We cannot explore here the intricacies and criticisms of the traditional theory of truth as correspondence. Let us only point out that even if both love and knowledge share this openness and attention to the particularities of others, they do it in very different ways.

The openness of knowledge aims at extracting something from its objects: their structure, essence, inner laws, constitution, etc. Thus, the attention and respect for particularities are not ends in themselves, but means to the elaboration of theories “that work” because they satisfy our epistemic criteria, can be experimentally verified, and (in many sciences) can be pragmatically applied. Galileo’s famous definition of experimentation as a sort of trial on nature clearly shows this dominating character of scientific research. In Kant’s words, the success of empirical sciences has come not because “Reason” has tried to be taught by nature, kindly and receptively listening to what it has to say, but because scientists have acted as “an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them” (Kant 1999, B xiii).

Control and domination of “its object” are never the ends of love. On the contrary, love nourishes and sustains the loved for her own sake, in freedom and unconditional promotion of what is good for her.

Additionally, love is self-giving to the point that “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends”(Jn 15:13); whereas knowledge is self-centered to the point that its methods and procedures filter, organize, and determine reality from a certain perspective, abstracting from the inexhaustible richness of reality what the basic concepts of a discipline regard as central and basic. Consequently, “to know in love,” as Professor O’Donovan suggests is the immediate aim of knowledge, is inherently problematic for modern science.

In his historical work on the images of nature in Western thought, Pierre Hadot has carefully explored the dominating attitude of modern science, which originated long before the scientific revolution of the Seventeenth Century, identifying it with the image of Prometheus. It “consists of using technical procedures to tear Nature’s “secrets” from her in order to dominate and exploit her” (Hadot 2006, 101). This Promethean attitude contrasts with another foundational image in Western intellectual life, that of Orpheus. This attitude, which has also motivated diverse intellectual movements, finds in perception, poetic discourse, and the pictorial arts the appropriate methods to understand nature. For the orphic attitude, the poet is the true interpreter of nature, since it was imagined acting like a poet, “and that what nature produces is a poem” (Hadot 2006, 201).

However, the Promethean attitude does not necessarily exclude all relationships of love. As it has been well studied, the founders of modern science were moved to study nature by the desire to know and appreciate the work and wonders of its Creator. Thus, for example, Kepler wrote in his *Astronomia Nova*: “The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony which has been imposed on it by God and which He revealed to us in the language of mathematics.” Therefore, for him, “Since we astronomers are priests of the Most High God with respect to the book of nature, it behooves us that we do not aim at the glory of our own spirit, but above everything else at the glory of God” (Letter to Herwart von Hohnenburg, 26th March 1598).

Even more, the belief in a created natural order, in opposition to the Greek idea of an eternal cosmos that did not require empirical investigation, was a foundational element of modern science. The origin of the basic presuppositions of science, such as the uniformity and regularity of the universe, and its intelligibility, has also been traced to the belief in a good and loving creator (Brooke 1991, 19).

Nonetheless, the gradual development of empirical sciences has led to what is called “naturalism.” This is the position according to which, in order to explain the universe, only “natural explanations” count. The universe is conceived as a closed system of physical causes and therefore no reference to a divine will, intelligence, purpose, or agency is needed. In a stronger (but quite common) sense, this means that what is real is that which can be scientifically explained. Causal explanation of physical phenomena, mathematical calculation, and experimental confirmation would thus set the limits of reality. Moreover, a corollary of naturalism is that neither love nor any human appreciation of value or meaning legitimately belong to the way things in the world really are. These emotions are human reactions to a reality devoid of intrinsic meaning and value, emotions that lack any cognitive value.

Of course, natural sciences do not necessarily require adopting a naturalist stance. This is rather an extra-scientific thesis, insofar as it is not the result of empirical investigation, but a metaphysical presupposition that directs research in a certain direction and predisposes a particular outlook on reality. For those who assume it, the famous exclamation of physicist Steven Weinberg will surely be appealing: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless” (1977, 154).

On the opposite side, the claim that it is possible and necessary to know the world in love not only challenges naturalism but also sets limits to scientific knowledge. To really make this actual in our epistemic and academic practices, a deep transformation is needed. This requires integrating the Promethean and the Orphic attitudes in a more integral understanding of reality.

Toward a Loving Science

What changes would be necessary in science to know in love? To raise the question for further collaborative reflection is the first step. Then different paths may be followed. One is that of a “Christian” or, more broadly speaking, “Theistic” science. If God creates and sustains the world in love, and thus divine love is the ground of all beings, then it is also love that makes it possible to discover and appropriately understand the basic nature of reality. Reality’s way of being, both as a whole and regarding specific phenomena, requires love to be grasped. What methods and producers can help to achieve such a deep understanding in each discipline? How can love work as an epistemic principle to evaluate theories? What kind of scientific communities would emerge following this aspiration? These questions indicate an agenda for this path, which, however, is not easy to envision in contemporary terms. Certainly, awe and wonder towards nature as expressing God’s creative love may be conceived as a form of love in science. But they are not enough for making love a constitutive part of research, that is, an element which directly contributes to the production of knowledge. In a challenging book which inverts the classic Kantian theme of putting religion within the bounds of reason, Nicholas Wolterstorff suggested that, for the sake of intellectual integrity, Christian (and other theistic) scholars should use their fundamental religious beliefs as “control beliefs”. Those are the beliefs that we need in order to determine “what constitutes an acceptable *sort* of theory”. (1984, 67) These beliefs work as criteria to evaluate the construction of theories, and include, for example, logical consistency, simplicity, and other aesthetic concepts to which we referred before. They are not the result of empirical investigation but rather make it possible.

Could love work as a control belief for Christian and other theistic scholars? If so, this does not mean that “acceptable” scientific theories should be expected to be already contained in religious beliefs or texts, or that science and academic research should renounce their intellectual freedom and the power to self-critique and the critique of other beliefs. Rather, it means that intellectual freedom and rational critique can stand on the commitment to care, respect and the promotion of the good of others, including nature, which characterizes love. Assuming love as an epistemic criterion has nothing to do with dogmatism or blind obedience. On the contrary, it opens up the space to build rational inquiry as the constant search for that which grounds, forms and animates reality on all its levels and complexities, constantly challenging

our theories and paradigms, inviting us to humbly move beyond. The very possibility of progress and new discovery *are given* together with the inexhaustible richness of reality, so that a loving science may become a celebration of the gift of being.

A second path does not begin from a theistic commitment, but rather from the critical examination of modern science. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002) examined the deep connections between it and the domination of nature and other human beings. By reducing the qualitative differences of the world into quantifiable data, the possibility of including meaning as a fundamental dimension of reality was lost, and the way for establishing power and control as the basic operations of science was set. Modern reason, which aimed to contribute to freedom and human flourishing, turned into an instrument of dominion. Could qualitative difference, lived experience, and the dimension of meaning be recovered in scientific research and methods? Might care and respect for nature replace control and domination both as methodological requirements and as criteria for the evaluation of theories? What form would a science committed to care and respect for nature take? These are some key questions that could help search for this path.

There are, of course, other possible avenues to explore the possibilities for science to know in love. Here, I have just attempted to explore what concrete forms love should and could take in science. The conversation is open.

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