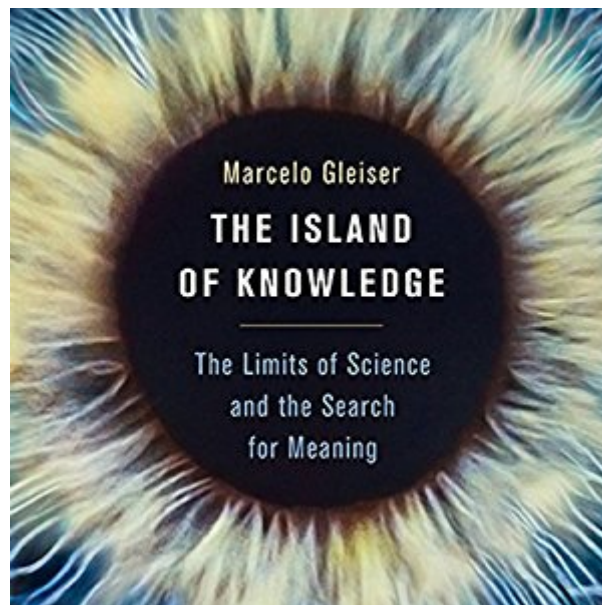




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The Island Of Knowledge: The Limits Of Science And The Search For Meaning



Synopsis

Why discovering the limits to science may be the most powerful discovery of all. How much can we know about the world? In this audiobook physicist Marcelo Gleiser traces our search for answers to the most fundamental questions of existence, the origin of the universe, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge. In so doing he reaches a provocative conclusion: Science, like religion, is fundamentally limited as a tool for understanding the world. As science and its philosophical interpretations advance, we face the unsettling recognition of how much we don't know. Gleiser shows that by abandoning the dualistic model that divides reality into the known and the unknown, we can embark on a third way based on the acceptance of our limitations. Only then, he argues, will we be truly able to experience freedom, for to be free in an age of science we cannot turn science into a god. Gleiser ultimately offers an uplifting exploration of humanity's longing to conquer the unknown and of science's power to transform and inspire.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is ostensibly about the inherent limits of scientific knowledge, but actually provides an excellent summary of what is known (at least in physics) and traces its development from the Greeks onward, in the process of identifying these limits. One limit arises from the cosmic horizon of 13.8 billion years, before which the universe was opaque to radiation, implying that we can never receive information about regions further away than 13.8 billion light-years. Uncertainty at the sub-microscopic scale is due to the quantum weirdness of knowing only the probability of a particle's location until it is measured, the inherent uncertainty of that measurement and the

entanglement (action at a distance) between particles Early Western philosophers looked for a unified theory of the nature of matter. Thales (600 BCE) thought "all stuffs of the world were but different manifestations of a primal stuff, the embodiment of a reality always in flux". Parmenides, somewhat later, wrote "that what is can not change, for it then becomes what it is not". According to Lucretius (50 BCE), Leucippus and Democritus thought that all things were made of unchanging atoms moving in a void under various forces, assuming different shapes and forms under different forces by the reordering of numerous atoms. Aristotle posited a bottom-up natural arrangement of his four basic substances--earth, water, air and fire--to explain why a body moved up or down when displaced from its natural place. As the author notes, scientific inquiry is an ongoing process, implying an ever-changing perception of reality.

(from reasonandmeaning.com) There is a new book on the intersection between science and the meaning of life: *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning* by Marcelo Gleiser, the Appleton Professor of Natural Philosophy and Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Dartmouth College. Gleiser's main thesis is that our observations yield only an "island of knowledge." Thus there are limits to science's ability to answer fundamental philosophical questions. These limits to our knowledge arise both from the tools we use to explore reality and the nature of physical reality itself. What we can know is limited by the speed of light, the uncertainty principle, the incompleteness theorem, and our own intellectual limitations. Recognizing these limits does not entail abandoning science and embracing religion. We should continue our scientific investigation of the nature of the cosmos, Gleiser argues, for by coming to know the universe we come to know ourselves. Obviously Gleiser is right--there are limits to scientific knowledge as the incompleteness theorem and uncertainty principle strongly suggest. As the island of our knowledge grows, so too does the ocean of uncertainty which surrounds it. Still science gives us our best chance to understand the nature of the cosmos, and hence the the most firm foundation upon which to understand the meaning of the cosmos. Gleiser also argues that science and religion focus on the same question. The urge to know our origins and our place in the cosmos is a defining part of our humanity.

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