31st August 2022

Knowledge

"If you dissemble sometimes your knowledge of that you are thought to know, you shall be thought, another time, to know that you know not."

Francis Bacon, *Essays 'Of Discourse'*

A recent news report told us that scientists have "supercharged one of the Earth's most powerful telescopes that will reveal how our galaxy formed in unprecedented detail." The William Herschel Telescope in La Palma, Spain, will survey 1000 stars per hour until it has catalogued a total of five million. A super-fast mapping device will analyse the make-up of each star and the speed at which it travels. And so it will be able to show how our Milky Way galaxy was built up over millions of years.

Fine! I understand the need to expand our knowledge. Without explorations, there would be no Covid vaccines, world-wide-web, international travel, insights into the causes of climate change, and a host of things we could list. But we already have knowledge of the inadequacy of health provision in the world's poorer nations; the devastation caused by drought and crop-failures; the well-documented poverty gap in western nations … another long list. Why, then, would we spend vast amounts of money on an enterprise that offers nothing to the alleviation of human suffering? How the Milky Way was built up over the years might be interesting. But does it matter? Can it not simply remain a mystery?

The words of Psalm 139 are clear on this issue. Mystery matters. Awe and wonder *can* be enough. As Francis Bacon put it, it's OK "to know that you know not". The 20th century Hymn writer, Ian Pitt-Watson, puts the beginning and ending of the metrical version of Psalm 139 like this:

You are before me, God, you are behind,
And over me you spread your hand;
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
Too high to grasp, too great to understand.

Search me, O God, and know my heart,
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
Keep me from any path that gives you pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me" is quite enough for me for now.

A prayer for today

Lord, my knowledge of you is nothing to your knowledge of me. That's wonderful!

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