

Before beginning the online application for Honors Foundation, read the following and compose answers to the questions at the article's completion.

Matriculation address by Dr. Micah Kiel, Theology professor

This summer I read a book by Lawrence Krauss, one of the world's leading physicists, called: "A universe from nothing. Why there is something rather than nothing." Being a theologian myself, someone who is interested in questions about God, meaning, and truth, I was quite curious to delve into this book about physics and get an answer to such a foundational question.

This book is fascinating. It presents a mind-boggling picture of the earliest moments of the universe, an explanation of the big bang, and how what we find in our cosmos and its origins can be explained by what we know of the laws of physics. I learned a lot from reading it, at least the parts that I could understand.

Much to my chagrin, however, the book never answers the question, "Why there is something rather than nothing." In fact, part way through the book, Krauss admits as much, saying that that the book should really be titled "how there is something from nothing." This is false advertising. It's like calling a Justin Bieber song "good" or saying that Facebook has "privacy" settings. Well, shame on him, or, at least on his editors and publishers, who promised something they could not deliver. "How" and "why" are very different questions.

As I peruse the landscape of our culture today, I believe we often find ourselves caught between "how" and "why." I'm going to flip on my professor switch right now and discuss a big word you may not have heard before, "epistemology." I won't explain fully how this word has roots in the Greek language (although I'm sure you'd love to hear that, too). Epistemology refers to the study of how we know what we know. Our society today is epistemologically two-faced. We are confronted by two different ways of knowing.

The first of these ways is scientific. The scientific method has increasingly dominated our worldview over the last few centuries. This is a good thing! We cherish the advances in medicine, science, and technology. Our understanding of the natural world has expanded profoundly through the revelation of evolution; through experiments regarding the smallest particles; and through new understandings of distances measured in light years. All of these are indebted to a scientific way of knowing the world. I am not a scientist, but I think I'm right in saying that science is about observation, experimentation, and measurement, all with the laudable goal of formulating, testing, and modifying a hypothesis. This is a very specific way of knowing things.

The second way of knowing is essentially experiential. It's about what is in your gut or your heart, not what's in your head. How do you know that you love someone? Or that someone loves you? Love, as experienced, is not susceptible to scientific experiment. Science can't explain why something is beautiful, why it moves us, how it provides meaning and structure to our lives.

You may not have thought about it this way before, but these are the two dominant, and potentially contradictory, ways we tend to view the world today.

There's no better way to illustrate this than by talking about baseball. It's a trivial example, but there is an epistemological crisis within the world of baseball right now. If you've seen the 2011 movie *Moneyball* or read the book it is based on, then you have some sense of what I'm talking about. *Moneyball*, and the real story it portrays, pits a number-crunching science geek against the old guys who evaluated players by intuition, with their own subjective eyes. This movie is, at some level, about epistemology-how do we

know what we know? And, it argues, that a scientific way of evaluation is to be favored. Another baseball movie, 2012's *Trouble with the Curve* deals with some of the same issues, although through the gauzy guise of a fictional romantic comedy. In this movie, the subjective reigns. Clint Eastwood's intuition, his heart and his gut sense, wins out, and the numbers-based evaluators get it wrong. Again, this is a trivial example, but I think it emblematic of a broader tension in our society. The numbers certainly tell us things about baseball players and strategies. Scientific analysis can tell us, for certain, that the Cubs will never win the world series. Statistics have revolutionized how the game is played and discussed over the last 10-15 years. But is that why we watch? Is there a way scientifically to codify and analyze the aesthetics of the game of baseball? No, we watch because of the experience of it: The sights, sounds, smells, traditions, and camaraderie, the way the game's lazy monotony is pierced by random excitement, these things cohere into something that entertains and delights.

An education at St. Ambrose, whether you like it or not, places you right in between these two ways of knowing. You are going to learn the scientific method. You might take statistics, math, biology, accounting. You will hear, both here and in society in general, of the importance of the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). These are scientific essentials. You also will take fine arts, theology, philosophy, and English. In these courses, artistic expression and the subjective art of interpretation are supreme. These are the courses that our society is tending to devalue, the ones you have to "get out of the way" in order to graduate.

Initially, these courses need to be separate. We don't want people doing biology in Lewis Hall the same way they interpret an aria across the parking lot in Galvin. Having said that, however, the thing that makes St. Ambrose unique, the thing that can make you different from most other people when you graduate – in four or five or six years – is the ability to bridge these gaps. At St. Ambrose, you will discuss both "how" and "why." The best students are those who don't compartmentalize those questions, but find creative ways to have them mutually inform one another. Don't view your classes like apps on your phone that you open and then close. They should not be self-contained. We, the faculty and staff at St. Ambrose, will help you with this, but we can only do so much. The real job is left to you – to think, to reflect, to ask, to try, to be bold, to discuss. Different ways of knowing the world are not mutually exclusive. One is not right and the other wrong. They are different, but both are essential.

I like to quote Socrates, who famously said, "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology 38a). That's exactly what I'm trying to talk about here. Asking both "how" and "why" is not easy; asking both questions fervently will force you to stretch your thinking, to examine everything from several points of view, so that you know what you think and why you think it.

The temptation will be for your time at St. Ambrose to be focused only on a contractual understanding of your future. What will you do in the market-global economy? What cog will you be in the machine? We want you to have a job and to be good at what you do, but the aspirations for you at St. Ambrose are far beyond that. In light of this, I quote Wendell Berry:

You will have to avoid thinking of yourselves as employable minds equipped with a few digits useful for pushing buttons. You will have to recover for yourselves the old understanding that you are whole beings inextricably and mysteriously compounded of minds and bodies.

There is a difference between "success" as defined by the economy and "vocation," something to which you are called. To quote Berry again:

The logic of what your society means by "success" supposedly leads you ever upward to any higher-paying job that can be done sitting down. The logic of vocation holds that there is an indispensable

justice, to yourself and to others, in doing well the work that you are "called or prepared by your talents to do.

Living the examined life will allow you to find not just how you'll earn a pay check, but that which you are called to. Ten years from now, you'll be an engineer who is smart and competent, who knows "how" to do the job well. One day, if your boss wants to cut back on safety in order to design a cheaper product, an Ambrosian should be able to stop and ask: "Why" as well as "how."

An education at St. Ambrose rooted in the liberal arts and Catholic Intellectual Tradition, will equip you to be conversant in both how and why. I end by quoting the poet Rilke:

Take your well-disciplined strengths  
and stretch them between two  
opposing poles. Because inside human beings  
is where God learns.

Berry, Wendell. May 2007 Commencement Address, Bellarmine University.

Krauss, Lawrence. *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing*. New York: Free Press, 2012. Print

Plato. *Apology*. Trans. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. Print.

Rilke. "Just as the Winged Energy of Delight." Trans. Robert Bly. 1924. Web.

[http:// www.wisdomportal.com/Art/Rilke-WingedEnergy.html](http://www.wisdomportal.com/Art/Rilke-WingedEnergy.html)

## Questions

Dr. Kiel states that "an Ambrosian should be able to stop and ask: 'Why' as well as 'how,'" and he suggests that "the best students are those who don't compartmentalize those questions, but find creative ways to have them mutually inform one another."

Write an essay of 750 words or less using concrete examples (like Dr. Kiel's example of the engineer who asks both how and why) to answer the following questions:

What is the difference between knowing "why" and knowing "how"?

In what ways can these two questions mutually inform, or relate to one another?

In what ways could asking both of these questions shape the way you fulfill the various roles you will play throughout your life, for example your role as a student, as a professional in your career, your social roles such as parent or friend, your role as a citizen in a community, etc.?