John Stackhouse's Vocation-Centered Epistemology

Myron A. Penner
Trinity Western University

John Stackhouse's *Need to Know* is an ambitious book. Stackhouse's stated aim is to provide a model for Christian *thinking*—that is, how to think, as a *Christian*. Thus, the concept of *vocation* is a natural structuring motif for Stackhouse's project because according to Stackhouse, vocation is "the divine calling to be a Christian in every mode of life" (68). This divine calling extends, for Stackhouse, to the realm of thought and the most basic aspects of human consciousness.

Stackhouse appropriates a wide variety of disciplines in laying the groundwork for, and then ultimately presenting and applying, his model for Christian thinking. He employs concepts and data from history, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, theology, and biblical studies, to name a few, en route to describing his preferred model for Christian thought. The result is a sweeping and in many respects impressive survey of areas relevant to his model. Here are just a few examples. Through the survey of what he terms "cognitive styles," Stackhouse orients the reader to prominent themes from the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Postmodernity. Sensitive to both complex historical and contemporary circumstances, Stackhouse avoids the simplistic silo approach to intellectual history in which movements and individuals are wholly captured by some particular label, noting that different emphases from each theme can be found throughout history. In accessible and informed prose, Stackhouse helps the reader through basic issues of biblical interpretation and the narrative arc of biblical theology as a story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. In my view, Stackhouse's footing is most sure when discussing issues of biblical and theological interpretation.

Need to Know's five chapters manoeuvre through the following progression. Our current epistemic context is pluralistic, embodying a mix of complex and intermingled cognitive styles (Chapter 1). Because vocation is the call to be Christian in all of life, this call extends to our cognitive life (Chapter 2). Thinking as a Christian is done within the cognitive confines of five epistemic resources: experience, tradition, scholarship, art, and scripture. These five resources can be apprehended via reflective reason, pre-reflective intuition, and imagination (Chapter 3). Thinking Christianly entails, as one is able in the particular context in which God has placed one, putting these epistemic resources apprehended in various modes in conversation with each other, for the express purpose of making shalom (Chapter 4). As a result, Christians will apportion assent according to the evidences yielded by consulting all the resources and modes available to one in their vocational context, an enterprise suitably understood as finite, fallible, but conducive to human flourishing (Chapter 5).

Stackhouse's approach, if not refuting the goals and projects of more traditional and more philosophically oriented epistemology, certainly re-orients epistemology by subordinating the cognitive enterprise to the focus of vocation. As a result, we get Stackhouse's most provocative claim, and one that most distinctly sets him apart from traditional epistemology: "As gaining knowledge helps us to [maximize *shalom*], God can be counted on to provide it as we seek it properly. As gaining knowledge will *not* help us to do that, Christian epistemology acknowledges that God will not give us what is, in this respect, gratuitous or even counterproductive knowledge" (20).

Let's put Stackhouse's claim in sharp relief against the contours of traditional epistemology. In the tradition of western philosophy going back to at least to Plato, philosophers have been concerned to identify what separates knowledge from mere true belief. Happy accidents and lucky guesses can produce beliefs that are true. But if believing true things matters, and we want to have some hope that one's beliefs have a good chance—that is, a likelihood higher than mere chance—of being true, we'll need to understand and pay attention to those features of belief that help make it likely that one's beliefs are true. Perhaps these properties are internal to the subject's awareness and to some degree a function of the subject's control. Perhaps these properties are external to the subject's awareness and merely a product of reliable, truth-oriented, cognitive faculties. Or perhaps these epistemic good-making properties involve some combination of internal and external factors. But whatever the case, what typically has united epistemologists in their systematic theorizing on the nature of knowledge and rationality is the desire to maximize true belief. This, says Stackhouse, is mistaken. What the Christian should be concerned about is not the maximization of true belief, but rather the maximization of *shalom*: human flourishing and peace according to the purposes of God. Of course, true belief can, says Stackhouse, in some contexts contribute to *shalom*. But in other contexts, this is not the case. In fact, it could be that given what God has to work with—finite and sinful free human creatures—God's purposes are better achieved through creatures having *false* beliefs.

Here, as elsewhere in Stackhouse's corpus (e.g. *Finally Feminist*, and *Making the Best of It*), his concept of God as pragmatist *par excellence* shines through. God settles for what might be considered less than the best in some cases in order to achieve other purposes that, all things considered, are more important to God. In this case, bringing about *shalom* is more important than, say, ensuring that humans have a maximal, or even just a significantly larger, stock of true beliefs.

There is an interesting parallel between this pragmatic feature of Stackhouse's theologically oriented vocational epistemology and aspects of contemporary evolutionary epistemology. Evolutionary science is based on the premise that heritable fitness enhancing traits will survive, leading to incremental change over time in populations of organisms. These incremental changes, if given enough time, eventually give rise to new species. The important feature, from an evolutionary perspective, is that the trait passed on from parent to offspring be 'fitness enhancing,' where fitness is understood in terms of maximizing the ability survive and reproduce. Notice that in a real sense, for organisms that have beliefs, whether they have *true* beliefs is only of secondary importance (if important at all)

to whether an organism has beliefs that contribute to their survival and reproduction. This has led many to wonder whether the truth of evolution should cause one to doubt whether their cognitive faculties are truth-oriented.

Compare these concerns from evolutionary epistemology to Stackhouse's vocational epistemology. It's possible, on Stackhouse's epistemology, that whether a person has *true* beliefs is only of secondary importance (if important at all) to whether an organism has beliefs that contribute to its ability to bring about *shalom*. This is interesting territory, worthy of more exploration than can be addressed in this short review. Some interesting questions lurking nearby included: What about one's beliefs concerning what constitutes *shalom*? Could God's purposes for actual *shalom* be accomplished by human agents having false, but pragmatically useful, beliefs about what constitutes *shalom*? What is the relation between evidential reasons for the things we think are true about the world, including what we think is true about God and the good life, and the prudential reasons—where prudence is understood as what, pragmatically, will contribute to *shalom*—we have for thinking that some things are true? Should prudence trump evidence? Is it even possible for perceptions of what is prudent to override perceptions of what is evident?

I don't think so. Epistemic good-making properties are important to us—not just the philosopher and epistemologically-minded theologian, but to *every* cognitive agent making their way in the world, precisely because truth matters to us. We believe the things we do because we think that those descriptions are *true*. Now, we can certainly be self-deceptive and poor, biased reasoning creatures driven by all sorts of passions and motives (including prudential ones) that expressly do not have truth as their aim. But when, say, evidence contradicts my belief that *p*, reflectively we don't say "well sure, the evidence is such that it's very likely that *p* is false, but it's in my best interests to belief *p*, so therefore *p*." Perhaps we dismiss the evidence because we mistakenly devalue the evidence, and that devaluation may be motivated by all sorts of pragmatic and non-truth oriented concerns, but we block evidence in those contexts precisely because we know that truth-oriented epistemic good-making properties matter. Thus, a further set of questions arise when it comes to attempting to "apportion assent," in the good Lockean fashion that Stackhouse commends: namely, how do we go about apportioning assent to those concepts and beliefs that norm what constitutes *shalom*?

As stated at the outset, *Need to Know* is an ambitious book. It goes beyond traditional epistemology, and does so in two respects. First, it goes beyond the concerns of traditional epistemology by in many respects addressing the structure of thought itself. And second, it goes beyond traditional epistemology by adding the concepts of *vocation* and *shalom* as having epistemological significance. It's in this latter respect that *Need to Know* makes a genuine contribution to Christian epistemology. However, if as I've suggested above, the concerns of traditional epistemology, including concepts of epistemic justification, warrant, evidence, and rationality in its various forms, are central to our experience of the world as cognitive agents, then we need subsequent work, either by Stackhouse or by others, in which his provocative work is connected more explicitly to these central, and more traditional, epistemological themes.

Bibliography

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