



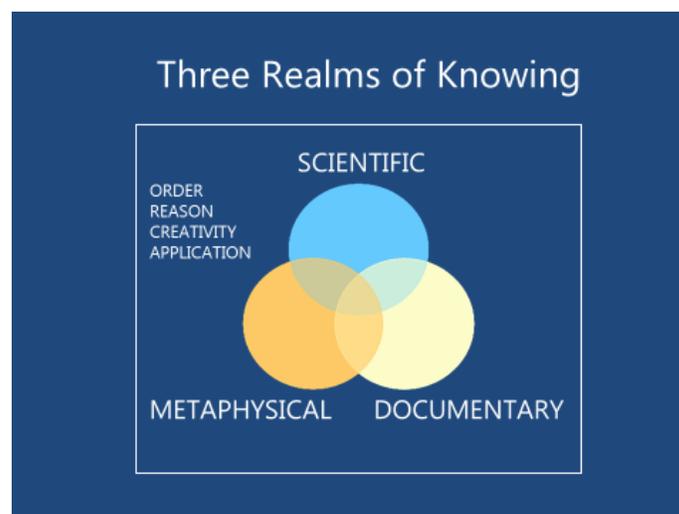
## It Floats!

### Reflections on the Unity of Knowledge and the Social Sciences

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For the past seven years I have been a middle- and high-school teacher, and one thing that I unswervingly devote myself to in the instruction of my students is the conviction that there is a unity of knowledge. Why? Chiefly because so many oppose the idea out of hand, and because I know that they will—at most universities and in the marketplace—be regularly challenged regarding their faith. Thus, I unashamedly teach the maxim “All truth is God’s truth.” If all true knowledge shares a common source—namely the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the universe—it follows that no true knowledge can compete or conflict with any other true knowledge.

In order to help my students visualize this, I developed a diagram that I have been using in theology and science classrooms for about two decades.



The intent of the diagram is to communicate the interrelationships among three epistemic realms, specifically the scientific, documentary, and metaphysical realms. Each realm enjoys its own means for obtaining knowledge, and each realm can only answer questions appropriate to its means. Of course, the scientific realm deals with the natural world, and finds its epistemology on observation and experimentation in an effort to answer scientific questions. The documentary realm focuses on the past, and relies on various kinds of documents—journals, correspondence, photographs, official public records, archeological findings, etc.—to answer historical questions. Finally, the metaphysical realm answers ultimate questions of valuable or worthless, virtue or vice, beauty or ugliness, etc. True knowledge can be obtained by faith in what God has revealed about himself and his redemptive purposes, both in the book of nature, the created order, and in his Word—the living word, Jesus Christ, and the written word, the Bible. True knowledge, that is, reliable data points, can be obtained from each realm, but that does not mean that everything that nominally issues from each realm is true. In all three realms, it is possible that human interpreters will incorrectly “connect the dots,” and thus get the wrong picture. That is, scientists, historians, and theologians can all get waylaid in their pursuit of truth, and just because true knowledge has been obtained does not guarantee that an accurate understanding of reality will emerge.

In this diagram, it is of critical importance that the three epistemic realms are mutually intersecting circles, and that all three realms are circumscribed by a larger circle that represents the atmosphere in which all truth must be sought. This atmosphere is characterized by creativity, order, reason, and activity/application, and is a *sine qua non* of truth pursuit if, in the final analysis, truth is to solidly cohere, to be effectively communicated, and to be faithfully utilized or applied. With regard to the mutual intersection of the epistemic realms, even a modicum of reflection will reveal that realms must overlap, *contra* the notion of *non-overlapping magisteria* (NOMA) proposed by late Harvard paleobiologist Stephen Jay Gould, as set forth in his 1999 book *Rocks of Ages*.

Gould suggested a “central principle of respectful noninterference—accompanied by intense dialogue between the two distinct subjects, each covering a central facet of human existence” (p. 5). In his context, the subjects that he saw as distinct but central to human existence were science and religion. At first blush, Gould seems even-handed and wonderfully irenic. But how can these fields possibly be understood as NOMA? For example, in the field of religion, here the metaphysical realm—at least as understood from the Bible—it seems that miracles are key aspects of God’s unfolding redemptive purposes. Are not miracles, properly understood, instances of the temporary suspension of natural laws? If so, the metaphysical and scientific realms necessarily *must* intersect. But Gould will have none of that, for in the end,

science always trumps religion and, in his view, a suspension of natural law would be a gross boundary transgression.

My point here is not to fully engage Gould's NOMA nonsense; I'll do that elsewhere. But I will insist that epistemic realms are necessarily overlapping—they truly must be. A historical science such as geology, using the “documents” of the rock and fossil records, falls squarely in the overlap between the scientific and documentary realms. The Bible, as both a key source of God's self-revelation and as a book full of historical narrative, obviously plots in the overlap between the metaphysical and documentary realms. And as we saw above, miracles must have a solid footing in both the scientific and the metaphysical realms. If epistemic realms are not mutually overlapping, as illustrated in the figure, true knowledge will not cohere. Instead, true knowledge will conflict and compete with other true knowledge, rendering the source of truth a pitiful and conflicted peddler of trinkets.

What does any of this have to do with the social sciences? I have long pondered the heart of the “Three Realms of Knowing” diagram, that central area of overlap among the three realms. What area of knowledge blends the scientific, documentary, and the metaphysical? With some students in the past, I had tentatively posited the notion that perhaps disciplines such as sociology and psychology might lie at the heart of the diagram, but I was blissfully agnostic for a long while, content not to press the issue. Then in the fullness of time, which happened to be just a couple of months ago, a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade student (Thanks, L<sup>2</sup>!) asked about the heart of the diagram and, without a speck of “teacherly” provocation, suggested that things pertaining to the pursuit of truth regarding the self—the person, or persons collectively—might lie in the central area of overlap. Eureka! This idea has a buoyancy that even a middle-school student can grasp. I'm a believer.

In order for this idea to gain some intellectual traction in our midst, allow me to unpack it succinctly. The fact that persons, individually or collectively, can be studied scientifically—that is, through observation and experimentation—seems beyond contestation. Moreover, a documentary or historical aspect inheres the study of the person(s); human behaviors are themselves “documents” of interior commitments and drives, and the persons are themselves shaped by historical events and circumstances. Finally, there are essential aspects of the person(s) that we can rightly understand only through divine revelation—chiefly axiology, ethics, and aesthetics, among others. Therefore, let us revel in the reality that all truth is God's truth, setting aside all cross-disciplinary squabbling, and collectively become people who teach the veracity and model the application of the unity of all true knowledge. Christian social scientists have a tremendous position of privilege and responsibility in this.

Russian writer Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828- 1910) once poignantly posited this: "Progress consists, not in the increase of truth, but in freeing it from its wrappings. The truth is

obtained like gold, not by letting it grow bigger, but by washing off from it everything that isn't gold" (as quoted in *Tolstoy's Diaries*, 1985). I discuss this powerful image regularly with my students. In my mind, Tolstoy is likening the pursuit of truth to panning for gold—not the touristy gimmick of selling a bag of “salted” sand and gravel to a gullible thrill-seeker, but the backbreaking labor of digging through possibly tons of sediment in remote and inhospitable places, all the while threatened by blood-sucking or venomous creatures, and poisonous or prickly plants, or both. Since actual gold panning is perilous and thoroughly wearying, why do people do it? For the possible precious payout!

Do we have the courage to teach and model truth pursuit and the unity of knowledge? Nothing else is worth our lives.