

Lesson 12: The Self-Evidence of the Principles of Epistemology

[The Nature of the Dependence of Philosophy on Epistemology](#)

Understanding the concept of knowledge in a broad sense which includes every kind of awareness and perception, many topics of epistemology could be presented, some of which do not formally come under this science, such as those concerning revelation, inspiration, and the kinds of mystical disclosure and intuition.

However, one problem which is usually included for discussion in this branch of philosophy pivots about the senses and the intellect. But we cannot discuss all of these issues here, for our principal aim is to explain the value of intellectual perception and to affirm the truth of philosophy and the validity of its rational methods.

For this reason, we shall only present those topics which are useful for metaphysics and theology, and incidentally for some other areas of philosophy such as philosophical psychology and philosophical ethics.

At this point it is possible to raise the question of what are the basic premises which support epistemology, and in what way they can be confirmed. The answer is that epistemology is in no need of borrowed axioms for its subjects, for its issues can be clarified solely on self-evident primary grounds (*badihiyyat awwaliyyah*).

Another question which may be raised is this: If the solutions to the problems of ontology and other sciences which are arrived at by rational methods depend upon whether or not the intellect has the capacity to solve these sorts of problems, doesn't that imply that first philosophy [metaphysics] also is in need of the science of epistemology to provide the basic axioms of philosophy, although it is said that philosophy has no need for any other science?

Elsewhere we have indicated the answer to this question. Here we present a more precise answer. First, the premises directly needed by metaphysics are really self-evident judgments and have no need of proof, and the explanations regarding these judgments given in the science of logic or epistemology are in truth expository, clarifying rather than argumentative.

That is, they are a means to direct the attention of the mind toward a truth which the intellect understands without need for reasons. The reason for discussing this kind of judgment in these sciences is that misconceptions have arisen about them which turn into doubts, as in the case of the most self-evident of judgments, that is, the impossibility of contradiction, leading some even to imagine that contradiction is not only not impossible, but that it underlies all reality.

Doubts which have arisen about the value of rational knowledge are cut from the same cloth. It is to address these doubts and to remove these misconceptions from the mind that these discussions are undertaken. Really, the inclusion of these judgments among the topics of logic or epistemology is a digression, an indulgence, or condescension for the sake of those who harbor suspicions. If someone did not accept the value of rational knowledge, albeit unconsciously, how could one argue with him on the basis of rational proof?! Even the arguments advanced in favor of such doubts would be of a rational nature (note carefully).

Secondly, the need of philosophy for the principles of logic and epistemology is an application of knowledge to knowledge. To explain, someone whose mind has not been poisoned by doubt can reason to a certain conclusion with respect to most topics, and his reasoning would be in accord with logical principles without the need for attending to them and without knowing, for instance, that his reasoning accords with the first form of the syllogism and the conditions that govern it, or without being aware that there is an intellect which understands these premises and which accepts the validity of the conclusion that follow from them.

On the other hand, it is possible that some, in order to refute rationalism or metaphysics may employ reasoning and be unaware of the rational metaphysical premises they use, or in order to refute the rules of logic they may base their reasoning on the rules of logic, or even in order to invalidate the inviolability of the law of contradiction, they may resort to this very principle without being aware of it, and if they were told, 'This reasoning of yours is both valid and invalid,' they would become annoyed and regard this as mockery.

Thus, in reality, the dependence of philosophical reasoning on the principles of logic or the principles of epistemology is not the sort of need that the sciences have for the posited principles of their subjects.

Rather it is a secondary need involving the dependence of the principles of these sciences upon themselves; that is, it is the need for reconfirmation in science, for acquiring further confirmation for these judgments, as in the case of the self-evident propositions concerning which it is said that they depend on the impossibility of a contradiction.

It is clear that the dependence of self-evident propositions on this principle is not of the same kind as the dependence of speculative propositions on self-evident propositions, otherwise the difference between self-evident and speculative propositions would not remain, and at least one proposition, the principle of non-contradiction, has to be accepted as being self-evident.

The Possibility of Knowledge

Every rational person is of the belief that he does know things, and that he can know things. Hence he makes an effort to acquire information concerning matters of his needs or interests, and the best sign of this sort of effort is what scientists and philosophers have done by bringing about the various fields of the sciences and philosophy.

Hence the possibility and actuality of science is not something that any rational person whose mind has not been confounded by doubt would deny or even have reservations about. That which is open to discussion or examination and which it is reasonable to disagree about is identification of the frontiers of human knowledge and specification of the means of acquiring certain knowledge, and the way to distinguish correct from incorrect thought, and matters of this kind.

As has been indicated in previous discussions, in Europe, dangerous waves of skepticism have repeatedly appeared, and even great thinkers have been swallowed by it. The history of philosophy remembers schools of thought which absolutely have denied knowledge, such as sophism, skepticism, and agnosticism.

The best explanation of the absolute denial of knowledge (if this charge is correct) is that its victims were afflicted by a severe form of over scrupulousness, a state which affects some people with regard to various other matters as well.

Actually it should be considered a kind of mental illness. In any event, without going into a historical investigation concerning the existence of such people and inquiring into the motivation behind such views or the verity of their ascription to those who are claimed to have held them, we take them as doubts or questions that require an answer suitable to philosophical discussion, leaving the subject of historical fact to be decided by historical research.

A Survey of the Claims of the Sceptics

That which has been reported of the statements of the sophists and the skeptics may be divided from one angle into two parts: one having to do with what they have said about existence and being, and the other concerning what they have expressed about science and knowledge. That is, their statements have two aspects: one aspect concerns the subject of ontology, while the other pertains to epistemology.

For example, the remark is attributed to one of the most extreme of the sophists, Gorgias: "Nothing

exists, and if there were anything, it could not be known, and even there were knowledge of being, this knowledge could not be communicated to others.” The first phrase of this remark is about being, which must be discussed in the section on ontology, but the second phrase is relevant to the present discussion, epistemology, and so, naturally, it is this second phrase which we shall proceed to discuss, while the first phrase will be examined in the discussions of ontology.

First, this point must be mentioned: all who would doubt everything will not be able to doubt their own existence, the existence of their doubt, nor their perceptual faculties, such as the power of sight and hearing, and the existence of mental forms and their own psychological states. If someone even expresses doubts about these cases, he is either sick, and must be cured, or he is lying and expresses evil intentions, and so must be corrected and reprimanded.

Likewise, someone who speaks and discusses or writes books cannot doubt the existence of a party to the discussion, or the existence of the paper or the pen with which he writes. At the extreme it might be said that I perceive all these things within myself but I doubt their existence in the external world. As would appear from the statements of Berkeley and some other idealists, they accepted all objects of perception as mere forms within the mind, and denied their external existence.

However, they accepted the existence of other people who have minds and perceptions. This view is not an absolute denial of knowledge and existence, but a denial of material existents, and their doubt amounts to one in relation to some of the objects of knowledge.

Now, if someone claims that no certain knowledge is possible, the question will be put to him as to whether he knows this, or whether he also has some doubt about it. If he says that he knows it, then at least one thing that is certainly known has been admitted, and his own claim has been violated. If he says that he does not know it, this means that it is possible that he grants the likelihood of certain knowledge. In other words, his own speech has been shown to be invalid.

However, if someone says that he has doubts about the possibility of knowledge and definite knowledge claims, it will be asked of him whether he knows that he has such doubts or not. If he answers that he knows that he has such doubts, and then not only the possibility but the actuality of knowledge has been admitted. If, however, he says that he also has doubts about his very own doubts, this very speech is either caused by illness or bad intention, and requires a non-theoretical response.

In response to those who advocate the relativity of all knowledge, who claim that no proposition is valid absolutely, universally and eternally, one may ask such a person whether that claim itself is valid absolutely, universally and eternally, or whether it is relative, particular, and temporary.

If it holds always in all cases and with no qualification or condition then it is true. Then at least one proposition which is absolute, universal and eternal has been proved. If this knowledge itself is also relative this means that in some cases it is not valid, and in the cases where it does not hold there are propositions which are absolute, universal and eternal.

The Rejection of the Doubts of the Skeptics

One of the doubts upon which the sophists and skeptics rely and which they have expressed in various forms and by presenting different examples are the following: Sometimes one acquires certainty about the existence of something by means of the senses, but afterwards he comes to realize that a mistake has been made.

Thus one comes to know that sensory perception is not necessarily reliable. It follows that the likelihood arises that my other sensory perceptions may also be mistaken, and the day may come when their error will also become apparent. Likewise sometimes a person finds a principle to be certain on rational grounds, but afterwards he finds that his reasoning was incorrect, and his certainty is transformed into doubt.

Thus it becomes known that intellectual reasoning is also not necessarily reliable. In the same way the probability of error infects other intellectual perceptions. The conclusion is that neither sensation nor reasons are reliable. Nothing remains for man but doubt.

The response would be as follows:

1. The purpose of this argument is to arrive at the validity of skepticism and the knowledge of its truth through reasoning, and at least to get the other party to the discussion to accept your point, that is, you expect that he will attain knowledge of the validity of your claims, while you maintain that the attainment of knowledge is absolutely impossible.
2. The discovery of error in sensory and intellectual perceptions implies the knowledge that these perceptions do not conform to reality. This necessarily implies that we accept the existence of knowledge of the error of perception.
3. Another implication is that we know that there is a reality with which our mistaken perception does not accord, otherwise there would be no concept of the error of perception.
4. Another implication is that it must be known to us that the mistaken perception itself and its mental form are contrary to actuality.
5. Finally, the existence of the one who errs, as well as his senses and intellect must be accepted.
6. This reasoning itself is a rational argument (however fallacious) and to rely upon it is to consider the intellect and its perceptions to be reliable.
7. In addition to this, other knowledge is assumed here, and that is that mistaken perceptions, being in error, cannot be true. So, the skeptic's argument itself implies the acceptance of several instances of knowledge, and so how can one deny the possibility of knowledge absolutely, or even doubt it?

All of these answers refute the argument of the skeptics. In analyzing it and exposing its fallacy we prove the validity and error of sensory perception by the help of reasoning. However, as has also been said, it is not true that the discovery of error in intellectual perceptions also infects all other intellectual perceptions, because the possibility of error may only enter speculative, or other than self-evident, perceptions.

But the self-evident propositions of the intellect which are the basis of philosophical proofs do not admit of error at all, and the explanation of their infallibility will be presented in Chapter Lesson Nineteen.

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