

1

FOUNDATIONS

CONSIDER SOME EXAMPLES OF KNOWLEDGE, FROM THE SIMPLEST to the advanced. A dog knows where it buried a bone; a baby knows its mother; a savage knows how to hunt; a student knows the multiplication table; a physicist knows the laws of motion.

What do all these examples of knowing have in common? A retained awareness of some fact of reality. From the dog that retains its awareness of the bone's location, to the physicist who has a retained awareness of the laws of motion, information is stored and can be reactivated — whether the reactivation is automatic, triggered by sensory cues, as it is for the dog, or is volitional, as it is when a man asks himself questions in order to bring stored material back to mind.

Knowledge is not a transient state of awareness, as in viewing the passing scene from the window of an automobile, but a stable and enduring mental product — information that you possess, facts that you have gotten hold of, grasped.

Ayn Rand's characterization of knowledge summarizes this, and states the basic means by which knowledge is acquired: Knowledge is “a mental grasp of a fact(s) of reality, reached either by perceptual observation or by a process of reason based on perceptual observation.” [ITOE, 35]

THE FIRST AXIOM: EXISTENCE

Knowledge is of facts of reality, i.e., aspects of existence. The basis and starting point of all knowledge is the fact that there is a world to be known. Or, in Rand's indelible statement, "Existence exists." [AS, 1015]

The existence of things is perceived directly: we see things, hear things, feel them, smell them, and taste them. That *there is something* is perceptually given; it is not learned by inference from other facts (which themselves would have to exist). "Existence exists" is a formulation of what is self-evident. "Self-evident" means: available to direct awareness.

All knowledge, whether perceptual or intellectual, is of something, something that exists. Any claim to knowledge is a claim to know that something is the case, that some state of affairs *exists*.

Accordingly, "Existence exists" is not a derivative or restricted truth but an *axiom*: a fundamental, primary, self-evident truth implicitly contained in all knowledge.

Axioms cannot be proved. This is not a weakness or subjectivity lurking in them. Axioms are better than proved: they are self-evident. "Existence exists" does not need to be proved; it is directly perceived. Just open your eyes, and you know all there is to know about the reality of reality. There is an unlimited amount to be learned about what exists, the forms and varieties and aspects of existents, but nothing further to be learned about the fact that existence exists, nothing beyond what is contained in your first awareness at the start of your life: "it is."

Some people demand that axioms be proved. But such a demand fails to grasp what proof is. "Proof" is an advanced, not a primary, concept. It depends upon the prior concept of "existence," and on an immense body of other knowledge. Young children and savages have no concept of proof.

All ideas do have to be shown to be valid. But "validation" is a wider idea than "proof." There are, broadly, two forms of validation: by proof and by direct perception.

Proof is a process of inference — deductive or inductive inference. In either form, inference is a process of moving in thought from something known to something else logically related to it. An inference is made from something, not from nothing. Consequently, there must be a starting point. The starting point of any valid chain of proofs, however long, is the information given in direct awareness — i.e., the self-evident.

If you see footprints in the sand and conclude that someone has walked by, that conclusion is reached by inference. But your seeing of the footprints

constitutes direct, non-inferential perception; the presence of those shapes in the sand is self-evident to you.

As Aristotle observed, it is illogical to hold that absolutely everything has to be proved. Proof is indispensable when direct observation is not available. But proof is neither necessary nor possible in regard to the basic information on which all knowledge is based: perceptual data. As important as proof is, it is the secondary, not the primary, means of validating ideas. The primary means is direct awareness.

Self-evidencies, directly perceived facts, are what make proof possible. To state the point in an extreme form: proof is what we resort to when something is not self-evident.

And let us ask: why does proof prove? What makes it “work”? Proof establishes an idea by connecting it to the directly perceived, the self-evident. To demand, therefore, a proof of the self-evident is an absurd reversal.

Many philosophers dismiss the idea of self-evidency as arbitrary or subjective. Since I will argue that consciousness and many facts about consciousness are self-evident, it is important to establish firmly the idea of self-evidency from the outset.

Although many things have been falsely claimed to be self-evident, in all such cases, the error lies with what has been taken to be self-evident, not with self-evidency as such. Again, “self-evident” means: available to direct awareness. The self-evident is that which makes itself evident by being directly observed, rather than by being inferred from something else.

“Self-evident” is not a synonym for “obvious.” To one who has learned arithmetic, it is obvious that two plus two is four, but that truth is not self-evident; it is inferred by a process of comparison and counting. But that the page you are reading exists is not an inference: it is self-evident.

The data of sensory perception are self-evident, but the conceptual interpretation of that data, and inferences drawn from it, are not self-evident. They must be validated by reducing them back to the self-evident.

The opponents of self-evidency will tell you that in the medieval era it was self-evident that the world is flat, but we now know it is round. But the medievals were not able to perceive the shape of the planet. What is given in perception is a very small portion of the Earth’s surface, and all one can say about what is given in perception is that the curvature is less than the eye can detect. The expanse of ocean or prairie one can see is indeed flat — to the standard of precision given in visual perception. To take a position on what the shape of the Earth is beyond what perception can reveal is to engage in either inference or blind guessing. Only astronauts in space are able to see