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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2006

The Meaning of "Knowledge is Power"

During this most recent graduation season, I was reminded of the oft quoted remark in commencement addresses: "knowledge is power." As with all sentences with an "is" in them, the meaning can be interpreted in two different ways. It may seem like a simple equation, but it is actually unclear which way the equation runs. So I thought I would point out these two opposing meanings just to make sure we are reflecting on what we mean when we say "knowledge is power."

Meaning #1: If you have knowledge, then you will have power. The idea here is that the acquisition of knowledge results in social power. The one "in the know" holds a certain power over those who do not. The knower is a go-to-guy. This is the usual meaning at commencement addresses: "hey, don't worry that you have all this debt and will never make as much as your friends, because you have power on account of your knowledge."

Meaning #2: If you have power, then you will have knowledge. This is the opposite of the above meaning. Although the former is more traditional and therefore quite common, this meaning is gaining significance in our contemporary world. The basic idea here is that knowledge is really just power in disguise. Another phrase illustrates this: "the winners write the history." In other words, those who exert power have the influence to promulgate their view of what has happened and therefore generate knowledge. The social critic is the one who is able to unmask the power dynamics behind so-called knowledge. This need not be a cynical view: if you want to be apart of the spread of knowledge, put yourself in a center of great influence.

Any thoughts?

Is there some other sense to the equation I have missed?
Which meaning do you usually imply when you say this phrase?
What happens when we mean it one way but it is taken another?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:24 PM

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At [8:09 PM, June 28, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Perhaps a third possibility of "knowledge is power"... Those "in the know" are presented with greater opportunity for influence. Knowledge in and of itself does not endow a person with significant influence who has no experience, no discipline or no purpose. I distinguish between knowledge as cognitive and knowledge as intuitive. When many educational professionals proclaim that knowledge is power they seem to suggest that massive cognitive exposure equals "knowledge" and thus some higher endowment of ability or advantage. No volume of that kind of knowledge is actual power in the mind of a person who lacks the additional elements I mentioned. Perhaps knowledge accompanied by all of these is wisdom and the book of Proverbs seems to indicate that's where the real power is.

At [10:38 AM, June 29, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I usually quote Foucault for the second line of thought: "knowledge is violence" (although I suppose he was saying something more epistemological in the first place). I suspect Bacon meant the first sense when he coined the phrase.

At [2:57 PM, June 29, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Interesting sidenote here from your other lines of thought, John.

Random replies:

The slogan to the official Google Blog is: "Knowledge is Power" and I suppose they are growing in both. Although I might adjust it for them and say "Access to Knowledge is Access to Power."

I believe Bacon also said: "Monuments to wit survive monuments to power" - so I agree with Schenck that he meant the "first sense" you speak of.

Quote of the day:

"Ignorance is impotence... or was it impotence is ignorance... I don't recall. Call me." - David Drury

At [4:57 PM, June 29, 2006](#), [Geoff Holsclaw](#) said...

I usually follow Foucault on this one also, but while he may have seemed to lean toward the second option, i think he held the two option together in a Knowledge/Power nexus.

But I would in a sense lean toward the second as the reality of the

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first.

In Lacan's terms (or Badiou), knowledge is what everyone knows, it is 'common sense', but the Truth punches a hole in knowledge, and is usually viewed as weakness and death.

so maybe:

knowledge:power::truth:weakness

At [8:33 AM, June 30, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

Sometimes you enter into a discussion and feel like in intellectual hobbit. For example while that phrase makes most of you think of Bacon or Foucault I think of the opening screen of Mortal Combat.

At [1:48 PM, July 01, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I have little doubt that having knowledge leads to a kind of power. And addressing graduates with the phrase "Knowledge is power" usually elicited a response "Goodie, goodie now I can be more powerful."

What is not addressed (enough) is how power is not in and of itself *good* as most of Americans assume (both personal power and national power). Power corrupts too. So can knowledge.

Indeed, maybe most graduates (and professors too) today need to be taught more about the proper use of knowledge/power which can find solutions to pain and poverty but can also invent horribly better ways to destroy and enslave humanity.

Perhaps one of the great lessons Christ taught us is that the *laying aside of power* is a greater thing than accumulating it? How does this relate to knowledge?

(OK OK perhaps I'm leaning too far toward the Anabaptists here) and to Jesus.)

At [11:41 AM, July 03, 2006](#), [mark o wilson](#) said...

All I know is, that if I've done my homework before the board meeting, it sure goes better.

At [4:07 PM, July 04, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

The statement "knowledge is power" is the first step in a transitive chain to whatever one wants.

One path: knowledge is power, power is money, money is happiness...

Another path: knowledge is power, power is control, control is

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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freedom...

Maybe "knowledge is power" is a call to take a bite of the forbidden fruit so that we too may become like gods.

Or as Keith.Drury hints to, maybe it is a lure to lead us into our heads and away from our hearts where the true seed of faith grows.

At [7:18 AM, July 05, 2006](#), [Dan](#) said...

Os Guinness suggests we substitute the 'knowledge is power' phrase for 'truth is freedom.' Where the former tends to corrupt (as has already been mentioned), the latter cannot, if it truly is "truth."

Of course, the postmodern reaction is "Whose truth?" I'll let you others answer that one. Besides, I'm late for work.

At [11:56 AM, July 14, 2006](#), [Jim Womack](#) said...

The knowledge to power relationship is also cyclical. Knowledge always results in greater resources and greater resources results in the ability to attain more knowledge. A simple example of this circular relationship is language development and communication. As an individual learns and comprehends that foundational knowledge is a building block or stepping stone for greater comprehension. Understanding the alphabet and its sounds is needed to understand words and to attain the ability to read. Understanding how to read words allow us to understand sentences...

Sometimes the access to knowledge is limited by or level of power or physical resources (Internet, Books, Education, Cheese...).

I believe that a problem can arise when either one is the goal (knowledge for the sake of power or power for the sake of knowledge). If one simply loves knowledge, I really don't see a problem with this (except that knowledge for the sake of knowledge is useless). Knowledge with no practical or real life implementation is only thought and idea. However, knowledge that is applied can become a valuable tool or a dangerous weapon. What determines this is the motivation behind the acquisition knowledge and then how we choose to use the recourses we have been given.

Proverbs 24:5

A wise man has great power,
and a man of knowledge increases strength;

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