

# Talk at Hotel Ansonia

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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During my visit to London and Paris last year I had many talks with the materialistic philosophers of Europe. The basis of all their conclusions is that the acquisition of knowledge of phenomena is according to a fixed, invariable law — a law mathematically exact in its operation through the senses. For instance, the eye sees a chair; therefore, there is no doubt of the chair's existence. The eye looks up into the heavens and beholds the sun; I see flowers upon this table; I smell their fragrance; I hear sounds outside, etc. This, they say, is a fixed mathematical law of perception and deduction, the operation of which admits of no doubt whatever; for inasmuch as the universe is subject to our sensing, the proof is self-evident that our knowledge of it must be gained through the avenues of the senses. That is to say, the materialists announce that the criterion and standard of human knowledge is sense perception. Among the Greeks and Romans the criterion of knowledge was reason — that whatever is provable and acceptable by reason must necessarily be admitted as true. A third standard or criterion is the opinion held by theologians that traditions or prophetic statement and interpretations constitute the basis of human knowing. There is still another, [pg 21] a fourth criterion, upheld by religionists and metaphysicians who say that the source and channel of all human penetration into the unknown is through inspiration. Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.

In Europe I told the philosophers and scientists of materialism that the criterion of the senses is not reliable. For instance, consider a mirror and the images reflected in it.



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These images have no actual corporeal existence. Yet if you had never seen a mirror, you would firmly insist and believe that they were real. The eye sees a mirage upon the desert as a lake of water, but there is no reality in it. As we stand upon the deck of a steamer, the shore appears to be moving, yet we know the land is stationary and we are moving. The earth was believed to be fixed and the sun revolving about it, but although this appears to be so, the reverse is now known to be true. A whirling torch makes a circle of fire appear before the eye, yet we realize there is but one point of light. We behold a shadow moving upon the ground, but it has no material existence, no substance. In deserts the atmospheric effects are particularly productive of illusions which deceive the eye. Once I saw a mirage in which a whole caravan appeared traveling upward into the sky. In the far North other deceptive phenomena appear and baffle human vision. Sometimes three or four suns, called by scientists mock suns, will be shining at the same time, whereas we know that the great solar orb is one and that it remains fixed and single. In brief, the senses are continually deceived, and we are unable to separate that which is reality from that which is not.

As to the second criterion — reason — this likewise is unreliable and not to be depended upon. This human world is an ocean of varying opinions. If reason is the perfect standard and criterion of knowledge, why are opinions at variance and why do philosophers disagree so completely with each other? This is a clear proof that human reason is not to be relied upon as an infallible criterion. For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything is continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. In the future much that is announced and accepted as true now will be rejected and disproved. And so it will continue ad infinitum.

When we consider the third criterion — traditions — upheld by [pg 22] theologians as the avenue and standard of knowledge, we find this source equally unreliable and unworthy of dependence. For religious traditions are the report and record of understanding and interpretation of the Book. By what means has this understanding, this interpretation been reached? By the analysis of human reason. When we read the Book of God, the faculty of comprehension by which we form conclusions is reason. Reason is mind. If we are not endowed with perfect reason, how can we comprehend the meanings of the Word of God? Therefore, human reason, as already pointed out, is by its very nature finite and faulty in conclusions. It cannot surround the Reality Itself, the Infinite Word. Inasmuch as the source of traditions and interpretations is human reason, and human reason is faulty, how can we depend upon its findings for real knowledge?

The fourth criterion I have named is inspiration through which it is claimed the reality of knowledge is attainable. What is inspiration? It is the influx of the human heart. But what are satanic promptings which afflict mankind? They are the influx of the heart also. How shall we differentiate between them? The question arises: How shall we know whether we are following inspiration from God or satanic promptings of the human soul? Briefly, the point is that in the human material world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself. Through it the human mind is quickened and fortified into true conclusions and perfect knowledge. This is conclusive argument showing that all available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible. Therefore, man is not justified in saying, "I know because I perceive through my senses," or "I know because it is proved through my faculty of reason," or "I know because it is according to tradition and interpretation of the Holy Book," or "I know because I am inspired." All human standards of judgment are faulty, finite.[pg 23]

