

# Unfathomed Knowledge, Unmeasured Worth and Growth?

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W. W. Bartley III, *Unfathomed Knowledge, Unmeasured Wealth: On Universities and the Wealth of Nations*. Open Court, La Salle, IL, 1990.

*Unfathomed Knowledge, Unmeasured Wealth* takes to task professional philosophy, the sociology of knowledge, and universities and their faculties in general. The book's central contention is that "there is a *world-wide* slump in the amount of knowledge generated by universities, a slump which prevails in all except a few scientific disciplines" (p. 121). According to Bartley, this regrettable state of affairs has arisen because of the undue influence of false philosophies and sterile theories. These factors have led universities and their faculties to adopt a noncompetitive orientation which undercuts the growth of knowledge.

The "unfathomed knowledge" of the title refers to Bartley's view that truth is not manifest but, rather, that knowledge claims (and economic products) are not fully understood by their producers (cf. p. 27). The informative content of our ideas or theories (the set of claims incompatible with them) is infinite, and the producers of the ideas or theories cannot be aware of all of this content. Instead, each individual accesses only a "slice" of the idea or theory, and each idea or theory must be considered as an objective product. Ideas or theories, like spiders' webs and birds' nests, are objective products that may be studied independently of the intentions of their producers.

Bartley's overall orientation is derived from those of Karl Popper and F. A. von Hayek. His "pancritical" rationalist is interested in an idea's criticizability rather than in its credentials. Such rationalists maintain that rationality dictates that we hold our ideas or theories critically (instead of requiring that we provide justifications for our views). As Bartley sees it, both the competition of ideas and the competition of products are "discovery" processes. He maintains that epistemology studies the growth of knowledge, knowledge is a form of wealth, economics studies the growth and contraction of wealth, and, therefore, epistemology is a branch of economics (cf. p. 89). Thus the

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central concern of epistemology must be to better understand the conditions that contribute to the growth and contraction of knowledge.

Unfortunately, instead of concerning itself with the study of the ideas and institutions that foster the competitive processes that engender the growth of knowledge, traditional epistemology sought out the credentials that would validate our ideas or theories. Bartley quickly summarizes his criticism of traditional justificatory epistemology near the end of this book (a criticism developed in detail in Bartley 1984). He maintains that the most comprehensive justificationalists would justify all of their beliefs or theories. They run into traditional skeptical and fideistic challenges as they attempt to rationally justify their commitment to rationalism—their efforts to validate their standards of rationality engender circularity, vicious infinite regress, or kerygmatic expressions of unjustified faith. More “limited” justificationalists, on the other hand, limit the scope of rationality, maintaining that our standards of justification are not subject to justification and that justificatory questions arise only relative to these unjustifiable standards. Such views encourage fideism, however, and they lead to a situation wherein epistemologists are limited to describing the standards adopted by groups of individuals.

As Bartley tells the story, such “limited” rationalisms lead to the currently popular “sociology of knowledge” approach to epistemological problems championed by Thomas Kuhn. This orientation aims to “chart causal relationships between personal or political conditions or interests and knowledge, to demonstrate that all knowledge is the expression of and determined by special interests” (p. 73). Bartley contends that the “unfathomable” character of our ideas or theories undercuts the sociological approach to epistemology. Because knowledge claims are unfathomable to those who advance them, they cannot be the expression of either individual or group interests:

Ideas are not fully known to their inventors or to the communities that first sponsor them; they are autonomous and may turn out to have implications and unintended consequences contrary to the interests of their inventors or sponsoring communities. Ideas not only express the interests of the communities; they often contradict and sometimes transform the interests of the communities in which they originate. (p. 74)

Bartley believes that the popularity of the sociology of knowledge approach to epistemology helps explain the failure of contemporary universities to generate knowledge. The Kuhnian orientation is incompatible with the notion of a free market of ideas. Instead of viewing university professors as involved in a competitive enterprise oriented toward the growth of knowledge, the sociologist of knowledge emphasizes the role of precedent and tradition in their activities. According to this orientation, reigning “paradigms” dominate the intellectual landscape, and the university environment consists of professional “disciplines” that are independent and cannot sit in judgment on one another. Where intellectual revolutions occur, according to

the sociologist of knowledge, the changes in the intellectual landscape are not made for rational reasons, and such changes leave us with incommensurable theories and revolutionary change rather than with the growth of knowledge. The adherents of the dominant paradigms can be expected to resist such change with all the resources available to them.

As Bartley sees it, university professors today *need* the sort of ideology offered by a Kuhnian sociology of knowledge to legitimate their academic practices. Because they are mainly concerned with protecting their property rights to their ideas and with ensuring that there is a consistency between their ideas and those of their particular professional communities, competitive structures are stifled, and static structures which enable the elite to enforce their ideas are encouraged. Indeed, Bartley maintains,

the chief institutions of contemporary research—especially those connected with faculty hiring, graduate research and the professions—are late feudal in character. The departments and professions consist in arrangements more closely resembling fiefdoms, guilds, cartels, and mutual-protection rackets than any free-market arrangements; and they are primarily concerned not with the production of innovative knowledge, but with the control of entry, the gaining of “livings,” the placements of vassals, and the controlled production and protection from competition of noninnovative alleged knowledge. A great number of ideas widely supposed to be crucial amongst academics would perish if not endowed with the intellectual equivalent of price supports, which I take to be the real function of such institutions as required courses in university catalogues. The university has become a virtually ideal setting for those who want to gain a sheltered pulpit. (pp. 114-15)

According to Bartley, “pancritical” rationalism prescribes a cure for the above malady. By emphasizing the unfathomable character of our ideas or theories, by emphasizing the central importance of criticism and the critical endeavor, and by emphasizing the economic character of epistemology it would encourage free market structures that would engender the growth of human knowledge. As he sees it,

competition not only makes the best use of *existing* knowledge, but also generates knowledge that *none* of the participants in the process as yet possesses. In their interaction, various participants can bring to bear their dispersed, specialized individual knowledge on the unknown and unfathomable object-product. In doing so they may discover more of its potentialities and utilize it accordingly. . . . The market process elicits or creates not-yet-existing knowledge about already existing products, as well as creating new products. (p. 65)

At the core of Bartley’s positive theory is the view that the pancritical rationalism which he recommends is conducive to the growth of knowledge. Given his contention that the truth is not manifest, however, it is not clear

what entitles him to this claim. This worry is illegitimate, of course, if it amounts to nothing more than the question "What justifies Bartley's commitment to pancritical rationalism?"—his pancritical rationalism rejects such justificational questions, and a demand for such a justification would be question-begging. Nonetheless, Bartley's positive contribution hinges on the claim that pancritical rationalism has the advantage of leading to the growth of knowledge—he claims that Kuhn's sociological approach to epistemology is only able to talk about belief *change* and that epistemologists must understand the factors that lead to the *growth* of knowledge.

For Bartley, "growth" has a positive connotation—growth of knowledge is movement toward truth. If the term is to have this connotation rather than suggesting, for example, the development of cancerous tissue in an otherwise healthy organism (or the growth of pollution in a previously unpolluted ecosystem), then the "changes" in our ideas and theories must be evaluated and measured against some standard, and the pancritical rationalist must provide such a standard if this view is to be ultimately satisfactory. Of course, pancritical rationalists do not wish to offer a standard of growth that is rooted in the sociologists' orientation—they wish to speak of the objective growth of knowledge (and wish to claim that free market competition is conducive to, indeed perhaps necessary for, this growth).

Clearly, the pancritical rationalist will maintain that the only standard available is that of criticizability—criticizable ideas or beliefs that withstand the test of criticism will be ones rated higher on the scale of growth than others. Given the claim that truth is not manifest, however, it is not clear how the pancritical rationalist can sustain this sort of claim. The pancritical rationalists may be thoroughly consistent in their commitment to criticism (on this issue see essays in Radnitzky and Bartley 1987), but if they cannot provide some assurance that the changes recommended by their methodology constitute growth rather than mere change, their criticism of the Kuhnian epistemological orientation hoists them on their own petard.

At the core, Bartley's epistemology is an evolutionary one that holds that

the question of the justification of opinion is as irrelevant as a question about whether a particular mutation is justified. . . . The issue, rather, is of the viability of the mutation—or proposed opinion. That question is resolved through exposing the opinion to pressures, such as those of natural selection—or attempted criticism and refutation. Mere survival for a time is not enough to show either adaptation or truth; a species that survives for thousands of years may eventually become extinct just as a theory that survived for many generations may eventually be refuted. (p. 241)

There is a danger that Bartley is misled by the biological metaphor he adopts, however. Natural selection offers a clear standard for judging mutations (or changes), and this standard may be extended for longer or shorter periods of

time depending on the choice of the individual who examines the changes in the populations and environments. But there is no other test than this available in biology—there is no truth against which mutations may be judged except their conduciveness to survival over time. In the epistemological realm, however, Bartley is not willing to let the matter end with an idea's ability to withstand criticism over selected periods of time. *Truth* is the goal he seeks, and growth is the end he would have our epistemology and universities serve. It is not clear how he can sustain these ends with his chosen methodology.

Bartley contends that

human knowledge grows by the method of variation and selection found in living organisms. Furthermore, evolutionary adaptation in organisms is also a knowledge process, a process in which information about the environment is incorporated into the organism. Human knowledge—like the processes for acquiring knowledge—increases by conjecture (blind variation or untested new theories) and refutation (selective retention). This process resembles evolution with variations of organic forms sometimes surviving, sometimes disappearing. (p. 241)

Unless one accepts some Peircian or Hegelian model according to which the evolution tends toward a predetermined end, however, one must recognize that the biological or conceptual changes that occur over any period of time need not carry any positive implications for the future. What is presently survival-conducive (or whatever presently survives criticism) need not be such in the future. Where one lacks a separate standard (or where that standard is not manifest), the collective process of change (whether we are considering the biological or conceptual case) is correctly described as growth only if "growth" means no more than that the particular changes that have occurred have occurred.

If Bartley's contention that the pancritical rationalists' methodology is growth-conducive cannot be sustained, then his recommendation that universities overthrow their current ideology and structure and adopt, instead, his preferred model so that they can engender growth (rather than mere change) loses much of its force. Indeed, his view appears, in this case, to fall prey to exactly the sort of criticism he offers of the sociologists' epistemology and the current ideology and structure of universities.

Those who find some solace in the criticism just offered should not rest easily, however. To establish that Bartley's preferred orientation might be on the same footing as the sociological one does not in any way legitimate the current orientation. Most academics pay extensive lip service to the goal of contributing to the growth of knowledge and to the importance of the free interplay of ideas, and Bartley's scathing portrayal of the current state of affairs certainly has a germ of truth in it. But the remedy he proposes might not cure the disease he identifies; thus some cure must be found.

## REFERENCES

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