



The Nature of Inquiry

Fun with Epistemology

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THE NATURE OF INQUIRY has two sides: Intuition and Reason.

Intuition

My metaphor for intuition is the eye because, like the eye, intuition sees. The eye sees the visible, intuition the invisible. But in both cases, what is seen exists. As opposed to what is seen by imagination, which does not. Imagination sees fuzzy little green men, furiously spurring buffalo across the plains with six-shooters blazing; this does not exist. But the eye sees a book and the book does exist. Likewise, intuition sees reason and reason exists. Intuition sees ethics and ethics exist. It sees metaphysics and so on; all are real.

Intuition is direct knowledge: things known, but not by learning – neither by experience (what we see, what we do, what happens to us) nor by authority (what we are told). In the sculpture, the eye is radiant with the brilliance of intuitive insight.

Reason is apprehended by intuition. For example, “A cannot be non-A.” This axiom is directly apprehended as self-evident. It’s an irreducible proposition neither deduced from experience nor induced by argument. If it is not self-evident, no argument or experience will prove it.

Ethics are similarly apprehended. “You shall not short-change the blind-man.” We grasp this intuitively, we grasp that it is just, and we grasp that justice is good. Yet nothing in the corporeal world dictates it. And we know it without being told. Again, we perceive it intuitively or not at all.

In American political theory, for example, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” How true. But again, nothing in the tangible world suggests this. In fact, the inequities of nature (one person is smart, another is dull, one is strong, another weak) argue against it. It’s the incisive light of intuitive insight that cuts through the haze of people’s disparities to reveal the fact of their underlying equality.

Metaphysics is similarly axiomatic: “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes).

In the sculpture, intuition apprehends reason. A trilobite is my metaphor for reason because, like the trilobite, reason is vital and willful, rigid yet flexible, primal yet complex.

On this side of the sculpture (intuition), the trilobite is concave; it is form without substance. This is because intuition has apprehended reason, but intelligence has not yet applied it.

Lastly, two beetles presume, unselfconsciously, to gaze into this lens of dazzling insight. As intuition has “inquired” and found reason, so the beetles likewise inquire of intuition for the insight it has acquired. They are not attacking the eye; you know this by the fact that the eye is not flinching. But, is it an affront for mere insects to look into the eye of man? Is it an affront for man to look into the eye of God? Yet this is just what intuition does, and who would not say that everyone’s the better for it?

Reason

On this side of the sculpture, reason is in control – vigorous and robust, no more a mere phantom of disembodied potential. Here, applied to the universe, reason has yielded science, which in turn has harnessed the elements to produce technology: chemistry, electricity, mechanics.

Things look pretty beat-up on this side, unlike the pristine world of ideals occupied by intuition. But that’s not because reason is inferior. It’s because reason, using the raw material at hand in the world, is doing the “heavy lifting.” Not in the rarified air of abstraction, but in the seething ooze of the physical world. Applied this way, reason is the fountainhead of blessings like medicine, sanitation and foodstuffs.

Intuition and Reason

From the subjective standpoint of the thinker, reason, ethics, metaphysics, etc. seem to be subsets of intuition because we arrive at them intuitively. But objectively, intuition is just our phone line to these axioms, which exist quite apart from our perception of them.

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