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The Fruitless Search for the Theory of Everything

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Recommended Citation

Earnshaw, Rebekah, "The Fruitless Search for the Theory of Everything" (2018). *Faculty Work Comprehensive List*. 887.
https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/887

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The Fruitless Search for the Theory of Everything

Abstract

"Knowing truly is something we are given and not something we achieve."

Posting about discovering truth from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-fruitless-search-for-the-theory-of-everything/>

Keywords

In All Things, knowledge, truth, worldview, learning

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

The Fruitless Search for the Theory of Everything

 inallthings.org/the-fruitless-search-for-the-theory-of-everything/

Rebekah Earnshaw

May 1, 2018

in things

I've been a know-it-all for as long as I can remember. I like truth. I like certainty. I loved science and math at school because there was clearly a correct answer in those subjects. History and English baffled me with their nuanced perspectives and complex arguments. I wanted to be right, and I wanted to know I was right in very narrowly defined terms. When you know it all, I thought, there's nothing left to learn. I thought the goal of learning was to stop learning.

But it doesn't take divine revelation to realize the error to "you can have it all figured out"—rather, just an ounce of humility and a bit of time. And indeed, in time, God blew my misunderstanding of truth out of the water.

For example, the world can be described and explored in many different ways. Math and physics are related, but they're different perspectives. (Never trust an atom. They make up everything.) Biology and chemistry explore the same world, but will tell you different stories. History, art, drama, and literature weave a tapestry of vibrantly diverse threads. Medical professionals, educators, psychologists, economists, and farmers all know things. But they don't see those things the same way.

These differences in ways of knowing put the lie to any claim of an ultimate "theory of everything" (TOE). One example of such a theory comes from physics, where scientists are searching for a single set of equations that depicts the four fundamental forces of nature. In this TOE, the electromagnetic force (which causes charged particles or magnets to attract/repel), the weak nuclear force (which holds quarks and other subatomic particles together), the strong nuclear force (which holds atoms together), and the force of gravity (which keeps planets orbiting the sun and your feet on the surface of the earth), would be described by a single equation as a coherent whole. We would be able to describe the workings of the entire universe – from the movement of distant stars to subatomic chemistry – with one (rather long but) beautiful equation.

But while complete in one perspective, no TOE will prove or explain why my mother loves me. You can fully exhaust the physics of love, but still not get it. It would be reductionistic to claim ultimate explanatory power for any theory. After all, describing a single aspect of the world in a holistic fashion is not identical with complete knowledge. There still remain multiple perspectives and many ways of knowing.

Physics may describe the arc of the ball. Bio-mechanics may describe the movement of muscles. Sports psychology may describe the winning-team motivations. But no one has yet adequately explained to me “March Madness.” There are multiple perspectives, and even combined they remain partial and incomplete.

To get out of this bind, long before TOEs, the philosopher once appealed to fourfold causality. He argued that to fully know, we must explain the material, formal, efficient, and final reasons for things. Only with this complex approach could greater answers be reached. But even that falls short. Holistic gives a different view than reductionistic, but it’s no more ultimate.

A great arrogance of the Christian is the claim to know ultimate Truth. This arrogance is the temptation of the modernist, the desire to master ultimate knowledge. But in reality, we can’t get outside ourselves to gain an objective view. There is no neutral ground and no ultimate knowledge we can discover. We always remain partial, incomplete, and dependent in our knowing. Dependent on our senses. Dependent on our thoughts. Dependent on one another. As far as our wisdom extends, there is nothing final about it.

And even when I know I know something, I get things wrong. All my knowledge is partial, dependent, and flawed.

The truth is, we can’t figure it all out. And in turn, the good news is not that you can work out the truth. It’s not that you can grasp it all and get it right. It’s not that if I lay all the evidence out, then you will logically and necessarily be convinced. We can’t argue anyone into the kingdom.

Knowing truly is something we are given and not something we achieve. Knowing truly depends on the one God, Father, Son, and Spirit, giving himself—not on our working him out. Our tendency to get Jesus wrong only changes when he corrects us himself.

God made creatures that have life and integrity in themselves, and can be rightly, though partially, known in relation to themselves and one another, and not just in relation to him. Knowing the chemical composition of the rubber in the basketball may not be everything, but it’s something. Partial knowledge can be true knowledge without claiming to be ultimate.

I got Jesus wrong. But I understand now that knowing is personal and transformative, and not something I will ever get to the bottom of. Now, I still long to be right, but I’m also alright not knowing. I’m okay with always having more to learn. I hope and pray that this comes from God graciously showing me that my identity isn’t found in knowing-it-all and in academic achievement. My certainty doesn’t come from my calculations or my making-sense-of-it-all, but from Christ giving himself to me and for me.

By every means we have, may we love God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength, and all our minds. May we always be learners.