

## Topic 1

### 1. Introduction

Epistemology has been, throughout the entirety of the History of Philosophy, a fascinating field of discussion. Many thinkers from different nations have given their view on the nature of knowledge and the best way to achieve it. Nonetheless, few of these philosophers agreed with one another, and heated quarrels on the nature of *episteme* have been common since at least the times of Socrates.

Amidst these interesting discussions on Epistemology, an interesting position rose to prominence and influenced every form of thought on knowledge that came after it: the idea that only through pure rational thought one can reach True Knowledge, that is, the basic universal unchanging structure of the universe. A famous thinker who defended this way of thinking about Epistemology was the great Moises Maimonides. In *The Guide for the Perplexed* he argued that: although Truth can appear to us as clear as daylight, many times we confuse ourselves and cease to perceive this light, for we let matter and habit take us astray from the right pathway to True Knowledge. In order to better understand Maimonides' point, I will break his argument into simple premises and a conclusion:

1. Truth is an unchanging and universal essence
2. Matter is subject to constant change and can only reveal us appearances, not the essences of things.
3. Habits work as biases that fundamentally alter our perception of reality, taking us further from Truth.
4. Therefore, matter and habit are a "veil" that prevents us from reaching Knowledge on Truth as an essence.

In this essay I will critically analyze Moises Maimonides' version of this position in Epistemology and point out its limitations. I will do so by drawing objections to the second and third premises formerly explained. Aiming to demonstrate the conclusion that: although matter and habit can often times represent an obstacle to the search for True Knowledge, one cannot access Truth without them.

In my first argument I will present an objection to Maimonides' view on matter as a barrier to True Knowledge, proposing the idea that the human mind needs sensible objects in order to reach it. In other words, one cannot reach True Knowledge *in spite of* matter, but only *through/by means of* impressions that can be grasped by our sensibility. Then I will present a possible counter-argument for this view and answer it adequately. In this argument I took inspiration on the thought of great philosophers like Aristotle and David Hume, and used some of their concepts to my aid.

In my second argument I will reflect on the Maimonides' understanding of habit, and posit that: although most of the times habit confuses us and works as a "veil" of prejudices and biased preconceptions, one cannot simply renounce it, habit is a fundamental feature of human nature that should be criticized, in other words, it should be subjected to a meticulous rational investigation that can determine its limitations and influences on our thought. This is the only way to go beyond the obstacle represented by our habits and be a step closer to Truth. In this section I used Francis Bacon's work to better fundament my argument.

### 2. Argument A: Matter and Reason

So as to better understand the following discussion, we must first clearly define what "matter" means. In this text, the word "matter" will refer to that which can be apprehended by our sensibility, in other words, anything that can be seen, tasted, heard, touched or smelled is a material object.

In the realm of materiality, *becoming*, that is, constant flux and change, is everywhere. Things that we perceived yesterday as having certain material properties may have completely different properties today. The sky, for example, is blue at day and dark at night, an apple goes from green to red, a river's water is never the same as it was a minute before. *Panta rei*: everything flows. Understanding this reality, many people come to believe that, in order to reach True Knowledge, pure reason is the only possible way, for pure reason (supposedly) deals only with concepts: objects of our intellect that are not subjected to the constant change seen in the sensible world. An apple might rot, but the idea of an apple is unchanging and, obviously, does not rot, nor ceases to be.

However, there is an issue with this argument: although reason is indispensable for achieving True Knowledge, it is not sufficient. Reason can be understood as a toolbox, and matter as construction material: tools are useful and necessary, but one cannot build a staircase using only a hammer, wood planks are needed as well. One can only build a staircase through the use of both the hammer and the planks. To put it clearly: our reason cannot deal with subjects that go beyond the possibilities of sense perception, trying to do so leads us to mistakes, unsolvable paradoxes and other forms of *aporia*. This is because the concepts we deal with while reasoning always stem from experience (this idea will be further explored in Section 3. "Counter-Argument: Innate Ideas).

As a means to fully grasping Universal Truth, one must start with material particular beings, and then, through our Reason's faculty of abstracting, connecting and relating different sensible representations, reach common features between particular material beings (universals, as they came to be known in Metaphysics). Universals, unlike particular material objects, are unchanging. The red in an apple is the same as the red in blood, and even if a particular manifestation of redness, like an apple, ceases to exist, red as a universal will not. Thus, dealing with universals "extracted" from particular material entities, one can aim to grasp the unchanging foundations of reality and Truth, but this whole process cannot start without a first sensible intuition.

Let's use an anecdote to better understand this point: imagine Adam, in the moment he was created by God. He has never seen anything moving, and so he cannot possibly think or conceive anything about movement. He has never seen a cause followed by an effect, so he cannot think of causality. Only when Adam first sees the clouds moving in the sky he can start to think about movement, only when he sees the creation of Eve he can start to think about causality. Sensible objects are not a block in the road for True Knowledge, but its starting point. We cannot reach the essences of things using only our empirical impressions, but we need them in order to, by means of rational operations of our minds, reach the Universals and, thus, the essences of reality.

The only way to reach True Knowledge is through the use of our sensorial faculties *and* reason. Both of them are necessary, neither can be discarded.

### **3. Counter-Argument: Innate Ideas**

A possible objection to Argument A is to posit that humans are born with knowledge on the universals, and simply remember it when faced with material "copies" that resemble them. Thus, experience would not be the right way to access True Knowledge, but a distraction, a "veil".

However, this counter-argument has some flaws: firstly, it does not hinder my final conclusion. Adam could have been created with the idea of movement in his mind, but he could only remember it by watching the clouds move, sensibility is still a necessary condition for Knowledge.

Moreover, the existence of innate universals is causally redundant, that is, there are explanations on the apprehension of Knowledge that rely on less and simpler premises than the Platonic notion of innate ideas. David Hume pointed out on his works that every possible conceivable idea is either directly derived from our empirical impressions or a result of the manipulation of such experiences by the operations of our understanding. The idea of an unicorn, for example, comes from the connection (operation of our understanding) of the ideas of a horse and a horn, which stem directly from our empirical apprehension of those beings (empirical impressions). Even the idea of Infinity can be explained on those terms: Infinity is the negation

(operation of understanding) of an idea (the finite) that comes from our experience with material objects (finite beings). The necessity of the existence of innate ideas is not present in this system.

Innate Universals are, therefore, not needed for a cohesive Theory of Knowledge and even if they were so, this would not imply that Argument A's conclusion was wrong.

Finally, it is important to address as well that Immanuel Kant's conception of innate ideas also do not represent a meaningful challenge to the main point of Argument A. Although he thought there was a set of innate *Categories* of sensibility and understanding, such *categories* are "forms with no content", they simply represent the boundaries and limits of our reason and experience, but, in order to reach true meaningful statements about reality, one needs *sense data*. Try to think using only pure reason is vain, for it goes beyond the capabilities of the human intellect: once again, it's like trying to build a staircase using only a hammer and no planks. Thus, one can only adequately reason with intuited material objects in space and time, and my point in Argument A still stands.

#### **4. Argument B: Habit and the Pursue of Knowledge**

Many thinkers believe that the only way to clearly and safely reach True Knowledge is by abandoning one's taste, history, and preconceptions. At first sight this is not a wrong proposition, but is it possible in practice? Is it possible for someone to renounce its own humanity in order to achieve True Knowledge? No! We are, before anything, human beings. We have our own individuality, history, etc.. Moreover, as Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, we cannot pretend to be empty and impartial subjects coldly looking at objects. One needs to recognize its position in History and orient their thought based on the recognition of the historical limitations and necessities of their time.

Habit works similarly. As part of our natural constitution as human beings, we cannot throw it away. The only way to reach True Knowledge is by first recognizing our habits, prejudices, and, generally speaking, cultural/intellectual baggage, criticizing it and pointing its influence on our thought. For the purpose of better understanding this thesis, let's take a look at a simple metaphor: habits are like sunglasses, they might make everything we see look darker, but as long as we recognize that the darkness comes from our sunglasses and not from the outside world, we can objectively deal with it, albeit through a limited perspective. By recognizing the limits imposed by our habits on our thought we can be a step closer to Truth, but ignoring habit is simply impossible.

In other words, by understanding the influence and limitations of our habits, one can "filter" their thought, that is, distinguish in which areas our habit significantly alters our perceptions of things and in which areas our judgements might be reliable. Taking the sunglasses metaphor once more: by understanding the limitations imposed by our sunglasses we can understand that, although it is not safe to assume the color of a paper sheet, its form is not influenced by the sunglasses, therefore we can reliably tell that the paper sheet is indeed rectangular. As a famous thinker once said: "to recognize our limits is already to be beyond them" and this, evidently, applies to the limitations imposed on us by our habits.

Francis Bacon had a similar position on that matter. He recognized the existence of "idols", preconceptions that altered our empirical impressions of the world. Habit is but another form of "idolatry" (in Bacon's use of the word). However, Bacon tried to build a method to get rid as much as possible from the confusing influences of the idols, but it is impossible to eliminate it entirely. The best alternative is to try and clear whatever idols are possible to be neutralized, and to criticize and recognize the influence of the remaining ones. The same goes with habits, one should try to get rid of habits that represent a passable barrier in the road to True Knowledge, but, when faced with the unavoidable barriers of habit, one should not simply ignore them and pretend to be an impartial unbiased observer, but rather recognize the role these habits play in the development of one's reasonings.

To sum up, while Maimonides is right in believing that habit can make the search for True Knowledge harder, it is safe to assume that the only way of dealing with that difficulty is not simply ignoring its existence, but actually by knowing it fully and recognizing the influences of habit on

our reasonings that cannot be erased. In this way, we might not be face to face with Truth itself, but certainly closer than we would be if we simply ignored our habits.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay I analyzed Maimonides' propositions that regard matter and habit as obstacles to reaching Truth. I presented an objection to his view on matter as a "veil" that covers the "light of Truth", positing that one needs material objects in order to adequately develop coherent reasonings and deal with Universals, empirical impressions are the starting point of Knowledge, not a mere distraction/illusion. Notwithstanding, it is important to point out that reason is also necessary for the apprehension of True Knowledge, empirical impressions are *only* the starting points of this complicated process. I then showed how, even assuming innate ideas to be true, my point still stands.

Finally, I agreed on Maimonides' view on how habit may hinder our thoughts, but, recognizing it as an unavoidable part of human nature, I offered a possible way to minimize its negative effects on the search for Truth: recognizing its influence and limitations and pointing them out, never ignoring them.

In a nutshell, my essay aimed to demonstrate the idea that: the search for Truth cannot be adequately done without the aid of sensible experience (and, therefore, matter) nor it can be done by renouncing or ignoring our fundamental human features (such as habit), but rather by uniting reason and experience and recognizing the limits imposed on us by our own humanity. We need matter to reach Truth, and we cannot get rid of our habits in our path to True Knowledge.