Direct Knowledge

Empiricists say that knowledge is grounded in experience, but rationalists say the processes of reasoning are more important. A third possibility seems to be that some knowledge might be known directly. Of course, we might say that seeing something gives direct knowledge, with no intervening processes (such as conceptualisation), or that our reason has instant insights where no 'process' is involved. But we also have other concepts, such as 'intuition', 'inspiration', 'memory', 'introspection', and even 'imagination', which suggest direct access to knowledge. If such knowledge existed it would have a potentially higher status than other modes of knowing, because there is less to go wrong (as could happen with sense representations, or steps in reasoning). Direct knowledge is not the same as self-evidence, since a fact may only become self-evident after careful thought (or proof), or comparison of experiences.

The most important candidate for a source of direct knowledge is '**intuition**'. This concept has a mixed reputation, and we meet regular examples of highly implausible beliefs held on no other basis than intuition. If, however, we ask why elementary convictions about experience or simple logic are held to be true (if we can find no further grounding for the truth than its immediate obviousness) then 'intuition' is the only faculty of thinking that we can point to. If we refused to accept our strongest and simplest intuitions, it is hard to see how any knowledge could get off the ground. We have a spectrum running from 'a mere hunch' to the 'screamingly obvious', all referred to as 'intuitions'.

Our most trusted knowledge is the securest theories of science, in which intuition is replaced by exact measurement and impersonal mathematics, but the greatest scientists are famous for their intuitive insights, which lead them to investigate fruitful pathways that others have neglected. We may seek to eliminate intuitive knowledge from science, but without an initial trust in intuition it seems unlikely that any great scientific success would ever have been achieved. At the other end of the spectrum of possible knowledge, we only seem to know moral or aesthetic truths by means of intuition (if indeed we do actually 'know' such things).

The intuitions used in science are played down, and a great emphasis on the intuitive character of moral judgements would undermine our confidence in them. Hence it is in the middle ground where talk of intuitions is commonest, and it is very common in philosophy, where an appeal to shared intuitions is a common tactic in the quest for a consensus about basic principles and concepts. In epistemology, for example, complex belief situations are imagined, in the hope that we can all have the same intuition about which of those beliefs count as knowledge. The shared intuitions of the speakers of a language about meaning and usage are the foundational evidence in philosophy of language.

Great detectives, mathematicians, doctors and logicians all seem to be distinguished by successful intuition. Singling out significant fragments of evidence, or discerning patterns that others cannot see, are the hallmarks of such talent. If we agree that intuition can be both highly successful, and productive of results which clear and systematic thinking never attains, then we must ask why this is so. When intuition is invoked, it is probably because no clearer explanation is available for what is being proposed. In solving puzzles we may pursue clear logical steps, but find that a blurred confidence about a correct answer appears before the steps to get there are known. If that is right, it may be that the clear steps are already present in the mind, but cannot be consciously articulated. Intuition would thus be a rational process, but adding a concealed dimension to rationality which is not found in precise logic.

Critics will not be impressed by the claim that intuition is rational, since the only evidence for that would be success at the end of the enquiry. We tend to remember our successes and quietly forget our failures, but if intuition has innumerable failures (which it surely does), then it should be treated with great caution (and may even rest more on emotion than on reason). We should certainly be aware that the shared intuitions of people about things can be startlingly diverse between two remote cultures, or two widely separated historical periods.

Modern philosophers do not talk much about '**inspiration**', but the traditions of oracles, priests, mystics, and poets in touch with their muses all imply that some special minds can locate and access hidden or supernatural sources of truth. We might even talk of inspiration as a source of knowledge if a great logician produces a landmark proof which goes far beyond current practices, and our word 'genius' marks such exceptional abilities. As with intuition, though, inspiration tends to neglect its failures (its dull poems, clumsy proofs, and evil advice from the gods), and some further criterion of knowledge is needed before we should accept a truth that is only 'inspired'.

'**Imagination**' is usually of what is unreal, so is presumed not to offer direct knowledge, but imagination is central to all thinking, and a correct explanation may occur to us in a flash of imagination, and we might even say that a designer knows the future, if their imagination conceives of something which is then constructed.

No one thinks that '**memory**' generates knowledge for us unaided (though we might spot new facts among our memories). Nevertheless if we remember that something is true it has a direct quality. If we remember a simple truth of arithmetic, or the location of some car keys, this is done without a proof or supporting evidence. If we say we 'remember' something, that implies that it is true, and if it turns out to be false we say we 'thought' we had remembered it. Many truths reside in memory which we cannot recall, as when we recognise an acquaintance from long ago, whom we took to be entirely forgotten. An interesting feature of this direct knowledge is that it comes in degrees, from vivid and accurate memories of very recent events to tentative memories of obscure truths or remote but real events. This variable strength of direct knowledge seems equally true of intuition, and even of inspiration.

The experience of remembering something is, however, no guarantee at all of truth. Most people have believed that they remembered an event, only for a group of fellow witnesses to say they have got it wrong. If we allowed the possibility (a faint one!) that the universe was created five minutes ago (complete with memories) then nearly all of our memories would be totally false, and we know that brainwashing and vivid dreams can intrude into memory. As with intuition, we cannot give up on memory at this point, since nearly all human knowledge resides in memory, and its direct recall is the commonest means of knowing something which is available to us.