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Forms of Knowledge: Understanding the Intangible

I am a dialectical thinker by nature – or perhaps it was the social context I grew up in that caused me to become one who easily embraces opposing perspectives, or could I be anti-atomistic and merely reacting against dualistic modes of thinking for the sake of creating debate, or perhaps years of academia have made me skeptical to the point of not knowing what to think! As Brian Fay states in his book *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, we are currently living in a state of skepticism about truth, objectivity, and knowledge. Although this book engaged me on many levels, I found myself constantly revisiting an understanding of the "self" and the definition of "knowledge." I was particularly interested with two areas within his writing: 1) his analysis of the role linguistic systems play both in how we interpret meaning and reality and in how we experience individual sensations, and 2) his explanation of the philosophy of narrativism, being a middle course between narrative realism and narrative constructivism. In the text below, I will focus on the first interest.

As a student with a background in art, specifically the translating of abstract and intangible experiences into non-literal visuals, I found myself asking questions about *forms* of knowledge early on in Chapter 1 of this book. Questions such as: If knowledge involves being able to say something about its objects and to have an understanding of the experience, how would one classify forms of communication that are not linguistic? Is expressing ideas through art or music as valid a form of knowing/interpreting? These questions subsided upon reading Fay's disclaimer on page 24, when he stated that this book focuses on discursive forms of interpretation, cases in which one is able to say in words the meaning of an experience, yet "we are to note other forms of knowledge which are interpretive but not discursive" (ie. dancing, drawing, etc.)

Fay's distinction between "knowing" and "meaning" was very intriguing to me – the fact that we need to have an understanding of another's experience, rather than just a feeling, to really know them (later defined as insider epistemology). He described this distinction as the same for understanding meaning in a product or act. In response to my questions about perceptive differences between written forms versus non-linguistic forms, I can't help but wonder if the depth of meaning to an interpreter changes depending on the form of the act or the text. Is the level or depth of an interpreter's understanding of a work different when a concept is expressed in writing versus the same concept expressed in an art form? He used the example of T.S. Eliot's poetry to explain that we don't have to be like Eliot to understand his poetry, and further states that "Poets themselves can be mystified about what they have written, and can be enlightened by others who see meanings closed to the authors themselves." I feel this is true. When an artist participates in the act of creating, a form of knowledge exists that may be hard for the artist to articulate until after the project is complete. Fay's point about the meaning of the poem being more evident to the author after the fact, reminded me of a book I read this year by Jonah Lehrer (2007) titled *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, in which the author illustrates through case studies of artists, neurological intuitions embedded in their work that prefigure findings of modern neuroscience today. An example would be how poems of Walt Whitman literally described the body as the source of feelings, something that William James (when a scientist, not a philosopher) first began to realize.

This brings me to Fay's writings of epistemological relativism and the question of whether our experiences are actually shaped and coloured by our conceptual schemes. Whorf's hypothesis is that the perceptions we experience and the sensations that we feel are a function of the linguistic system we belong to. Genuine experiences only occur after the sensations have been organized into something more coherent and the type of organization changes depending on the specific linguistic system. This theory proposes that people who speak different languages experience different sensations, and furthermore that we actually think differently too. Though I am interested in the larger implication of Whorf's study – principles of thought being radically different depending on where you live – I am even more curious about the translation process from lived/sensory experience to linguistic knowledge to individual self-awareness. This is something I plan on investigating further.