



Knowledge: Domination or Genuine Service?

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Francis Bacon is known for equating knowledge and power. Today, one might interpret his idea of knowledge as an electronic club to manipulate others. In this essay, I examine one's relation to knowledge in terms of a receptivity that might be described as service. Whether one actually treats another in harmony with relation to knowledge remains, of course, a matter of one's free will. Nevertheless, at the level of being, the person is more fittingly described as a humble servant of the truth and of one another rather than as a domineering figure seeking to manipulate.

INTRODUCTION

Francis Bacon (1561–1626), an enlightenment figure of the seventeenth century, is known for equating knowledge and power.¹ In today's terms, one might interpret his idea of knowledge as an electronic club to manipulate another and to beat him into submission. But one might ask, is the Baconian concept of equating knowledge and power even valid? One without medical knowledge, for example, is indebted to one who has it; but, does that knowledge *essentially consist* of the doctor's *contrivance over* the patient? If *power* adequately describes the very essence of knowing, then it suggests a stance of control over the known object. *In its very acquisition*, is knowing an object dominating or manipulating it? Or, rather, does the knower let that object reveal itself?

In this essay, I focus upon the human person's relation to knowledge. A proper understanding of that relation reveals that, at the ontological level, the human person is a beholder of truth, and thus, a humble servant of it and not a domineering figure who manipulates others. Whether one actually treats others in harmony with one's relation to knowledge remains, of course, a matter of the person's own free will. Nevertheless, at the level of being, I argue that the very acquisition of knowledge demands receptivity to the truth of the thing revealed. By implication, one's relation to another person is likewise characterized by receptivity rather than by domination.

In order to describe the human person's receptivity to truth and, therefore, to others, my first step is to consider briefly one's relation to knowledge. I highlight the scholastic notion of knowledge as a relationship between the knower and the thing known. In this relation, the person *takes in* the form of the intelligible object. One's *taking in*, or *receiving of* reality

requires the contemplative act of beholding. Beholding the thing known necessitates receptivity precisely because the knower *lets* the object *be* what it is rather than forcing it to be what it is not. Because the knowing relationship is, necessarily, one of receptivity so described, one's relation with others is best characterized as a contemplative receiving rather than as a manipulative domination of the other.

KNOWLEDGE: A RELATION BETWEEN THE KNOWER AND THE THING KNOWN

Given the vast amount of literature on the subject of knowledge as a relation, I simply offer a sketch of the human person's relationship to the object known, which suffices to illustrate my present claim.² In order to articulate the ontological depth of the human knower, I first highlight the fact that, between the person and the thing known, there exists a relationship.³ Focusing upon the relation between knower and known is vital to my argument because it highlights the fact that a "being's ability to know . . . is its ability to transcend its own delimitations, the ability to step out of its own identity and to have 'also the form of the other being.'"⁴ It is precisely this ability of transcending oneself that requires, as I argue, a contemplative *letting be* of truth at the core of the human person.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, "Knowledge takes place (*contingit*) according to the mode of the knower."⁵ This mode, or way of human knowing, is through the senses.⁶ But further, the object known has some kind of affinity to—or reality in—each person because knowing something entails that "its likeness is in the one who knows."⁷ Thus, while the person's relation with the thing known begins through the senses, one *takes in* the object such that its likeness resides in oneself. Indeed, the "idea of the thing known is in the knower."⁸ The relation between the knower and the object known, then, is a relation of union.

One might ask, *how* does the likeness of something dwell within the knower? Precisely, what is it to which the knower unites? St. Thomas answers that the knower unites to the form of the thing known; it is the form of the object that abides in the knower.⁹ He explains that, because the human person is an intelligent, rational creature, he is "naturally adapted" to take in the form of the thing known.¹⁰

Twentieth century philosopher, Josef Pieper, articulates the relation between the knower and the thing known. To know means, "to have the forms of other things, to be the other, to be identical with the other, to be all things. To know is to become another."¹¹ The relation between the knower and the thing known, then, is profoundly intimate; the knower "becomes" the thing known through union with the form.¹²

Although more could be said regarding knowledge, it suffices to characterize it as the assimilation of the knower with the object known by means of the form.¹³ To expound upon the unique dimension of this relation will ultimately help qualify *how* one's relation to knowledge—and hence, to another person—may be understood as *service*.

KNOWING THE OBJECT

If knowledge is a relation of union between the knower and the object known, does one control or dominate the form by somehow trying to force it to be what one wants it to be? Or, rather, does the form itself, by being known, reveal something to which the knower must humbly submit? Granted that the knower may mistake one thing for another, can he, at any time, *impose* whatever form he wants upon the thing known?¹⁴ Does that change the reality of the thing known? Does it alter its form? Would it not be a rather preposterous and impossible task? Even though a person might mistake one thing for another, does that error *change* the known object in its own being? Does knowing even *occur* if the knower somehow tries to manipulate an object to be that which he desires?

In knowing, is it not rather the case that the knower stands back from himself, so to speak, and allows the mystery of the reality he beholds to reveal itself to him? Is this *standing back* an adequate characterization of the knower's relation to, or assimilation of, the form of the intelligible object? Does it not seem to suggest *distance* into a relation I have just described as *intimate*?

These questions already anticipate my description of the relation between the knower and the object known. My task, then, is to show why it is impossible for the knower to dominate the object by imposing his own form upon it. Showing this impossibility will reveal that the “distance” of the knower from the known is actually a “prerequisite” for the intimate knowing of the form.¹⁵ Analyzing the relation between knower and thing known, then, requires the following steps.

First, I explain the knower's abstraction of the form in terms of *letting* the object reveal itself. Second, I show that letting the object reveal itself suggests that the human person contemplates reality. Third, I argue that, if the person beholds reality by letting it manifest itself, then he *serves*—rather than *dominates*—the thing known. Serving reality by letting the object reveal itself requires humility on the part of the knower. In sum, the knower's “service” of reality by beholding it places *distance* at the very inception of the knowing process, for it is precisely that act of standing back which makes possible the beholder's intimacy with the form of the object known.

KNOWLEDGE AS A “LETTING BE”

I have said that the knower knows the object through union with its form. I might ask, then, *how* does the knower abstract the form? How does that union occur? On one hand, it seems unlikely that *any* manner of assimilation would occur if a person imposes whatever form he chooses. On the other hand, how does his intimate union with the form take place without *distance*, that the very thing might be known? To answer how the person relates to the form of the object known, I further ponder Thomas’ description of the knowing relationship.

Thomas explains the assimilation between the knower and the thing known in two ways: either the person knows things “in themselves, or in their own nature.”¹⁶ On either account, the active power of the human intellect, the agent intellect, renders intelligible “forms that it abstracts from images.”¹⁷ How are these forms rendered intelligible?

The knower lets the intelligible object reveal itself and this *letting* happens when, according to Thomas, the person knows the object.¹⁸ In order for the knower to know the “forms that it abstracts from images,” then, the knower must receive the object’s form by *letting* it reveal itself.¹⁹

Another way of articulating the intrinsic characteristic of *letting* an object reveal itself is to recall Pieper’s notion of one’s ability to know as *transcending*, or rising above oneself.²⁰ Pieper’s use of the term, *transcend*, signifies how the knower *lets* the form of the object be: he rises above “his own delimitations” and transcends himself by taking in “the form of the other being.”²¹

Thus, in the very act of knowing an object, one necessarily has to *let* something happen. Yet, this *letting* is not a directly willed intention. Rather, it is intrinsic to the nature of knowing, as such. One might characterize the relation between knower and thing known, then, precisely as a *letting be*. Unless the knower *lets* the form *be* as he abstracts it from images, knowledge does not take place. If such is the case, what does the aspect of *letting be*, or *transcending*, indicate about the human person?

TRANSCENDENCE INDICATES THE KNOWER’S CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION

To speak of the knower as one who transcends himself by letting the form of the intelligible object reveal itself is to suggest that the person is a beholder, or contemplator.²² When the knower takes in the form of the object known, he contemplates it as a reality that can never be fully explained, calculated, or analyzed. Indeed, it appears to him as a revelation of the mystery of being. By its very existence, the known object “reveals” to the

knower something of the inexhaustibility of being and the person, struck by such plenitude, contemplates. Indeed, the very nature of reality calls for its manifestation to the knower in the first place.

Pieper elucidates the concept of beholding as an *effortless contemplation*.²³ I argue that “effortless contemplation” not only summarizes knowing as, paradoxically, a surrender to the form of the known object, but also, it implies that the thing known has an exuberance, or plenitude, which is made known to the knower.

Pieper explains that to *contemplate* means to: “open one’s eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one’s vision, and the things seen enter us, so to speak, without calling for any effort or strain on our part to possess them.”²⁴ To “open one’s eyes receptively” to the world signifies the knower’s involuntary beholding of reality aside from any directly willed intention.²⁵ Certainly, one may choose to turn away from an object that lies before one’s eyes; but, by receiving whatever presents itself to one’s field of vision, the person *is* somehow affected by it; one contemplates it whether or not one wills to do so.

Indeed, the forms of the objects seen “enter us” and they do so without “any effort or strain on our part to possess them.”²⁶ In other words, the person takes in the thing known by beholding it; the object reveals itself to the person and he *lets* it do so, necessarily, without “any effort” on his part. Thus, Pieper shows that, without an “effortless contemplation” of the intelligible object, the person simply does not know its form. What does “effortless contemplation” signify for the knowing relation?

CONTEMPLATION IS ESSENTIAL TO KNOWING

I have suggested that, without the knower’s effortless contemplation, he cannot receive the form of the intelligible object. Pieper’s description of contemplation shows that, should one impose a form upon the thing known, he violates knowing itself because the form *must* effortlessly enter the contemplator for knowing to occur.

The human knower *cannot* control or dominate the thing known by forcing whatever form he wants upon it; if he does not behold the thing known as it is in itself—if he does not surrender to it—then he does not know it. Rather than imposing a form upon the object known, then, the person *necessarily* allows the form of the intelligible object to enter freely, “without calling for any effort or strain . . . to possess” it.²⁷ By his very knowing of the form, the person freely receives it.

To receive the form of the object known means that the beholder becomes a knower. Granted, one might refuse to accept the truth of the thing known (such as a medical diagnosis). At the same time, it is quite im-

possible to know by dominating, controlling, or even rejecting the thing known; one can only know by contemplating and by surrendering to the reality that reveals itself because only thus does the person unite with the form. Knowledge, therefore, entails humility.

CONTEMPLATIVE BEHOLDING DESCRIBES THE PERSON AS A SERVANT

I have shown that, in being known, reality strikes the person such that he beholds it. One might posit that the very act of contemplating reality might be described as “service.” Why might *beholding* indicate *service*? As I have indicated, in beholding an intelligible object, the knower lets it reveal itself. Because he does not—and indeed, he *cannot*—force or impose a form upon the intelligible object, he does not control it. Rather, *being* struck and *being* affected by the object known manifest service, or surrender precisely because the person *beholds* rather than *imposes*; he *takes in*, rather than *intrudes upon*; he *lets reality be* rather than *dictating what it is*.

Beholding indicates service, then, in the sense that the knower lets the reality known manifest itself. In the very act of taking in the form, the person “serves” the form with that service which demands his effortless contemplation. Far from being an overpowering dominator, knowing requires one’s “effortless contemplation” of the object known. *Beholding* indicates *service* by letting reality manifest itself.

“BEHOLDING” HOLDS INTACT THE KNOWING RELATION

If the notion of service inheres in knowing, then explaining the beholder as one who serves reality helps us see that, in the very act of transcending oneself by taking in the form of the intelligible object, the person exemplifies *humility* rather than dominance. How is this so? Knowing requires surrendering precisely because the person effortlessly receives the form of the object in an involuntary beholding. Knowing is simply *letting* the actual reality of the object *be* rather than vainly attempting to control it.

Granted that the knower exemplifies humility in “serving” the reality of the intelligible object, I claim that his serving must perdure throughout the knowing relation or else he ceases to know. Thus, “serving” is *necessarily* essential to knowledge. Serving reality holds intact the knowing relation because even the simplest object reveals something of the richness of being. Indeed, a thing is much more than what it appears to be at first glance and this plenitude is *served* in the sense that the knower beholds it as it *is*.

The relation between knower and thing known unavoidably points to one's ability to transcend oneself precisely because, in order to know, the beholder serves the form of the thing known. Again, serving reality by letting it reveal itself requires the knower to stand back from himself and behold reality, rather than aggressively seeking to overpower it.

WHY BEHOLDING ADMITS OF INTIMACY AND DISTANCE IN THE KNOWING RELATIONSHIP

I began my study by showing that the relation between the knower and the thing known is so intimate that the knower, without losing his own identity, actually "becomes" the thing known through taking in its form. Yet, I have also suggested that distance, or standing back, likewise inheres in this intimate relationship for the knower to be able to behold the form in the first place. It remains, then, to indicate why beholding requires both intimacy and distance in the knowing relationship. Thus, one might ask, how are intimacy and distance united in the knowing relation? Why is it simply not possible for knowing to occur unless there is both intimacy and distance in this single relation between the knower and the thing known?

As I have shown, knowing cannot take place without beholding because the person must receive the form of the thing known. Further, I have indicated that the beholder effortlessly contemplates reality by letting the object known reveal itself. Since knowing cannot occur without letting reality reveal itself, the knower retains some distance from the thing known, which is necessary for contemplation to occur.

The act of knowing is at once both distant and intimate. By transcending oneself in knowing the form (intimacy), the person serves the form by letting it be (distance). Because the knower becomes one with the object known by letting it be what it is, his one act of knowing is both intimate and distant. In order for the human person to know, then, he must contemplate reality and not control or manipulate it; indeed, it is this very act of contemplation by which knowing reveals the humility of serving.

KNOWLEDGE SIGNIFIES THE PERSON AS A SERVANT

How does knowledge constitute the human person as servant? While I have argued that the person serves reality by letting it be what it is, analogously, one might claim that the person likewise serves another by letting the other reveal who he is. To offer a concrete illustration of the person manifested as servant, one has no better model than the Virgin of Nazareth, who says, "let it be."²⁸

In the Gospel according to St. Luke, one reads, “Let it be done to me according to your word.”²⁹ With this verse, one has the model of a person who *lets* reality manifest itself to her; consequently, she exemplifies the perfect service of it.³⁰ Because Mary acts in this way, she is not only *maid-servant*, or *handmaid*, but also *mother*; she mothers the Reality she serves by completely taking It [Him] into her being most perfectly on all counts: physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

By letting Reality reveal Himself, Mary serves Him; thus, she offers a preeminent example of intimacy and distance in the knowing relationship. By beholding Reality, she serves Him (distance) and she becomes intimately united with Reality Himself through her divine motherhood. Again, Mary serves Reality so perfectly that she becomes one with Him who, in this union, literally abides within her in the Flesh.

Mary’s perfect, effortless contemplation of Reality, therefore, shows service in the knowing relationship; each human person may likewise be described as *servant*. The Virgin Mary’s service toward Reality reveals that *beholding* results in a preeminent union of knower and Known by which she becomes not only Mother of God—but also, in time, Mother of the human race.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that, if knowledge is a relation between the knower and the thing known by which one assimilates the form, then this relation, which is at once both intimate and distant, involves beholding, or contemplating. Further, I have also suggested that contemplating the object known necessarily requires “service” in the very act of letting reality manifest itself. Moreover, I have described this *beholding* as *service* because one lets the object known reveal itself, rather than attempting to control or dominate it. Letting reality reveal itself requires standing back, rather than dominating the object known.

Having described knowing as a form of “service,” one may likewise explain one’s relation to another person as humble service. Mutual knowing means continually serving reality, for knowing is always a new event, which is nourished by the inexhaustibility of the other’s being. If the inherent character of knowledge is service, then, and, if this service requires beholding, which inheres in the very nature of what it means to know, then claiming that knowledge signifies dominance or power over another violates the very nature of knowing. While knowing necessarily entails serving reality by letting it be, one’s relation to another likewise requires a contemplative stance of beholding; thus, one might characterize the human person as *servant*.

In sum, at its ontological core, *knowledge* is a *contemplative beholding of the truth*. Consequently, one's relation to another person is appropriately characterized not as *dominance*, but rather, as *service*. The form of that "service," which is directed toward another, involves letting the other be who he is, in and of himself. Portraying *knowledge* as *letting be*, describes the human person as a servant of truth, for he embraces the truth as it reveals itself to be.

Notes

1. Francis Bacon, *Magna Instauration* [*The Great Instauration*] in *Essays, Advancement of Learning, New Atlantis, and Other Pieces*, ed., Richard Foster Jones (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1937), 264; Bacon, *Novum Organum* in *Advancement of Learning, Novum Organum, New Atlantis*, vol. 30, *Great Books of the Western World*, ed., Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), I, 3. Hobbes, secretary for a short time to Bacon, perhaps speaks even more plainly on knowledge as a means to acquire power. In *Leviathan*, he refers to power as a "means to obtain some future apparent good." Further, Hobbes seems to suggest that the knowledge of science is power because it provides us with the necessary "means." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* in 'The Prince,' by Nicolo Machiavelli and 'Leviathan,' by Thomas Hobbes, vol. 23, *Great Books of the Western World*, ed., Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), chap. 10. In a future work, one might elaborate more fully upon the notion of knowledge and power as understood by both authors.

2. For a sampling of texts that refer to knowledge as a relation, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), I, 12, 9; I, 14, 1. Henceforth, this work will be cited, ST. For additional works, see also: Josef Pieper, "The Truth of All Things" in *Living the Truth* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1989), especially p. 37–46; Pieper, "Reality and the Good," in *Living the Truth*, especially chapters one, three, and seven. Henceforth, citations from these two essays by Pieper will be abbreviated with their titles.

3. For the Thomistic understanding of the intellect's relationship to "forms that are abstracted from the senses," see the following text as an example. Aquinas, *Faith, Reason, and Theology: Questions I–IV of his Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius*, trans., Armand Maurer (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), I, 2. Henceforth, this work will be cited, *Faith Reason and Theology*.

4. Pieper, "The Truth of All Things," 37.

5. "Cognitio enim contingit secundum quod cognitum est in cognoscente." Thomae de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae* (Torino, Italy: Edizioni San Paolo, 1999), I, 12, 4. Henceforth, this work shall be abbreviated with its full Latin title, *Summa*

Theologiae. For an additional example, see *Summa Theologiae*, I, 12, 11: “modus cognitionis sequitur modum naturae rei cognoscentis [the mode of knowledge follows the mode of the nature of the knower.]”

6. Thomas often mentions that knowledge begins in the senses. See, for example, the following: ST. I, 12, 12; I, 84, 6; *Faith Reason and Theology*, I, 3; *The Division and Methods of the Sciences: Questions V and VI of his Commentary on the “De Trinitate” of Boethius*, trans., Armand Maurer (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), VI, 2. Henceforth, the last work will be cited as *Division and Methods*.

7. “Sic enim cognoscitur unumquodque, secundum quod similitudo eius est in cognoscente.” *Summa Theologiae*, I, 12, 9.

8. ST. I, 14, 1.

9. Aquinas, *Faith Reason and Theology*, I, 2.

10. ST. I, 14, 1.

11. Pieper, “Reality and the Good,” 133.

12. Incidentally, because of this tight bond between the knower and the thing known, we are to exercise great vigilance over what we see, hear, and read, as the Catholic spiritual tradition continually exhorts us.

13. In this work, I speak of knowledge, or the knower’s assimilation with the form of the object known, which, according to Thomas, is simple apprehension. He speaks of simple apprehension as the first moment of knowledge, by which one abstracts the form from the thing known. For example, he explains that, “Knowledge begins with apprehension but it ends with judgment, for it is there that knowledge is completed.” In this essay, then, I speak of the beginning of knowledge, rather than its termination. If the beginning of knowledge shows that “service” of which I speak, an ensuing discussion elsewhere might also apply it to judgment, which completes the act of knowledge. *Faith Reason and Theology*, I, 2; *Division and Methods*, VI, 2; ST. II-II, 173, 2.

Since Thomas distinguishes between speculative and practical knowledge, one may object to my discussion of this topic based upon the claim that Bacon’s description of knowledge as power is more akin to what Thomas calls practical knowledge, while in this essay, it seems as if I refer solely to speculative knowledge. To such an objection, I would reply that, although both speculative and practical knowledge have different ends, in either case, knowledge *per se* requires a relationship of union with the thing known. It is upon this principle that I shall depend, while at the same time, I acknowledge that an adequate answer would require further discussion elsewhere. *Division and Methods*, V, 1.

14. In this sentence, “at any time” implies that either in the initial act of apprehension, or in the final act of judgment, the knower cannot force, or impose the form upon the object. See Aquinas, *Division and Method*, VI, 2. In order to maintain that this is *exactly* what Bacon meant by his dictum, *knowledge is power*, requires comprehensive development elsewhere. Having noted the difficulty with the claim, I show in this essay its extremeness in light of the fact that the knower assimilates the object known by taking in the form.

15. Both intimacy and distance are so closely connected that it is as if they were two different sides of the same coin. One might posit that distance “precedes” the intimate knowing because one first has to *stand back* in order to *take in* the form. One might compare it to knowing a piece of art, such as a work by Oscar-Claude Monet (1840–1926). Especially given his impressionism, one needs to stand back to see it clearly, while another form of knowledge results from an up-close examination.

16. ST. I, 12, 9.

17. Aquinas, *Faith Reason and Theology*, I, 3.

18. ST. I, 12, 9.

19. Aquinas, *Faith Reason and Theology*, I, 3.

20. Pieper, “The Truth of All Things,” 37.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans., Alexander Dru (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1998), 7.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Aloisius Gramatica, Curavit, *Biblorum Sacrorum, Iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, Nova Editio (Citta del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1913), Lk. 1:38.

29. “Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum” (Lk. 1:38).

30. Some might object to the claim that the beholder takes in reality involuntarily since, in this example, Mary freely consents to contemplating, or taking in the Divine Reality, in a most perfect way. I respond that Mary did *voluntarily* behold the Divine Reality in serving it by pronouncing her fiat. But, in the first instance, upon hearing the messenger’s words, Mary serves the reality of the message presented to her with that reverence that speaks of being captivated by the plenitude of being, which involuntarily entralls us. She ponders in her heart what sort of greeting she has just heard (Luke 1:29). Thus, her verbal, “let it be,” serves to articulate that resounding, interior *letting be* already present.