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World View*



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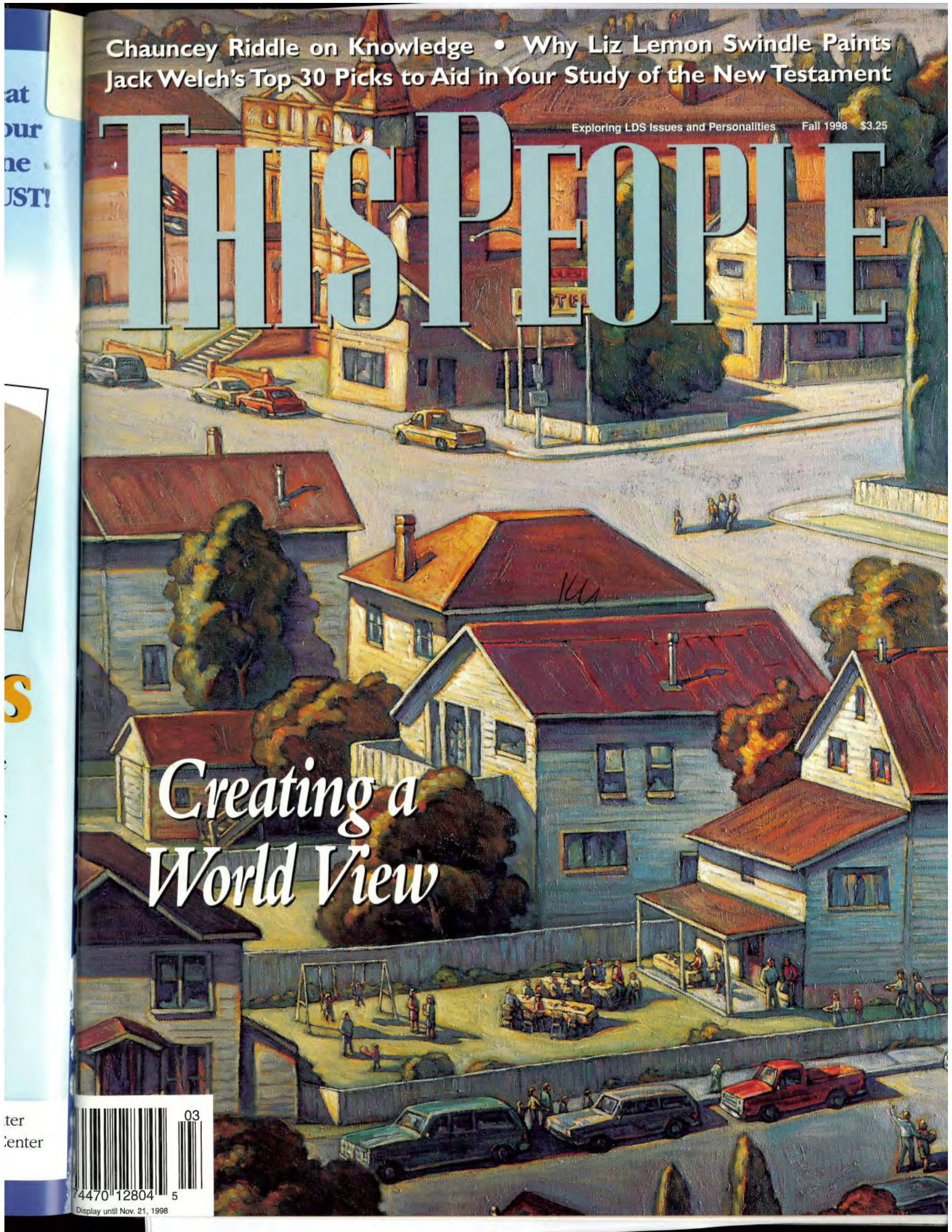
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# THE POINT IS TO KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW

*It is good to know. But it is better to know that you know.*

WE HUMANS DELIGHT IN KNOWING.

We love to look, see, hear, understand and imagine. But there is a downside: We sometimes think we know something when we don't, confusing a feeling of certitude with real certitude. We shall examine the ways humans know to build a picture of what we can and cannot, do and do not know.

The technical name for studying human knowledge is "epistemology," a Greek term formed from "episteme," meaning *to know*, and "logy," meaning *words about*. Our survey of human knowing will cover all of the important kinds.

**1** We begin with *authoritarianism*. This kind of knowing focuses on ideas gained from others by communication. This is the easiest of all the forms of knowing to use, and the one most people depend on: If you want to know something, just ask someone you consider to be an authority on the subject. For instance, we commonly ask our parents about things which happened to us before we could remember: where and when we were born, who our grandparents are, etc.



ENTRANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT BY JOHAN H. BENTHIN © The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Courtesy the Museum of Church History and Art. Used by Permission.

While authoritarianism is very convenient, it has pitfalls. The first is knowing who is an authority on a subject. If you personally really know who is and is not an authority on a given subject, you are probably an authority yourself on the subject and don't need to ask. If you are not an authority on the subject, then you are forced to ask someone else (an authority) as to who is an authority, and you may or may not get a good answer. Once you have located someone whom you consider to be an authority, it is necessary to communicate with them, and when you have an answer you must ask yourself, Did that authority understand my question?, and, Did I understand the answer of the authority correctly?

But assuming that you have located a genuine authority and have successfully communicated with them, you can get some very good answers in a very economical manner.

This is why we go to doctors, lawyers, agricultural experts, mechanics, plumbers, and others to get good answers when we have trouble.

**2** We next look at *rationalism* as a way of knowing. Rationalism uses human reason to compare and relate ideas. It presupposes three things: a) A system of reasoning in which you have confidence, b) Premises or ideas which you wish to reason about, and c) Premises which are sufficiently general to allow you to reason. For example, a) might be the system of arithmetic; b) might be your knowledge of your beginning bank balance at the first of the month and all of the checks you have written during the month; and c) might be the knowledge that only you have the power and authority to withdraw funds from the account. With those three things in place, you can use the system of arithmetic to subtract the checks written from the initial balance and have confidence that since no other person can withdraw funds, you now know how much you have left in the bank account.

Rationalism is a very sure way of coming to knowledge when all three of those factors are in place. But reason itself cannot assure you that those three factors are actually all in place. So reason is an



**Empiricism is a wonderful way of knowing if you are driving on the right side of the road, what time the clock says it is, locating your favorite tie, and for finding your wife in a crowd. But it won't work for many important things because we cannot perceive those important things with our physical senses.**

important way of knowing, but it can never stand alone. It needs other epistemologies to furnish the wherewith to reason. Other examples of good rational knowing are the theorems of plane geometry, syllogistic and other logical systems, and predicting the trajectories of heavenly bodies once we know their past history.

**3** Third in our survey is the epistemology of *empiricism*. Empiricism is gaining knowledge by using our human physical senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste, etc. There are about twenty-five identifiable human senses, but we depend mainly on the five mentioned. For example, if you want to know if the tomatoes in your garden are ripe enough to pick, it would be a good idea to go look at them. Their color is typically a good index to their ripeness. If they are indeed dark red, that is a good indication that they are ready to pick. You might look at the calendar and think, today is the 10th of August, and the tomatoes should be ripe (rationalism), or you could send

someone out to look for you and report back (authoritarianism). But you are likely to be best satisfied by your own visual and gustatory inspection.

Empiricism is a very good way of knowing about our immediate physical environment, but it does little for the past, the future, the distant, or the unobservable. And when you can directly inspect what you want to know about, one must be sure that one is looking at something which is very familiar (the first time we see something we do not see it very well), that we are not being fooled by some aberration (it pays to look two or three times, as in the carpenter's adage: measure twice, saw once), and that we are not dreaming (for this we usually rub our eyes). Empiricism is a wonderful way of knowing if you are driving on the right side of the road, what time the clock says it is, locating your favorite tie, and for finding your wife in a crowd. But it won't work for many important things because we cannot perceive those important things with our physical senses.

**4** Now we come to *statistical empiricism*, which is a mixture of empiricism and rationalism. It is empirical because one uses one's senses to collect a lot of observations, called *data*. But then one must manipulate that data by means of statistical formulas. The manipulation is rationalism.

For instance, if you want to know what brand of tires wears the longest, you must gather a lot of data. You might try putting new tires of ten varieties on ten different automobiles, the ten being the same make and model. Then you drive these automobiles until the tires are worn out (preferably over the identical routes at the same time), then see how many miles are recorded for each brand of tires. But wait! Perhaps some of the brands of tires had unusual samples. That means you must try three or four sets of each brand. Then when you look at the average (statistical manipulation) for each brand, it will be easy to discern which brand wears the longest.

Statistical empiricism works well where one can be empirical, but the rational manipulation of the data tells us things which sheer observation cannot. I

cannot tell which brand of toothpaste is best for preventing cavities by brushing just my own teeth: I must have many persons using many brands to gain a reliable statistical result.

So if you need to know which paint holds up the best on a highway, or which kind of cleanser is most cost effective, or which high school students are most likely to do well academically in college, statistical empiricism is your friend. It only works, of course, for large populations which are adequately sampled, and where the data is properly interpreted. But if those factors are in place, it is most useful.

**5** Next in our survey we come to *pragmatism*. Pragmatism is knowing what works. When we know what works we do not always know why it works, but when someone is desperate, they will settle for what works without knowing why. Most pragmatic knowledge is gained by sheer coincidence, observing what works as compared with what does not.

When people have ill health, they often are willing to try most anything to get relief. When something works for them and they actually do get relief, they then swear by whatever worked and sometimes want to tell others how to cure the malady which formerly beset them. But what works for one person does not always work for another, and what seems to work sometimes has serious side-effects which are worse than the original malady. But pragmatism holds a prominent place in epistemology simply because we do not understand all things yet we can do many things we do not understand.

So if you find that eating lots of spinach seems to give you added strength, you might continue, because perhaps the spinach really is the cause. Or if when you choke your lawn mower only three-fourths of the way, it always starts, and won't readily start when choked to any other point, you would do well to continue choking it at three-fourths. That makes good pragmatic sense.

Pragmatism rescues all of us from our frustration and impotence at times. It is valuable.



**It is the attitude of being careful, of rejecting anything where the evidence is slight or inconclusive, to be sure of knowing only that which is fully manifest and apparent.**

**6** Next in our repertoire of ways of knowing is *mysticism*. This mysticism is said to be a way of knowing "immediately" instead of "mediately." Rather than knowing something through reason or sensation, one knows because one is part of the thing known, is it, and thus knows its being directly. Mysticism is difficult to describe because it is admittedly ineffable, not amenable to verbal representation.

Proponents of mysticism say that it is *the* way of knowing because it is more satisfying than any other epistemology. In mysticism, one does not just be aware of something, but partakes directly in its being; this is said to be the superior kind of knowing.

Mysticism is often associated with religious knowing, and is sometimes identified as the basis for revelation. This association does not hold for most Latter-day Saints for reasons which will be discussed below. But many in the world find their religious fulfillment in what they denominate as the mystical experience.

Some limitations of mysticism seem apparent. If it is not rational or has no rational content, how can it be understood? If it is non-empirical, how can persons compare experience? If the sole criterion for epistemological success is satisfaction, how can one have any assurance that the mystical state is not just self-induced aestheticism? But these limitations do not bother the avowed

mystic. He points out that these are the very advantages which make mysticism the preeminent epistemology.

**7** Our next candidate for a way of knowing is *scepticism* (French spelling; you may prefer the Germanic *skepticism*). Scepticism is more an attitude than a full-blown epistemology of its own. It is the attitude of being careful, of rejecting anything where the evidence is slight or inconclusive, to be sure of knowing only that which is fully manifest and apparent. Thus one might be rightly sceptical of many advertising claims, even though they be clothed in the garb of legitimate statistical empiricism: how large was the sample, how random was the sample, was there a double-blind control set of data? One is often sceptical about empirical observations unless they see for themselves (I am from Missouri, so "Show Me!"). It is good to be sceptical of reasoning that is sheer rationalization (inventing the premises necessary for a desired conclusion, but not being able to show that the premises are true). It is often good to be sceptical about pragmatic results, or claims of pragmatic results, for often they represent only coincidence.

One can be reasonably sceptical and careful using any of the epistemologies, and experience with mistakes shows us the necessity of a healthy dose of scepticism in most epistemological adventures. But one can also be too sceptical, "throwing the baby out with the bath" as the saying goes. One can see and know, and still not believe, as when Laman and Lemuel saw and heard an angel but rejected the experience. One can have good reasoning and reject it, as when many reject the organization of the Primitive Church as being a key to the true church of Jesus Christ in the latter days, denying the restoration of all things. One can reject authority when the person truly is a demonstrated authority, as when the contemporaries of Jesus rejected him as a legitimate holder of the priesthood even while he was exercising that priesthood in the exact same manner as the prophets of old whom they accepted.

Scepticism can be a wonderful balance to overweening desire, but it can also be used to defy knowing of something obvi-

ously true but contrary to overweening desire. It is like dynamite: a powerful way to clear obstacles but also a means of destroying everything else. In ancient times the sceptics rejected the claims of the rationalists and idealists in favor of that which was preeminently empirically demonstrable, a safe position in the midst of extravagant claims, but they lost some of the wonder of what imagination can do.

We come now to two specialized epistemologies invented by the world because no single epistemology satisfied the needs of knowing. These special variations are scholarship and science.

**8** *Scholarship* is the search for accuracy and truth in historical matters by limiting one's evidence to that which is publicly documented. Thus the scholar must become the master of all extant documentary evidence related to a topic of choice, and from the massed evidence construct a picture of the past which contains as little interpolation (filling in the blanks) as possible while explaining all of the documentary evidence available. One example of good scholarly enterprise for



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Latter-day Saints is genealogical research, where every conclusion should be backed up by actual documentary evidence.

Scholarship is a great advance on ordinary story-telling, but it has its limitations as well. The documentary evidence may itself have been created by very biased persons who were not interested in the truth. No matter what language the documents are written in, interpretation of the recorded evidence introduces many chances for error. Sometimes documents have been deliberately destroyed to hide the truth, thus leaving only conjecture possible. And sometimes supposed documents are actually clever forgeries, as in the case of the Salamander Papers in recent LDS church history.

But notwithstanding the problems, scholarship is a legitimate and valuable tool in the hands of any person who will learn to use it carefully.

**9** *Science* is the creation of rationally consistent explanations of publicly observable phenomena. Publicly observable phenomena are the results of physical experiments or direct observations which any skilled person can observe or reproduce. Rationally consistent explanations are accountings for a set of phenomenal data which are consistent with other accepted theoretical explanations in the particular scientific field.

For instance, it had been noted that moldy bread when eaten by some persons seemed to improve their health. Most people were rightly sceptical that there was any connection between the eating of the moldy bread and improved health. But then when penicillin was developed it turned out that the moldy bread was actually a natural form of penicillin and penicillin contains a substance which has the ability to inhibit the growth of bacteria in the human body. So after the scientific explanation was developed, the eating of moldy bread to improve health was no longer such a far-fetched idea.

Science depends upon the statistical manipulation (rational use) of arrays of empirical data, coupled with theoretical explanations as to what is happening. Science has proved to be a powerful and valuable way of knowing, though not infallible. When science fails it is because the evidence observed was not sufficient or representative (though unscrupulous persons have sometimes "fabricated" evidence), or because the wrong premises were used in interpreting the data (e.g., it was once assumed that heat was an actual substance), or because the proponents of science overstep their bounds and claim that conjectures are truth in things that cannot be known scientifically (like the origin of life on the earth).

Technology is the ability to do things physical. Science is often confused with technology in the minds of persons who do not think much about epistemology. Technology is the "how to do things" knowledge of the human race, the sum of the pragmatic knowledge available, whereas science is the creation of explanations for what can be and is done technically. In today's world, science has better press than technology, so science gets a lot of credit for doing things which are simply technical abilities.

For a long time in history, technology and science were quite separate disciplines. The craftsmen were the technologists and made steel even though they could not explain why what they did worked. Scientists were busy inventing theories to explain things but paid no attention to mundane things like making steel. But as scientific experiments grew more technical and demanding, scientists

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had to call on the craftsmen to build and operate their equipment. And as technology advanced, scientific explanations began to aid the development of technology (instead of the old try this and try that method of pragmatism), as when the atomic bomb was invented through theoretical calculations. Today science and technology, scientists and engineers, work hand in hand to increase the power of human beings to build and destroy.

There yet remain two ways of knowing. These are as important as the rest, but are usually neglected in the study of epistemology. These are conscience and personal revelation. They are rejected by the world because the results from them have been so varied and different for different persons, and because they demand moral living, which the world wishes to avoid.

**10** *Conscience* is the Light of Christ which comes to all persons of normal mentality on this earth. It has the specific function to give a witness of what is good. Satan is also abroad and spreads ideas and feelings of evil in the hearts and minds of men. Thus all men are immersed in a sea of spiritual enticement, being enticed to hurt one another, to steal, to lie, to commit sexual sin, etc., by Satan; and at the same time they are enticed to be good to one another, to share, to tell the truth, to be sexually pure and faithful, by the light of Christ. It is the opposition of these two enticements in each human life which creates agency, the opportunity to choose for oneself one's course of life.

There is no other way to know what is good other than the light of Christ. True, someone may tell you what they think is good, as parents and friends usually do, but to know for sure what is really good comes only from the light of Christ. One may reason what might be good, but that only works if the premises are good, which simply pushes the problem back one step. We cannot observe empirically what is good and bad. Pragmatism does not help. We are left to the enticing of our own heart. We are free because the good from Christ and the evil from Satan are not labeled: we must place the labels on them. Thus some call abortion good because they want it to be good, while others hearken to the light



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require the light of Christ  
and personal revelation  
from God.**

of Christ and recognize it as a great evil. This matter of conscience and telling what is good and what is evil puts human beings on unequal ground: each person must go by the witness of his own heart as to which is the good and which is the evil. Those whose hearts are more evil than good think that evil is good. Those whose hearts are more good than evil tend to think that good is good. Thus all mankind are free to choose for themselves.

**11** *Personal revelation* is the direct communication of God to the heart, and mind, or body of a human being by God. It generally follows the light of Christ and comes only to those who choose to accept and live by the light of Christ. Personal revelation is given to direct and empower the servants of God. Because it always has a rational message and discernable content, it is not mysticism (though some persons call it that any-

way). Personal revelation is the key to knowing all things, and to know them in the best way; but it is available only to those who live by the light of Christ and choose good over evil. So it is relatively unknown by the world, and where it is known, it is usually despised as an aberration on human intelligence.

There is a great danger in personal revelation, for Satan can and does give personal revelation abundantly. The safeguard is in paying attention to the light of Christ: one who has mastered the difference between good and evil will easily discern the good revelations from God as distinct from the evil revelations of Satan. All these revelations come through the voice of conscience, but must be discerned by the heart.

A wise Latter-day Saint will know and use all of the epistemologies, employing each where most needed and most valuable. But the most important epistemologies are those of conscience, the light of Christ and personal revelation. To make a living, to subdue natural forces, to work in political situations among men, all require special epistemological techniques which one shares with the world. But to be righteous, to build an eternal family, to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth and to further the eternal welfare of the souls of men require the light of Christ and personal revelation from God. All these epistemologies are treasures, but two are most valuable above all the others.

It remains now to discuss how each of these epistemologies relates to and contributes to the building of a testimony of the truth of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A testimony is two things: a personal knowledge of the truth of something, and the bearing witness of that knowledge. The first is the more important, but the second is one of the great building blocks of the Kingdom of God on the earth. When enough people have solid testimonies, and those solid testimonies have been witnessed to every soul on the earth, the earth will be ready for the second coming of its true king, Jesus Christ.

Authoritarianism is important to a testimony because if we know persons who

are reliable and responsible human beings and they bear testimony to us about the gospel, we have good reason to investigate seriously the possibility that we could also find out the truth of this matter. But we can never settle for the testimony of someone else. We must have our own light, our own independent evidence, to be sure.

Rationalism helps us with a testimony because the single important criterion for rational certitude is consistency. If we find that the gospel is consistent with itself, that is good. That does not of itself mean that we have established the truth, but if we were to discover actual inconsistencies in the doctrines of the gospel, we would have good reason to reject the message. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ has been attacked by the enemies of the church for over a century and a half in the attempt to find some inconsistency. But the enemies fail, because there are none, and any person who thinks he or she has uncovered one is showing that they do not yet understand what they are talking about. One of the wonderful things about the restored gospel is that it is a logical redoubt, a fortress of good ideas which are totally consistent with each other.

Empiricism is important to a testimony because there needs to be something physical, something tangible, to help us come to knowledge. The outstanding piece of physical evidence for the truthfulness of the gospel is the existence of the Book of Mormon. That volume is a living miracle. To read and understand it is to see the hand of God moving to bless all the people of this earth with true concepts about Jesus Christ and how to come to him. The enemies of the Church have tried for this century and a half to find out who "really" wrote the book, because all of Joseph Smith's contemporaries knew he did not have enough background to have invented it. The only hypothesis which fits the known historical facts is the simple claim of Joseph himself: he translated it from ancient records by the gift and power of God.

Statistical empiricism makes its contribution to the work of the Lord in practical matters such as missionary work (coming to know what kind of person is most likely to listen to the message), but



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its contribution to a testimony is largely subsumed under empiricism. The practical help of statistical empiricism must always be counterbalanced against the witness of the Holy Spirit, for sometimes the most unlikely persons are the most receptive to the gospel message.

Pragmatism makes a magnificent contribution to a testimony. The gospel is the message that if we will put our trust in

Jesus Christ (faith), change our ways to become like him (repentance), we will know of the doctrine's truth because we will be given the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. Everyone who has accepted baptism and the confirmational challenge to receive the Holy Ghost into their lives knows that the message really does have pragmatic value: the presence of the Holy Ghost in their lives is the manifest evidence that they are on the true path which leads to godliness.

Mysticism does not make a contribution to a real testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel, so far as I can ascertain. Mysticism seems to be a counterfeit of revelation. My advice is to be wary of it, and to seek divine revelation instead.

Scepticism does contribute to a testimony. It does so by getting us to check every piece of evidence we have and to discard that which is illusory or unreliable. False testimonies from other persons, false stories that sound like faith-promoting incidents, false interpretations of scripture and doctrine — all can tend to destroy the strength of an otherwise



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good set of evidence. So we need to be careful that we do not allow any "junk" into our treasury of evidences.

Science contributes to a testimony by discovering the grand order and design of the world in which we live. All physical things bear witness of their maker, our Father in Heaven, and science can help us to understand and marvel at the goodness of our God in providing us with such a beautiful and intricately fashioned sphere of existence. Science of itself does not and cannot prove that there is a God or

that he created this world. But if we know those things from other evidence, knowledge of science can strengthen our testimony.

Scholarship has its place in building testimony by showing us that in every culture and religion there are remnants of the true gospel and of the true ordinances. Adam and Eve knew the gospel and the ordinances, and their children have carried traces of those blessings unto the latest generation.

But the most important elements of a



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testimony come through our own personal spiritual experience. He who rejects the light of Christ will never have a testimony of the truth of spiritual things until it is too late, until he dies and discovers he is still alive or is resurrected and physically faces the Savior.

But those who do accept the light of Christ come to love good, and their love of good leads them to more good, which leads them to the witness of the Holy Ghost. That witness is the indispensable core and foundation of any real testimony. To know the truthfulness of the way of the restored gospel by the Holy Ghost after seeking good through the light of Christ is to grasp the iron rod which leads along the path to eternal life. (To seek revelation from the Holy Ghost without first clearly distinguishing good from evil by living by the light of Christ is to invite confusion and gives Satan power to give us false revelation which we cannot correctly identify.)

The person who is founded upon the rock of revelation from the Holy Ghost, and is surrounded by the additions of authority, reason, experience, pragmatism, science, and scholarship has built his own secure redoubt which can be the foundation of an eternal life and an eternal kingdom. It is a prize greatly to be desired, and one within the grasp of every child of God on this earth.

It is good to know. But it is better to know that we know. ■

**Chauncey Riddle is a professor emeritus of Philosophy.**

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