UNIT 3 JUSTIFICATION: CLASSICAL APPROACH

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize the students with the four main issues of truth and justification from Eastern and Western perspectives;
- To encourage them to question the sources of justification and certitude in knowledge; and
- To make the students realize the different types of certitudes possible.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to understand justification of knowledge, we begin with certitude. Then we speak of the traditional ways of justifying knowing by using evidence.

3.2 KNOWLEDGE AND CERTITUDE

During the course of our reflections so far we have often had to raise the question about 'certitude' (or 'certainty'). Thus when we explained what we meant by 'knowledge' and how in our understanding of the term 'truth' and 'reasonableness' were essential characteristics of it, we had already to raise the question whether , if such were the case, it would be possible to say that we 'knew' anything for sure, i.e. with certainty. Again, when we discussed the validity of 'inference' we referred to the empiricist's understanding of it as yielding only pragmatic probability but not 'certainty'. Again, when we

discussed 'testimony', we conclude that 'belief' could certainly be considered as 'reasonable' but left the question of certainty' till later. The problem of certitude became more acute, of course when we discussed 'truth'. It is clear that it is one thing to say what 'truth' is and what it is not, it is quite another to say whether , and to what extent I can be sure (certain) of the 'truth' (no matter how it is understood). Some Indian schools of Philosophy (e.g. samkhya) too characterize true cognition as 'certain' (*asamdigdha*) – i.e. as subjectively certain and not only objectively 'uncontractictable' (*Abadhita*).

The notion of 'certitude'

The scholastics generally define 'certitude' as 'the firm assent of the mind to the truth, based on evidence'. This definition is certainly a good one, but we prefer to explain 'certitude' in our own way. And the way we understand it is simply this: ''the conviction that such and such is (is not) the case". The following explanations will hopefully make things clear.

i. **Conviction**

In our understanding of the term, 'knowledge' is 'the awareness that such and such is (is not) the case'. The notion of 'certitude' as 'conviction' adds to the notion of 'awareness' the scholastic 'firm assent' but not so much as an act performed here and now but rather as a psychological state of mind resulting from it. (This is partly determined by the usage in modern English of the terms used here , like 'assent'). Another word for 'conviction' is 'persuasion'. I can be aware of something, that such and such is (or is not) the case but depending on what the case is (as we are going to see) I can be more or less convinced or persuaded that that is so. This can even be made clearer if we compare and contrast other possible psychological states with regard to whether such and such is (is not) the case, as follows:

ii. **Conviction and evidence**

What makes all the difference between that state of mind when one 'doubts?' Or that state of mind when one simply 'thinks' that such and such is the case, and that state of mind when one is 'convinced' ('persuaded', 'certain') that that is so? In 'doubt' one has reasons for and reasons against that such and such is or is not the case. One is in decisive, wavers, between two reasons, or sets of reasons. When one 'thinks' that such and such is, or is not, the case, one is inclined towards one side more than to the other. One has formed a 'probable opinion' about the matter but still hesitates to say definitely, unwaveringly, that it is so. Notice that this admits a range of degrees – depending precisely on the force of the reasons towards which he is inclined to accept. It is only when one definitely decided for or against one side then he is convinced. When he is no longer afraid that there can be any reasonable room for doubting and therefore that he can be mistaken, that one is convinced and says that he is sure, certain, that such and such is or is not the case. And the reasons because of which he is moved to take such a step or to find himself in such a state of mind – are precisely what we have previously called the 'evidence'. This is merely an analysis of the psychological process involved. In actual life, it is often gone through spontaneously, unreflectively.

iii. **Conviction and truth**

'Conviction' refers to a state of mind, 'truth' refers to the correspondence itself between what is asserted or denied about whether such and such is,

or is not, the case. 'Conviction' is 'subjective', 'truth' is 'objective'. one can, in other words, be convinced that such and such is, or is not, the case and if this does correspond to what in fact the case is, one is right; other wise one is wrong. In the latter case, his conviction is erroneous.

3.3 Kinds of Certitudes Possible

We are going to touch here on a very important question. In fact, many every day doubts regarding the possibility of being 'sure' ('certain') about different things- including, for example, moral and religious matters – can and in fact does lead to a certain kind of scepticism, if not about the possibility of being sure of anything at all, at least about the possibility of being sure of certain matters. We have already raised so many questions in this regard in our very introduction. Often we become aware of so many opinions given on certain matters, one saying this and another saying completely different and contrary to the first that one is tempted to despair of 'knowing what to believe any longer'. An analysis of the different kinds of certitude, which are possible and reasonable – but only reasonable. – are to be expected in different matters can help us sort things out.

In a sense, it is true, one is either certain (convinced) or one is not. Strictly speaking, it would make no sense to say that I am 'more or less' convinced. What I am really saying is that I have a strong opinion on the matter but I am not yet convinced. And we have distinguished between the state of mind implied by saying that one has an 'opinion' and that implied by saying that one is 'convinced' ('certain'). Generally scholastics point out that the difference between the possible kinds of 'certitude' is not due to the degree of 'firmness' of assent , nor is it due to the difference in the fields of knowledge , but on the kind of evidence available according to the case. Strictly speaking, this is, according to us, correct. But following our own line of exposition, and keeping to our own understanding of the terms ('knowledge', 'truth', 'certitude', 'evidence' we, here again, proceed in our own way.) If certitude is based on evidence, we prefer to distinguish between the different kinds of possible and expected certitudes on the basis both of the different fields of knowledge and consequently of the different kinds of evidence.

3.4 LOGICAL CERTITUDE

Here we are in the field of 'formal' field of knowledge, the realm of pure ideas and the relationships between them - as in Logic and mathematics. The evidence of the truth of the propositions is obtained by analysis of the terms and the definitions used. No other means of verification is needed – or indeed possible. Here the truth is expressed in analytical propositions which are therefore 'necessary true' propositions (or 'tautologies') and can be seen to be such even before ('a-priori') their application to other fields of knowledge. And the certitude thus based on such kind of evidence, admitting of no possible or conceivable exception, can be called 'absolute'. I am absolutely certain (by a kind of 'logical certitude') that if A = B, and B=C, then A=C. I am similarly certain that 2+2=4. Again I am similarly certain that it is either raining or not raining. Similarly with definitions: I am certain, in the same way, that if I define a 'rational animal' as man , then that man is a rational animal is for me absolutely certain.

3.5 ONTOLOGICAL CERTITUDE

Here we are in the field of the 'informal' knowledge of being as being, the realm of visible and tangible realities but considered from the point of view of those characteristics which they have in common to the extent that they are beings, existents. This realm could be considered as the counterpart, as it were, of the Logical realm – if we are prepared to admit, as we pointed out before, that the 'laws of the mind' (the logical realm) are based on the 'laws of being itself' (the ontological realm). The evidence of the truth of the judgments is obtained, certainly first from general experience (including sense-experience, but more directly from a reflection on the nature of the judgment itself as judgment. Of course, there can be other methods, but ultimately certain laws of being itself can be 'insightfully' discovered – what we have called 'first principles' – which not only are self evident (cannot be denied without contradiction but also serve as the ultimate basis for any further knowledge of reality. The 'self evidence' in question here, however, is not merely logical but ontological, and the contradiction would not be one of the terms (contradiction in terms) but a judgmental one (an exercitive contradiction). Here the truth is expressed in 'synthetic – a-priori judgments (in our sense, not necessarily Kant's). And the evidence thus based on such kind of evidence, again admitting of no possible or conceivable exception, can also be called 'absolute'. Thus I am absolutely certain that I exist, that I can know at least something for sure, that what is and cannot not to be at the same time, etc.

As we know, Sankara (and advaita in general) says that '*maya*' can be said neither to be 'real' nor 'unreal' nor 'both real and unreal. In terms of 'logical values', advaita, unlike Western Logic does not operate with a 'two – valued logic' (i.e. 'true' and 'false') but with a 'three-valued' one , i.e. true (real), false(unreal) and 'indescribable'. Hence the relation between 'true' and 'false' is not a contradictory one but only a contrary one. That is to say, if 'p' (standing for a thing, concept or proposition) is false, one cannot infer that therefore 'non-p' is true (for it can be neither false nor true) – or in other words, to say that 'Maya' is not real (false), one cannot infer that therefore it is real (true). But does all this really disprove the Law of Non-contradiction and the Law of Excluded Middle. We think not. (Later on, however, we shall try and explain that these laws – and a 'two-valued – operate only when what is asserted or denied are understood in a univocal sense. When we apply it to religious language, they have to be applied in a qualified way.) Even a 'three-valued Logic' can be ultimately reduced to a 'two-valued Logic': either what you are saying is true (that a 'three-valued Logic' is possible and valid) or it is false.

A similar position is held by the Buddhist Nagarjuna (and Madhyamika in general). Of no object whatever can we say that it is 'real'(for 'real' means 'existent in its own right, non-related and non-originated), or 'unreal' (for somehow it exists, it appears), or 'both real and non-real' or 'neither real nor unreal' (for in these two latter cases, that would be more gibberish). This is the famous way of arguing according to the four 'categories of thought and speech" (*catuskotis*). Notice, first of all, that Madhyamika makes use of this destructive dialectric not to deny the empirical value of Logic, truth and knowledge, but simply to show that from an 'ultimate point of view' , the phenomenal world is not the 'really real' – which is indescribable and

beyond these categories of thought and speech. Secondly it is clear from the third and fourth category, the statements would be gibberish precisely because they would express contradictory propositions. Only if 'real' and 'non-real' were understood in an analogical sense, would the statement be intelligible. So, once again the *catuskoti* logic does not disprove the Principle of Contradiction and that of the Excluded Middle, as we understand them. But from this Madhyamika Logic a lot can be learnt with respect to the use of logical language to speak about reality 'from an ultimate point of view'.

Again, something similar (but not quite similar) is found in the Jain doctrine regarding the 'indeterminate' and 'multi-faceted' reality (*Anekantavada*). No one thing can be understood thoroughly for that would require that one knew it from all points of views and in all its relations. Only from an 'ultimate point of view' can one know everything (*Kevalajnana*). So, from the everyday and empirical point of view, we have always to qualify our judgments as 'somehow' ('*syat*') true or 'somehow' false. (This is the Jain '*syadvada*' theory of knowledge)

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is the scholastic definition of certitude?

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2. How do we obtain the evidence of the truth of propositions in logic?

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3.6 PHYSICAL CERTITUDE

Here we are in the field of the knowledge of the things, of their properties and ways of acting, the realm therefore of Science. The evidence of the truth of the laws of Nature is obtained by, first of all, sense-perception, verification or falsification by laboratory-conducted experiments of hypotheses formed, etc. here, the opposite of a given law is not, at least theoretically inconceivable. Its truth is subject to our further understanding of how nature works, so to say. In this field the only possible certitude we can have – and the only one to be expected is 'physical certitude'. It is not 'absolute' but 'hypothetical' – in the sense that I can say, "Yes", I am sure on the possible evidence given so far". Hence I can say I am sure, certain, that the sun will rise from the east, that action and reaction are equal and opposite, that the volume of a gas at constant temperature varies inversely with the pressure, etc. (We

need not to have recourse to the possibility of 'miracle' to explain the hypothetical kind of 'physical certitude'. The language of modern scientists about the 'provisional' character of all scientific laws is enough.)

3.7 MORAL CERTITUDE

Please note that here we have to be careful for unlike the previous usages of the term 'certain' (or sure) which is a philosophical technical one, the usage of the term 'to be morally sure' is also an everyday common one. We often use such expressions as, "I am morally sure that the exam is postponed till next month" – by which is meant that "I am pretty sure that….", " I have good strong reasons to believe that ….", etc. So we have distinguished between at least three meanings of 'moral certitude' :

'Certitude' in the field of knowledge of Ethics which studies how we should behave, the general norms and principles which should help him judge what is 'right' or 'wrong' both in general and day-to-day situations, especially in 'conflict-situations' etc. we are aware how, especially today, how certain questions regarding the moral justifiability of certain actions (e.g. nuclear warfare, capital punishment, abortion, birth control, etc.) are debated. We are all aware too that certain ways of behaviour or of action which in the past were normally justified, today they are morally condemned (e.g. slavery), or vice-versa (e.g. exacting interest on loans). This uncertainty can lead one to say that no certitude at all can be had in 'moral matters' and each one is to let himself be guided either by one's conscience or, at most, by the current customs of one's people. The disastrous consequences of such a position can easily be ascertained. The thing is that people expect a kind of certitude in 'moral matters' which is neither possible nor even to be expected.

So, how is the 'evidence' of the truths in moral matters obtained? Here, of course, different methods can be and are used. If one based one's Ethics on the immediate data of (moral) consciousness – which, as we said, can be seen to be self-evident' (e.g. the good is to be done, evil to be avoided; if an ought to do what is right, he can do what is right; man ought to fulfill himself as a man; etc.), then some truths in moral matters can be known with absolute certainty. This part could be considered as a part of Ontology itself and thus of these ontological certitude is possible. But as for the rest, evidence is obtained by good arguments – which bring us to the third meaning of 'moral certitude'. We shall examine second meaning first.

A second meaning of 'moral certitude' is that which can be had in the field of knowledge of human nature, its psychological make-up, human's social relationships and history. This is the realm of the Human (Social) Sciences. What kind of evidence can be obtained for the truths of these Sciences? Naturally much depends on each Science. Sociology or Psychology use different methods than that of History, for example, depending on the way evidence is obtained, the kind of certitude possible would be different. But both Sociology and Psychology study, certain human behaviour constants. These, of course, are different for those constants studied and formulated as 'physical laws' – for here man is, because of his freedom, less predictable than things. But if I am told that "an exploited class will sooner or later revolt", that "a given culture is largely determined by its economy" , that "the population

growth is inversely proportionate to technology and urbanization", what evidence can I have for that and how do I obtain it? It is clear that the evidence here is obtained through observation (which today is conducted on very scientific basis). The certitude based on such evidence cannot amount to 'physical certitude' – the field of knowledge, to start with, is different, and consequently the kind of evidence obtained in both is different. Precisely because this evidence, in most of the Social Sciences, is based on the observation of the usual ways of human behaviour ("*mores*"), the certitude which is only possible here is 'moral certitude' (in this second sense).

A third meaning (and the fourth one which follows) of 'moral certitude' is taken more from the everyday usage of the term and has nothing to do with any particular field of knowledge. Whenever the only evidence I have for a given truth is 'testimony' (witness, the spoken or written word of a reliable person) the only certitude which is possible and to be expected here is 'moral certitude' in this third sense. In addition, no matter what the field of knowledge is. About a given law of nature, the scientist can have 'physical certitude' but a non-scientist, who relies on his competence and reliability, can only have about the same matter 'moral certitude'. We spoke at some length about this kind of knowledge based on 'testimony' and its 'reasonableness' and how, in point of fact, most of our knowledge is thus based on it. We need not repeat all that here.

A fourth meaning, important to bear in mind, of 'moral certitude' is when the evidence, no matter what the field of knowledge is, is based on good reasons. 'Testimony' may be one – but if it is only one, then we have 'moral certitude' in the third sense. Here one has to have more than that. Notice that even in Science, the scientist may start by having good reasons to form a hypothesis. At that stage he has moral certitude about the truth of his hypothesis, by further research, moral certitude can become physical certitude. But in Human Sciences, the greater amount of reasons make the truth more probable, never a physical one (unless one proves that the question at issue is a physical phenomenon.) When we spoke of 'moral matters' we said that apart from a small amount of truths, the greater part are based on good reasons. Of these we can only have 'moral certitude' in this fourth sense. This need not dismay us. On the contrary this should liberate us from that anxiety to look for absolute certitude where such a thing is neither possible nor to be expected.

In fact, 'moral certitude' in the fourth sense is 'stronger' than the one in the third sense. Actually, 'moral certitude' in the third sense is the weakest of the lot, but still it could, given the nature of the case (i.e., How can I be sure who my parents are?), or the actual conditions of the knower (i.e., How can I be sure that there are a North and a South Pole?), it is the only 'moral certitude' to be expected. But notice that often moral responsibility demands that, given the nature of the case and the actual conditions of the knower, the latter should not content himself with it, e.g. the doctor in the exercise of his duties with the patients, the counsellor with the counselee. Hence the distinction between 'ignorance' (absence of that knowledge and moral certitude expected) and 'nescience' (absence of that knowledge and moral certitude not expected from one.)

3.8 RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE

Here we are in the field of religious knowledge. But a lot have first to be said before we can adequately tackle the nature of religious certitude, the kind of evidence on which it is based, how we go about obtaining such evidence, the nature of religious truth and the kind of language it is expressed in. All we have said so far in this section is meant to clear the ground for the religious epistemological question.

But by way of anticipation, lest we should leave the question of 'religious certitude' hanging in the air, so to speak, we could from now pass the following remarks. In our way of proceeding where we are distinguishing meanings of certitudes (or kinds of certitude) on the basis of both of the field of knowledge and, consequently, on the kind of evidence possible in that field, it is already to be foreseen that the kind of religious certitude possible and to be expected, given the specificity of the field of knowledge concerned – will be specifically different, at least at some stage or level of the process by which one obtains it, from every other kind.

It is an observable fact that most people 'inherit' so to say, religious beliefs from their parents, educators, etc. Hence the conditioning factor here wrought by 'society' on one's religious beliefs (and for that matter on other beliefs of his political, social and other fields). This, of course, raises the question whether and to what extent such conditioned religious knowledge is genuine knowledge. But that is not what concerns here directly. What concerns us here is to observe that at the beginning – and in most cases, throughout one's life – man's religious belief is based on the witness, testimony, of others. We discussed the conditions under which it could be considered 'reasonable', but, at any rate, the 'certitude' based on it can only be 'moral certitude' in the third meaning of the term explained above.)

Even at a higher (or deeper) level, when one starts thinking out for oneself, if his religious beliefs remain based on the evidence of his respective scriptures ("written testimony"), his certitude can only be 'moral certitude' – and his religious beliefs remain 'beliefs'. Still if at this stage, one sees more and more reasons to confirm, corroborate, justify, his religious belief – indicating the reasonableness of his act of believing in those particular Scriptures and in their contents, answering difficulties which may arise in a reasonable way, showing the untenability of opposite beliefs in a fairly convincing way etc. – then he can be said to be 'morally certain' in the fourth sense of the term. A 'convergence of probabilities' (Newman), in this respect, can even amount to something like, but perhaps not quite, 'ontological certitude' – if, that is , this convergence can be seen to point to, or to be finally based upon, a 'self-evident truth' insightfully intuited.

Many great philosophers, who were at the same time great religious men, claim something further – and herein lies, according to us, the specificity of 'religious certitude'. And this is the more noteworthy since these men belong to different religious traditions. They claim a direct perception of supra-sensible Reality, of reality in its ultimate significance, in its Ultimacy (or ultimate causes). Hence they distinguish two levels of reality (the empirical and the transcendental) two levels of experience (the *vyavaharika-dristi*, and the *paramartika-drsti*, according to Vedanta, Jaina and Buddha and the rational and sapiential according to Christianity), and hence two levels of knowledge and of certitude.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Briefly speaking, what is the second meaning of 'moral certitude"?

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2. What is the specificity of religious certitude?

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3.9 TOWARDS JUSTIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Our next set of topics will be about a set of questions concerning knowledge and its justification. Distinguishing the skeptical questions from "Socratic" questions, we will dwell on what justification of knowledge implies. Some background knowledge and specially on propositional knowledge may be useful (Feldman 2010). The traditional, tripartite understanding is that knowledge is justified true belief. This implies that what is needed in addition to true belief is traditionally said to be "good reasons" or "evidence" or "justification". So, the traditional analysis of knowledge holds that knowledge is justified true belief, having good evidence. In other words

1) Knows that p if and only if

   i) S believes that p;

   ii) it is true that p;

   iii) S is justified in believing that p.

2) These three conditions must all be satisfied independent if in the case of a justified true knowledge. If only any two of the above conditions are satisfied then we assure that the knowledge is not fully justified.

3.10 SOME ISSUES ON JUSTIFICATION

1) Justification of knowledge needed for epistemology requires very strong reasons. There can be reasons that make belief more reasonable than denial or suspension of judgment, but still fall short of reasons good enough for knowledge. E.g., weather forecasts, election forecasts, etc. (Feldman 2010)

2) But in many cases knowledge does not always require absolute certainty. Perhaps we can have something like evidence that puts the proposition beyond all reasonable doubt, though not beyond all possible doubt. Eg., All lights are on in my room, water freezes at 00 C (under normal conditions), etc.

3) A related idea is that justification does not guarantee truth. Victims of perfect hallucinations, or extremely well-done deceptions, may have justified but false beliefs, but may be rarely false.

4) Evidence and practical reasons: There is a big difference between having evidence for the truth of a proposition and a motivation for believing it. Thus justification need not always lead to practical consequences. This is because there are difference between reasons for belief and reasons for acting.

5) Sources of justified belief (and knowledge) are perception, introspection, memory, reason. These are psychological processes in us and may be faulty at times.

6) What about intuition, faith, and mystical experience? Can they be fully justified? Please note a difference between intuition as something weird and spooky and as merely acute deep perception (which no doubt exists and is, I think, a source of justification). Whether the others are a source of knowledge and justification is a more contentious issue. Notice that we have considerable evidence about the nature and merits of perception and memory and we lack comparable evidence about the merits of faith or mystical experience. So there does seem to be a basis for treating them differently.

7) William K. Clifford's Principle is noteworthy: "It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." Though theoretically this principle is perfect, it is not always clear what he meant by "insufficient". The principle says that it is wrong to believe when the evidence is not supportive. We can generalize: and assert that it is wrong to disbelieve when the evidence is supportive, wrong to suspend judgment when the evidence is not counterbalanced. In other words: overall evidence determines which is the right attitude (Feldman 2010). The significance of Clifford's principle is that it says that evidence is the determining factor. How important something is, how nice it would be for it to be true, etc., make no difference.

8) A popular slogan is: everyone has a right to believe what they want. As a legal principle, that seems admirable, since we do not want thought censoring and moral policing. But as an epistemological principle, this slogan is mistaken and it conflicts with the suggested interpretation of Clifford's principle. Clifford's principle is good enough principle, provided we clarify that is "insufficient evidence."

3.11 LET US SUM UP

After having spoken of the kinds of certitudes, we understand knowledge as justified true beliefs. We took up some issue connected with justification and

evidence. Then we saw briefly some reasons for unjustified beliefs and why people keep on holding to them, in spite of contrary evidences.

3.12 KEY WORDS

Nescience : is the absence of that knowledge and moral certitude not expected from one.

Syadvada : From the everyday and empirical point of view, we have always to qualify our judgments as 'somehow' ('*syat'*) true or 'somehow' false. This is the Jain '*syadvada'* theory of knowledge.

3.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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