

On Certain Knowledge

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

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Good morning everybody. Please be seated.

This morning I wish to make some statements connected with the subject, "Do we have, on this plane of being, such a thing as certain knowledge?" We'll explore the three domains of sensuous cognition, conceptual cognition, and introceptual cognition.

First, with respect to sensuous cognition, this is the form that is fundamental to empiric science, which is based upon the observation of sensible fact. The method of observation may be technically developed so that it is reduced to the observation of a number on a dial, simplifying it. The method involves determining a group of facts, ultimately of a sensuous order. But these facts do not of themselves determine a law of connection between the facts. On that point, Francis Bacon was in error. A connecting principle must be invented. A skillful individual, one who has genius and insight, may succeed rather readily in offering a connecting principle that works, but in general it is determined by a method of cutting and trying. Thus, you have the Newtonian determination of the inverse square law in connection with gravity. But if we consider our series of observations as determinations of points upon a plane, we can illustrate the fact that there is a potential infinity of interpreting principles that would satisfy the group of observations. One might, for instance, have five determinations—and let these represent points upon a plane—if he imposed the condition that the interpreting principle was an equation of the second degree, he would get a unique determination in the form of some conic section. But if he did not impose that arbitrary condition, there are an infinity of possible curves which would pass through those five points when you consider higher plane curves of the third and higher degrees. Thus, there is an actual infinity of possible interpretive correlations that would explain the series of facts. By moving from below, from fact to law, there is no positive assurance that that which we reach is determinate. The result is that empiric science gives a pragmatic truth that works more or less well, but not with certainty. The classical example of empiric failure was that of the breakdown of the Newtonian conception and the ultimate replacement of it by the Einsteinian conception of the cosmos. This was almost a traumatic shock to the scientific community.

But there are other considerations about sensuous determination that render it highly questionable. There is the lake for instance, the seeming lake, that one may see upon the desert which proves to be a mirage. One could be involved in a very serious error if he moved towards that lake seeking water that he needed very badly. There is also the hallucitory experience of a snake seen which proves to be only a rope or a stick. The senses lied in one way, or they gave us a false impression. These examples are in connection with the visual sense, but I can give you some examples of auditory misinformation. We had this experience frequently in the days that we were up in the canyon, ultimately building the ashram up there. On one occasion while we were still using donkeys for transportation from the end of the road and were using the north trail,

we were expecting Eugene about that time and we had just finished the evening meal when we heard a clear-cut call down the trail. One of our associates, Carmen DeCono, took a lighted lantern and went to the top of the trail where the descent begins down toward the valley and there called. There was no answer. We learned later, this was in July, that Gene was at that time playing roulette with death on a motorcycle in Death Valley. It would be physically impossible to hear any call from down there.

On another occasion, we had two young children, Bob and Doroethy, at the camp—the grandchildren of my wife—and were expecting their parents at the noon meal. All of us heard a clear-cut call from the ashram. Our camp at the time was about 275 feet vertical lower on the north fork of Tuttle Creek. We all moved out from under the shelter where the camp was and looked up at the ashram and called back. No response. I went up. No one at the ashram. I went on down the trail, ultimately to the little house that was on the ranch at that time and there was Jim and Helen taking a rest after a rather strenuous drive and a long period without sleep. That was three miles away, no call was made, and if made, would not have been heard by us. Yet, the sound was as clearly objective as any physical sound I have ever heard.

And this experience was repeated in connection with a problem we had in those days which was that of hunting donkeys, who were our means of transportation at that time from the end of the road for necessary supplies. Before one went down for supplies, he first secured donkeys, took them down, staked them out, and then later loaded them with supplies and brought them back up. But you had to find them first. And this proved to be a very complicated art that very few ever mastered. Usually they would graze around the area on bunch grass and finally work up until they got up to a meadow at 10,000 feet where there was adequate grass to maintain them for the season. That was about 2500 feet vertical above camp. To get them, then, meant a climb to 10,000 feet. I once was climbing up, had gotten up fairly high when I heard the donkey bell over on the other side of the north fork of the canyon 500 or 600 feet below where I was, and I had to make a judgment. Should I go down? If it was unreal, then I would have lost 500 or 600 feet of altitude which I was not inclined to do. If they were there and I went on up, I'd have to climb to 10,000 for no use. I finally decided to discount the sound. I found them at 10,000 feet. We often heard this false sound that was as physical as any sound ever heard. I found that the method to eliminate it consisted in trying not to hear the donkey bell, and if it came through, then it was real. If you tried to hear it, you could hear this false sound that was fully as objective as the real sound. Incidentally, the donkeys were pretty smart. They knew perfectly well that being caught meant work. They had no enthusiasm whatever for work, although they would do it if they had to. And they'd play a game with you. They would see you before you would see them. They would hide themselves behind a bush, and they would hold their heads still so the bell wouldn't ring. Flies, however, helped the hunter. Furthermore, they were very curious. They'd hide their bodies, but they'd stick the head out watching you. It was a fine art and very few mastered it. Well, what this illustrates is, you can't always believe what you hear, or what you see, or otherwise sense. Sensuous knowledge does not give you certainty.

Now, concerning conceptual knowledge, of which the supreme expression is mathematics. The most certain knowledge that we have commonly available to us is mathematical knowledge; nonetheless, there is a source of potential error. First of all, at

the base of any mathematical discipline there is a body of postulates. Euclid called them axioms or self-evident truths. We know today they are not necessarily self-evident. The story of the effort to prove the parallel axiom is well-known in mathematical circles. As left by Euclid it seemed like a proposition, but it was found to be unprovable. A certain assumption was made that there were no such things as parallel lines. In other words, that all lines on a plane would intersect in a finite distance; that even though a line drawn through a point outside a given line—a line drawn through that point intersecting the given line—and another line put through that point so that the interior angles on one side of the transversal were equal to two right-angles, even so, in this geometry it was assumed that they would meet in a finite distance. It was purely a pure construction not intended for application. It led to a geometry that involved no contradictions. Nonetheless, when Einstein was seeking a generalization of his theory of relativity, this geometry, not the geometry of Euclid, fit the facts with which he was dealing—one of the most astonishing developments. And furthermore, if we go to the very foundations of mathematics itself, we find a group of paradoxes. An example of such a paradox is the one that comes down to us from the days of the Greeks known as the Cretan Paradox. A Cretan said, “All Cretans are liars,” meaning that everything a Cretan said was a lie. If that was true, then this Cretan told the truth and proved that all Cretans were not liars. The truth of the statement implies its own falsity.

Now, at the very root of thought we run into a group of problems of that sort involving the implication that at the very basis of our thought there is a degree of uncertainty. He who goes through the experience of the transformation which awakens that knowledge which may be called “knowledge through identity,” does have an experience of certainty. It is the one certain knowledge that we have. But it exists in a form that is neither sensuous nor conceptual, and is therefore on its own level incommunicable. To render it communicable, either sensuous or conceptual means must be employed. In this process of *transcription* there is an unavoidable or ineluctable error since the law of sensuous relationships and of conceptual relationships do not fit the order of knowledge as it is known in the lucid state, therefore, any transcription, whether sensuous, as in the form of art, or conceptual, as in the form of conceptual language, involves an inherent error; so that on this plane of being, we move without the benefit of certainty.

By a somewhat different route, Bertrand Russell arrived at the conclusion that all knowledge is probable knowledge—none of it certain. His field was the logic of mathematics, the domain of our most certain knowledge. And I am forced to the same basic conclusion. Norbert Weiner, in one of his books, propounded this statement, that all of our supposed scientific laws in nature are only statistical, that we know no scientific law that is inevitable.

We are badgered in our search for knowledge by the principle of uncertainty, of a certain indetermination. The consequence of all this is that he who would journey toward that domain of ultimate assurance cannot be ultimately certain on the way. He therefore must dare; and he must face the possibility of failure. Success on that path does indeed lead to certainty, but a certainty that cannot be communicated. He who travels the path may fail. Failure probably would not mean death, but it could mean psychosis. Nonetheless, here is a call that should challenge everyone who has the feeling for the Great Adventure: to dare on the evidence, which necessarily must be less than certainty,

to find the treasure which indeed transcends every human measure of value. It is an adventure badgered by dangers on the way, but if successfully consummated leads to the Value beyond all other values.

We seek here to render this path more accessible, more guarded against the inherent dangers of the way, but let no one think that it is a secure path all the way. One may make mistakes, and one of the greatest mistakes that is being made in our own day is through the use of intoxicating agents that do indeed lead to other states of consciousness, some of which are intriguing. I refer to the drug culture. But these experiences are not of the true Enlightenment or Realization. Between this zone of outer consciousness and that other supernal zone of true Enlightenment, there is the “intermediate zone”—the zone where the dangers of the way lie.¹ Some of it does consist in the meeting of hostile forces, but more largely, the danger is the danger of seduction. There is what Aurobindo has called in this intermediate zone the “valley of the false glimmer.” It is easy to see that the way of the drug is to the valley of the false glimmer. To reach to the true goal calls for maximum clarity of discrimination, maximum effectiveness of all of one’s objective and inner resources to see clearly, not to be intoxicated and enjoying a false glimmer.

¹ Aurobindo Ghose, vol. 15 of the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 1039-1046.