

## *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience*

PHILLIP H. WIEBE

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*Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience* by Phillip H. Wiebe is an empirically oriented study of the veracity of a specific type of spiritual or religious experience, namely that of intuitive knowing. Wiebe examines a number of cases of intuitive knowing contained at the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Center. The study of such experiences is probably on the fringe of what is considered a legitimate topic of research in the academy, particularly in philosophy departments. However, Wiebe is a thoroughgoing empiricist who, though now a theist himself, oftentimes appears quite sympathetic to naturalism. For instance, he consistently affirms the need for cognitive science to study spiritual experiences. Indeed, part of what makes this book interesting is that it reads as if a sceptic has been convinced of the veracity of religious experience, based on evaluating such experiences through an empirical framework. As such, Wiebe is very careful to never overstate what conclusions can be drawn from cases of (alleged) intuitive knowing.

Wiebe explains that the concept of intuitive knowing can be found in ancient Greek thought (1). He says that “[t]he power of the intellect to grasp concepts and truths intuitively that are neither derivable from sense perception, such as the concept of infinity, nor justifiable by empirical evidence, such as inviolable principles of ethics, has been widely considered a characteristic that sets humans apart from all other earthly creatures” (1). Plato and Aristotle both held that intuitive knowing was knowledge pertaining to matters that are eternal. That is, “[t]he intellect came to be seen as capable not only of intuiting the reality of natural laws, a moral order, and an ontological order that includes God, but also of proving our immortality” (2-3). Augustine thought that intuitive knowing existed in intellectual visions; these are the visions that Wiebe examines in this study (3-5).

In this review, I focus on some of the epistemic issues which undergird Wiebe’s discussion of intuitive knowing. Wiebe says that “[t]he extraordinary success of the modern sciences might have distracted us from the possibility that another kind of knowledge exists, one that does not repudiate science in the least, but reveals another reality whose significance to our existence as *persons* outweighs that of science” (8). This type of knowledge is different than that purporting to establish scientific claims. It is experiential, rather than experimental. Wiebe offers a personal example of intuitive knowing. He *knew* that he would win a door prize before the draw occurred. It was a feeling of knowing that some event would occur. But he *knew* his belief could not be justified even though he had a true belief. Wiebe claims that the justification in such cases might be possessed by a spirit or God (14-15).

Wiebe claims that his own explicitly religious experiences were similar in phenomenology to the one described above. That is, he did not know that he knew, he only believed that he knew. According to Wiebe, knowing that you know amounts to certain knowledge. Thus, “[i]ntuitive knowing might *feel* like certainty, but it is not certain knowledge, it is just knowledge, at best, on the supposition that some justification exists” (16). Wiebe refers to this as ‘simple knowledge.’ He claims that there might not be very much simple knowledge and that “finding examples of simple knowledge might be more difficult than it appears—maybe we need to go to intuitive knowledge to find them” (16).

Furthermore, he says that, “because every knowledge claim involves an implicit truth claim, and no obvious way exists of establishing religious truth, I will use ‘intuitive knowledge’ to give expression to the unique *feel* of an experience, rather than focus on the possible truth or justification involved” (16). This has the feel of knowledge but it lacks justification. Thus Wiebe asserts that intuitive knowledge is a type of quasi-knowledge that lacks justification.

Notice, however, that Wiebe here implicitly operates with an internalist account of epistemic justification. According to Wiebe, a spirit might provide the justification for intuitive knowing, but the experiencer herself does not possess it. However, this need not be the case if externalist accounts of epistemic justification are correct. On a reliabilist or proper functionalist account of justification, the knower need not possess or be aware of the epistemic justification for a belief in order for it count as knowledge. Rather, certain conditions need to obtain in order for the believer to make a knowledge claim. For instance, perhaps the belief needs to be formed in a reliable way, or formed in an epistemically appropriate environment, etc. Here it may have been beneficial for Wiebe to interact with Reformed Epistemology, led by Alvin Plantinga, in order to underscore how his conception of knowledge differs from Reformed Epistemology. Doing so would help situate Wiebe’s project within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. In sum, Wiebe’s quasi-knowledge can be plausibly understood as knowledge in externalist terms. Highlighting this point actually strengthens Wiebe’s project. For it puts intuitive knowledge on the same epistemic standing as that of many other knowledge claims, at least from an externalist’s perspective.

The cases of intuitive knowing that Wiebe examines include experiences of God where the person comes to the knowledge of love or providence, while other cases are about knowledge of a moral realm. Given space constraints, it is not feasible to discuss Wiebe’s explication and evaluation of specific cases of intuitive knowing, which is his primary focus. Indeed, it would be a disservice to the nature of the project to do so without the appropriate time and space. Instead, I have tried to show that given his philosophical and methodological commitments such a careful discussion is a very worthwhile pursuit. This book will be of interest to specialists in philosophy of religion. It will also be important to anyone of an empirical bent who has an interest in religion. I recommend it.

KIRK LOUGHEED *McMaster University*