

CAN WE KNOW THE ABSOLUTE?

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The concept of the absolute means completeness or perfection. This meaning is the very opposite of relative. Something that is relative is objective and changeable, while that which is absolute is complete in itself and represents a perfect state. Absolute is sometimes used as synonymous with the Divine, or Divine Mind. In the definition of metaphysics, there is always the conclusion that metaphysics tends toward the understanding of the ultimate reality, or ultimate being. In this sense, metaphysics is directly concerned with the absolute.

To refer to the idealism of Plato, we remember his concept that ideas are more real than any part of the material universe. He believed that the ideas in the mind were reflections of the physical world and that the ultimate idea or absolute form existed above and superseded all individual ideas. On the basis of these conclusions, Plato eventually postulated that form is more real than any material thing can be. Form is the essence of reality and not matter, which is the basis by which different things in the physical universe are distinguished one from the other.

As an example, in order to understand further this Platonic point of view, we might use as an illustration the fact that the same matter exists in animals and in human beings. That is, there is no difference in matter between, let us say, an elephant and a person. Both of these living entities are

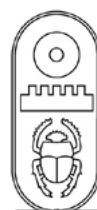
made of the same material. To be more technical, they are of the same chemical composition. Both are made so that they even function in a similar way. At the same time, there is considerable difference in the organization of the matter of which an elephant and a human being is constituted. They are different in their appearance. They are different in their function. They are different in their habits. There are a few similarities. They both breathe. Blood circulates, and they possess what we know as life.

It is therefore the form that anything takes rather than the matter of which it

is composed that makes the difference between material objects. For this reason, the idealist claims that reality can only be understood when it is considered in terms of form and ideas, not because it is different as a result of our physical perception. The idealist clings to the concept that ideas are the ultimate reality, that we cannot go beyond the ideas that develop in our own mind and consciousness. This is

not to say that everything else is an illusion but rather that ideas are fundamental or basic.

It might be well to point out here that in the metaphysical concept of idealism there are subdivisions, in other words, different schools of thought. There is no one metaphysics. There are many metaphysics, so to speak.



Subjective idealism believes that only ideas exist and nothing else. The English philosopher George Berkeley advanced this theory to its ultimate form. He upheld the theory that there was no external world which a person perceived. A person had only ideas which she projected into her environment and which caused her to believe that the physical world existed. Berkeley's concepts were much more profound than this short reference to them, but nevertheless convey the general idea that subjective idealism deals only with ideas and nothing else.

Other thinkers support the metaphysical concept known as objective idealism; that is, there is a physical world that is made up of objects. The universe is composed of physical things. We perceive them, and as a result of our perception, form ideas concerning them, their nature, their appearance, and their function. For objective idealists, the material world in a sense acts as a trigger to set off the ideas that are within the mind of the perceiver. These ideas, in the final analysis, are real.

I look at a book. It seems to consist of paper bound in a certain form. As I look at it, unless I am already familiar with the book, its purpose, its contents, and the reason for its existence are not apparent, but if I study it, the idea is created within my consciousness of what it really is. As I gain the impression of its contents, I formulate my own conclusions and mentally become familiar with this idea of a book, which, according to Plato, would represent a more perfect idea than has ever been achieved in the physical world.

Objective idealism seems to be a logical process, one to which many who have

studied metaphysics subscribe because it acknowledges what a person finds to be the obvious. Since we can know only what we perceive, since we can actually experience and realize only the ideas that are in our minds, we cannot deny the logic that has come from the fact that every human being, and apparently every animal, from observations of its behavior, acknowledges the existence of an actual, external, material world. We cannot walk through a door. We know that it is a solid material. Therefore, it is hard for us to accept the extreme idealism that it does not exist except in the mind.

According to the objective idealist, it exists in the same form that the materialist considers it to exist. But I, as an objective idealist, accept it only in terms of the interpretation and the mental judgments that result from its perception within my mind.

Regardless of the technicality of some definitions, philosophers, particularly the idealists, generally agree in distinguishing two distinctly different ways of knowing a thing. The first way infers that we are external or moving about the object concerned. The second way of knowing is to enter into the object.

The first method depends on the point of view from which we perceive the object and on the symbols by which we express ourselves in attempting to tell what our perception produces in our mind. We must always be aware that language is a symbol. The words by which we express ourselves are symbols for what we understand or perceive. The second method of perceiving a thing depends neither upon our viewpoint nor the position of the object, nor does it rely on any symbol.



We gain the first kind of knowledge by perceiving the object from the outside as a part of our immediate environment. This form of perception can be described as relative. In the second form of knowledge, we perceive an object by entering into it. In doing so, we attain the absolute.

For example, when I perceive an object in space, my perception of motion will vary with my position and with my point of view. It may move or I may move. My understanding of it will depend on my objective perception and the interpretation which I place on my perception in my mental processes. If we consider an object to have absolute movement, we would be attributing to that moving object an interior, or a state of mind.

We would imply that we are in sympathy or in harmony with those states. We might say that we would be inserting ourselves within the object as a result of our sympathetic understanding or projection of or to the object. By this second method of obtaining knowledge, I am within the object. My experience will depend neither upon my position nor upon the symbols with which I interpret its motion, since I have rejected all translations in order to comprehend its being. I have entered into it, and I shall have obtained an absolute.

As another example, we might consider an actor taking part in a play, motion picture film, or television series. The author of the play has produced the character. The actor's words and actions are dependent upon what the author has decided. I therefore cannot identify myself with the actor through objective perception. If I

identify with the character, its entire being would then be my being, and his actions would be my actions. When I am simply observing the play or motion picture, what I know about any performer would result from the viewpoint from which I observe such actions.

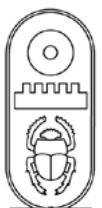
All the traits of actors performing in a play are therefore known to me only with comparison with other people or things I already know and are signs by which the actions are expressed symbolically. Symbols and points of view place me outside any character I witness. They permit me to know only what the character has in common with others and not what the individual himself actually is. That which is peculiarly the self of the individual is the sum total of his essence.



That essence cannot be perceived from without or expressed by words or other symbols. What I witness has left me with a relative concept of the individual. To be in a state of oneness or coincidence with another individual

whom I witness would give me the absolute, the perfect conception of what the witnessed individual actually is. In this illustration, the absolute would be synonymous with perfection.

As another example, we might consider a group of photographs of a town or city, taken from all the points of view that were possible, including those from an airplane. We could put them together, but they could never be equivalent to the town itself, in which we could move about and observe directly what the town was. The composite photographs would be only a relative representation of the town.





Again, this idea can be found if we had all the translations of a poem in all possible languages to add together the different patterns of meaning, correcting each other to give a more and more faithful translation, yet the translated poem would be relative. It would never succeed in rendering the complete inner meaning of the original, that is, the absolute. Everyone who has attempted to make translations from one language to another is aware of how difficult it is to express the absolute meaning contained in the original. The absolute is the original poem or object and not its representation. The original and not its translation is perfect by being perfectly what it is in the first place. It is the absolute and is not the relative.

The following illustration has been frequently used to bring out a similar idea. When you raise your arm, you accomplish a movement from within. It is a very simple perception on your part, requiring no particular thought or analysis. At the same time, for me, that movement or action observed from outside of you through my own perceptive apparatus would seem to be your arm passing through one point, then through another point. Between these two points there exists the possibility of other points. If I should begin to count, the action could conceivably go on forever.

Viewed from the inside, the absolute is simple. Perceiving it from the outside in relation to the signs and symbols which express it, it becomes a complicated and never-ending process. In the final analysis, we can conclude that the absolute can be comprehended only through intuition, while everything else we perceive falls within the limits of analysis.

This concept is well described in a statement by the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

An absolute could only be given in an intuition, while everything else falls within the province of analysis. By intuition is meant the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible. Analysis, on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, to elements common both to it and other objects. To analyze, therefore, is to express a thing as a function of something other than itself.

In the end, all analysis is therefore translation. Analysis is a development into symbols. A representation is taken from various points of view from which we note a resemblance. Intuition, in contrast to physical perception, is a process that

takes place within the mind and has its roots within the soul or inner self. The Rosicrucian philosophy defines intuition as the ability to perceive through other channels than the physical senses. It is therefore an intellectual sympathy having certain emotional patterns by which one is able to attune himself with something outside himself and to coincide with what is unique in the other thing, and, as a result, gain absolute knowledge of it.

The intuitive process is more or less spontaneous. We have difficulty in attempting to analyze it objectively as it happens inside us. Thus it is difficult to put into words what has taken place in an intuitive experience. In experiencing intuition, we are approaching the absolute, which, as has been repeatedly stated, is not translatable into symbols of any kind.

The absolute, we have said, is simple, complete. Intuition, too, is a simple and complete process. That which originates through intuition is in all probability more disposed to lead us to a degree of comprehension of the absolute than is anything we perceive. Analysis, on the contrary, reduces an object to elements already known and expresses a function of something other than itself. As I have already stated, it is a translation, a development into symbols, a representation taken from successive points of view. In its desire to learn of an outside object, analysis can multiply without end the number of its points of view in order to complete its always incomplete representation.



The process of analysis continues into infinity. It becomes more and more complicated, ever adding to the data collected, but the simple action of intuition is more specific. It is complete in itself, and through intuition we immediately grasp the absolute and not merely various points of analysis. The function of science is analysis. It works primarily with symbols. It seeks to

describe the objective world as a result of the perception of the observer. Those who accept a mechanistic or materialistic concept of metaphysics believe that they may be dealing with ultimate reality.

The only way in which we can possess or grasp a reality absolutely instead of knowing it only relatively, of placing causes within it instead of observing its actions from the

outside, of experiencing and conceiving the results of intuition instead of making an analysis, is, in short, by seizing it without expression, translation, or representation by symbols, which may be considered one of the ultimate purposes for metaphysics.

According to Henri Bergson, metaphysics, in the last and final analysis is “the science which claims to dispense with symbols.” To dispense with symbols is to dispense with analysis. To dispense with analysis is to go to the heart of anything, to enter into the object, to learn through intuition rather than by objective perception. This is the true path toward the comprehension of an ultimate reality, which is the meaning of metaphysics.

