

Lesson 13: The Divisions of Knowledge

In Search of the Cornerstone of Knowledge

It was mentioned in the previous lesson that some knowledge and perceptions are completely indubitable. Furthermore, the reasons given by the skeptics to justify their perverted views based on their absolute denial of knowledge embody and necessitate several instances of knowledge.

On the other hand, we know that not all our ‘knowledge’ and beliefs are true or correspond to reality, and furthermore, in many cases we ourselves notice some falsehoods. In view of these two points, the questions arise as to the differences among the varieties of human perceptions, such that some of them are infallible and indubitable while others are fallible and doubtable, and how we might distinguish between them.

It is a well-known matter that Descartes tried to found an unshakable philosophy in order to combat skepticism, and he used the indubitability of doubt itself as the cornerstone of his philosophy. Furthermore, the existence of the ego of the doubter and thinker is a corollary based on that foundation.

He introduced clarity and distinctness as the criterion of indubitability, which he made a standard for distinguishing correct from incorrect ideas. He also attempted to employ a mathematical approach to philosophy, and in fact sought to introduce a new logic.

We are not presently in a position to evaluate Descartes’ philosophy or to examine the degree to which he was successful at the task he set for himself. We shall only mention the point that to begin with doubt as a starting point for arguing with the skeptics is reasonable, as was seen in the previous lesson.

However, if someone were to imagine that nothing is quite so clear and certain, and that even the existence of the doubter must be inferred from the doubt, this would not be valid. Rather the existence of the aware and thinking ego is at least as clear and indubitable as the existence of the doubt itself which is one of its states.

Likewise, 'clarity and distinctness' cannot be considered the major criterion for distinguishing correct from incorrect ideas, for this criterion by itself is not sufficiently clear and distinct and free from ambiguity, and is not a serious and crucial measure, and consequently cannot divulge the secret of the infallibility of certain kinds of perceptions. To be sure, other views of Descartes could be argued at great length, but such an examination would be outside the scope of the present study.

The First Division of Science

The first division of knowledge to be considered is that between (1) the knowledge which is known directly of the essence (dhat) ¹ of the known object, in which the real and genuine existence of the object of knowledge is disclosed to the knowing subject or the percipient, and (2) the knowledge in which the external existence of its object is not observed and witnessed by the knower; rather he becomes aware of it by the mediation of something which represents it, which is termed its 'form' (surat) or 'mental concept' (mafhum dhihni).

The first kind is called 'presentational knowledge' or 'knowledge by presence' ('ilm hudhuri) and the second kind is called 'acquired knowledge' ('ilm husuli), [that is, knowledge acquired by conceptual representation].

The division of knowledge into these two kinds is rational, comprehensive and exclusive, and in this regard no third state can be supposed besides these two; that is, there is no knowledge other than knowledge which is of these two kinds.

Either there is an intermediary between the person who knows and the essence of the known object, by means of which the awareness is obtained, in which case the knowledge is called 'acquired,' or such an intermediary does not exist, or in that case there will be 'knowledge by presence.' However, the existence of these two kinds of knowledge in man needs to be explained.

Knowledge by Presence

The knowledge and awareness that every one has of himself as a perceiving existent, is a knowledge which cannot be denied. Even the sophists who considered man to be the measure of all things did not deny the existence of man himself and the knowledge man has of himself.

Of course, this means that man himself, his very ego, is a perceiver, a thinker, who by internal witnessing (shuhud) is aware of himself, neither by means of sensation or experience nor by forms or mental concepts. In other words, he himself is the knowledge, and in this knowledge and awareness there is no plurality or otherness between knowledge, the knower, and the known object.

As was previously mentioned, 'the unity of the knower and the known' is the most perfect instance of 'the presence of the known object to the knower'. However, awareness of man by color, shape, and other

characteristics of the body are not like this, but is acquired through sight, touch, and the other senses, and by means of mental forms.

Within the body there are numerous internal organs of which we are not aware, unless we come to know of them by means of their signs and effects, or we become aware of them by learning anatomy, physiology, and other biological sciences.

Likewise, this means that such knowledge is simple and unanalyzable, not such as the propositions, "I am," or "I exist," which are composed of several concepts. Thus, the meaning of 'self-knowledge' is this very intuitive, simple and direct awareness of our own souls. This knowledge and awareness is an essential characteristic of this 'self-knowledge'.

This is proved in its own appropriate place [in this book], that the soul is immaterial and that every non-material substance is aware of itself. These topics are related to ontology and philosophical psychology, consequently this is not the place to discuss them.

Our awareness of our psychological states, sentiments and passions are cases of direct presentational knowledge. When we become frightened we become directly aware of this psychological state without any intermediary, without the mediation of any form or mental concept.

When we are affectionate toward someone or something, we find this inclination within ourselves. When we make a decision to do something, we are aware of our decision and will. To be afraid of something, or to like something, or to decide to do something without awareness of the fear, or affection, or will is meaningless. For the same reason, the existence of our doubts or suppositions is undeniable. No one can claim that he is unaware of his own doubt, and that he doubts the existence of his doubt!

Another instance of knowledge by presence is the knowledge the self has of its perceptive and motor faculties. The awareness the self has of its ability to think or imagine or of its motor abilities is presentational knowledge and is direct. These things are not known by means of forms or mental concepts.

For this reason one never makes a mistake about their employment. For example, one never uses the perceptive faculty instead of one's motor abilities, and one never uses one's ability to move instead of thinking about something. Among the things known by presence are the forms and mental concepts themselves, which are not known to the self through the mediation of other forms and concepts.

If it were necessary for knowledge of anything to be obtained by means of forms and mental concepts, one would have to know every mental form by means of some other form, and knowledge of that form also by means of another form. In this way, for everything you knew you would have to know an infinite number of other things and have an infinite number of other mental forms.

It is possible that a question might be raised here, for if presentational knowledge is the thing known

itself, then it becomes necessary that mental forms will be both presentational knowledge and acquired knowledge.

For these forms, in one respect will be known by presence so, they themselves will be knowledge by presence itself. In another respect, it is supposed that they are cases of acquired knowledge of external things. So, how is it possible that one knowledge can be both presentational knowledge and acquired knowledge?

The answer is that mental forms have the property of mirroring outer forms and representing external things, and as they are means for knowing external things, they are considered as cases of acquired knowledge.

With respect to the fact that they are present before the self, and the self is directly aware of them, they count as presentational knowledge. These two respects are different from one another: the respect of their being present is the self's direct awareness of them and the respect of their being acquired is their representing external things.

In order to explain this further we shall attend to the analogy of the mirror. We are able to observe a mirror in two independent ways. One way is that of one who wants to buy a mirror, which looks at both sides of it to see that it is not broken or defective. The other way is that of one who uses the mirror, as when we look at the mirror to see our face, and although we look at the mirror, our attention is to our own face, not to the mirror.

Mental forms can also be independently attended to by the self, and in this case we say that they are perceived by presentational knowledge. They can also be a means by which external things or persons may be known, and in this case we say that they are cases of acquired knowledge.

It should be noted that the point of this explanation is not to distinguish the two cases temporally; rather the point is to distinguish two respects, without entailing that a mental concept, in so far as it is a case of acquired knowledge of an external object, should not also be known by the self or lack the respect of presence to the self.

The Reason behind the Infallibility of Presentational Knowledge:

By attending to the explanation given about presentational knowledge and acquired knowledge and the difference between them, it becomes known why

the knowledge of the self and knowledge of the states of the self and likewise other cases of knowledge by presence are fundamentally infallible, for in these cases it is the reality itself which is observed. To the contrary, in cases of acquired knowledge, forms and mental concepts play an intermediate role, and possibly there may not be complete correspondence with external things and persons.

In other words, error in perception is imaginable when there is an intermediary between the perceiving person and the perceived entity, and knowledge is realized by means of it. In this case the question arises as to whether this form or concept which mediates between the perceiving subject and the perceived object and plays the role of reflecting the perceived object represents the perceived object precisely and corresponds to it perfectly or not.

Unless it is proved that this form and concept corresponds precisely to the perceived object certainty will not be acquired with respect to the validity of the perception. However, in the case that the thing or person perceived is present before the perceiver without any intermediary with its own very existence, or is united with it, no error can be supposed, and one cannot ask whether the knowledge corresponds with what is known or not, for in this case the knowledge is the known itself.

Furthermore, the meaning of truth and error in perception now become clear. Truth is the perception which corresponds to reality and completely reveals it. Error is the belief which does not correspond to reality.

The Concomitance of Acquired Knowledge with Presentational Knowledge

Here we should mention an important point, namely that the mind always takes a picture of what is present to it like an automatic machine. From these it gets specific forms and concepts and then analyzes and interprets them. For example, when one becomes afraid his mind takes a photo of the state of fear which it can remember after the state has left.

Furthermore, it apprehends its universal concept and by appending other concepts projects it as a proposition such as 'I am afraid,' or 'I have fear,' or 'Fear exists in me.' It interprets the appearance of this psychological state with a marvelous alacrity on the basis of its previous knowledge and identifies its cause.

This entire mental process, which is accomplished so quickly, is distinct from the state of fear and its presentational knowledge. However, simultaneity with knowledge by presence is often the source of a mistake, and one fancies that since he finds fear with knowledge by presence he also comes to know its cause with knowledge by presence, but that which was apprehended with knowledge by presence is simple, without any form or concept and also devoid of any interpretation whatsoever, and that is why it allows no room for error.

To the contrary, the simultaneous interpretation is from acquired perceptions which by themselves provide no guarantee of truth and correspondence to reality. With this explanation it becomes clear why and how mistakes occur in some cases of acquired knowledge. For example, a person feels hungry and thinks that he needs food, but this is a false appetite and he does not really need to have a meal.

The reason is that that which has been perceived with the infallible presentational knowledge was that specific feeling, which was accompanied by a mental interpretation based on comparison with previous feelings according to which the cause of the feeling must be a need for food. This comparison, however, is incorrect and because of it an error occurs in specifying the cause and providing a mental interpretation.

The errors which occur in gnostic disclosures are also of this sort. Hence, it is necessary to be completely precise in specifying presentational knowledge and to distinguish it from its accompanying mental interpretations in order not to err as a result of this confusion.

Gradation in Knowledge by Presence

Another noteworthy point is that all cases of presentational knowledge are not equal with respect to intensity or weakness. Rather, sometimes knowledge by presence is adequately powerful and intense to come to one's consciousness, while at other times it is so weak and pale that one is only semiconscious or even unconscious of it.

Sometimes the difference among the levels of knowledge by presence are caused by difference in the levels of existence of the perceiving subjects, that is, to the extent that the self is weak with respect to the degree of existence, his presentational knowledge will also be weak and pale.

To the extent that the degree of his existence is more perfect, his knowledge by presence will be more perfect and more conscious. This explanation depends on explanation of the gradation of existence and of the degrees of perfection of the self, which are to be proved in another area of philosophy, but here we can accept that on the basis of these two principles it is possible for presentational knowledge to be intense or weak.

Knowledge by presence of psychological states also can have other forms of intensity and weakness. For example, when a sick person who is suffering from pain and who perceives this pain with knowledge by presence, sees a close friend and turns his attention to him, he no longer perceives the pain.

To the contrary, in times of solitude, and especially in the dark of night in which there is nothing else to which he can pay attention, he feels the pain more intensely, and the cause of this is the intensity of his attention. Differences in the degrees of presentational knowledge may effect the mental interpretations associated with the degrees of intensity and weakness.

For example, although a self at the lowest levels has presentational knowledge of itself, it is possible that due to the weakness of this knowledge it may imagine that the relation between the self and the body is the relation of identity, concluding that the reality of the self is this very material body or the phenomena related to it, but when a more perfect degree of knowledge by presence is achieved, and in other words, when the substance of the self is perfected, such a mistake will no longer occur.

Likewise, in its proper place it is proved that man has presentational knowledge of his Creator, but due to weakness of the degree of existence and also due to the attention given to the body and material things, this knowledge becomes unconscious. However, with the perfection of the self and decrease in attention to the body and material things and the strengthening of attention of the heart to God, the Exalted, this same knowledge will reach the stage of clarity and consciousness, until one says: “Is there any manifestation of [something] other than You and not of You?”²

¹. By essence (dhat) is meant the thing itself, the reality of the thing. This is to be distinguished from the whatness or quiddity, which is the descriptive answer to the Aristotelian question, ‘What is it?’

². These words are commonly attributed to Imam Husayn (‘a) and are included in standard printings of his Supplication of the Day of ‘Arafah, although Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (1037/1628 – 1110/1699) expresses doubts about the authenticity of this part of the supplication and opines that it is the work of a sufi shaykh. See William Chittick, “A Shadhili Presence in Shi’ite Islam”, *Sophia Perennis*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1970, pp. 97–100, where it is pointed out that the section is from the munajat attributed to Ibn ‘Ata’illah (d. 709/1309), included in the translation by Victor Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1985), p. 66, paragraph 19

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