

A Priori Knowledge

You know a cat is in front of you by experience, and you can know that $7+5=12$ just by thinking about it. The first truth depends on experience, but the second truth seems independent of any experience. It is said that the arithmetic is an *a priori* truth, or that its justification is *a priori*, meaning that it is prior to experience. If you believe that all knowledge must come from experience, you will be highly suspicious of a priori knowledge; if you accept a priori knowledge, you will want to know its scope and reliability. Might a priori knowledge offer us deeper, or broader, or more absolute truths than can come from our limited human experience? Or is such knowledge trivial, or even illusory?

We could learn that $7+5=12$ by counting out pebbles, or by being told (rather than by mere thought), so the hallmark of a priori knowledge is not the way in which it is learned. The suggestion is that, once you have got the hang of basic numbers, you don't *need* to look at pebbles, or to be told, because experience is irrelevant. This is clear if the thinking and the experience come into conflict. If you acquire seven pebbles and five pebbles, and then count them all, and the total is thirteen, you don't change your arithmetic from now on; you have obviously made a mistake. If, bizarrely, we all made it thirteen, we would conclude that a collective hallucination had occurred; the answer has to be twelve – we know it a priori. Knowledge is taken to be a priori if it is true, and no experience could ever change it.

The commonest examples given of a priori knowledge are arithmetic and logic. If A is greater than B, and B greater than C, we know a priori that A is greater than C (because identity is 'transitive'). Once we grasped certain concepts, we can derive many conclusions from them a priori, such as that circles don't have corners, that the past cannot be changed, that where there is an 'up' there is a 'down', that being red excludes being blue, and maybe that gratuitous cruelty is wrong. Such a priori truths are taken to be necessary. Sometimes bolder claims are made, such as seeing that the concept of God requires that God exists, or seeing that all events necessarily turn out the way they do. If a priori truths tell us more than the mere contents of concepts, they are said to be 'synthetic'.

The traditional view has been that 'the a priori' specifies an area of reality, which is only accessible by pure intuition or reason, and contains the general and eternal truths about reality. Nowadays such things are treated as metaphysics, and the concept of a priori knowledge belongs in epistemology. That is, being a priori is not an particular way of existing, but a particular way of knowing. In the older view it would be said that a true sentence or proposition is a priori in its nature (as in ' $7+5=12$ is a priori'), but it is now more usual to say either that some sentences have a priori justification (as in 'we see a priori that $7+5=12$ '), or that our attitudes to sentences are a priori (as in 'I have an a priori commitment to $7+5=12$ '). The older view focuses on the truth, and the newer view focuses on the person.

We say that some truths seem to be 'self-evident', which implies an a priori status. The presence of a cat might be described as 'self-evident', but normally we mean that a truth is obvious and unquestionable without evidence. Self-evidence is a bit vague and unreliable, because absurdities are sometimes seen as self-evidently true, and two claims held to be self-evident could even contradict one another. What is self-evident to a genius may not be so to a normal person, so we must distinguish what is self-evident to some person, from what is taken to be intrinsically self-evident. The latter might be obvious to you if you *were* a genius, or had a divine intellect. Self-evidence suggests the thought that a priori knowledge may come in degrees (like memory), and that it might be fallible, or potentially defeasible by some rival thought. The older view often took a priori knowledge to always be true, and certainly truth, but the modern approach allows doubts.

One way in which knowledge might reveal itself to us a priori is by being 'innate'. That is, if the truths were built into our minds, then clearly thought would be the only means of revealing them. On the whole, rationalist philosophers defend innate ideas, and empiricists dislike them. The extreme empiricist view says the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank page which only acquires ideas by experience. But if the mind were entirely blank then nothing would happen to experiences when they arrived (like throwing books into a dustbin), so something must be innate. The dispute is whether what is innate counts as 'ideas' or 'knowledge' (or mere 'processes'), and whether such ideas need to be true. Evolutionary success might come from having a mind full of innate delusions. If some a priori knowledge came from innate ideas, there might still be other routes to it, such as pure reason or analysis. Critics of innate ideas say it is impossible to distinguish what is innate from what is learned.

Where earlier philosophers claimed that a priori knowledge could be synthetic, and reveal necessities, a modern view claimed that they are entirely analytic (or mere tautologies). That is, we only know things a priori because they involve the meanings of our words (or perhaps the nature of our concepts), and this can never tell us anything about reality. If such truths seem to be necessary (such as that bachelors must be unmarried) that is only because we defined our words that way. If there is no clear boundary between word meaning and the reality referred to, then a priori knowledge will also have blurred boundaries. If an analytic truth could be given up, then it is clearly not a necessary truth about the world. If we could even change our logic or arithmetic, in order to suit our scientific discoveries (such as quantum mechanics), then a priori knowledge of the world would look hopeless. A defence of a priori knowledge says that reality has helped to generate our words and concepts, so the nature of reality can partly emerge from their a priori analysis, provided the concepts are accurate and well-grounded.

Another defence of a priori knowledge says that it is a precondition of any knowledge of the experienced world, and even that experience itself may be impossible without an a priori framework of concepts and categories to generate something sensible from what our senses tell us. It is hard to see how we could grasp the physical world if we lacked concepts of ourselves, or of space, time and causation. Our instant rejection of contradictions, or our conviction that there is a reason for everything, seem to be accepted a priori, and the basics of classical logic, such as that if you accept a truth you must accept its implications, have a strong feeling of self-evidence. Our concept of truth seems to precede any attempts to assess what is true, and a set of accepted truths is assessed for consistency and coherence by some prior standard. It is hard to imagine rational thought without such a priori assumptions.