Chapter III

Seeds of Knowledge: Nuggets, Memes, and the Search for the Basic Unit

What is the basic unit of knowledge? To answer this pesky query means to also reveal what is knowledge and perhaps even what is the structure of knowledge. In such a pursuit we should start with some definitions of types and forms of knowledge, so that we can possibly gain desired common ground. In the previous chapter I discussed the recent focus on propositions and language as descriptors of knowledge. These are active at the level of words, concepts, and even complex notions, such as “belief” and “justification.”

There have been several attempts to distinguish between “knowledge” and “to know,” as well as distinct definitions of knowledge as “warranted belief” or “actionable information” (e.g., Werkmeister, 1948; Harman, 2002; Dewey, 1977; Cadamer, 1977). Table 1 shows the intersect between the descriptors of knowledge and their attributes.

Table 1 shows, for example, that knowledge sometimes has been described as “functional,” so that it serves some human purpose or is a tool in human
activities. Such knowledge-as-function may be “true” (when considered through the lens of propositions) or “false,” or serve an ethical function, or be viewed as human competence.

The distinction between the knower and to know has been extended from simply being an issue of terminology (Williamson, 1999) to an examination of cognitive processes and the internal representation of human knowledge. Hence this extension attempts to link the knower and the process of what constitutes to know (Harman, 2002).

In his book on creative evolution, published in 1911, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) succinctly summarized the relationship between the knower and knowledge, or in his terms, between intelligence and reality (see Bergson, 1998). He argued that: “Human intelligence, as we represent it, is not at all what Plato taught in the allegory of the cave…To act and to know that we are acting, to come into touch with reality and even to live it, but only in the measure in which it concerns the work that is being accomplished and the furrow that is being plowed, such is the function of human intelligence” (p. 191).

I cite Bergson because he is an excellent example of a perspective of knowledge that views it as a function of human action, exercised at the level of human cognition, intelligence, or the sphere of conceptual thinking. Kant’s distinction between the “things-in-themselves” (the “true” reality of which we do not know) and our perception of reality as “knowable” reality is maintained by those scholars who view knowledge either as a function or at the conceptual level of analysis. This has led to implications in political theory and other social sciences and to a field of “history of ideas” in which ideas or complex concepts are traced through history, geography, and social environments to determine their diffusion, growth, absorption, and transformation.¹ These ideas or concepts are also values embedded in people and their societies.

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