

KNOWING BY FAITH

Virgil Warren, PhD

Limitations of science

Science has three major limitations. First, (1) science cannot deal with universals, or absolutes. It is subject to “the plague of particularity” because it is limited to the inductive approach. Science can form and test hypotheses, which are mental deductions from previous particulars; but these hypotheses are approximate, since they are based on limited previous experience. Since science cannot deal with the absolutes of universal space or eternal time, science cannot lead to an adequate understanding of “the big picture.” In short, science cannot produce a worldview. It deals more with particulars than with systematics.

The second limitation is that (2) science cannot deal with history strictly speaking because it can deal only with recurring processes. At best, science can extrapolate backwards into the past (including cosmogony) and forward into the future (eschatology) on the assumption of uniformitarianism. The uniformitarian assumption is that the same set of factors has always and everywhere been operative (at least potentially so) although the rate of these processes may vary.

Thirdly, (3) science cannot deal with what lies beyond the space-time “material” universe. It can deal only with natural processes. Science, then, is in no place to pronounce denials on the existence of arenas outside the realm it can investigate.

Christian epistemology

Christianity does not deal with the metaphysical realm or even the real, spiritual realm directly. With their physical senses—extended and intensified by instrumentation, people can come to know what lies beyond the natural realm by intervention of the supernatural into the natural. Intervention makes the supernatural able to be experienced indirectly and approximately in the natural. Intervention can occur in a way that is visible; visible intervention into the natural realm is called “miracle,” a form of “manifestation.” Miracle produces results that natural processes do not produce. The issue is how the effect is produced, not what effect is produced. The same effect may come by natural or supernatural means.

In 2 Corinthians 5:7 Paul parenthetically makes an important statement about living that has far-reaching implications for how we know: “*We walk by faith, not by sight.*” “Walking” refers to the conduct of life. Since conducting life depends on knowing how to conduct life, Paul implies something about how we know how to live. We come to know that by faith more than by sight. Faith/trust/belief involves a second person who stands in the gap between the ignorant first person and the thing to be known (epistemology), even as a second person stands in the gap between the dependent first person in need and the result bestowed (salvation). “Sight” is evidently Paul’s word for direct experience; so “faith” is his word for the alternative to direct experience, alternatives channeled through other persons. This category includes indirect experience of the experienceable and revelation about the unexperienceable supernatural. In

general, we know through other persons (faith) what we cannot know by personal experience (sight)—including sensory perception.

Some things we can know by trusting other people or by our own direct sight, but the practical limitations of time and space mean that, in fact, we know even most natural things by trust in testimony rather than direct experience. We know them interpersonally rather than scientifically. Some things cannot even be known by direct sight—the supernatural as well as the universals of time and space within the natural.

So, faith does not contrast with knowledge, but with sight. Faith and sight are two ways to obtain knowledge. Sight is direct experience through the senses, and faith is indirect experience through the testimony of persons. The popular approach equates knowledge and certainty with science, on the one hand, and religion with faith and uncertainty, on the other. That arrangement creates the notion that science is certain and religion is uncertain; science is objective and religion subjective; science is rational and religion is affective. That approach does not represent the real situation either for science or religion, because most of what scientists know they have not directly experienced or personally verified, and much of what religion deals with applies to objective existence.