

Epistemology: How Do You Know?

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Not long ago I gave a series of lectures on the subject of Epistemology at the Auckland Medical School to a group of medical doctors completing a Master's degree in the Sociology of Medicine. In the front row was an Asian doctor who also had a PhD in Science. In a spirit of excitement, he posed the philosophical question "What is Reality?" I responded by affirming that the building is real and the chairs and the tables are real. He is real and is asking a real question and expecting a real answer. "Okay, he said, "But how do you know?" I replied, "My senses confirm that you are talking."

I could dismiss him as a figment of my imagination but that would support Solipsism the theory that states the self is all that is real. Nothing exists outside my mind. Solipsism is a debatable subject among philosophers. There is a popular cartoon on the Internet where a young boy meets a beautiful lady. He says to her, "Excuse me, madam, you have just disproved Solipsism. There is no way my mind alone could have created something as beautiful as you."

The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi faced this problem when he said, "When I was asleep I dreamed that I was a butterfly but when I am awake how can I be sure I am not a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?" Anyone who suffers from butterfly syndrome needs to be chased with a net but if nothing happens then the butterfly wins.

Ultimately, when the rubber meets the road will my view correspond with reality? To ask the question "How do I know"? Is to enter the domain of epistemology. That discipline explores the possibility, structure, and validity of knowledge. How do you know that you know what you know? This is the perennial question.

If the senses are not reliable then science is not possible, communication would be impossible, and life would be unthinkable. "How do we know this is the fundamental question in philosophy?" This was the disturbing question for Einstein when he declared, "The most incomprehensible aspect of the universe is that it's comprehensible." Imagine how the three-

pound grey substance we call the brain is able to communicate, paint artistically, sing melodically, engage intellectually, and think profoundly. Christianity is the only faith that supports the reality of truth and provides a meaningful ground for it. In a world of darkness and doubt. Jesus declared, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8: 32).