

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 2: Epistemology](#) > [Lesson 19: The Value of Knowledge](#) > The Case Itself (Nafs al-Amr)

Lesson 19: The Value of Knowledge

[Return to the Original Problem](#)

We know that the original problem of epistemology is whether man is able to discover the truth and obtain information about reality. If so, how? What is the criterion by which one can recognize the truth from incorrect thoughts which are contrary to reality? In other words, the main fundamental discussions of epistemology include the problem of ‘the value of knowledge’, and other problems are considered to be introductory or supplementary.

Since there are several kinds of knowledge, it is natural that the problem of the value of knowledge should also have different dimensions. But what is of special importance for philosophy is the evaluation of intellectual knowledge and the proof of the ability of the intellect to solve the problems of epistemology and other branches of philosophy.

We first explained the general types of knowledge, and we came to the conclusion that a sort of human knowledge is without intermediary and is knowledge by presence. In other words, it is finding reality itself. In this kind of knowledge error is impossible. But with regard to the fact that this knowledge by itself does not meet the scientific needs of man we discussed acquired knowledge and its types. We also made clear the role of the senses and the intellect in them.

Now it is time to return to the original problem and explain the value of acquired knowledge. As acquired knowledge, in the sense of the actual discovery of reality, is the same as affirmations and propositions, naturally, the evaluation of acquired knowledge is accomplished in their area. If ideas are mentioned it will be indirectly and as the components of propositions.

[What is Truth?](#)

A fundamental problem about the value of knowledge is how to prove that human knowledge corresponds to reality. This difficulty appears in case there is an intermediary between the knower and

the known. Because of that, the knower is the one to whom knowledge is attributed, and the known is the one to which being known is attributed.

In other words, knowledge is other than that which is known, but in case there is no intermediary, and the knower finds the objective existence of the known, naturally such questions will not arise.

Therefore, knowledge which is capable of truth—that is, which corresponds to reality—and is capable of error—that is, which differs from reality—that very knowledge is acquired knowledge. And if truth is attributed to knowledge by presence, this is in the sense of a denial of the possibility of its being in error.

Meanwhile, the definition of truth, which is discussed under the topic of the value of knowledge, is known, that is, it is the correspondence of the form of knowledge with the reality which it describes.

However, there may be other definitions of truth, such as the definition of the pragmatists, “Truth is a thought which is useful in the practical life of man,” or the definition of the relativists, “Truth is knowledge which is appropriate to a healthy perceptual apparatus,” or a third definition, which says, “Truth is that upon which all people agree,” or a fourth definition, which says, “Truth is knowledge which can be proved by sensory experience.”

All of these are besides the point of the discussion, and avoid answering the original problem about the value of knowledge. They can be considered as signs of the inability of the definers to solve this problem.

Supposing that some of them are correctly justified, or they are considered as the definitions necessary for specific cases (even if the definition itself is not correct), that is, they are considered as specific signs of some truth, or they indicate some specific terminology, but in any case, it must be noted that none of these justifications are able to solve our original problem.

The question about the truth in the sense of knowledge which corresponds to reality is left unanswered, and requires a correct and clarifying answer.

Criteria for the Recognition of the Truth

The rationalists hold that the standard for recognizing the truth is ‘the nature of the intellect’ (fitrat-e ‘aql). The propositions which are inferred correctly from self-evident propositions and which are really components of them are considered to be truth, while sensory and experiential propositions are considered valid to the extent that they are proved by the aid of intellectual arguments.

However, we do not see any explanation given by them of the correspondence of self-evident propositions and innate propositions (fitriyyat) with realities, except the one mentioned by Descartes, who resorted to the wisdom and honesty of God with respect to innate thoughts. The weakness of this is clear as was mentioned in the seventeenth lesson.

There is no doubt at all that the intellect, after imagining the subject and predicate of self-evident propositions, automatically and without need for experience, definitively judges their unity. Those who have raised doubts about this proposition either have not correctly imagined the subject and predicate or are affected with a kind of illness or scruples.

But our discussion pertains to the following: whether this so-called innate kind of understanding is requisite of the way in which man's intellect has been created, so that it would be possible for the intellect of another existent (for example, the intellect of a jinn) to understand the very same propositions but in another form, or if man's intellect were created in another way would it understand matters in a different form, or whether these understandings correspond perfectly to reality and are representatives of things in themselves, and any other existent which also had an intellect would understand the same forms.

Plainly, what it means for intellectual knowledge to have real value and to be true is the latter, but its mere innateness (assuming that it is here interpreted in the correct way) does not prove the matter.

On the other hand, empiricists hold that the standard for the truth of knowledge is capability of being proved by means of experience, and some of them have added that it must be proved by practical experience.

However, it is clear that first of all this standard is only applicable to sensory things and cases which are susceptible to practical experience. Matters of logic and pure mathematics cannot be evaluated by this standard. Secondly, the results of sensory and practical experience must be understood by means of acquired knowledge. Exactly the same question will be repeated regarding what guarantees the correctness of acquired knowledge, and by what standard can its truth be distinguished.

Inquiry into a Problem

The main point of difficulty regarding acquired knowledge is how it can be determined when there is correspondence, while it is this very form of cognition and acquired knowledge that serves as the means of our relation to the external world.

Therefore, the key to this problem must be sought where we are able to have an overview of both the form of understanding and that which is concomitant with it and we can understand their correspondence by presence and without any other intermediary. Those are propositions of inner sense, which on the one hand we find by presence concomitant with cognition, for example, the very state of fear, and on the other hand, we perceive the mental form related to it directly.

Therefore, the propositions, "I am", or "I am afraid", or "I doubt", are completely indubitable. So, these propositions (propositions of inner sense) are the first propositions whose value is hundred percent proven, and there is no way for them to be in error. To be sure, we must take care that these

propositions are not mixed with mental interpretations, as was mentioned in lesson thirteen.

We find such an overview in the propositions of logic, which describe other mental forms and concepts. For although both the description and the object described are found in two levels of the mind, both levels are present to the self (i.e., the I who understands).

For example, this proposition, “The concept of man is a universal concept” is a proposition which describes the features of ‘the concept of man’, a concept which is present in the mind. We are able to distinguish these features by mental experience that is without using sensory organs or the intermediary of any other perceptual form.

We understand that this concept does not describe a specific individual, but is applicable to numerous individuals. So, the proposition “The concept of man is a universal concept” is true.

By this means the way is open for the recognition of two groups of propositions, but these are not sufficient for the cognition of all acquired knowledge. If we are able to obtain a guarantee of the correctness of primary self-evident propositions we would be completely successful, for in their rays we can recognize and evaluate theoretical propositions such as the sensory and experiential propositions.

For the sake of this task we must pay careful attention to the whatnesses of these propositions. On the one hand, we must examine the concepts employed in them and consider what kind of concepts they are, and how they are obtained. On the other hand, we must look at the relations among them and consider how the intellect is able to judge the unity of their subjects and predicates.

The first aspect has been made clear in lesson seventeen. We know that these propositions are formed of philosophical concepts, concepts which terminate in presentational knowledge. That is, the first group of philosophical concepts, such as ‘need’ and ‘independence’ and then ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ are abstracted from direct knowledge and inner sense. We find their correspondence with the source of their abstraction by presence. Some philosophical concepts also reduce to them.

The second aspect that is the qualities of judgment of unity between their subjects and predicates becomes clear with comparison between the subjects and predicates of these propositions with each other. This means that all of these propositions are analytical, the concept of whose predicates is obtained from the analysis of the concept of their subjects.

For example, in this proposition, “Every effect requires a cause”, when we analyze the concept of effect we arrive at the conclusion that an effect is an existent whose existence is based on another existent, that is, it needs another existent, which is called the cause. Therefore the concept of need for a cause is implicit in the concept of effect. Their unity is found by mental experience.

To the contrary, in the proposition “Every existent requires a cause,” because from the analysis of the concept of ‘existent’ the concept of ‘requires a cause’ is not obtained, we cannot consider it a self-

evident proposition. But it is also not a true speculative proposition.

In this way it becomes clear that primary self-evidence also terminates in knowledge by presence, and so they find the way to the guarantee of their truth.

A problem may be raised, that if what we find by presentational knowledge is a specific effect, how can we generalize judgments regarding it to every effect and consider such a universal judgment to be self-evident?

The answer is that although we abstract the concept of effect from a specific phenomenon, like that of our own will, it is not for that reason a specific essence, and, for example, to be considered from among the kinds of qualities of the soul, but it is because its existence is related to the existence of another.

So, everywhere this quality is found this judgment is also established. Of course, the confirmation of this quality for other cases requires intellectual proof. For this reason this proposition by itself cannot establish the requirement of material phenomena for a cause, unless an intellectual proof of their existential relationship can be provided.

God willing, we will explain their proofs in the lesson on cause and effect. With the same proposition we also can judge that everywhere there is an existential relationship, the terms and relation can be established, and so, the existence of the cause.

In conclusion, the secret of the infallibility of primary self-evident propositions is their dependence on knowledge by presence.

The Criteria of Truth and Falsity of Propositions

With our explanation about the standard of truth it became clear that self-evident propositions, such as primary self-evident propositions and propositions of inner sense have the value of certainty. The secret of their infallibility is that the correspondence between the knowledge and the object of the knowledge is proved through presentational knowledge.

Propositions which are not self-evident are to be evaluated by logical standards, that is, if a proposition is obtained according to the logical rules of inference, it is true; otherwise it will be incorrect.

Of course, it must be noted that the incorrectness of a reason does not always signify the incorrectness of the conclusion, for it is possible to prove something which is correct by using reasons which are incorrect. Therefore, the invalidity of an argument only provides a reason for lack of confidence in the conclusion, not a reason for its actual error.

It is possible that a doubt may be raised here. According to the definition of truth as knowledge which corresponds to reality, truth and error are to be found only with regard to propositions which may be

compared to reality in the external world. Metaphysical propositions, however, do not have an external reality to which they could correspond. Hence, they cannot be considered as true or false, but it must be said that they are absurd and meaningless.

This doubt arises from the assumption that external objective reality is equivalent to material reality. In order to remove this doubt it is to be noted that, first of all, external objective reality is not limited to material reality, but also includes the abstract; furthermore, it will be proven in the appropriate place that the abstract participates in reality to a greater extent than does the material.

Secondly, the reality which is meant is that to which propositions must correspond, the absolute referent of propositions; and by the external world is meant that which is beyond the concepts about them, even if that reality and referent is in the mind, or is psychological; and as we have explained, purely logical propositions describe other mental things.

The relationship between the level of the mind which is the place of the referents of these propositions and the level from which they are viewed is like the relationship between that which is outside the mind and the mind.

Therefore, the general criterion of the truth and falsity of propositions is their correspondence or lack of correspondence with the concepts beyond them, that is, the recognition of the truth and falsity of propositions of the empirical sciences is the comparison of them with the material reality to which they are related, for example, in order to discover the truth of the proposition,

“Iron expands when heated”, we heat iron in the external world, and observe the difference in its size, but logical propositions must be evaluated by means of other mental concepts which are related to them. In order to recognize the truth or falsity of philosophical propositions, one must consider the relation between the mind and its object, that is, their being correct is that their objective referents, whether material or abstract, must be such that the mind abstracts the concepts related to them.

This evaluation is accomplished directly in the case of propositions of inner sense, and for other propositions it is accomplished with one or more intermediaries, as was explained.

The Case Itself (Nafs al-Amr)

We come across this expression in the language of most philosophers that a certain matter corresponds to “the case itself”. Among these are ‘true propositions’ some of which do not have any instances for their subjects in the external world. If supposing an instance to be existent, the predicate applies to it, such a proposition will be true.

It is said that the criterion of truth for these propositions is their correspondence with the case itself, for not all their instances exist in the external world, so that we may evaluate the correspondence between the purport of the propositions with them, and say that they correspond to the external world.

Likewise with regard to propositions which are formed of secondary intelligibles, such as logical propositions and propositions which apply to judgments about nonexistent objects or impossible objects, it is said that the criterion for their truth is their correspondence to a thing in itself.

With regard to the meaning of this expression, there are several accounts which are either very artificial, such as the saying of some philosophers that the word 'amr' (case) is the world of the abstract, or they do not solve the problem, such as the saying that what is meant by 'nafs al-amr' is the thing itself, for the question is left unanswered that at last for the evaluation of these propositions, with what are they to be evaluated?

With the explanation of the truth and falsity of propositions it became clear that the meaning of nafs al-amr is something other than external reality, rather it is a container for the intellectual demonstration of reference which differs in various cases. In some cases it is a specific level of the mind, such as with regard to logical propositions.

In other cases it is the assumption of an external demonstration, such as the referent of the proposition of the impossibility of the unity of contradictories. In cases in which there is an accidental relation in the external world, such as when it is said, "The cause of the absence of the effect is the absence of the cause," it is established that the relation of causality in truth is between the existence of the cause and the existence of the effect, and accidentally it is also related to their absence.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-19-value-knowledge>