



Music and the Sources of Knowledge

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Introduction

The problem of knowledge is not limited to a consideration of its nature. It extends to issues of origin of knowledge. How do we arrive at the judgments we make about reality? The essence of an enquiry of this nature is to articulate concepts and ideas that often appear hazy and to see how the path to knowledge in general, relates to musical knowledge. The impression seems to be that musical knowledge follows a peculiar but unique route. The other proposition may equally be true, namely, that the internal faculties which process human knowledge do so according to predetermined schema and categories capable of integrating and differentiating the contents of reality arranged and presented as knowledge. We therefore look at the major sources of knowledge – the senses, the intellect or reason, intuition, authority. Then we look at dream and the imagination in relation to making music. In the midst of all this, we shall try to establish the meaning and place of inspiration in music making.

The Senses

Through the senses, we gain a special type of knowledge generally known as experience. There is a considerable form of respect for the senses as though they were the most reliable sources of knowledge. The role they play in our knowledge experience is so powerful that some thinkers reckoned that they alone can provide valid knowledge. These five senses involve the experiences of touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Knowledge from them involves our immediate recognition of their sense objects. But alone and in themselves, they may not accomplish much without the collaboration of other processes of knowing. Some philosophers have identified a group of other sources of knowledge which they call the internal senses. They include the common sense, memory, fantasy and instinct. These internal senses are attributed with the function of making us aware of our internal states. By internal states, we mean attitudes, pains, moods, pleasures, as well as some mental processes like willing, thinking, believing, wondering etc. Also attributed to the internal senses is the function of unifying, conserving and re-assembling the data of the external senses. The distinction is, however, problematic since the internal senses are supposed to involve mental processes which make them indistinguishable from reasoning.



Some philosophers upheld the senses as the most valid or at least a major source of valid knowledge. These are the philosophers called the empiricists. They were mostly British. John Locke is a great protagonist of the extreme empiricist tradition which holds that there is no knowledge outside sensation or experience. His idea of the mind is analogous to a piece of wax upon which impressions or ideas are imprinted. It is only this impression that we can know. Pragmatism, though a form of empiricism, however, depreciates the role ascribed to the senses by traditional empiricism. It presents the mind as selecting and forming knowledge according to the interests and purposes of the knower. It is obvious that we acquire some knowledge through the senses. A child, for example, born with defect in any of the senses, cannot acquire the knowledge proper to the defective sense. A person born blind, for instance, has no idea of colours. This shows that sensation is a source of knowledge it is however, not without its flaws. Emotions, prejudices and the limited nature of the senses themselves, can distort our knowledge.

In relation to music, sound is the raw material and the direct object of the ears. A defective ear is a relative impediment to the capacity to employ sound maximally. It is, therefore, worthy of consideration in a discourse in music. Apart from the inability to understand innately the interconnectedness of one pitch to another, most of the judgments related to people who are described as being tone deaf are related primarily to defective sense of hearing. No doubt exceptional prodigies like Beethoven would exist, but Beethoven was not born deaf. The failing ears progressed gradually until it became total. Yet he continued to defy all odds while he wrote down even more complex works with what has come to be known as inner ear. Of course, he did not depend on the external ears anymore. The sound bank in his memory could suffice.

The Intellect or Reason

Apart from the senses, another channel through which we obtain knowledge is by reasoning or through the operations of the intellect. The reality of the intellectual knowledge is substantiated by the fact that man has knowledge of abstract general ideas which are irreducible to any particular experiences and can unify all particular instances of objects belonging to a species whether they exist presently or will exist in the future. Moreover the process of deductive reasoning is a purely intellectual activity which no means of sensation can give. The proponents of reasoning as the only determinant source of knowledge are the Rationalists. Rationalism is understood as the view that we can only know what we have thought out. It holds that the mind has the capacity to discover truth by itself, or that knowledge is obtained by comparing ideas with ideas. Thus rationalists



consider the sense as providing only meaningless raw materials which must be systematized. Some form of rationalism, however, admits that some kinds of knowledge are possible. Such forms of knowledge include analytic and mathematical truths, which by their very nature are universal and necessary truths for which the senses cannot sufficiently account. Radical rationalists, on the other hand, claim that it is only through reasoning, and independently of the senses that we can arrive at valid knowledge. Extreme rationalism is prone to extolling a system of impregnable logical consistency, but one that is very far removed from reality.

In relation to music, the composition of an original work may be inspired by assorted sounds like the chirps of birds, the locomotive, the running stream, the sewing machine, the cry of an infant, and a host of other sounds from a given soundscape. At the same time, music can be created without any recourse to a cue. It can well up from the inside of the individual and that is the part that confounds the non-initiates of the art. They find it almost impossible to comprehend something that looks like creation out of nothing which is the special attribute of God's creation. It is for this reason that musicians, especially, composers are regarded as co-creators with God. So, the role of the human intellect in the creation of music cannot but be given a due consideration in a discourse of this nature. Whether it is in the writing of an opera, or jazz or country music or an oratorio, what we witness coming from composers are mind-boggling if considered from the point of view of the source of the creative object. Located in the human person, the ability to hear and write down virtual music playing in the head of the composer both ethereal and uncommon. Scott (1981) attributes some of the musical abilities of composers to spiritual intelligences. According to him,

Through music, man should at least come to sense the other world with millions of its incorporeal denizens existing concurrently with the physical. We refer of course to the Deva Evolution, those spiritual intelligences ranging from nature-spirit to loftiest cosmic archangel. Since the generality of mankind are not sufficiently evolved to perceive these Devas, the power of music was brought into service. As the melodious utterance of a poet will often convince a skeptic of some truth when no amount of dry argument is of avail, so the melodious sounds of music can achieve a similar, nay, even greater, result (109).

He states further that "by inspiring composers to convey the vivid life and movements of the Devas, as also their atmosphere and even their music in terms of earthly sound, the Masters are enabling man to 'hear' what as yet, he cannot 'see" (109-110).



Intuition

Intuition means “the direct apprehension of knowledge that is transcendental knowledge claimed by some mystics is intuitive in character rather than rational or experimental. Intuition is, therefore, best considered as a source of knowledge different from not a result of conscious reasoning or of immediate sense perception” (1986: 210). It involves not only an immediate awareness of some external object but also of the internal states of the knower. Some experiences convince us about the reality of intuitive knowledge. Self-consciousness, for example, has been posited as a typical case of intuition because it neither involves direct sense perception nor logical reasoning. It is rather an immediate awareness of an internal state. Intuition also results from accumulated past experiences which get subsumed in the subconscious and are employed more readily and faster as solutions to some problems than sensation and reasoning. More still, the sensation and reasoning. Intuition, however, is not a very safe source of knowledge. It can lead to absurd claims if left unchecked by reason or the senses.

To a great extent, intuition behaves like a unique manifestation of the intellect. The issue of direct apprehension of truth or its object is in the true behaviour and mannerism often attributed to artists including musicians. Sometimes, they fail to explain how they arrive at some of their poems, lyrics, melodic lines or harmonic progressions and arrangements. How does it come about? It happens like a brain wave, in a flash, like it is revealed from above. Music-making involves the sporadic bursts of intuition as a common phenomenon.

Authority

By “authority” is meant a reliable testimony given by someone on facts we have no first-hand experience about, that is, one which we are unable to investigate by ourselves due to limitation of resources. The authority to which we appeal must, however, be either an expert in the field in question or dependent ultimately on the authority of an expert in the field. We must as well be reasonably certain that the authority in question has made use of the best available methods to arrive at his result.

Max Black suggests that the following qualifications are to be present if we are to rely on the testimony of authority:

- Recognition by other authorities
- Agreement with other authorities and
- Special competence.

All these are necessary because our appeal to authority must be justifiable on solid grounds. Historical facts provide us ample evidence and excellent examples of



knowledge based on authority. For example, one who did not know or witness the two world wars can rely on the authoritative statements of historians. Further examples of knowledge based on authority include all knowledge of facts about specialized disciplines like science, philosophy, theology, psychology, music, medicine and astronomy.

Authority, unlike experience, reason and intuition, is a secondary source of knowledge because facts known through authority are not known directly but are rather based on the authority of another, though a more competent person. Authority as a source of knowledge becomes questionable when accepted on face values without any application of rational judgment on it, or any effort to ascertain the validity of its truth claim.

Dreams

In what ways can we regard dream as a source of knowledge? This may hardly go for any of the biological and physical sciences which place a lot of premium on observation, consistency and experimentation. In as much as we may not speak absolutely for the scientists, there could be the possibility of solutions and breakthroughs and inventions and designs coming to the practitioners as a form of revelation in dream states. As for artists, many have said authoritatively that they 'received' their music or song text or instrumentation style in dreams. It is, however, difficult to tell if these dream state revelations have connections to the myriads of our conscious activities and thoughts which become transformed into dream state projections. It is common for artists to wake up in the middle of the night to scribble some music or even rush into home studios to record such dream-given music which can vanish before dawn. Often attempts to recollect such vanishing lines or tunes prove abortive.

There are very many theories that tend to explain the process of knowledge. The scholastics made a clear distinction between the knower (the subject which knows) and the known (the object of knowledge). According to them, faculties unite but not physically, in an immaterial manner. There is a subtle union of the knower and the known. Through a cognitional act, the object of knowledge gets united to the knowing subject so as to enable the subject know it. During this gnoseological union, the knower does not lose his identity while absorbing with his mind, the identity of the object. This is essentially how we know external objects. Other processes provide us with knowledge of propositions and of ourselves. They include: deduction, induction and consciousness.



Deduction: Deduction is a logical process by which we derive a particular proposition from the general or universal. Often, three statements or propositions are involved, two acting as the premises on which the third, the conclusion, is based. Consider the statements:

All black people are more emotional than reasonable

Mugabe is a black man,

Therefore, Mugabe is more emotional than reasonable

The conclusion can equally be inferred directly from a universal premise in which case only two propositions may be required e.g

All Nigerian presidents have stolen public funds

Therefore, Buhari have stolen public funds

It has to be noted that the truth content of the statements is not called to question here. It is the logical validity that is of interest. However, the truth or validity of a deductive reasoning depends on two factors, namely the truth value of its premises and the validity of the deductive process.

Induction: Induction is another logical process in which general conclusions are reached through the evaluation of particular instances. Induction is the process of knowing from the particular to the universal or general. Induction could be complete or incomplete. It is complete if every member of the class under investigation is considered. It is incomplete if only some of the members of the class are considered and judged sufficient for a general conclusion. While we can say that complete inductions are always true, the same may not be said of incomplete inductions except for certain conditions.

Consciousness

Consciousness is considered a process of knowing especially the object, the self. It knows the self. We can, through consciousness, know ourselves. Consciousness can be direct or reflexive. In direct consciousness, the subject and the object are involved. That means that the subject is aware of its relationship with the object. Regarding reflexive consciousness, the subject is more conscious of itself while the object is made obscure.

Evaluation

Drawing a distinct line between one source of knowledge and another is not easy. The reason for this is simple. The different sources of knowledge equally act as collaborators in the process of knowledge. Even the case of sensation which looks very simple and obvious is not really that simple and obvious. The interpretation of the



sensation felt does not belong to the hand to make. There are inseparable communications and contacts going on among the component faculties for knowing. This means that all the sources of knowledge are complementary not antagonistic. Reason supplies what the senses cannot process whereas the senses the lower material objects that reason cannot handle. That implies that there is no real dichotomy between empiricism and rationalism. They seem to be two perspectives of the one and only reality about the nature of knowledge. Apparently, such seeming contraries can co-exist as the two sides of a coin.

References

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