

Love is the Last Word: Aldous Huxley on Knowledge vs. Understanding and the by Maria Popova

To understand anything — another person’s experience of reality, another fundamental law of physics — is to restructure our existing knowledge, shifting and broadening our prior frames of reference to accommodate a new awareness. And yet we have a habit of confusing our knowledge — which is always limited and incomplete: a model of the cathedral of reality, built from primary-colored blocks of fact — with the actuality of things; we have a habit of mistaking the model for the thing itself, mistaking our partial awareness for a totality of understanding. Thoreau recognized this when he contemplated our blinding preconceptions and lamented that “we hear and apprehend only what we already half know.”

Generations after Thoreau and generations before neuroscience began illuminating the blind spots of consciousness, Aldous Huxley (July, 26 1894–November 22, 1963) explored this eternal confusion of concepts in “Knowledge and Understanding” — one of the twenty-six uncommonly insightful essays collected in *The Divine Within: Selected Writings on Enlightenment* (public library).

Aldous Huxley

Huxley writes:

Knowledge is acquired when we succeed in fitting a new experience into the system of concepts based upon our old experiences. Understanding comes when we liberate ourselves from the old and so make possible a direct, unmediated contact with the new, the mystery, moment by moment, of our existence.

Because the units of knowledge are concepts, and concepts can be conveyed and transmitted in words and symbols, knowledge itself can be passed between persons. Understanding, on the other hand, is intimate and subjective, not a conceptual container but an aura of immediacy cast upon an experience — which means it cannot be transmitted and transacted like knowledge. Our forebears devised ways of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next — in words and symbols, in stories and equations — which ensured the survival of our species by preserving and passing down the results of experience. But knowing the results of an experience is not the same as understanding the experience itself. Complicating the matter is the added subtlety that we may understand the words and symbols by which we tell each other about our experience, but still miss the immediacy of the reality those concepts are intended to convey. Huxley writes:

Understanding is not conceptual, and therefore cannot be passed on. It is an immediate experience, and immediate experience can only be talked about (very inadequately), never shared. Nobody can actually feel another's pain or grief, another's love or joy or hunger. And similarly nobody can experience another's understanding of a given event or situation... We must always remember that knowledge of understanding is not the same thing as the understanding, which is the raw material of that knowledge. It is as different from understanding as the doctor's prescription for penicillin is different from penicillin.

Understanding is not inherited, nor can it be laboriously acquired. It is something which, when circumstances are favorable, comes to us, so to say, of its own accord. All of us are knowers, all the time; it is only occasionally and in spite of ourselves that we understand the mystery of given reality.

Art by Dorothy Lathrop, 1922. (Available as a print.)

A century before Huxley, William James listed ineffability as the first of the four features of mystical experiences. But in some sense, all experience is ultimately mystical, for experience can only be understood in its immediacy and not known as a concept. (Half a century after Huxley's generation swung open the doors of perception beyond concept with their psychedelic inquiries into the mysteries and mechanics of consciousness — and swung shut the scientific establishment's openness to serious clinical research into the field with their unprotocoled playhouse of recreational neurochemistry — science is finally documenting the ineffable contact with raw reality as the primary payoff, both clinical and existential, of psychoactive substances.)

At the heart of Huxley's essay is the observation that a great deal of human suffering stems from our tendency to mistake conceptual knowledge for understanding, "homemade concepts for given reality." Such suffering can therefore be allayed by replacing the confusion with clarity — with a total awareness of reality, unfiltered by the "meaningless pseudoknowledge" that arises from our reflexive and all too human habits of "over-simplification, over-generalization, and over-abstraction."

Such total awareness, Huxley observes, can produce an initial wave of panic at the two elemental facts it reveals: that we are "profoundly ignorant" — that is, forever lacking complete knowledge of reality; and that we are "impotent to the point of helplessness" — that is, what we are (which we call personality) and what we do (which we call choice) are merely the life of the universe living itself through us. (Anyone able to think calmly, deeply, and undefensively about free will will readily recognize this.)

Art by Margaret C. Cook from a rare 1913 edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. (Available as a print)

And yet beyond the initial wave of panic lies a profound and fathomless sea of serenity — a buoyant peacefulness and gladsome accord with the universe, available upon surrender to this total awareness, upon the release of the narrative enterprise, the identity-intoxication, the conditioned reflex we call a self.

Huxley writes:

This discovery may seem at first rather humiliating and even depressing. But if I wholeheartedly accept them, the facts become a source of peace, a reason for serenity and cheerfulness.

[...]

In my ignorance I am sure that I am eternally I. This conviction is rooted in emotionally charged memory. Only when, in the words of St. John of the Cross, the memory has been emptied, can I escape from the sense of my watertight separateness and so prepare myself for the understanding, moment by moment, of reality on all its levels. But the memory cannot be emptied by an act of will, or by systematic discipline or by concentration — even by concentration on the idea of emptiness. It can be emptied only by total awareness. Thus, if I am aware of my distractions — which are mostly emotionally charged memories or fantasies based upon such memories — the mental whirligig will automatically come to a stop and the memory will be emptied, at least for a moment or two. Again, if I become totally aware of my envy, my resentment, my uncharitableness, these feelings will be replaced, during the time of my awareness, by a more realistic reaction to the events taking place around me. My awareness, of course, must be uncontaminated by approval or condemnation. Value judgments are conditioned, verbalized reactions to primary reactions. Total awareness is a primary, choiceless, impartial response to the present situation as a whole.

Art by Margaret C. Cook for Leaves of Grass. (Available as a print.)

Huxley notes that all of the world's great spiritual traditions and all the celebrated mystics have attempted to articulate this total awareness, to transmit it to other consciousnesses in the vessel of concepts — concepts destined to enter other consciousnesses via the primary portal of common sense, and destined therefore to be reflexively rejected. In consonance with Carl Sagan's admonition that common sense blinds us to the reality of the universe and Vladimir Nabokov's admonition that it blunts our sense of wonder, Huxley writes:

Common sense is not based on total awareness; it is a product of convention, or organized memories of other people's words, of personal experiences limited by passion and value judgments, of hallowed notions and naked self-interest. Total awareness opens the way to understanding, and when any given situation is understood, the nature of all reality is made manifest, and the nonsensical utterances of the mystics are seen to be true, or at least as nearly true as it is possible for a verbal expression of the ineffable to be. One in all and all in One; samsara and nirvana are the same; multiplicity is unity, and unity is not so much one as not-two; all things are void, and yet all things are the Dharma — Body of the Buddha — and so on. So far as conceptual knowledge is concerned, such phrases are completely meaningless. It is only when there is understanding that they make sense. For when there is understanding, there is an experienced fusion of the End with the Means, of the Wisdom, which is the timeless realization of Suchness, with the Compassion which is Wisdom in action.

In a sentiment the great Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh would come to echo half a century later in his life-broadening teaching that “understanding is love’s other name,” Huxley concludes:

Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, “love” is surely the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loudspeakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity which one hesitates to pronounce. And yet it has to be pronounced; for, after all, Love is the last word.

Complement this fragment of Huxley’s wholly illuminating and illuminated *The Divine Within* — which also gave us his meditation on mind-body integration and how to get out of your own shadow — with his contemporary Erich Fromm on the six steps to unselfish understanding and the pioneering nineteenth-century psychiatrist Maurice Bucke, whose work greatly influenced Huxley, on the six steps to cosmic consciousness, then dive into what modern neuroscience is revealing about the central mystery of consciousness.