



Intuition: A Special Way of Knowing

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Why is it a national tragedy when 39 people commit suicide? Answering that question tells us something important about the existence of God and about a special way of knowing.

The headline of Thursday's *LA Times* read, '39 Dead in Apparent Suicide.' From coast to coast the daily papers carried the story of the mass suicide of a religious cult in San Diego known as Heaven's Gate. Before I read a single word of the coverage, a question occurred to me.

Why does mass suicide make the front page of papers all over the country? The obvious answer is, 'Because it's tragic.' This response, though, raises another question: 'Why is it tragic?' The answer to this second question tells us more about the nature of the world than many people realize. The key to answering it lies in understanding a very particular way of knowing.

How We Know Things

We know things in a number of different ways. Some things we know as a result of discoveries we make in the physical world. We use our senses to empirically test our environment. After gathering information, we draw conclusions we believe are justified by the evidence. Philosophers sometimes call this 'a posteriori' knowledge. Science often employs this empirical method of learning.

Still other things we know through pure reason. We draw inferences based on cause and effect, or we draw conclusions by employing the laws of rationality. If someone offers to show you a

square circle for the small charge of \$2, save your money. Square circles cannot exist because the notion is contradictory. One need not look behind the curtain to know with certainty that such a claim is false. The error is self-evident; contradictory things cannot both be true. There are squares and there are circles, but there are no square circles.

Both of these methods require justification before we can be confident of the results. To demonstrate the truthfulness of a scientific theory, we cite the evidence--the experiments, the observations, the factual data--that leads us to our conclusion. A theory is either good or bad, depending upon how well it is supported by the evidence.

To prove there are no square circles, we appeal to fundamental laws of rationality, like the law of non-contradiction. To test the soundness of an argument, we examine the logical steps that lead us to our conclusion. Are there any fallacies in our line of thinking? If the premises in our argument are accurate and our reasoning is valid, then our conclusion is sound and our results must be true.

A Third Way

There's a third way of knowing, though, that needs no such justification: intuition. In fact, this way of knowing is so foundational that justification is impossible. That's because knowledge by intuition is not gained by following a series of facts or a line of reasoning to a conclusion. Instead, we know intuitional truth simply by the process of introspection and immediate awareness.

When I use the word 'intuition,' I mean something specific. I don't mean female intuition, or a policeman's hunch, or an experienced stockbroker's sense that the market is headed for a plunge. Each of these is a type of a specialized insight into a circumstance based on prior experience.

The kind of intuition I have in mind is immediate and direct, what the [Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) describes as 'immediate knowledge of the truth of a proposition, where 'immediate' means 'not preceded by inference.' [1]

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was referring to

this kind of knowledge when he wrote, 'A truth can come into the mind in two ways, namely as known in itself, and as known through another. What is known in itself is like a principle, and is perceived immediately by the mind....It is a firm and easy quality of mind which sees into principles.' [2]

Philosophers call this kind of knowing 'a priori' knowledge (literally, 'from what is prior'), knowledge which one has prior to sense experience. University of Mississippi ethicist Louis Pojman gives this example: 'If John is taller than Mary and Tom is taller than John, Tom is taller than Mary.' He writes:

Intuitional truth doesn't require a defense—a justification of the steps that brought one to this knowledge—because this kind of truth isn't a result of reasoning by steps to a conclusion. It's an obvious truth that no rational person who understands the nature of the issue would deny.

Some people are uncomfortable with this notion. It seems like cheating. We have no other alternative, though. If you can't know some things without knowing why you know them—if you don't have some things in place to begin with—you can't know anything at all. You can't even begin the task of discovery.

Intuition is the way we start knowing everything. C.S. Lewis wrote, 'If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved.' [4] There are certain things you must know immediately—directly—in order to have the tools you need to begin learning other things. The mind grasps them immediately, and all inferential knowledge flows from them.

Aristotle put it this way:

Aristotle's point is that certain intuitions must anchor all other knowledge. Say, for example, I ask you how you know a certain fact. When you offer evidence, I then ask, 'How do you know your evidence is reliable?' When you make your defense, I ask, 'How do you know that?' This same question could be asked again and again, resulting in Aristotle's infinite regress.

If it's always necessary to give a justification for everything we know, then knowledge would be impossible, because we could never answer an infinite series of questions. [6] It's clear, though, that we do know some things without having to go through the regress. Therefore, not every bit of knowledge requires justification based on prior steps of reasoning. Eventually you're going to be pushed back to something foundational, something you seem to have a direct awareness of and for which you need no further evidence.

I often use a classical representation of a syllogism [7] when I teach on the discipline of clear thinking. I write this major premise on the board: 'All men are mortal.' Then I add the minor premise: 'Socrates is a man.' Then I ask the students, 'What's next?' Their unanimous answer is, 'Socrates is mortal.'

How did all of my students immediately know the conclusion of my syllogism? It logically followed from the first two premises. The ability to see that conclusions naturally follow from adequate premises is a function of intuition.

Intuitional knowledge can't be 'proved' because, on the level of intuition, no further analysis is possible. Analysis makes the complex simple, but if a thing is already simple, it cannot be broken down further. Once we understand the proposition in question, we just 'see' that the thing is true. It is self-evident after a little reflection.

Basic math is another thing that can't be proven. Its truths are known by intuition. Someone once took me to task on this, suggesting he could scientifically prove two plus two equals four. He took two apples and put them together with two more apples to give a total of four. That was his 'scientific' proof.

The math wasn't proven in this case, though; it was simply exemplified with different tokens. A token is some physical representation—a sound, a mark of ink on a piece of paper, an object—that represents the unseen type, in this case, a number. Let me illustrate.

I could write 'two plus two equals four,' or ' $2 + 2 = 4$,' or substitute apples as my tokens instead of words or numerals. In each case, the math is

demonstrated—restated with different tokens—not intuition. Those who are not capable of grasping such things are mentally handicapped, deficient in their abilities.

We know this to be the case because if this apple demonstration was a true scientific proof, as he attempted, then the experiment would need to be repeated to verify consistent results.

'Repeat the experiment?' one might ask. 'That's silly. There's no need to repeat it. The outcome is obvious.' That's my point. It's obvious to our intuition. No scientific proof is necessary, nor is it possible.

Math is obvious because of our intuition. As long as one knows what the symbols in the equation $2 + 2 = 4$ represent—the numerals and the mathematical signs—a moment's reflection shows that the truth of the equation is self-evident. Indeed, if you disagreed, I would be at a complete loss to prove it to you. Either you see it, or you don't.

To know something intuitively, incidentally, doesn't always mean to know the facts automatically or inerrantly. Things like apples in groups and a person's height are details of the external world that need to be discovered. Addition and multiplication tables need to be learned. This is generally done before a student has full grasp of the meaning of the terms themselves, a necessary precondition for intuition to be applied. Rote memory temporarily accomplishes what the understanding cannot. As time goes on and a student's mental capacities mature, knowledge based on intuition becomes more apparent. With a little reflection, any person of reasonably sound mind can produce addition or multiplication tables on his own.

Further, errors in math may be common, but this is not a mark against intuition. It's actually evidence for it. If there was no intuition, the errors could never be known, nor could they be rectified. Intuition serves as the source of justification for facts that, in the early stages of mental development, must be learned.

To know a thing by intuition means that the truth of the proposition is 1) immediately evident, 2) needs no further justification, and 3) is obvious once all the facts are known. Mathematical truth must be learned, but it is justified by an appeal to

Plain Moral Facts

We know many things this way. Intuitive knowledge can be rational, but it can also be moral. There seem to be what G.J. Warnock called 'plain moral facts,' or 'moral common sense,' according to philosopher Henry Sidgwick.

An example of a plain moral fact would be, 'Human beings have intrinsic value.' In the Declaration of Independence, our founding fathers referred to this truth as 'self-evident.' It needed no defense because it was 'self evidenced,' so to speak, with its justification coming from within, not from without. Upon this foundation they built their case for the Revolution, and we build our case for human rights.

Many of our moral rules are conclusions we come to as a result of moral reasoning. Since humans are valuable, we ought not take their lives without proper justification ('Thou shall not murder').

Certain moral rules, though, are not conclusions we reach; they are premises we begin with. All moral reasoning must start with foundational concepts that can only be known by intuition. These are the kinds of truth that any rational person understands. That's why one doesn't carry the burden of proof in clear-case examples of moral truth. 'People who fail to see this,' says philosopher William Lane Craig, 'are just morally handicapped, and there is no reason to allow their impaired vision to call into question what we see clearly.' [8]

A person who denies obvious moral rules—who says that murder and rape are morally benign, that cruelty isn't a vice, and that cowardice is a virtue--doesn't merely have a different moral point of view; he has something wrong with him. If somebody says to me, 'I think rape is morally acceptable,' I'm not going to 'tolerantly' reflect on his alternative morality. Instead, I'm going to recommend he get help, fast.

Some will attempt to deny moral intuition. In unguarded moments, though, when an event or situation causes their intuition to rise naturally to

the surface, their language gives them away.

When people's 'moral common sense' is offended, they are compelled to speak out. They readily pass moral judgment on others, condemning injustice in the courts, or attacking racist governments, for example.

Intuitions and Mass Suicide

Certain circumstances cause our deepest intuitions about life to rise to the surface. In moments like these, our intuitions are revealed in the language we use.

Language does not create reality; it describes reality. It is not the cause, but the effect. We discover something in the world and then use words to express or describe what we've experienced.

To understand why it is significant that the mass suicide in San Diego was considered tragic, I need to acquaint you with a word. The word is '*telos*,' a Greek word that simply means 'goal.'

You might have heard references to something called a teleological argument for the existence of God. These kinds of arguments attempt to show that God's existence may be properly inferred based on what seems to be a purpose, or goal to particular things in the universe.

The reason one feels a deep sense of tragedy when 39 people commit suicide is because of *telos*. When a six-year-old dies of leukemia or a group of high school honor students perish in a plane crash, we say, 'Their lives were cut short,' or 'They died an untimely death,' or 'It was such a waste.'

These phrases depend for their meaning on the notion of *telos*. Their lives were shorter *than they should have been*. They died *before their time*, or more explicitly, before their *appointed* time. They died before a certain purpose was fulfilled. Deep down inside we know that the child and the students did not achieve what they were 'meant' to accomplish.

We also consider it tragic to make a conscious decision (as opposed to being pressed into poverty by circumstance) to be a bum, begging

and living under a freeway in cardboard boxes. The more libertarian among us would no doubt acknowledge a person's 'right' to live as he wants, but even the libertarian has a nagging sense that this life is being wasted. By contrast, we look at someone like Mother Theresa or Jonas Salk, and applaud them for having accomplished something wonderful, having fulfilled something of their purpose in life.

Why do we feel compelled to talk someone out of suicide? Why try to dissuade them if life has no goal? We're so sure of transcendent human purpose that we try to stop people from killing themselves and 'wasting' their lives. A life can only be wasted if it has a purpose that is never fulfilled.

Notice that the notion of untimely death here has no relation to the person's own subjective goals. The goal of a suicidal person is to die, a purpose he fulfills if he takes his life. An infant who dies unexpectedly has no goals or aspirations of his own. Yet in both cases we have this nagging suspicion that something is wrong.

How do we know this is tragic? We know it by intuition. It's built into the structure of our minds. Our reactions to these things—suicide, untimely deaths—are spontaneous, immediate, and intuitive.

Our sense of tragedy lies in our conviction that these people did not fulfill some larger purpose, a *telos* bigger than their own temporal wants and desires. If there is no purpose in life, there is no tragedy when a child is struck down in its infancy, or when high school students are killed in a plane crash, or when 39 people commit suicide. There is no waste when a gifted pianist whiles away his life under a freeway abutment.

Mass Suicide and the Existence of God

It's odd the way bizarre events sometimes hold a key to the meaning of the universe. In unguarded moments, these circumstances bring into focus a very powerful intuition: human lives have purpose. They have a goal, a *telos*.

A goal is a function of mind. Persons have goals, not things. If there is a goal for our lives—such that cutting our lives short is tragic—then it's fair to ask, 'Where did this purpose come from? Who (not

what) has this goal for my life?'

There can be no purpose beyond us if there is no Purposer beyond us. Purpose is evidence of a plan. There can be no plan if there is no Planner.

This Divine Planner has not left us without direction. He's given us the faculty—intuition—to know there is a plan, a 'life abundant' that can be experienced. He's given us specific guidelines to know the plan itself. He's given Himself to be a companion with us through the journey.

[1] Paul Edwards, ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 4, p. 204.

[2] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (London: Benzinger Brothers, 1911) Ia., Q84, a2, quoted in Louis P. Pojman, What Can We Know? An Introduction to a Theory of Knowledge (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 89.

[3] Louis P. Pojman, What Can We Know? An Introduction to a Theory of Knowledge (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 196.

[4] C.S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man (New York: Macmillan, paperback edition 1955), p. 53.

[5] Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1006a.

[6] Incidentally, this knife cuts both ways. When asked, 'How do you know that?' one can respond with, 'Why do you ask the question?' When the skeptic responds with, 'Because you can't claim something is true unless you have proper justification,' ask, 'Oh? Well, how do you know that?' This reverses the process, putting him on the slope slipping into infinity.

[7] A syllogism is a form of deductive reasoning consisting of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion.

[8] William Lane Craig, 'The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality,' unpublished paper, p. 8.