



Knowledge and intuition

Greg Koukl

, Thomas Hardy listed intuition as the first evidence for the logician. Learn how to use an appeal to man's intuitive knowledge to defend your Christian world view.

I had some great conversations with a single's group at a retreat in the mountains this weekend. We focused on making a careful, clear-headed defense of biblical Christianity. When the topic got around to how we know things, the issue of intuition came up.

It seems that as I grow as an apologist, I rely more and more on the relevance of intuition as a way of knowing. I'd like to explain to you what I mean by intuition and show you how capitalizing on the notion of intuition could help you cover a lot of ground when you defend your faith.

We did something at this retreat I've never done before, but I'm going to do it again because it was so effective. I often close a talk with a session of Q&A, though sometimes the entire session is an informal Q&A, much like the radio show. That's fun for me. It's relaxed, interactive, and I can respond to the most pressing needs facing the audience. This time we did Q&A with a twist.

I started the morning with a talk on the apparent contradiction between James and Paul and the question of faith versus works in salvation ('Faith and Works? Paul vs. James'). Afterwards, the group leader handed out a list of the ten most difficult questions he thought Christians had to answer in defense of the faith--things like the historical accuracy of the Bible, innocent children dying of disease and earthquakes, the problem of evil, how we know Jesus ever existed, the

argument that all religions ultimately lead to God, and so on.

The leader then divided the group into ten smaller groups, one for each question, and gave them 15 minutes to ponder the issue. When they reconvened, we dealt with each question individually. This let them work through the issue on their own--which was a lot of fun--but also gave me an opportunity to respond with more insight and input, such as I was able.

There were times when I responded to things with, 'Yes, I think you're generally on the right track here, but you've got to be careful--more precise--in how you put it. The specific way you've stated it takes you in a wrong direction, which will cause you problems down the line.'

Or, 'Here's another angle. Instead of 'preaching' at a person by simply telling him the answer, it might be better to ask him a question leading him to your point of view.' Then I gave some examples of questions he might use with that particular issue. (If you've listened to the show or our tapes for very long, you'll recognize this as the 'Colombo' tactic. You take the offensive by asking a penetrating questions which you know the answer to, fair but leading questions that help you make your point more effectively.)

As I responded to the group, I realized I was using the Colombo tactic in a very particular way, a variation, so to speak.

There are certain things you must know immediately -- directly -- in order to have the tools you need to begin learning other things.

I'm convinced that many of the things essential to a Christian world view are things all human beings already believe without being told: the idea that human beings are special, valuable, made in the image of God and have transcendent value; that there's purpose in life; that man is not only valuable, but twisted, sinful, and guilty and deserves to be punished; that God is real and has made an orderly universe and designed it for a purpose. These are a few things off the top of my head, essential parts of the Christian view of the world that I believe every person already knows deep down inside.

Some of these things I mentioned are known through the faculty of intuition. When I say 'intuition,' I mean something very particular. I don't mean female intuition--a type of insight into a circumstance. I don't mean a hunch about something. I mean a way of knowing which is immediate and direct. It's knowledge you start with, knowledge that's already built in. Our founding fathers called it 'self-evident' truth.

This kind of truth isn't a result of reasoning to a conclusion, so intuitional knowledge doesn't require a defense. Some people are uncomfortable with this notion. It seems like cheating. Philosopher J.P. Moreland has pointed out, though, that if you can't know some things without knowing why you know them--if you don't have some things in place to begin with--you can't know anything at all. You can't even begin the task of discovery. Aristotle said that some things can't be proved, but without them you can't prove anything.

There are certain things you must know immediately--directly--in order to have the tools you need to begin learning other things. For example, how is it that you know--and you're going to say that only a philosopher would ask this kind of question--how is it you know which body in the room is your own? How do you know that you inhabit the body you normally call yours?

How does Greg Koukl know he inhabits and possesses the body that's sitting right now behind the mike in the KBRT studios? I don't reason my way to this knowledge. It's something I know through introspective awareness. I'm introspectively aware of the fact that I'm unified with this body.

If you tell me to prove it, you'd be making an odd request. Maybe an evidence might be that when I will my hand to move, then it's the hand of this body that begins moving, not the hand of the body across the room. That might be an indication to me which body is mine. But it seems unreasonable for me to have to offer such evidence, because my knowledge of which body is my own is immediate, an intuitive awareness that gives me truth about the world.

I use this bizarre example for a reason. The answer to the question of which body is our own

seems so obvious one wonders why even ask the question? That's the point. We ask the question because we're trying to get at the foundation of knowledge and not take anything for granted. But it seems like a foolish question, because it's so obvious which body is ours. We know the answer directly. We take it for granted, and we think it's foolish to even question it. That's the power of intuitive knowledge. I think we know many things like that.

Part of the tactical approach I take as a Christian apologist that capitalizes on the fact of intuitional knowledge is a concept I call 'Back of the Book.' I know things that are true about people I've only just met, but they don't know I know. I know some of their secrets, in a sense. How do I know them? Because God has revealed, in the Bible, things that are true about every human being. I've read the 'back of the book'; I know how the story ends. I've peeked into the person's private file, and so can you.

Because the Book tells us true things about every human being--awareness of God's existence, the sense of our own value, a knowledge of our own sin and guilt, etc.--we can appeal to those things knowing we're touching a nerve. Even if a person denies these things are true, I know he's lying to himself. In his heart of hearts he knows it, and in unguarded moments the truth comes out from his own lips. How does he know it? Through intuition.

During our 'Science and Faith' conference last week, I fielded this question: How do we know there's purpose in the universe? How can I prove it? My response was that purpose isn't something we argue for; it's something we're already aware of. Even the person challenging me believes that human beings have purpose, even if he's not immediately aware of it.

How do we make him see it? **I ask him a question which causes the intuition to rise to the surface**. For example, if somebody challenges about purpose in life, I'll ask him if he's ever talked anyone out of suicide. Has he ever deplored a young person's 'untimely' death? Has he ever called such a thing tragic? A child dies of a disease. A car full of promising high school seniors out for a night on the town gets hit by a train, and they all perish. Has he ever called such

a thing tragic?

Virtually everyone, when faced with a potential suicide, will try to talk the person out of it. Now, here's the question: Why? Why talk someone out of suicide if life has no purpose? Everyone, at some time or another, has shaken his head at the tragedy of an untimely death. Why is it tragic when a six-year-old dies of leukemia, or a car load of high school honor students perishes at a railroad crossing? Why is that tragic? Because an untimely death is one that happens **before its time**, before a certain purpose is accomplished?

Now the question you must ask yourself is this: 'What religious view makes sense out of the idea that human beings have purpose?'

Our reactions to these things--suicide, untimely deaths, etc.--are spontaneous, immediate, and intuitive. Deep down inside we know that each person's life is meant for something. It's not just that they have personal aspirations. A very young child dying of leukemia doesn't have aspirations. We consider it a tragedy for a different reason: The child did not accomplish what she was--watch this--'meant' to accomplish. We're not sure about the specifics of her purpose, but we're sure some purpose was intended, ergo the 'tragedy' of the 'untimely' death. We're so sure of transcendent human purpose that we try to stop people from killing themselves and 'wasting' their lives.

In the same way, we consider it tragic if someone makes a conscious decision (as opposed to being pressed into poverty by circumstance) to be a bum, begging and living under a freeway in cardboard boxes. The more libertarian among us would no doubt acknowledge a person's 'right' to live as he wants, but even the libertarian has a nagging sense that this life is being wasted. By contrast, we look at someone like Mother Theresa or Jonas Salk, and we applaud them for having accomplished something wonderful, having fulfilled something of their purpose in life.

My point is this: How do those observations make any sense if there's no purpose in life? If we have no purpose outside of us, then in what sense is it a waste when a child is struck down in its infancy? In what sense is it a waste when young high school students are killed in an auto

accident? In what sense is it a waste when someone with tremendous gifts wastes away his life sitting under a tree or a freeway abutment? Why is that a waste?

If I presented these questions to you outside of a religious context--that is, if you weren't trying to second guess me and protect yourself--your immediate response would be, 'It's obvious! Human beings ought to fulfill their potential. If someone kills himself, he's wasting his life.'

But why would any suicide be tragic, if there were no purpose to life? If there's no purpose, then there's no tragedy, no waste. Yet we intuitively know these things are tragic losses. Therefore, our lives must have some purpose waiting to be discovered and lived.

This is one extended example of all kinds of things we're aware of, things we know intuitively. We haven't thought them through, but our language gives us away.

So, when somebody makes a statement like, 'Prove to me there's purpose in life,' my answer is, 'You already know there's purpose.' He may not know what the purpose is, but he already knows human life is meaningful. We all know that. We know it intuitively.

Now the question you must ask yourself is this: 'What religious view makes sense out of the idea that human beings have purpose? Maybe a handful of them do, and then you have to go further to decide between them. But some religious views don't seem to make any sense out of life at all, and those must be false, because they don't explain the world as it really is.'

You see what I've done? Instead of arguing for a Christian point of view, I start with an intuition and I ask questions to get a person in touch with their own intuitive knowledge. Then I ask them to make sense out of it. As a Christian, I don't have that problem. I can make sense out of it. The Bible explains it. The truth it describes fits the real world and resonates with our own deepest intuitions about life.

Digging deeper link:

Intuition a different kind of knowing?

