

PREFACE

MANKIND HAS EXISTED FOR 400,000 YEARS. BUT 395,000 OF those years were consumed by the Stone Age. The factor that freed men from endless toil and early death, the root cause of the elevated level of existence we now take for granted, is one precious value: *knowledge*. The painfully acquired knowledge of how to master nature, how to organize social existence, and how to understand himself is what enabled man to rise from the cave to the skyscraper, from warring clans to a global economy, from an average lifespan of less than 30 years to one approaching 80.

Though mankind has risen from the cave, things have not been going well for us lately. The serene confidence of the Age of Reason has given way to a cultural atmosphere of depression and anxiety — especially among the intellectuals, who have become convinced that life is “fear and trembling, sickness unto death.” The art that speaks to modern intellectuals is typified by Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* and by literature that trumpets the futility of all human endeavor and celebrates unintelligibility. In 1998, a panel of literary scholars and authors was asked to pick the top one hundred English-language novels of the twentieth century. Here is a small taste of the novel they rated as number one, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

Im sure thats the way down the monkeys go under the sea to Africa when they die the ships out far like chips that was the Malta boat passing yes the sea and the sky you could do what you liked

What explains the critical acclaim for this puerile, subjectivistic chaos — in an era when technology’s disciplined, structured, logic is putting smartphones into the hands of people around the globe and landing remote-controlled vehicles on Mars? What explains the wider malaise of our culture?

The two-word answer is: *bad epistemology*. Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is the branch of philosophy that defines the nature, means, and standards of knowledge. Epistemology deals with the crucial questions: What is knowledge? How is it acquired? How is it validated? Since knowledge is man’s means of dealing with reality, a man attempting to function on an irrational epistemology is unequipped to deal with reality, dooming himself to doubt, confusion, and failure. Post-Renaissance philosophers, from Descartes to Hume to Kant, have spun out ever worse theories of knowledge, and the intellectuals are the social group most directly and intensely affected by philosophical theory. No effective antidote to the epistemological poison has appeared, so the paradoxical situation described by Ayn Rand half a century ago rings true today:

If we look at modern intellectuals, we are confronted with the grotesque spectacle of such characteristics as militant uncertainty, crusading cynicism, dogmatic agnosticism, boastful self-abasement and self-righteous depravity — in an atmosphere of guilt, of panic, of despair, of boredom and of all-pervasive evasion. [FNI, 11]

Our technological success has come from a dedication to reason and logic, but reason and logic have been distorted or openly attacked by mainstream epistemologists for the last 200 years, ever since Kant’s theory of knowledge gained dominance in the intellectual world. Establishment epistemology has carried to its logical conclusion Kant’s claim that reason cannot know reality. The result has been two schools of thought, one that accepts reason while ignoring reality, and one that accepts reality while denying reason.

Rationalism is the school that scorns sensory perception and constructs intellectual castles in the air. Empiricism is the school that scorns abstractions and demands that men hold their minds down to the animal level of unconceptualized, unintegrated sensing. Rationalism ultimately

degenerates into mysticism, as in its ancient father: Plato. Empiricism ultimately degenerates into skepticism, as in its modern father: Hume.

The mystics hold that knowledge can be acquired without any sensory or rational means; knowledge is said to come from “intuition” or “revelation,” which washes over us and to which we need only surrender. The skeptics, observing that men disagree — even about allegedly “revealed truth” — throw up their hands and announce that there is no truth, that any claim to knowledge is proof of dogmatism, and that we are doomed to perpetual doubt.¹ In the words of a former chairman of the UCLA philosophy department, “There are no answers. Be brave and face up to it.”²

Both the mystic and skeptic schools fly in the face of human history. In the one thousand years ruled by the mystical view, from the fall of Rome to the end of the medieval era, reliance on alleged revelations and religious authorities led not to cognitive progress but to stagnation. On the other hand, since the rebirth of reason in the Renaissance, fueled by the rediscovery of Aristotle’s works, a vast body of painfully won scientific knowledge — knowledge, not mere opinion — has produced our magnificent technological achievements. The broad record of human history shows that knowledge *is* achievable, but only by *reason*, applied to observational data.

Nonetheless, mysticism and skepticism have lived on, zombie-like, due to the success of the Kantian attack on reason. That attack has drawn its power from the errors and concessions in the theories of reason’s defenders (e.g., John Locke). Lacking a clear, uncompromised understanding of what reason is and how it operates, epistemology has succumbed to the Kantian onslaught, leaving men to face the lethal false alternative of mysticism versus skepticism.

The advocates of reason have been unable to answer the crucial question: what makes a cognitive choice valid or invalid? Since God or nature doesn’t tell us how to proceed in our thinking, what standard can we use to guide our thought processes?

Contrary to the foggy notions of a non-judgmental age, there is a *right* and a *wrong* direction to take — if grasping the facts of reality is one’s goal. The *right* direction means the one suited to cognitive success; any deviation

1 In colloquial usage, “skepticism” often means merely a cautious, “show me” attitude, but in philosophy, “skepticism” means the idea that knowledge is impossible, that man knows nothing. Of course, that would mean that no one could know that skepticism itself was true. On the self-refuting nature of skepticism, see CHAPTER 1, CHAPTER 5, and CHAPTER 10.

2 Donald Kalish, *Time Magazine*, Jan. 7, 1966, p. 24.

from that direction is *wrong* — wrong in relation to that goal, wrong in terms of the unwaivable requirements of acquiring knowledge of objective reality.

Whether a man wants to know the sum of two plus three, the method of forging metals, or the principles of a proper political system, to reach the correct answer he must follow a definite series of steps. But the steps one takes in pursuing knowledge are not set by instinct, genes, or culture. The course of a thought-process is up to the thinker to choose (see CHAPTER 10).

Understanding *how* knowledge is acquired and validated enables one to bring the cognitive quest under his conscious control and direction, equipping him to succeed in acquiring knowledge, to avoid whole categories of error, and to reach objective certainty in his conclusions.

On a wider, cultural scale, the need for a rational epistemology could not be more urgent. Western civilization itself is now under attack by the revived mysticism of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism and by the new skepticism of multiculturalism and postmodernism. The mystics say that science is wrong — false in its conclusions and blasphemous in its contravention of the Bible or the Koran. The skeptics say that science is neither right nor wrong — that truth, falsehood, good, and evil are baseless “constructs” imposed by a “patriarchal power-structure.”

An open, progressing, benevolent future requires a theory of knowledge that rejects the false dichotomy that sustains both mysticism and skepticism: the dichotomy of Empiricism vs. Rationalism. What is required is a theory that upholds *both* sensory perception *and* logic, a theory that shows how abstract, conceptual knowledge derives in a logical fashion from perceptual observation.

That theory has been provided by Ayn Rand, especially in her work *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Rand’s definition of “reason” sets the context for integrating perception and logic: “Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses.” [VOS, 22] At the base of Rand’s view of reason is her new theory of how abstractions, i.e., *concepts*, are formed from perceptual observation. Concepts are the tools of reason, and it is by means of concepts that man stores and accesses his knowledge.

The present work makes extensive use of Rand’s Objectivist epistemology, as I understand it after fifty years of professional study and teaching. To a modest degree, I elaborate on and build upon Rand’s system, but my extensions, even if valid, do not constitute part of the Objectivist philosophy, which is limited to what Rand wrote, plus those articles by others that were published under her editorship. (The definitive secondary

source on Objectivism is Leonard Peikoff's consummate work, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*.)

In this book I do not assume any prior familiarity with the details of philosophy nor with Objectivism. This book is addressed to the intelligent layman, assuming he has a definite interest in understanding how we know.

The organization of this book follows one of the cardinal principles of Objectivist epistemology: knowledge is hierarchical. Chapter by chapter, I trace the development of progressively more advanced forms of knowledge, from its base in the axioms of all knowledge, through the fundamental role of sensory perception, to the formation and use of concepts, through more abstract concepts, to propositions, and inference — first from the standpoint of what knowledge is, then from the standpoint of the means of validating it. After this hierarchical progression, I devote a chapter to Rand's revolutionary identification that "man is a being of volitional consciousness" — i.e., that free will consists in one's sovereign control over the operation of his own mind. A concluding overview contrasts the right ("bottom-up") and wrong ("top-down") theories of how we know.

My perspective is causal and biological. Knowledge is an achievement, one reached by employing certain necessary means, and its purpose is to aid men in the task of survival.

Knowledge is a product of the wider faculty: *consciousness*. If one adopts the causal-biological perspective on consciousness, and applies it to each of the different functions and levels of awareness, one can gain a crucial, even life-altering, understanding of the mind and its cognitive needs.

The misunderstandings of consciousness that have wreaked havoc on the history of philosophy, making philosophy appear irrelevant to daily life, all stem from taking consciousness to be non-causal and non-biological — or even, in the latest aberration, non-existent. But consciousness exists, and it functions according to its nature. Refusing to recognize its existence and its identity makes men mysterious to themselves. It turns men, in Rand's graphic phrase, into "prisoners inside their own skulls."

To gain self-understanding, one must understand the essence of the self: one's mind.