

# **THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE**

by

**David L. Lipe, Ph.D.**

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## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Among the major philosophical problems that are of supreme importance is the problem of epistemology. Man's search for knowledge and his desire to understand the essence and basic features of knowledge are perennial tasks. Schopenhauer spoke of the body/mind problem as the "riddle of the universe" or "world knot" (*Weltknoten*), by which he meant that all the great problems of philosophy overlap in the subject area of body/mind. Such certainly could be said of epistemology where, perhaps more than any other area of philosophy, all problems are interrelated—problems concerning language, methodology, religion, morality, etc. Thus, the task of epistemology is crucial. Everything about which we philosophize depends on our knowledge. If knowledge likewise is called into question, then that concerning which we claim to have knowledge is called into question. Surely no other area of philosophical inquiry could be more important than that which examines the very foundations of all knowledge—namely, epistemology.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate some considerations relative to: (a) how we obtain our knowledge; and (b) the kind of knowledge we possess. Such inquiries have serious ramifications. Philosophy offers two main historical answers to the question of how we obtain our knowledge—by sense experience, and by reason. Those who have insisted on the former as the basis for all our knowledge are known as **empiricists**, while those who insist on the latter are known as **rationalists**. Rationalists have held that reason itself, unaided by observation, can provide us with knowledge. Such knowledge generally is known as *a priori*. Though reasoning will disclose what will follow from the fact that X exists, empiricists have contended that reasoning cannot tell one whether, in fact, X does exist. To find this out, one must go and look.

Perhaps I can offer some insight to the different approaches to knowledge by considering two basic types of knowledge—*a priori* and *a posteriori*. A consideration of these two distinct types of knowledge

will reveal that some truths are known independently of experience while others are known only after evidence has been gathered by experience.

The general methodology I plan to follow is as follows. (1) I will examine the meaning of the two expressions, *a priori* and *a posteriori*. (2) I will discuss three basic features of *a priori* knowledge (while simultaneously providing insight into *a posteriori* considerations). (3) I will offer some general observations on *a posteriori* knowledge. (4) And finally, I will make some concluding remarks by way of summation.

### **THE MEANING OF A *PRIORI* AND A *POSTERIORI***

Before explaining the basic features of *a priori* knowledge, it is essential that we arrive at a clear understanding of the meaning of the expression “*a priori*” itself. *A priori*, and its opposite, *a posteriori*, apply primarily to propositions, objects, concepts, notions, ideas, statements, judgments, etc. The earliest occurrence of the phrases is in the writings of Albert of Saxony (fourteenth century) who distinguished between *demonstratio a priori* (the proof from what is before, i.e. from the cause), and *demonstratio a posteriori* (the proof from what is after, i.e. from the effect). The usage can be traced to Aristotle, who in his *Posterior Analytics* stated that that upon which proof is based must be prior to and better known than that which is to be proved (see Kalweit, 1955, p. 645).

By the eighteenth century, *a priori* referred to propositions, objects, etc. that were universal, necessary, and completely independent of experience, and whose truth could be established by the Law of Contradiction. *A posteriori* referred to propositions, objects, etc., that could not be established by the Law of Contradiction and whose truth had to be gleaned from experience. Accordingly, Leibniz distinguished between “truths *a priori*, or of reason” and “truths *a posteriori*, or of fact” (1951, p. 470). Thus, the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* came to be a distinction between what is derived from experience and what is not. This distinction was set forth clearly by Kant.

By the term “knowledge *a priori*,” therefore, we shall in this sequel understand, not such as is independent of this or that kind of experience, but such as is absolutely so of all experience. Opposed to this is empirical knowledge, or that which is possible only *a posteriori*, that is, through experience (1952, p. 14).

The distinction, then, is equivalent roughly to the distinction between what is empirical and what is not empirical. In connection with this, Kant also made a distinction between what is necessary and what is contingent, with *a priori* truths being necessary and *a posteriori* truths being contingent.

From the above observations we may make the following distinctions. An *a posteriori* (empirical) proposition refers to a factual statement that is to be proved or disproved by reference to evidence gathered through experience. An *a priori* proposition refers to universal and necessary truths that are independent of experience (except insofar as experience is necessary for understanding its terms).

Kant made it clear that although all our knowledge **begins** with experience, it does not **arise** out of it. Thus, we know *a priori* that all triangles have interior angles that total  $180^\circ$ , but before such can be known *a priori* it seems necessary to say that we must have sense experience—e.g., of triangles drawn on a board. Once we understand the terms involved we understand that this is a necessary, universal, intelligible truth and that no experience whatever can show this to be otherwise.

Since Plato, philosophers have been awed by the fact that certain propositions refer to objects and states of affairs that necessarily are true, highly intelligible, and absolutely certain. Plato was so impressed that one could know necessary, intelligible, and absolutely certain facts and states of affairs, independently of experience, that he developed his theory of recollection—namely, that the soul is born with this knowledge but has partially forgotten it because of its embodied state. Hence, achieving knowledge in a general way (and *a priori* knowledge in particular) is not a matter of learning something new but **recollecting** something previously known but forgotten. In the *Meno*, a slave boy is led by Socrates to “see” that a square whose side is a diagonal of a given square has exactly twice the area of the given square. Socrates, without telling the boy the answer, elicits it by asking questions that serve merely as the occasion for the boy to recollect what he knew but had forgotten.

Plato saw how knowledge of such states of affairs differed from all other kinds of knowledge. In the following paragraphs, I will give a description of some of the basic features of this unique type of knowledge recognized by Plato. It is not within the scope of this paper to go into a detailed analysis of all the

features of *a priori* knowledge that could be discussed. However, I will consider three features: (1) absolute necessity; (2) incomparable intelligibility; and (3) absolute certainty.

### ***A PRIORI* KNOWLEDGE**

First, the phrase “absolute necessity” refers to an object or state of affairs that cannot be otherwise. Various examples of absolutely necessary states of affairs (and thus examples of *a priori* truth in general) could be cited. For example, note the following:

1. The “laws of thought.” These “laws of thought,” as they traditionally have been called, can be stated in different ways as they apply both to propositions and to things. In general they may be stated as follows:
  - (a) The Law of Identity: “Whatever a thing is, it is.”
  - (b) The Law of Contradiction: “A thing cannot be and not be the same thing at the same time and in the same sense.”
  - (c) The Law of Excluded Middle: “A thing either is or is not.”
2. “Two plus two equals four.”
3. “Responsibility presupposes freedom.”
4. “The interior angles of a triangle equal 180°.”
5. “A whole is equal to the sum of its parts.”
6. “Moral values cannot be embodied in impersonal beings.”

Many other examples could be given illustrating the absolute necessity of *a priori* truth, but these are sufficient. The truthfulness of the above examples in no way depends upon experience; a mere understanding of the terms involved is sufficient to discover their accuracy.

To understand the feature of absolute necessity, the following distinctions must be made. First, the absolute necessity of *a priori* knowledge can be grasped clearly when contrasted to propositions: (1) “Two plus two equals four” and (2) “Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo.” In proposition (1), it is clear that once one understands the concept of numbers (in this example the concepts “two” and “four”) the proposition can be “seen” to be true by simply thinking about it. One is able to “see” that “two plus two equals four” is true concerning any particulars (two people, two books, etc.) in any place; hence, two books plus two books equals four books in any possible world. This is not a mere accidental fact but an absolute necessity. The absoluteness of the necessity is not increased by examining new instances of “two plus two equals four.” There is an inner necessity that is characteristic of the proposition.

The above point becomes even clearer if one considers the second proposition (“Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo”) in contrast to the first (“two plus two equals four”). In regard to the first proposition, there is an inner necessity joining the concepts “two” and “four.” The second proposition refers to a contingent state of affairs that could have been otherwise. It was possible for Napoleon to have been victorious instead of having been defeated at Waterloo. However, it never has been and never will be possible (or conceivable) that “two plus two” could equal five. No empirical generalization possesses the absolute necessity that characterizes *a priori* knowledge.

One should not conclude that the feature of absolute necessity characteristic of the above *a priori* example (“two plus two equals four”) is in any way limited just to mathematics. Propositions such as “responsibility presupposes freedom” can be seen to possess the mark of absolute necessity when contrasted to accidental facts (such as “Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo”). The absolute necessity that is evident in the proposition “responsibility presupposes freedom” can be “seen” by a mere understanding of the terms involved. The truth of the proposition can be known, not by empirical observation, but by a grasping of the nature or essence of the state of affairs to which the proposition refers.

A second distinction that demonstrates the absolute necessity of *a priori* truth is the contrast of *a priori* truths with laws of nature. The absolute necessity of such states of affairs as “two plus two equals four” and “responsibility presupposes freedom” is lacking when we consider laws of nature. It is conceivable that laws of nature such as the law of gravity could be otherwise. That the law of gravity is not absolute can be seen clearly from actual exceptions to the law (e.g., the floating axe-head as recorded in 2 Kings 6:5-7 and Peter’s walking on the water as recorded in Matthew 14:25-33).

To further see that laws of nature are not absolute, consider the proposition, “All crows are black.” This statement is only as secure as the available evidence on which it is founded. The proposition is only highly probable based on past experience. It certainly is conceivable that the color of crows could be otherwise. That there may be a white crow is possible on Earth or in some other conceivable world.

When one considers the “necessity” in a law of nature, it is clear that this necessity is not rooted in the essence of the object or state of affairs in question. It is not absurd to think of a law of nature as being

suspended by a miracle (as in the cases of the floating axe-head and Peter walking on water). However, the suspension of a state of affairs necessarily rooted in the essence of a being lies beyond the scope of a miracle (see von Hildebrand, 1973, pp. 67-68).

Second, *a priori* knowledge possesses the feature of incomparable intelligibility. By “incomparable intelligibility” I am not referring strictly to an object or state of affairs alone, as in absolute necessity. This intelligibility is grounded in, and presupposed by, absolute necessity. Further, this intelligibility is distinctly related to knowability. If one compares an *a priori* state of facts with empirical states, then the feature of intelligibility and its relationship to knowability can be grasped clearly. *A priori* facts can be understood (known) as they are. They are grasped not only **that** they are but **why** they are. *A priori* states of affairs allow our minds to penetrate them from **within**. If one thinks of accidental facts or laws of nature (such as discussed under “absolute necessity”), these can be known only as brute facts. Our minds grasp them from **without**, and they do not allow for “insight” in the fullest sense, i.e. a penetration into the reasons underlying the essence in question (see von Hildebrand, 1973, pp. 69-70)

The insight into necessary states of affairs such as “two plus two equals four” differs greatly from the grasp of a law of nature such as “all crows are black.” In the former example, the state of affairs referred to could not be otherwise. However, in the latter case the truth of the propositions is inferred from inductive reasoning based upon observation of facts of experience. Although a crow may possess intelligibility in that it may be known in a general way, it is not the case that it possesses incomparable intelligibility (allowing penetration into the reasons underlying its essence) because of its contingency (viz., it could be otherwise). Hence, while one may know that a particular crow is black, it is not the case that from examining the essence of a particular crow it therefore follows that **all** crows **must** be black.

Third, a basic feature of *a priori* knowledge is absolute certainty. “Absolute certainty” does not refer to an object or state of affairs as such; rather, it has to do with the relation between the object or state of affairs and our knowledge about it. Traditionally, knowledge of empirical objects or states of affairs has been said to lack the absolute certainty that is characteristic of *a priori* facts.

Compare the following two propositions: (1) “A thing cannot be and not be the same thing at the same time and in the same sense”; and (2) “All crows are black.” Regarding the former proposition, we have absolute certainty that the object or state of affairs to which reference is made is true; however, in regard to the latter proposition, the most that can be said is that based on past experiences all crows are **probably** black. In regard to the Law of Contradiction, we do not possess more certainty regarding its truth by being presented with new instances of it. Its truth is self-evident and known directly, without any possibility of mistake. It is not necessary to employ empirical methods to know that the pen I am holding cannot possess both the property of blue and green at the same time and in the same sense. The self-evident truth of the Law of Contradiction is that no pen can be both blue and green at the same time and in the same sense.

The truth of the proposition, “All crows are black,” is not so self-evident. It must be admitted that it is at least conceivable that there may be a white crow. Although one may know that a particular crow is black, it does not follow that all are black or will be black when hatched. Hence, one cannot possess absolute certainty that **all** crows are black.

Someone might contend that for the knowing subject to possess absolute certainty regarding an object or state of affairs, that certainty must be formed by an absolutely necessary state of affairs. However, although necessary states of affairs can be said to be **certainly true**, it does not follow that every object or state of affairs that is certainly true is **necessary**. For example, that I am presently writing with a pen certainly is true; but it is not necessarily true. It could have been the case that neither I, nor the pen, ever was created. We both could have been otherwise. Nevertheless, just because an object, proposition, or state of affairs could be otherwise does not mean that the certainty of the object, proposition, or state of affairs is less certain. Once the existence of the object or state of affairs is **given**, it is **possible** to arrive at **knowledge** of it, which is to say that one possesses such certainty that it is not possible to be wrong about the particular matter.

One may have certainty of *a priori* truths and one may have certainty of empirical truths. However, this certainty seems to differ not according to **degree** but according to **type** or **method**. Knowledge of *a*

*priori* truths is attained by way of **immediate insight** into the essence of the object or state of affairs, whereas knowledge of empirical truths is accomplished by way of **repeated observation**. It must be admitted that in achieving empirical knowledge, one is subject to mistakes. Because of this, some have concluded that no one ever can possess any certainty regarding empirical facts. It seems clear that to claim that one can possess no certainty because of past mistakes is to make a claim of absolute certainty that we have made past mistakes, hence admitting the possibility of absolute certainty in regard to empirical observations. More will be said on this in the following section.

### ***A POSTERIORI KNOWLEDGE***

It is possible to gain knowledge through empirical observations and to **know** that knowledge may be obtained in this way; however, not all perceptual experiences yield knowledge. One may speak of veridical, illusory, and delusory perceptions. Both illusory perception (where someone perceives some physical object but makes a mistake about the properties, position, or identity of the object) and delusory perception (where someone **thinks** an object exists when actually the object has no external reality at all) involve false beliefs. We cannot gain knowledge from false beliefs no matter how strong the evidence. In veridical perception (like correct reasoning) true beliefs may be formulated, and from those true beliefs one can gain knowledge. By “veridical perception” I am referring to that form of taking cognizance of something in which an object immediately discloses itself in a true or genuine way. From the very nature of the word “veridical,” it is evident that truth is an inherent aspect of such perception.

To further clarify the meaning of veridical perception, observe the following distinctions. First, in veridical perception the object of which one takes cognizance is self-present (this also is true in illusory perception where an object is self-present but a mistake has been made regarding its properties, position, or identity). The object actually is present and experienced immediately. Knowledge of the object is not attained by induction or deduction. The object actually is present.

Second, in veridical perception the object discloses itself to the mind in a meaningful way. There is an immediate contact between the perceiving subject and the object because the object “speaks” to us and informs us about itself. This mark of perception touches on an essential feature of knowledge—viz., the

receptivity of knowledge. “Receptivity” describes a conscious relation between the subject and the object where the relation goes from the object to the subject. When an object is perceived in veridical perception, we truly partake of the object. This does not mean that we become the object. Rather, we possess the object spiritually in such a way that a clear distinction is maintained between the subject and the object (see von Hildebrand, 1973, pp. 172-74,14-15).

Third, we may speak of a transcendent quality relating to veridical perception. By this we mean that in grasping the existence of an object, we actually transcend sense perception—i.e., we go beyond sense perception in an intuitive, intellectual apprehension of certain properties. To illustrate, one might consider the perception of a painting. It is not the case that one simply perceives the color of the painting. On the contrary, the painting unfolds itself to us in such a way that its aesthetic properties are apprehended as immediately as its color. Further, we **understand** that these non-material, aesthetic qualities we perceive (although they “inhere” in what we perceive with our senses) are not grasped by the senses as such. The perception of aesthetic qualities (as in a painting) is grasped more in what some have termed a “spiritual” perception rather than in “sense” perception. Thus, we may speak of transcending sense perception in order to experience a spiritual perception of certain qualities and attributes of objects (Seifert, 1977, pp. 129-131).

I claimed earlier that we often make mistakes, erroneous judgments, etc. in regard to this or that perceptual experience. I freely admit that I do not know the exact “how” of achieving certainty in perception (at least at this point in my studies). But it seems undeniable that because of certainty in regard to **illusory** perceptions (insofar as **we know** we have made mistaken perceptions) we are able to have certainty in regard to **veridical** perceptions. However, because of past mistakes made in empirical investigations and empirical facts, arriving at empirical certainty (a procedure that is not at all needed in achieving *a priori* knowledge) is **much more immediate**. This is the case because *a priori* objects and states of affairs disclose themselves to our minds in such a way that we immediately can penetrate their meaningful, necessary essence.

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