**Knowledge – a priori vs. a posteriori**

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**Knowledge and Reality**

**Jul. 25, 2007**

**Knowledge – formed from experience or derived from a foundation?**

One of the great debates of epistemology is the definition of knowledge as either dependent of the realm of experience or independent of it. The former ideology is consequently referred to as a posteriori knowledge and the latter as a priori knowledge. The great debate which has ensued for centuries involves whether knowledge can be exclusively categorized in either one or the other. Few have doubt that most of our knowledge stems from experience and perception, but the existence of innate knowledge, that exists independently of the senses, is controversial.

A posteriori knowledge is readily observed and the following example can be given: a college student knows that John Locke published his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1690 and that he died in 1704. It is evident that this information could only have been obtained from an external source, and could not have possibly been deduced from reason. Unless the student was a personal friend of Locke (in which case he would have to be over 300 years old), it is safe to assume that this piece of knowledge was obtained through experience.

A priori knowledge, on the other hand, is hardly obvious. Consider a newborn infant, born deaf, blind and without the ability to touch, taste or smell. With all his sensory mechanisms impaired, could it be safe to assume that this baby could never hope to obtain knowledge? Rene Descartes would argue otherwise. His famous aphorism “I think therefore I am” is an analytical statement that was deduced, rather than being derivative of experience. He proposed that the senses could not be trusted, as perception as we know it could potentially be a mere dream, or that we are tricked into believing it by an omnipotent being. Thus he throws away all beliefs that did not have a reliable foundation and ultimately comes to the conclusion that he knows he exists, simply because he has the ability to think. This is one of the major foundations for a priori knowledge.

In stern opposition to Descartes’ methods, John Locke, who in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* establishes the notion that all newborns are born with the mind like a blank state, remarked that all knowledge is henceforth obtained through experience, observation and education. Locke’s refutation of innate principles stems from his belief that there cannot be innate ideas, and thus no innate principles. Knowledge that appears innate, such as the distinguishing of colors was, according to Locke, furnished from senses starting in the womb. Furthermore, Locke splits knowledge into three degrees of understanding: intuition, demonstrative, and sensitive. Locke’s definition of knowledge as a strong connection between two ideas (that is, if one can derive B given A) might at first seem strict and unnecessary. I know, for example, that my dog has four legs. I also know that every dog I have ever come across has four legs. But it does not necessarily entail that I know that all dogs have four legs. If I came across a healthy dog that did not have four legs, I would be forced to concede that I did not know after all. But if I truly knew it, then I would know the impossibility of coming across such a dog. Thus the strictness of Locke’s definition does have basis.

This definition can be further applied to a priori statements. Let us peruse the statement “I know that I am thinking right now”. It is true, because the uttering of that statement involves thinking, and also that it does not result from any sensory experience. Under Locke’s definition, we can conclude that this act of thinking must correlate to our existence and our nature as a human being. Thus ideas have been derived and established from the first statement, and I can now say that I have knowledge of being a human and of existing because I can think, in accordance with the definition, despite the absence of any sensory experience. This would then be an example of a priori knowledge.

Self-evident truths could also be considered a priori knowledge. The statement “All bachelors are unmarried” is true by definition of bachelor meaning “an unmarried man”. Certainly we are not necessarily inclined to meet a bachelor to confirm this definition, as it will remain valid so long as bachelor does not lose its meaning in that context, so it is true independent of experience or the senses. Mathematical truths such as “A triangle has three sides” are also true regardless of how many triangles or 3-sided figures are observed, or in what language they are come across. A counterexample cannot exist, for a triangle which does not have three sides is no longer referred to as a triangle. The moment we try to contradict this statement, we fail because a 3-sided figure is what defines a triangle’s properties.

David Hume, one of the great philosophers, argued in favor of the empiricist view, and cited that all human knowledge is divided into relations of ideas – mathematical axioms and the like – and matters of fact, which arises out of contingent observation and sensory experience. Ideas were derived from impressions or sensations. Similarly, Leibniz separated knowledge into truths of reason and truths of fact. However, Hume’s ‘relations of ideas’ and Leibniz’s ‘truths of reason’ both accepted the view that some of the knowledge we obtain is independent of the senses, and are “discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe"[[1]](#endnote-2). This seems to confirm the separation of knowledge into a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge.

This distinction was further made clear by Immanuel Kant, who argued that a priori knowledge is transcendental, based on the form of the experience, while a posteriori knowledge is based on the content. While all knowledge begins with experience, it does not mean that all knowledge arises out of experience, and from this Kantian perspective, it can be seen that concepts such as time are transcendental; time passes by regardless of whether or not we perceive it, as are birth and death – such are inevitabilities and to say that “I did not know that I was born” or “I do not exist” makes no sense as your thoughts, and your brain operating the movements of your body make it clear that you exist (whether the mind can exist separately from the body is another matter).

Furthermore, basic instincts of survival and genetic traits of human beings also attest to the existence of a priori knowledge. A newborn baby will know that falling from a height should be avoided, despite not having experienced it before. We know that eating, drinking and sleeping should be done, despite not being taught how to eat, drink or sleep. We develop our own moral standards, even before we are taught which is ‘right’ and which is ‘wrong’. Our acknowledgement of our own existence and having free will are all signs of a priori knowledge.

Thus, it seems evident that while our knowledge usually begins with experience, some of that knowledge is known independently of our senses, and is considered a priori. This form of knowledge is usually that kind which is irrefutable and true ‘in every possible world’. It includes the concept of time, mathematical axioms, and instinctual traits of human beings. Most importantly, our thinking, our existence and our awareness of it are the most prominent pieces of evidence for a priori knowledge, or knowledge that exists independently of the senses.

1. Hume, (1777), §IV, Part I. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)