

I. Could we have represented Daphne's shapeshifting any differently than the way Bernini did?

Italian Baroque artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini once realized a marble sculpture representing the inhumane conversion of a human into a tree. With the "Apollo and Daphne" work of art, Bernini might have reached the acme of Aristotelianism, by trying to make tangible (indeed we can touch the statue) and clearly visible something which is by nature immaterial, abstract, i.e. the *idea* of "shapeshifting". Such a concept evidently pertains to the superior world of Ideas – to use Plato's terms-, which transcends the world of change, the reality we live in.

However, can shapeshifting be represented any differently? In fact, Bernini assumed that Daphne's transformation to a tree took place gradually: first the limbs became branches, then the skin hardened and dried out, and became the bark of the tree. However, what if Daphne actually became a tree all of a sudden and instantaneously?

Assuming that humans can solely have knowledge of how the world manifests and appears to them, as The Empirist philosopher John Locke believed, and not of the way it is *in reality*... then evidently the idea of shapeshifting is unknowable and ungraspable. As a consequence of the preceding statement, if the conversion of a being into another is unimaginable and inscrutable, what has Bernini sculpted?

Well, Bernini represented what he thought "shapeshifting" to be like. Nevertheless, can we define it as true knowledge?

II. Does Bernini possess true knowledge of the idea of shapeshifting?

By glancing at the sculptural complex "Apollo and Daphne", we might grant that Bernini truly believed Daphne's transformation to have taken place gradually just as he represented it- though that of Daphne is an ancient Greek mythological story, that is, narrated not necessarily real-. Therefore, he must have been firmly convinced about what he believed. Perhaps, or better, very likely, he did some accurate research by attentively scrutinizing the words of the Latin poet Ovidius or those of other writers who had narrated such beautiful story. Finally, we ought to assume that he was "well-equipped" in order to go through such an important mission. In fact, he was a renowned artist who could not take risks for negligence.

In other words, Bernini's true belief concerning Daphne's transformation must have been based on some valid argument, e.g. the "testimony" of Ovidius or the stories told by other authoritative ancient writers. And yet, can we consider his belief, validly supported, as true knowledge? What is knowledge about?

III. Knowledge and Experience

In order to better understand such a delicate concept, analyzing the origins of the word *knowledge* would be extremely conducive. It comes from the ancient Greek term "gignosco", which equals to "to know". "Gignosco" shares its verbal root (ghn-, which is doubled in the system of present) with another ubiquitous ancient Greek verb, "gignomai". The latter means "to become" or, by extending its meaning, "to be". Indeed, we are who we are because of our story, of our life experience, as the French philosopher Bergson claimed... Hence, we are who we have become after the vicissitudes and moments of which our life is made up. By comparing these two verbs, *to know*

and *to be*, it can be asserted that *knowledge comes from life experience* (1). In addition, living in the world clearly means perceiving, perceiving through the senses. In fact, humans live as sentient beings, otherwise how could they relate to others? And relations are a fundamental, irreplaceable, prerequisite in order to be defined as a human being... in fact, as Heidegger stated, being means “Being-in-the-world”... Heidegger’s *Dasein* deals with and takes care of other beings, and this is its constitutive dimension. So, going back to (1), it can be granted that we know what we experiment with and what we perceive through the senses.

Nevertheless, in this perspective, we could not assume the existence of a unique, single knowledge. That is to say, knowledge is disparate, because humanity is kaleidoscopic, and because not all individuals share the same sense perceptions. However, such a claim, that knowledge is different from individual to individual would prove to be insufferable. In fact, knowledge is the basis of human action, individuals act according to what they already know: they approach new situations and adapt to new circumstances by applying what they have learned throughout life. For instance, if one had a newborn child and were to purchase a new house, he or she would certainly choose a place that had no pernicious furniture. In fact, aware of the fact that young children are extremely sensitive and that they easily hurt themselves, that person would very likely avoid pieces of furniture with harsh edges. Such awareness can be attributed to the fact that during childhood that individual repeatedly hit his or her head against the corner of the table. Instead, if his or her partner had not experimented with such a situation before and believed that a table without sharp edges would have been inappropriate for the overall environment, they would very likely not achieve consensus and come to a common solution. Therefore, as the previous example shows, the existence of discordant and arbitrary knowledge compromises the buttress of human existence, that is, concord and harmony in the relationships with others.

Conversely, how could knowledge be one and the same for all individuals? Who would be the real possessor of knowledge in this infinite variety of opinions and in the pied ocean of human lives?

IV. Reason as a valid principle to define knowledge

However, there might be a general canon based on which knowledge would not be contradictory and would, at the same time, endorse and enhance the human necessity to communicate and relate to others. What if knowledge were defined as something which is apprehended through the senses (A)- and is therefore true-, and, at the same time, is validly based on evident data and rational analysis (B)? As to (A), Locke had it right when he said that what is known to humans through the senses must be true, but not necessarily real- indeed, humans learn about the “qualities”, the “appearance”, of objects, whereas the “underlying object”, the common substratum or “substance” to which all these qualities pertain is imperceptible and ineffable-. (B) is based on the assumption that rationality is a fundamental and common trait of human nature- *Cogito, ergo sum* ,or “ I think, therefore I exist” as Descartes would say,... or Blaise Pascal’s “thinking reed” -. So, on the common ground of rationality humans can accost other beings and try to explain the validity of their beliefs- which become knowledge in the moment that they are recognized as being so by others-.

Since *reflection* is peculiar to all individuals, when a thesis is presented by being reasonably and critically justified, such belief can be assumed to be knowledge. Indeed, the content of knowledge ought to be, by definition, something which is knowable. Whereby knowable means that a belief can be comprehended, and perhaps accepted, after having been scrutinized the validity of the reasoning on which it is based. In fact, if others can understand it, it must be respondent to the rules of reasoning and, consequently, it must be true. We can define “*human knowledge*” as being limited to phenomena occurring in the world in which we live where almost everything can be

unveiled and fathomed by the human intellect- even Locke as an Empirist compared *the human reason* to a powerful, though not omnipotent, plummet-.

Therefore, *knowledge ought to be defined as the belief or series of beliefs which are true because they are acquired throughout life experience, and which can be supported by means of information or evidence understandable and accessible to the human reason.* In other terms, "*knowledge is true belief based on argument*", as the ancient Greek philosopher Plato stated in one of his works, the "Theaetetus".

V. Conclusions

Going back to Bernini's case, his representation of the nymph Daphne's conversion from a human into a tree is knowledge. That is to say, it is true- though it might not have happened "in reality"-, and it can be recognized as being so by those who approach Ovidius' magnum opus, the "Metamorphosis", and accept his description of the event.

In conclusion, knowledge might be compared to the products that customers accumulate on the counter of a store: such products cannot be used and taken out to the external world unless they are scanned. In this metaphor, the scanner corresponds to the human reason, the store is the human mind, and the external world represents the dimension of human "vita activa"- as Hannah Arendt would call it-. Thereby, if a belief is not based on some valid argument, which is provided by reflection, it cannot be externalized and defined as *knowledge*.