

Curiosity and Acquaintance: Ways of Knowing

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*Curiosity has rightly received much attention in epistemology and educational research. Although, through the centuries, it has been regarded with a degree of ambivalence, the trend now is towards its championing as an intellectual or epistemic virtue. The present discussion juxtaposes it against a contrasting way of knowing, which I refer to as knowledge by acquaintance. The notion of acquaintance pursued here parts company with Bertrand Russell's adoption of the expression, taking up instead a more ordinary use of the term. It is suggested that both curiosity and knowledge by acquaintance can present problems. Working through an example drawn from Stephen Poliakoff's film *Close My Eyes*, the paper seeks to reappraise the value of knowing by acquaintance for epistemology and for educational practice and research.*

KEYWORDS: acceleration in research; Cavell; curiosity; knowledge by acquaintance; Russell; Stephen Poliakoff, *Close My Eyes*; Wittgenstein

Searching for curiosity

I googled for CURIOSITY. This is what I found:

From the Harvard Business School:

that new research into curiosity reveals a wide range of benefits for organisations, leaders, and employees. Fewer decision-making errors. More innovation and positive changes in both creative and non-creative jobs. Reduced group conflict. A less defensive reaction to stress and less aggressive reactions to provocation.ⁱ

From Robert Aymar, former director of CERN:

that 'The Large Hadron Collider is a discovery machine. Its research program has the potential to change our view of the universe profoundly, continuing a tradition of human curiosity that's as old as mankind itself.'ⁱⁱ

From Contemporary Clinical Dentistry:

that the 'Human brain by virtue of its natural inclination is always curious to discover the answers to curiosities to mitigate its craze and internal struggle. Human mind is a multi-faceted gadget very hard to master and decipher. It is the most complex and straggling appendage of the human body.'ⁱⁱⁱ

And, somewhere off at a tangent, from Alexander Pope:

that '(after providence had permitted the Invention of Printing as a scourge for the Sins of the learned) Paper also became so cheap, and printers so numerous, that the deluge of authors cover'd the land'.^{iv}

The search led me to ponder, and I began to dwell on what I had achieved. . . I remembered reading, more than twenty years ago, Bertram Bruce's pedagogically creative discussion of how search exercises could be made to work in the classroom. Bruce was thinking about the ways that searches could go beyond 'looking up' and become something more like enquiry, where 'searching is the journey, not just the arrival' (Bruce, 2000, p. 108), and he wrote:

This suggests an alternative to the common practice of asking students to cite one library source and one online source for an essay. Activities such as that presuppose an order to the Web that simultaneously over- and under-states its value. Instead, we could turn the Web's unruliness into a virtue. We might say: 'Use the Web to find the answer to such-and-such a question. Now, report on three things you learned that you had never imagined before you did that search'. (*Ibid.*)

This is an expansion of knowledge through links and connections, laterally as it were. Knowledge increases—information assimilated, new things discovered—though not along a straight path, not in the way that might be suggested by the idea that the Hadron Collider is the latest development in an unbroken history of knowledge about nature.

But how far does the expansion of knowledge coincide with increased publication? If the invention of the printing press led to the deluge of authors covering the land that Pope feared, more recent changes in technology are causing globally rising tides of publication in which we could well drown. Our theme in this suite of papers is acceleration, and its presence in publishing has been spectacular. Moreover, however one construes the relationship between publication and the advancement of learning, technological change has undoubtedly expanded knowledge itself: the growth of computing and the internet *has* meant that, for good or ill, we are inundated with information, but it has also massively increased the speed at which science makes progress. Furthermore, the extension of education, formally and informally—through longer periods of people's lives, the expansion of teacher education, and through increasingly technicised conceptions of teaching and learning—has coincided with these changes in publishing and contributed to acceleration in the growth of specifically educational research. Acceleration all round, so it seems, and although one may at times worry about both the flood and the speed, there is much that has been achieved.

Yet I find myself remembering also another paper, by David Kolb, that was published in the same special issue as Bruce's, and I mention it here as an indicator of the contrasts in ways of knowing with which my own argument is concerned. Almost at the start of his discussion, Kolb makes the following claim:

A serious enemy of education is a life of quick immediate intensities. Little intense bits of information delivered by sincere talking heads. Isolated serial intensities, one show or one song after another, one simplified role after another. Moments of intense experience branded and labelled (Kolb, 2000, p. 121).

Such information is abstracted, ‘pulled out of its constitutive relations and contexts, and so is not encountered in its full reality. Education should restore those relations and contexts. It should dispel that illusory immediacy and completeness’ (*ibid.*). But Kolb is well aware that complaints of this kind can seem like nothing more than reiterations of a familiar liberal arts rant, and he is keen not to say that learners simply need to slow down. Younger people ride the waves of the web with speed; but sophisticated readers of print can scan the pages of articles in their field with remarkable alacrity too. Rather than seeking quick bits of information, the expert has a built-in structure of categories and priorities, an evaluative background against which to discern what is pertinent and what is not. The worry is that the student without this is at the mercy of the providers of the information and vulnerable also to the impression that the links that are available are somehow natural rather than calculated, often for commercial or political purposes. In appealing to the need for structure and background, Kolb is not talking about abstract thinking skills: crucially what is involved is a matter of familiarity with a terrain, perhaps a section of a disciplinary field. But herein lies a worry too. ‘If the media glut is online, education ought to be there too’, Kolb writes, and the words that follow sound upbeat, but there is a sting in the tail. ‘The learners have to spend aware time there, and try new concepts, make mistakes and get feedback. They have to stay there for a while. But is there any “there” there?’

Kolb’s title is ‘Learning Places’, and this can be taken to refer both to the places where learning takes place, whether as classrooms, lecture-halls, or websites, etc., and to what it is to come to know a place—that is, not just to learn about the place but to become familiar or acquainted with it. His subtitle is ‘Building Dwelling Thinking Online’, artfully appropriating the title of Heidegger lecture, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ (Heidegger, 1971/1951), in which the lack of punctuation or conjunction is intended to suggest the internal connection in these aspects of our lives. It is important that place, in Heidegger’s discussion, is not the same as space. A place may be coextensive with the space identified by the grid-lines on a map, but a place is not determined or understood in that way: it is, say, the place where the bridge crosses the river, where the villagers pass one another by, where perhaps we arrange to meet. . . Heidegger’s evocation of place, as of building and dwelling, is nostalgic, but it is richly meaningful nonetheless. It evokes the way in which, before they are spaces identified by coordinates, places have already come into being through their significance in human lives. And their connection with dwelling is found in the fact that they are where we spend time: they can come to be familiar aspects of our lives. Kolb’s guiding question in ‘Learning Places’ is whether anything on the internet can become a place in the way that Heidegger seeks to describe.

Becoming familiar with a place may involve gathering new information about it, but it cannot be reduced to this. To be familiar or acquainted with a place is to have had direct experience of it and to have stayed a while, probably to have come back to it. You can be familiar with and come back to a classroom or school, to your home or homeland, to somewhere that perhaps you have just stayed a while, to a topic and an argument, to a teacher and a writer, and—pending the answer to Kolb’s question—to a website, a virtual place. In epistemology, these matters tend not to be addressed well. What is fairly clear as a starting-point, however, is that this familiarity or acquaintance involves something other than curiosity, something other than novelty too, and a different way of knowing. It is this that needs to be accounted for.

In order to move towards this, let me begin by saying a little more about the allure of curiosity, which, because of its contrast with acquaintance, will help to show what is at stake. Curiosity has had its strong champions, and it has been celebrated in recent years as one of the epistemic or intellectual virtues. But it has had its critics too, and it remains a troubled concept. Let us try to see why.

Lust of the mind?

Desire, to know why, and how, curiosity; such as is in no living creature but man: so that man is distinguished, not only by his reason; but also by this singular passion, . . . which is a lust of the mind, that by a perseverance of delight in the continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge, exceedeth the short vehemence of any carnal pleasure. (Hobbes, 1651, p. 35)

Thomas Hobbes associates curiosity with a seeking after causes, which in human beings combines creatively through the imagination to enable the projection of possible effects and new inventions. Retrospectively, however, it leads to a reflection on causes of causes and ultimately to the thought ‘at last, that there is some cause whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal; which is it men call God’ (p. 65). But with his curious expression, ‘lust of the mind’, which certainly implies desire but might suggest deficiency in other respects, Hobbes’ words touch on an ambivalence that has surrounded curiosity. It is celebrated now as one of the epistemic virtues, whereas Augustine struggled with the notion,^v and it was a target of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.^{vi} And, as we know, it killed the cat.

The idea of curiosity as an intellectual or epistemic virtue seems a natural outcome of recognition of the value and achievements especially of the physical sciences. The term is often coupled with the adjective ‘disinterested’, a word that many native speakers have some difficulty in disentangling from ‘uninterested’. Football referees should be *disinterested* (that is, unbiased), whereas one presumes that they will not be *uninterested* in the game! Correct usage of these expressions is sometimes worn as a kind of badge of a certain level of education. I do not know how far the distinction, playing out in these prefixes, is found in other languages; but in any case there is some reason to be suspicious of a distinction that purports

to contain interest in this tidy way. In an impressively subtle discussion of curiosity, Marianna Papastephanou presses the point in a political direction:

The adjective ‘disinterested,’ which has been attributed to curiosity and qualified its employment in educational philosophy at a given time, operated in political ways that disentangled epistemic from moral and political stakes and prepared the ground for what ended up to be an unqualified educational welcome of curiosity. However, attention is drawn to the fact that, though social and virtue epistemologies complicate disinterestedness and reclaim the social and virtue dimensions of episteme, they fail to adequately reclaim its political operations. Likewise, a politicization of curiosity and a concomitant political queering of curiosity as an educational aim are still missing. Transfers of virtue epistemology into educational philosophy continue to treat curiosity apolitically and to recommend it unreservedly as an educational aim (Papastephanou, 2016, pp. 1-2).

My sense is that the problems Papastephanou highlights are to be addressed also in more obviously epistemological terms and that there are already political dimensions to the epistemology.¹

In order to advance the argument along these lines, I shall begin by taking a step to the side and turning to an example from film. Stephen Poliakoff’s *Close My Eyes*, starring Saskia Reeves, Clive Owen, and Alan Rickman, was released in 1991, and the film has always struck me not only as providing an indictment of aspects of the British political landscape of the 1980s but also as offering an allegory of knowing, in wide-ranging human terms. Let me provide a sketch of salient episodes in the film.^{vii}

Ways of knowing in *Close My Eyes*

‘But if you are certain, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt?’—They’ve been shut. (Wittgenstein, 2009/1953, p. 236^e, §331.

A relentless blue sky hangs over a cityscape. Cranes punctuating the line of the horizon display the construction boom that betokens an economy that thrives, with the reinvention of the Isle of Dogs and the creation of Canary Wharf. This is London, magnificent but listless in the summer heat. And this is the high summer of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership.

We do not see the frenzied activity of the stock exchange, nor the frenetic lives of barrow-boys turned jobbers in the stock exchange; we do not see the champagne bars, crammed with bankers and hedge-fund managers.

¹ Papastephanou has pursued this topic more recently with the publication of a thought-provoking collection of essays entitled, *Toward New Philosophical Explorations of the Epistemic Desire to Know: Just Curious About Curiosity* (2019). I am very grateful to her for generously encouraging me to draw on my own contribution to that collection (Standish, 2019a) in the two pages that follow.

A main representative of this new capitalism is instead the handsome figure of Sinclair (Alan Rickman), who, in a palatial building on the banks of the river in the heart of London, presides over the small fortune of a margarine manufacturing business. Sinclair is a humane and good-natured man, whose genuine, if domineering, charm and generosity scarcely ever falter. Whatever the pressures of such a working-life must be, he is calm and apparently unflustered. Yet he is animated by an unflagging interest in things, manifested in a curiosity about minor details, about little things that others walk casually by. 'These ashtrays—they're very interesting. . . ', he remarks, passing some new installation in the reception area to his building. He collects and he attracts, and he observes. There is something magnetic, mutual about this charm, and it seems to gather people to him. Perhaps he collects them too.

Sinclair's character is juxtaposed against that of his wife, Natalie (Saskia Reeves), who is several years younger, and her brother, Richard (Clive Owen), some five years younger again. As children they were separated when their parents divorced. Now in adulthood, in their late twenties perhaps, and against suggestions of tension between them when they were younger, they are coming to know one another better. Richard works in an environmental conservation practice, a counter-culture to the land-grabbing construction that is all around, while Natalie seems unsettled and between jobs, disconnected from things. The affection between them slips into feelings that are intense and incestuous, and this is realised when they stay in the faded elegance of an apartment building, converted from what was once a grand hotel. It is important that Sinclair is no philistine, but he appears to live in a relaxed ease with the changing world of late-1980s London, while Richard and Natalie are shown to exist in varying degrees of friction with it.

Two incidents in the film warrant particular mention. The first arises when Richard and his boss, Colin, go to a meeting with a property developer. The meeting is tense, and the property developer is nervous and on the defensive as they question him about his company's compliance with planning regulations. He has heard that Colin has been in hospital and has AIDS. As the meeting intensifies, and in a pointed act of indecorousness and effrontery, Colin opens a triangular pack of sandwiches and bites into one in a display of hunger. He then, in an act of mock-sociability, reaches across the big desk behind which the man sits and offers him the partly chewed sandwich, pressing it on him, almost forcing it into his mouth; the man stammers and shakes with embarrassment and fear. This is the new plague, and there is no cure. Colin then offers the same sandwich to Richard, who without hesitation takes a bite and chews ostentatiously, both of them calmly staring at the man, now reduced to a sweating, gibbering bag of nerves. Eventually Richard and Colin leave. AIDS and the dark fears and repressions it represented, the signature disease of the 1980s, are now also seen symbolically to undermine the ubiquitous growth and prosperity. Richard's biting of the sandwich, accepting the saliva of the sick man, exemplifies his readiness to acknowledge and live with this dark side and, let us say, to live with its risks.

The second incident occurs a little later in the film. Sinclair and Natalie live in a beautiful, large house on the banks of the River Thames, upstream from and outside London. The harshness of the London skyline is here contrasted with the leafy banks of the river, even if the impeccable lawns of the gardens must this summer be lavishly watered, as betrayed by the yellowing, parched surrounding fields in which they picnic. But this is still a Green World, and thus it represents a kind of pastoral, a garden of England manicured and trimmed but still somehow preserved. In fact, it goes beyond pastoral when, one afternoon, when relationships have intensified and hostility simmers beneath the surface, Sinclair and Richard take their boat upstream, where leafy alders and willows lining the banks overhang the narrowing river. The parched grass gives way to the dark green shade of the trees. But why are they going upstream, and what source will they find? What does Sinclair know of the dark secret of this relationship between his wife and her brother? What is that relationship? After some time, Sinclair and Richard moor the boat and step onto the overgrown bank. They are in unknown territory. There is a rustle in the bushes, a strange noise, and from somewhere in the undergrowth a dragon appears. . . There is a flurry of excitement, and then the dragon's head and body lifts up. Some children giggle as they slip the elaborate disguise from their shoulders, laugh at the surprised adults, and run away into the surrounding trees. What is this heart of darkness?

The voyage upstream is a journey of discovery, a reaching back, towards the past as if its sources might explain where it is that we are now. It suggests a way of knowing the world that is in tension with the possibilities of the present, with the newness of the world of the booming city. Sinclair is impressively knowledgeable, and he is open and interested in people, places, and things. Richard and Natalie are constrained, introverted and troubled, at times alienated and enervated—in her case more obviously so. At the extreme, theirs becomes an intense carnal knowledge that smoulders and then explodes, releasing something dangerous in her but almost destroying him: its incestuous nature calls into question in particularly disturbing ways the relation to other people and suggests a possible overwhelming of the relation to the other, a loss of appropriate distance, symbolically a denial of separation. In the end this is shown to be destructive, and they survive partly through the resourcefulness, the circumspection, and, I think it is right to say, the generosity that Sinclair appears to show, which is sufficient to withstand this trauma. But the product on which his wealth and success are built is a light-spread butter-substitute, supposedly (at the time) a healthy alternative, and this oily product symbolises, in some ways at least, his lightness of touch on the world. The light touch of curiosity.

The powerful nature of the relationship between Natalie and Richard—its madness, its carnal knowledge—constitutes a drastic contrast to the well-oiled interest Sinclair has in, in effect, everything. There are problems in both directions, but paradoxically these converge in pathologies of the self. Remarks on the acquisitive, consumptive orientation of knowledge from Jean Baudrillard in his 'The Systems of Collecting', are apposite: for the collector, he writes, 'the singular object never impedes the process of

narcissistic projection, which ranges over an indefinite number of objects' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 12). I am taking the pathological tendencies in Sinclair to be of this type. The turning inwards represented by incest also implies a shoring up of the self—an avoidance of the break-up that must in some sense come in order that the family should healthy—health, that is, in a continual, partial dissolution and gathering into new forms, not in consolidation. Both constitute the relation between the self and the other in ways that are destructive. How we come to know and the ways that we know become constitutive of who and what we are. These are subjectively inflamed relations to the world that have not found its measure.

What the title of the film, *Close My Eyes*, refers to is left unclear. Natalie closes her eyes, we might say, to the significance of what she is doing when she asks her brother to kiss her; in responding, Richard does the same; they close their eyes as they kiss. The land-grabbing property developer turns a blind eye to conservation and planning regulations; Colin and Richard share a sandwich, shutting their eyes to the risk of HIV infection. Sinclair acquiesces in the monetarist capitalism that has fuelled his company's success and flaunts his bemusement at his own good fortune; but this is the politics that has refashioned the city and the country, changed working lives, and changed people. In the end, Sinclair says to Natalie and Richard, 'It's got to stop!'—as if perhaps resolutely closing his eyes to what has happened, to let something of the past go, to let go of some demons and move on.

What, we can ask also, of the names of the characters? Is Richard—who has given up a steady and well paid job in town planning for a poorly paid one in environmental conservation—not driven by a vision of the good city and, hence, cast as the protector of the city, the 'hardy ruler', as his Germanic name implies? Natalie asks her brother to kiss her, but she is not Eve: Natalie suggests 'natality', perhaps a newness struggling for expression, stifled at present by the kindness, generosity, and capability (and power) of her husband, relentless like the blue sky. And, while there might be some reason to suspect overinterpretation here, there is one name, Sinclair, that cannot pass without notice. It is not that Sinclair's 'sin' is 'clear', or that he is clear of sin, but perhaps that his sin is a certain kind of clarity—the absence in him of darkness, and hence his inadvertent repression of Natalie. There is something too Apollonian to him, and in the end this is stifling; something must break through. The tension between Richard and Natalie increases: he is pursuing her, she is saying it must stop, and then, almost casually, she tells him that she and Sinclair have decided to leave England, to go and live in America.

To mark their departure, Sinclair arranges a garden-party on the lawns of the riverside house. But it turns out that by the time of the party, they have changed their mind and have decided to stay. The party still goes ahead, and in the course of it Richard and Natalie walk away to talk. They bitterly quarrel, physically fight, are almost run over, and end up lying on the road together in each other's arms. Bloody, torn, and dishevelled, they walk back, past the groups of guests, and sit down. Sinclair comes to sit with them. He looks from one to the other and calmly says: 'Something tells

me it's the end of the party.' The three of them go into the house, and he tends Natalie's grazed knee:

Sinclair: You look as though you have been in mortar-fire, you too.
Natalie: We have!
Richard: You *know*, don't you?
Sinclair: I know a few things. . . I know that there was something extraordinary between you two, something that had to be purged. I don't want to know any more. There is a limit beyond which I can't go. I don't want to hear. It is enough that the worst is over.
Richard: You think so?
Sinclair: It's over. . . It's getting less 'intense', isn't it?
Richard: You're being so calm, Sinclair. It's amazing.
Sinclair: I amaze myself. Somebody had to be calm around here. I mean, I could start screaming. Maybe I will. Delayed shock. Who knows? I don't think so. I hope not.
Natalie: Told you it was wise, didn't I?
Richard: So, Sinclair, you know everything. What is going to happen?
Sinclair: To us or to the human race?
Richard: Both.
Sinclair: I haven't a clue.

In the closing scene, the three of them walk beside the river. There is smoke from bonfires, drifting downstream, towards London. They walk upstream, towards the fading evening sun.



Sinclair: Bonfires, look. That's autumn. Those fires are always the typical end to summer.
 Natalie: I certainly wouldn't call this summer typical.
 Richard: No.
 Sinclair: Could be a good idea we are not going away after all. Might have begun to miss this.

There is something here about letting go, about not holding on too long to any idea of how things *must be*. But also something about carrying on: Sinclair and Natalie are not leaving after all. As with Poliakoff's work generally, the meanings overflow, sometimes indulgently so, and it can all seem too much.

But what happens if the title of the film is read against Wittgenstein's enigmatic remark quoted at the start of this section? Wittgenstein's interlocutor asks: 'But if you are certain, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt?' And the response is: 'They've been shut.' (Wittgenstein, 2009/1953, p. 236^e, §331. The question is posed in the voice of the sceptic, the voice of epistemic conscience; but the reply comes from the voice of *human* conscience. It is as much as to say not 'This is what I know', as if amassing or submitting evidence, but rather 'This is what I do.' It is an expression of resolve, a shutting of the eyes in order the better to see (remembering the fact that if the eyes do not shut, they cannot see, cannot be human eyes). Or perhaps, if we recall the scene played out by Colin and Richard with the sandwich, it suggests the sustaining of the gaze on someone who is doing wrong. Stanley Cavell extends the point as follows:

[The answer Wittgenstein offers to the skeptic's question] is not generally conclusive, but it is more of an answer than it may appear to be. In the face of the skeptic's picture of intellectual limitedness, Wittgenstein proposes a picture of human finitude. (Then our real need is for an account of this finitude, especially of what it invites in contrast to itself.)

His eyes are shut; he has not shut them. The implication is that the insinuated doubt is not *his*. But how not? If the philosopher *makes* them his, pries the lids up with instruments of doubt, does he not come upon human eyes?—When I said that the voice of human conscience was not generally conclusive, I was leaving it open whether it was individually conclusive. It may be the expression of resolution, at least of confession. 'They (my eyes) are shut' as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt.—But doesn't everyone, everyday?—It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world (Cavell, 1979, p. 431).

It is possible, I think, to see the inflamed ways of knowing I have identified—the net cast by Sinclair's curiosity and interest in things, his all-purpose good humour and generosity, and the incestuous, inward-turning orientation of Natalie and Richard—as expressions, in their extreme form, of

scepticism: they are attempts to secure knowledge and live without doubt. Yet one can live resolutely in the face of doubt. Can we see the pulling back from that extreme form, in each case, in their differing ways, as the expression of resolution?

Given the prevalence of attempts to manage risk, in education as in so much else (to manage it by calculating it and then supposedly controlling it), might it not be seen that the ways of knowing in question are barriers, if not to falling in love with the world, then at least to genuinely caring about, and showing the value of, what it is that we pass on. Where is epistemology in relation to this?

Epistemology, acquaintance, and the classroom

I think its dominant trends lead away from what matters. Epistemology classically makes the distinction between knowing-that (propositional knowledge) and knowing-how (skills, competences), and the importance and educational pertinence of much of the work that has been done in studying their relation should not be questioned. But a third kind of knowing is also acknowledged—knowing by acquaintance (or knowing with a direct object). Bertrand Russell, the philosopher associated most in the modern period with this tripartite division, adopted the phrase ‘knowing by acquaintance’, and it was indeed important in his Theory of Descriptions. ‘We shall say’, he writes, ‘that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths’ (Russell, 1912, p. 78). It is part of Russell’s position that *S* has acquaintance with *O* (a subject has acquaintance with an object) is essentially the same as *O* is *presented* to *S*. The subject has acquaintance not with the table but with the sense data of the table. There are obvious Cartesian traces in this position (in its foundationalism, its opening to scepticism), and it is plainly empiricist (relying on what is given through the senses). Moreover, it prioritises *direct awareness* and *presence*. It also leads surreptitiously to a hardening of subject-object relations (the knowing subject in relation to an object-world). Knowledge by acquaintance is cognitive, on this view, but it does not involve the forming of descriptions or judgements. *Descriptions* are about the world and involve judgements (the application of concepts to the world); acquaintance, by contrast, has a necessary relation to an object (the sense data) and, in a sense, cannot be wrong (whereas descriptions obviously can be).

Russell’s conception of acquaintance in this epistemological context contrasts with acquaintance in ordinary usage.^{viii} In ordinary usage I might say that I know the apartment I live in, my cousin Fred, Lake Como, Beethoven’s 5th Symphony, Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, etc. This is a matter of familiarity, and it commonly involves duration and some kind of recurrence or repetition. This is not to say that such knowing is a mental state but rather that to say I know Lake Como will ordinarily mean that I have visited, walked beside, or perhaps swum in the lake, experiences that have some duration, and it is to put some emphasis on this: I will not say I know Lake Como if I have glimpsed it for a few moments from an aeroplane. Like Russell’s version, it involves direct experience, but what is direct

experience? Unlike Russell's, it is *not* non-conceptual, *not* infallible, and does not appeal to a metaphysics of presence (me-here-now as the ultimate authentication of the real). The direct experience referred to here is constructed out of, or made possible by, a vast background of experience and knowledge of the world, in which language and the different ways of knowing it makes available are implicated in complex ways. There is no raw, pure, or totally unmediated experience.

An instructive and pertinent contrast is provided by the comparison of *objects* with *things*.² Whereas objects are typically conceived in terms of an observational stance, things are understood in terms of use and holistic experience. Talk of objects reinforces the hardened S-O dichotomisation. Talk of things is characteristic of our ordinary involvement in the world, and it tends to imply familiarity; at least, it opens this register of thought. It is in terms of the latter that the idea of dwelling comes into play, a term that is meaningless without a sense of duration and familiarity. Hence, it harmonises with notions of habit, habitation, and habituation.

In the light of this, it can be seen that there is one aspect of education where knowing by acquaintance, in the ordinary sense, is *essential*: aesthetic appreciation. If you are studying physics and read, say, the SparkNotes *Introduction to Vectors*, you may not learn as much as from a good teacher, but you may genuinely gain some knowledge. If you pass the literature exam, but you have read only the SparkNotes guides, not the original texts that are on the syllabus, there is a real sense in which, by contrast, you have not had a literary education at all. Aesthetic education, thus, depends upon direct encounter with artworks. Two factors can be brought out here. First, I shall not labour the point that artworks take different forms, but what does need to be emphasised is that artworks are particulars.^{ix} And let me repeat, second, that direct experience of such works is nothing like direct experience in Russell's conception of knowledge by acquaintance.

Aesthetic appreciation shows the significance of acquaintance ost clearly, but its importance in education extends well beyond this. Think also of the following:

- the chemistry teacher's relation to the chemistry laboratory and to the Table of the Elements on the wall
- the history teacher's familiarity with a particular historical period
- the mathematician's sense of the 'feel' of different areas of mathematics
- the role of repetition and rhythm (particular rhythms, particular patterns), which might extend from the sequencing of activities in a class or a school day or year, through patterns in the substance of a subject itself, and to such matters as muscle memory in sport or music
- learning to speak—always a particular language, with its characteristic rhythms, intonations, accent

² For related recent discussions of *things*, see Sharon Todd (2020) and Gordon Bearn (2020).

➤ learning by heart.^x

In all the above cases, appeal needs to be made to something beyond knowing-that and knowing-how if justice is to be done to the experience. Moreover, in each of these cases there is the necessity of *staying* with something, of a certain instilling, and this is at odds with the novelty that curiosity seeks.

If my claims for knowledge by acquaintance are still obscure, however, consider the following example. Imagine that you are looking at a picture of flowering plants in a gardening catalogue. Each picture shows the head of the flowers in bright sunlight, their colours emphasised and the foliage in pristine condition. A caption to the picture gives the plants their horticultural name as well as some additional information, such as: 'Grows well in full sun. Height 1-2 metres. Flowers July-September.' The plant you are looking at is a sunflower, variety 'Lemon Queen, impressive with stylish pale blooms.' The photograph of the plant is eye-catching, and a range of information useful to the gardener is provided. But consider this image once again, now juxtaposed against another picture of sunflowers—not of a different variety of sunflower but a picture that is different in kind: one of the iterations of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. While it was easy to *describe* the picture in the gardening catalogue (in terms of the information it provided and the categories this readily fell into), with the Van Gogh painting it is more difficult to know what to say or where to begin. The artwork does not really provide *information* at all. Rather, it encourages anyone looking at it to *slow down*. . . Maybe you begin to notice the hang of the petals, the dark yellows and ochres, the thick paint and brush-strokes, and the flatness of the image. This list suggests something other than a checklist of criteria, and it has little to do with the amassing of information. It solicits from you a different response. You are becoming acquainted with the work, absorbing something of its presence. As this is sometimes put, though in phrasing that can easily grate, the sunflowers 'show themselves forth': you do not see them as a certain species with distinct properties but simply as there-in-themselves. Moreover, you looked at the entry for 'sunflowers, Lemon Queen' in the catalogue because, let us imagine, you were considering what to plant, and you might still have chosen this variety in the absence of the detailed information or of the photograph. But the experience of the painting is not dispensable in this way. Your interest in it will be of a quite different order.

I expressed some unease above about the idea of disinterestedness, which is apt to imply the detachment (in some sense) of the learner from the object of study and is partly at odds with the idea of instilling. If we consider this in relation to Plato, it looks decidedly out of place. How odd it would be to speak of those who make their way out of the Cave as having a disinterested attitude towards the light. It is crucial to the epistemology advanced in *The Republic* that knowledge, in its higher reaches, requires not only a seeing of the truth but also an affective response appropriate to the object of attention: it would be unthinkable, for example, for the emancipated prisoners to be indifferent to the light. While, as was made clear above, 'disinterested' does not mean 'indifferent', the term's muffling of interest is at odds with what Socrates describes as the process of coming to see the truth.

A recent paper by Yoshiaki Nakazawa nicely demonstrates a further aspect of what is at stake here. In ‘Habituation and Familial Love in Plato’s Theory of Moral Education’, Nakazawa moves from the familiar idea of habituation in Aristotle to a consideration of this theme in Plato too. His discussion centres on the idea of *oikeion*, which might be understood as kinship, familiarity, and a sense of things as close to oneself; or, in the words of Gisela Striker that he quotes, of ‘recognition and appreciation of something as belonging to one’ (Nakazawa, 2018). Aristotle stresses becoming habituated to virtuous actions, whereas Plato emphasises becoming habituated to things of value. It is of special importance on the latter view, therefore, to grow up in circumstances where one becomes familiar with or used to good things. As Nakazawa writes: ‘It is not the task of moral education to train, directly, one’s capacity to understand the attractions of the virtuous life, but rather, first, to make one capable of being attracted to the life of virtue’ (*ibid.*). It is worth pondering here the importance that is attached, in *The Republic*, to an education in music: ‘[R]hythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace, so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite’ (Plato, 1967, 401d-402a). The learner will ‘receive them into his soul, and, being nurtured by them, become fine and good’. He will become familiar with these things while he is young and before he is as yet unable to grasp the reason why, but ‘having been educated in this way, he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself’ (*ibid.*).

The phenomenology of knowing things helps to show, as we saw, that there is no pure acquaintance with things. Acquaintance always occurs in a context, against a background, and this is always linguistically conditioned. Experience of a thing is interwoven with and partially constructed out of descriptions and images of that thing (including fictional accounts). But our language and other modes of expression are not just representational and calculative but *productive (poiesis)*, enabling new things in the world to be experienced. In the age of the Internet, new things proliferate but in a particular way, with a bearing on what it is to come to know something. Kolb’s purpose, as we saw, was to consider in more or less Heideggerian vein how far users’ experience might be prevented from becoming curiosity-rich and acquaintance-poor.

But when Heidegger says that it is not the human being that speaks, using language as an instrument of communication, but rather language that speaks (Heidegger, 1971/1950), he is turning language into something impersonal or neuter. It misses the way that when something is said, when a thought is expressed, it is said *to someone*. That ‘someone’ is being addressed. This characteristic is fundamental in that it is out of this practice, out of being addressed, that we come into language, into thought (in the way that we ordinarily conceive of thinking), and in a sense into our lives as human beings. The practice has a specificity to it; with its rhythms and patterns and the background these come to form, our language provides the element, you might say, of a young person’s habituation. Of course, it relates to conceptual structures, but this phrase does not describe well the

nature of the lives of human beings as talkers: as people who address one another, in particular circumstances, in particular political and economic conditions, about things in the world. In addressing one another, people make statements, ask questions, and utter particular sentences, in patterns that become familiar. (Note the temporality and finitude of what they thus say.) This is formalised in the discipline of particular academic subjects, and it takes on a unique quality in forms of art. (The work of art is particular, specific.) What the child thus grows up with will constitute their habituation, and hence their *oikeion*—the things they are familiar with, which they can then experience, for good or ill, as their own and as part of themselves.

It is in light of this, furthermore, that we can interpret the ‘voice of human conscience’ that Cavell attributes to Wittgenstein. That voice is *doing something* in response to the sceptic’s problematics: it is engaged practically with the human propensity towards doubt.

Ways of knowing and educational research

I have tried to show problems that relate to the current acceleration in learning and research. The importance of *Close My Eyes* lies in its illustration of a contrast in orientations towards the world, which I have described as ways of knowing: one extreme is presented as, on the whole, attractive, and the difficulties attached to it are not initially apparent; the other is seen as obviously deviant and disturbing. I do not say that this is a straightforward *contrast*—we are not dealing simply with opposites here. It is a virtue of the film that it shows that these matters are not exclusively epistemological but are dimensions of what it is to be a human being, in the fullest and most rounded sense—hence, the importance of the connections the film makes to matters of psychological, moral, and political significance. Much of this is beyond the scope of my discussion, but it does have some bearing on the political issues relating to curiosity that are Papastephanou’s concern.

I have provided an account of the importance of knowledge by acquaintance in educational practice, especially in schooling. It seems to me beyond doubt that an inadequate grasp of the realities of such practice can skew educational research in ways that undermine its *raison d’être*. But my argument has a more direct bearing on educational research as I shall briefly explain.

It is a regrettable fact that research methods courses are generally governed by an empiricist orientation. I say ‘empiricist’ not in order to criticise the vast range of empirical work that takes place, much of which is of quality and value. My objection is rather to a prevailing assumption that it is *only* by gathering empirical evidence that research into education can be taken place, a belief I have argued to be obviously false and ideological (Standish, 2016, 2019b). Research methods courses often impart this assumption, whether deliberately or inadvertently; and this tendency itself, in putting the emphasis on technical approaches and protocols, further hides from view the knowledge by acquaintance I have been describing, as well as so much else (see Stone, 2006; Hodgson and Standish, 2008). There

is, to be sure, some empirical research in which knowledge by acquaintance is of the essence: in certain kinds of ethnography, for example, the researcher stays with a class over a period of time and absorbs its feel and rhythms, and the aim is to provide a rich picture of a particular context through the patient gaining of familiarity with it. Much more along these lines is found, in fact, in contemporary anthropology, a subject that seems less anxious about its credentials as science than educational research sometimes is. Clearly, then, much could be achieved if more time and resources were given to extending in research students' awareness of the importance of enquiry into education based on the humanities. Most readers of this journal are unlikely to need persuasion in that respect, and so I would like to conclude with a more specific suggestion. This will bring us back more directly to the particular argument I am pressing regarding knowledge by acquaintance.

Over the past two decades I have been involved in two international colloquia for doctoral students in which film has been a central feature of our research practice.^{xi} Our two-day meetings have been structured around the viewing of a film, typically chosen in combination with readings and presentations that are thematically connected in some way. The films are usually challenging and sometimes experimental in style, and the readings are taken from classic texts. The films are generally not directly about school or other educational institutions, but we have always found them to be pertinent to education in broader terms and to advance our thinking about teaching and learning, about human beings, society, and their mutual transformation, and about a variety of more specific concerns. The viewing of the film leads to careful consideration of language, expression, and forms of representation; but reflection and interpretation acquire a different rhythm where we, as it were, attend to Wittgenstein's repeated advice: 'don't think, but look!' (Wittgenstein, 2009/1953, §66)—we try not to rush to interpretation. The experience of watching these films together, the ways of knowing this enables, is at the heart of the kinds of conversations that ensue. The experience stays with us (much as I have found that *Close My Eyes* has again and again come back to me when I have thought about curiosity and what it is to know something), and it finds its way into published work of a variety of kinds.

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ⁱ Gleaned from various items online at: <https://hbr.org/2018/09/curiosity>. Accessed 10 September 2020.

ⁱⁱ Quoted at the start of Philip Ball's *How Science Became Interested in Everything* (Ball, 2012, p. 1).

ⁱⁱⁱ Editorial by S.G. Damle, Editor in Chief, *Contemporary Clinical Dentistry*, (Damle, 2014, pp. 147-148).

^{iv} Quoted by Elizabeth A. Hoffman in Exploring the Literate Blindspot: Alexander Pope's Homer In Light of Milman Parry (Hoffman, 20, p. 394), referenced in her text as 'Twickenham 5.49'.

^v 'Now, really, in how many of the most minute and trivial things my curiosity is still daily tempted, and who can keep the tally on how often I succumb?' (Augustine, Confessions, Book 10, Chapter 35, para 57)

^{vi} In *Being and Time*, curiosity is connected especially with seeing. 'It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew for another novelty. . . [C]uriosity is characterized by a specific way of *not tarrying* alongside what is closest. . . [I]t seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*. Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them—*thaumazein*. To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest. Rather it concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known' (Heidegger, p. 216). 'You must have read . . . , you must have seen. . . '—this way of speaking, Heidegger suggests, is characteristic of the way of thinking he is criticising. Tarrying is not a matter of this fleeting connection: it is staying with something and connects with dwelling.

^{vii} The plot summary provided by the British Film Institute is available at: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/494649/synopsis.html>. Accessed 20 September 2020.

^{viii} My argument here runs parallel to my discussion in 'Lines of Testimony' (Standish, 2020). Attention to the topic of testimony in epistemology has been shaped by a technical usage of that term, somewhat at odds with everyday usage of the expression. The technical usage has the effect of suppressing the ordinary sense of the respective terms and hiding the significance of testimony and acquaintance in human lives.

^{ix} There is only one *Mona Lisa*, and it is in the Louvre in Paris.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exists as a play in different iterations and different performances, night by night. There is only one *Casablanca*, but it exists in multiple celluloid and now digital copies. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* exists in multiple French editions, but it consists in a singular configuration of words. Andy Warhol experiments with multiples, etc. The boundaries are not always clear, and there are matters of degree: if you have read but not seen

Shakespeare's rarely performed *King John*, you are in a position to exercise aesthetic judgement; if you have read but not seen Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical*, rather more is missing. But in all these cases appreciation involves direct encounter with a particular.

^x See, for example, 'Learning by Heart' (Blake *et al.*, 1998).

^{xi} I greatly appreciated collaborating with Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, as well as with Naoko Saito at Kyoto University, in the early establishment of these colloquia and this approach. More recently the work has been sustained and extended through the efforts of many former students, including Stefan Ramaekers, Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, Ian Munday, Amanda Fulford, SunInn Yun, Adrian Skilbeck, Alison Brady, Bianca Thoilliez, and Sara Magaraggia.