
UNIT 2 PERSON

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Uniqueness of Human Being
- 2.3 Ontological Dimension of Human Person
- 2.4 Psychological Dimension of Human Person
- 2.5 An Integral Concept of Person
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Further Reading and References
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

We, in our day to day communication as well as understanding, use terms such as “Human” and “Person.” But, for centuries, a number of eminent thinkers have differed in their views and theories. The objectives of this unit are:

- To scan through the various theories
- Broaden our mental horizon
- And finally lead us into a better understanding of ourselves.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We live in an anthropocentric world where human person is considered as the centre, summit and measure of everything. The term ‘person’ is not used for plants and animals but it is exclusively reserved to human. Human is called a person because one is a subject and the term brings out the grandeur, dignity and nobility of person.

The word ‘person’ comes from the Greek word ‘*prosopon*’ meaning mask, to personify in a role, which became the Latin ‘*persona*’. Neither in common usage nor in philosophy has there been a univocal concept of person. In common usage ‘person’ refers to any human being in a general way. The person is distinct from a thing or material object. The term ‘person’ generally stands for a living conscious human being.

2.2 UNIQUENESS OF HUMAN BEING

All people in the world, believers or non-believers, recognize something unique in man/woman. Philosophers, psychologists and scientists have explained this uniqueness of human differently. For philosophers, it is the reason that makes human different from other beings. For scientists, it is consciousness that makes human unique among other creatures. It is precisely because of this unique status that we owe respect to every human person. The human being alone is a person. Human has the dignity of a subject and is of value in oneself.

Human is a unique creation of the forces of nature. As a unique creation, a human being reveals this originality and uniqueness in one's development as well as in one's acts. An individual is a being who is one in itself and distinct from all other beings. Many philosophers have stressed the element of uniqueness, singularity and individuality of the human person. Even though human shares with other sub-human beings a number of qualities, one enjoys a life that is qualitatively different from other forms of life. The life of human is specifically different from that of animals and plants, because one has the unique dignity of an individual, rational and immortal being.

Individuality of Human Person

As human begins to go deeper into oneself, one becomes aware of oneself as a subject and that one is different from the rest of the universe and thus discovers one's individuality. Being an individual, one is unique, dynamic, rational, free and creative. An individual should never be considered or treated as an object or commodity. We can make use of a thing at our will because it has no will and freedom. Since it has no will, we don't require the consent of the object to use it. But a human person is quite different from an anonymous entity because one is an intelligent and free individual.

Rationality of Human Person

Human beings are different from other animals because they have the power of reason. Rationality is human's capacity to ask the 'why' of things. It is the capacity to think rationally. To think rationally implies the capacity to distinguish between what is reasonable and not reasonable in the matters we come across in our life. Reason is the natural capacity of human beings to arrive at truth in a holistic way.

Human, being rational is capable of relating oneself with other beings making them participate in one's life and promote one's true good. In order to become authentic human person, proper reasoning in our thinking and action is needed. Everything human does when executing human acts must be a manifestation of one's rationality. The power of reason helps human form concepts, pass judgements, organize them in systems and give meaning to reality. Because of one's reasoning power human emerges superior to other beings on earth. Therefore, we can rightly describe human as a rational animal as Aristotle puts it.

Immortality of Human Person

Human beings seem to be unique among other creatures of the earth because they not only are fully aware of the inevitable death but also coupled with this awareness they seem to refuse that death is the end. Human, being a unity of body and soul or matter and spirit, death cannot be the end of everything. If I was not spirit, death would not exist for me; there would only the corruption of my body. Therefore, death is understood as a separation of the soul from the body. For philosophers like Plato and Aquinas, human is a unity, one substance composed of body and soul. But human soul being spiritual can subsist without matter. Therefore, the soul, for Plato continues to exist even after the death of the body because soul alone is the true reality of human. Etymologically speaking *im* is non and *mortality* is death. So immortality is non-death. It is the continued and perennial existence of the human, the soul. This is a unique nature and feature of human alone.

Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom is the property of will. The object of will is the good. The will is the tendency towards or love of total good. To desire good is a value. To be free means to be able to decide freely for a specific good. It is equally openness to good or that it is implicitly oriented towards an unlimited good, which corresponds to a fundamental openness towards truth. Freedom is the power of decision of a moral object. Freedom of the individual manifests the way in which a person is made manifest, the way one acts and expresses emotions, the manner in which one is present to others and to the world.

Freedom in the hands of human is a weapon of dual stature. It can be adopted either for good, or for evil. It can serve human for the cultivation, the promotion, the elevation and the realization of one's own being. But it can also serve to obtain the opposite effect; to degrade, humiliate and annihilate one's own being. With good use of freedom human can become a hero, a saint, a benefactor of humanity. Meanwhile with its evil use one can become an addict, a terrorist, a nemesis of humanity.

Therefore, freedom in its true sense implies freedom with responsibility. Human persons are called to live in freedom and responsibility. A human of mature personality takes full responsibility for one's life- thoughts and actions. Human being a moral agent is responsible and answerable for all what one thinks, speaks and acts. One is responsible for one's life mixed with triumphs and successes, mistakes and failures. We ourselves are responsible for all our actions.

Self Transcendence

Etymologically 'transcendence' means to go over and beyond a threshold or a boundary (*transscendere*). Self transcendence has its basis in human's power of never being satisfied with finite, the limited or the imperfect. Human is spirit and lives one's life in continuous opening toward the Absolute.

Different Interpretations of 'Transcendence'.

Transcendence is the movement with which man continually "overtakes" himself. This movement has a direction and points towards a goal, the Absolute. In the history of philosophy there have been philosophers who give *egocentric*, *philanthropic* and *theocentric* meanings to transcendence.

Egocentric Transcendence: Human is currently in a precarious, alienated and inauthentic state. The emphasis is on human rising above what one is now and reaching a superior state of happiness. Human is in a tension to free oneself from one's misery and needs to find oneself again through a more complete actualisation of one's possibilities. Philosophers in this group include Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Heidegger etc.

Philanthropic Transcendence: Human is currently confined in one's individualism. The emphasis is on the social dimension and advocates the perfection of the human community and an attempt to originate a new humanity freed from social inequality. Philosophers in this group include Marx, Comte, Bloch, Garaudy etc.

Theocentric Transcendence: Human is constitutionally open towards the Absolute and escapes incessantly from the confines of one's own reality. Human is the absolute opening to being in general, or human is "spirit". The transcendence toward the Absolute

Being (*theocentric*) is the only fundamental structure of human. Philosophers in their group include Thomas Aquinas, Blondel, Rahner, Marcel, Lonergan etc.

Person

The Opening of Human to the Absolute is the Fundamental Constitution of Human

Human is basically spiritual, that is, one lives one’s life in a continuous tension towards the Absolute, in an opening towards it. This is revealed even in the banal actions of everyday life. One is *human* only because one is in the way towards God, whether one knows and expresses it or not, whether one wants it or not. One’s opening to God is *intrinsic*. One is the finite being totally open towards the Absolute. One can accept or refute it but not destroy it.

This transcendence attests that the being of human is spiritual and cannot, therefore, be reduced to the material. The spirituality of human is, first of all, positive. One is an “I”, a person that exists as a unique subject and opens to a “You”, that is a pure person.

However, it is important not to define human as a negation of material. Human’s spirituality does not indicate, in the first place, different properties from those materials. Intelligence and will do not exist of their own account. They are abstractions. What exists is a concrete person who thinks and wills. To think and to will are modes of being (accidental entities) of the personal being. The problem of spirituality is not regarding the immateriality of the intellective faculties but the subsistence and unity of the person.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) How does reason differentiate human person?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) How is immortality a unique nature of human?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.3 ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN PERSON

The ontological concept of person gives emphasis to human as an individual endowed with the faculty of will, freedom and autonomy. The uniqueness of ‘human person’ lies in the fact that human person is first of all an individual, unique, original, irrepeatable, irrepresentable being as every human has a unique combination of qualities and talents that no one else has. For Augustine, person means, the single, the individual. To be an individual is to be one, namely being undivided in itself and distinct from all other beings. The uniqueness of person is implied in the concept of individual.

Definition of Person as given by Boethius and Aquinas

The merit of giving an adequate first definition of person in the ontological perspective goes to Severin Boethius. He defined person as *rationalis naturae individua substantia* (individual substance of rational nature). This definition of Boethius was revised by Aquinas. Aquinas defines person as *subsistens in rationali nature* (a singular subsistent of a rational nature).

Substance

This is the first category of Aristotle, that which is in itself. The person is a being that exists in oneself because one is complete substance. Person is a substantial and individual unity.

Individual Substance

The substance, in the fullest sense of the word is the individual. The universal concept does not exist in reality but only in the individual. In the philosophy of Aquinas these two terms individual and substance are united in the term ‘subsistent’, which means a total autonomy of existence and action. The ‘subsistents’ is an individual substance that forms a complete whole.

Rational Nature

While there are individual substances that are not persons, there are no persons that are not individual substances. Every person is an individual and a human person has a rational nature. The element that distinguishes human from animals and things of this world is one’s rationality. To be a person one has to be capable of exercising reason. It is this rational faculty that helps the human person to distinguish between real and unreal, right and wrong and knowledge and opinion. The ontological concept of person gives emphasis to the faculty of will and the autonomy of the person. Human as a willing being is an autonomous subject who tries to transcend time and space. This means that human is an end in oneself. A person is therefore capable of deciding for oneself and of acting in accordance with one’s own decisions in order to arrive at one’s ultimate end. A human becomes an authentic person when one acts in a morally upright way taking responsibility for one’s actions. One must creatively respond to the challenges with a spirit to change and grow, by relating oneself to God, fellow-beings and nature as free persons.

2.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN PERSON

Persons are individual human beings capable of mental activities. It was Descartes who proposed a theory of mind and for him, person is not just a material body but person for Descartes is a self, a self conscious mind which thinks, feels, desires etc. Descartes no longer defines person in relation to the autonomy of being, but in relation to self consciousness. In his psychological sense of person, Descartes admits firstly intellectual knowledge and reason as the essential requisite of the person and secondly, self consciousness as a distinctive mark of human.

The Psychological Person

From the psychological point of view human can be viewed as a being that has self awareness. The person is the 'I'. The discovery of the 'I' means 'becoming aware of my individual existence, separated from that of other beings'. In the psychological understanding of person, human intellect, thinking, reasoning, knowledge and self consciousness are emphasised.

Self Consciousness

Human differs from animals as a self-conscious being in the cognitive level. Self-consciousness and objectivity are the two elements which distinguish human from animals. In fact, animals know objects and know themselves but reach neither self-consciousness nor objectivity, because they do not succeed in separating themselves either from the knowing subject or from the known object. Human has the awareness of the 'I' (subject) and 'non I' (object).

The inter related actions of reason, volition and emotion together constitute the human mind (consciousness). By the existence of these mental functions we become self conscious that we are subjects and not objects. The person not only acts consciously, but is also aware both of the fact that one acts and of the fact that it is one who acts. Self-consciousness is the awareness by the self of itself. Self knowledge is the basis of self consciousness.

Human Person as a Subject

A subject is a willing, feeling and thinking entity. Human as a subject is a unique being endowed with intellect, will and heart. Since human is a subject, no human being should be treated as an object, a thing or as a function. As a subject one is a knowing, conscious, free and self transcending being in the world.

As a thinking being I hold on to my reasonably legitimate ideas and views. As a feeling subject I seek and desire for the emotional satisfaction of my life. And as a willing being I desire to be an autonomous subject and I make myself a free person by responsible exercise of choices.

The human person is a subject and refuses to be an object. In order to become authentic human beings, we need to discover our true self, deepening and widening our consciousness, forming an integral vision, creating open attitudes and having right convictions.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is person according to Boethius and Thomas Aquinas?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Human differs from animals as a self-conscious being. Explain.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Substantial Unity of Human: The Absolute Value and Dignity of the Person

Human is a substance. In fact, one has all the properties of a substance; constancy, stability, identity, autonomy in being etc. Thus we can say that human or more exactly every single individual of the human species is a substance. The complete substance of the human being is neither the body, nor the soul, but the body and the soul in their profound unity.

Person is Open to the Absolute

In contrast to the purely material, the structure of human as a spiritual being, given intelligence and will, means that one is open to the infinite, tending to supersede every limit. The object of intelligence is being as being. It chooses the finite within the horizon of infinite and has an infinite desire to know, as well as unbounded potential. Similarly, the will is never content with the attained good, but tends towards the greater. Since only God is infinite and unlimited Truth and Good, only God can satisfy the quest of the human person.

The Person Open to the Absolute is an End in Oneself

The human person is not a means to an end but one is an end in oneself in the sense that one is ordained by the Transcendent. In one sense the person is relative as one is dependent on the Absolute and in another sense, one is an absolute form because one is willed by the Absolute. This is the authentic dignity of human person because one has been caused in such a way as to be able to direct oneself to the absolute.

Dialogical concept of person

Philosophers like Max Scheler (1874-1928), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) describe human as a being-in-relationship, a being-with-others. According to them humans are embodied self-conscious beings who stand in relationality with others and it is to be realized through dialogue. Human is not only an individual, but also a communion being. In order to lead a meaningful and authentic existence one must establish a loving and mutually reciprocal relationship with other human beings. According to Max Scheler, the human being lives first of all, and principally in others and not in oneself. One lives more in the community than in one's own individual. Therefore, dialogue attaches directly to the persons. In dialogue I enter into relationship with others and is conceivable only between persons. For dialogue, I must first recognize in the other persons as independent subject of existence, interiority, a capacity for response, and freedom- in short- subjectivity.

Martin Buber's Concept of Person

According to Buber human existence is essentially related and relational. Human life with all its complexity finds its meaning, richness and happiness in being related to others. For Buber life is relationship with others from birth to death. According to Buber a genuine relationship can take place only in the '*sphere of between*'. The '*sphere of between*' is not something permanent, rather it is ever created whenever two human beings meet. One turns to the other and in order to communicate with each other, must reach out to a sphere beyond one's own namely the '*sphere of the between*'.

The Three-fold Relation

Human has a threefold relationship by virtue of one's very nature and situation. First one is related to the world and to things; second one is related to humans –both to individuals and to many; third one is related to the absolute. Thus we can say that human has got an I-It, I-Thou and I-Eternal Thou relationship. To be a genuine human person, one should relate oneself with the Absolute, fellow beings and nature in mutual selfless love, sharing and co-operation. Absolute is the indispensable foundation and basis for every genuine I-Thou relationship. Without the eternal Thou human's relationship will become sterile and useless. The Absolute is the Absolute Being who makes possible every I-Thou relationship.

Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Person

Marcel's philosophy has been called in the philosophy of communion. He insists that to be genuine in our interpersonal relationships we must be totally and unreservedly available to the other. Marcel identifies selfless love and mutual openness as intersubjectivity in our relationship with others. One should place oneself at the disposal of others. Marcel calls this capacity '*availability*'.

To become an available person means to be a free person. Because the unavailable person is tangled within oneself, one is limited to one's own self created world. When someone leads a 'closed' life and does not make oneself available to others, he/she leads an inauthentic life. A person leads an authentic existence only when one is making oneself 'open' to others in love and sharing. According to Marcel, "I can become myself only through the other, my friend".

The available person gives oneself without the expectation of receiving back. One is actually at the disposal of others. When one opens up oneself for others, one is open to reality itself. This enables one to grow deeper and deeper in life, whereas the self-centred, unavailable person refuses the call of others and thereby one becomes uncommitted. One is not ready to go beyond the petty circles one craves. One forgets the fact that when one gives one grows and that through self sacrifice one reaches self-fulfilment. Only a liberated, free, available person can enter into a meaningful and authentic interpersonal communion.

The Intersubjective Communion

Intersubjectivity does not merely mean collective labour or it is not merely being together either. But it calls for an interaction in a deeper level. It means that I must be willing to put myself at the disposal of the other. Here ‘the other’ is considered and treated not like an object, but as the subject, as the magnetic centre of presence. At the root of presence there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is regarded by me as taking me into account. Now by definition an object does not take me into account. I do not exist for it.

Let us take the example of a bus conductor. I often travel in a particular bus. Therefore, I have to deal with this particular conductor often. Now the conductor is an instrument for me. He /she gives me a ticket and I pay for it. Nothing more than that. Seeing him /her uneasy one day, I ask, “What is the matter?” Responding to my question he/she comes to me. Here originates the subject - subject relationship. In this way we really become present to each other. In this mutual presence starts the Marcelian intersubjectivity.

This encounter or meeting or inter-subjectivity is not something accidental or happening by chance. Marcel writes: “To encounter some one is not merely to cross his path but to be, for the moment at least near to or with him. To use a term I have often used before, it means being a co-presence”. This meeting or encounter is “not mere interaction between two persons... but a reciprocal intercourse of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ who get to know one another as persons.” My genuine individuality is found out only in relation with the other. There is no self without communion. By self-enclosure I am actually destroying myself. So, one should get out of one’s own egoistic way of being.

2.5 AN INTEGRAL CONCEPT OF PERSON

The ontological, the psychological and the dialogical concepts of person include some good elements. The ontological concept of person gives importance to the will and volitive dimension. It implies that human is an ‘individual substance’ who takes free decisions. Psychological concept of person gives emphasis to intellect and cognitive dimension. It implies that human is a self-conscious being in the world. The dialogical concept stresses the heart and the affective dimension and describes person as a loving and feeling being. All these concepts and dimensions put together we can speak of human as a person who thinks, wills and feels. Human person thus is a thinking, willing and feeling entity. Human is precisely a person because one is the master of oneself and one has self control. The dignity of human too reveals that one is a person with independence, freedom and responsibility.

Check Your Progress III

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Human being as spiritual being is open to the Absolute, How?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) What do you understand by the term “Inter-subjectivity”?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.6 LET US SUM UP

Human is a mystery. Millions of people have been speculating on the nature of human being for centuries. Various branches of science have attempted to explain the making of human beings. Still human beings remain a mystery. No one has ever succeeded in comprehending the nature of human beings completely. Human is an evolving being possessing the properties of autonomy, self-consciousness, selfless love and self-transcendence. One is a self-transcending being capable of never being satisfied by a given facticity, capable of transcending and projecting oneself beyond space and time. The worth of a human person lies not in what one does or what one knows, but in what one is. Human is an incarnate spirit and is made up of matter and spirit. Since one is an incarnate spirit one has a soul and is spiritual. A spiritual being is essentially intelligent. An intelligent being is essentially able to will. A being, able to will, is necessarily free. A free being is necessarily personal. Human, who is intelligent, free, spiritual and personal by nature, is able to communicate and enter into relationship with the Absolute. Human is an unfinished product. In so far as human is a conscious and free being, one is aware of oneself as a being on the way, who in freedom directs one’s ascent to the fullness of being. Thus, becoming human is a life long human process of learning to transcend our self with love, integrity, fidelity and care. Human being is a possible possibility tending towards the Infinite and one’s ultimate destiny consists in being united with the Infinite.

2.7 KEY WORDS

- Person** : The word ‘person’ comes from the Greek word ‘*prosopon*’ meaning mask, to personify in a role, which became the Latin ‘*persona*’.
- Transcendence** : To go beyond a limit or range, e.g. of thought or belief or to exist above and apart from the material world.

2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Mondin, Battista. *Philosophical Anthropology*. Rome: Urban University Press, 1985.

Sumner,C. *The Philosophy of Man*. 3 Vols. Addis Ababa: Central Publishing Press, 1989.

Lescoe, Francis J. *Existentialism With or Without God*. New York: Alba House 1974.

Marcel, Gabriel. *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.

Chethimattam, J. B. and Thomas, T. M. *Image of Man*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1974.

Glatzer, N. N. *The Way of Response: Martin Buber*. New York: Schockens, 1966.

Aquinas,Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Vol 1. Westminister: Christian Classics, 1981.

Van Ewijk, Thomas J. M. *Gabriel Marcel: An Introduction*. New Jersey : Paulist Press, 1965.

Manimala, Varghese J. *Being, Person and Community*. New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1974.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Human beings are different from other animals because they have the power of reason. Rationality is human’s capacity to ask the ‘why’ of things. It is the capacity to think rationally. To think rationally implies the capacity to distinguish between what is reasonable and not reasonable in the matters we come across in our life. Reason is the natural capacity of human beings to arrive at truth in a holistic way.
- Human, being rational, is capable of relating oneself with other beings making them participate in one’s life and promote one’s true good. In order to become authentic human person, proper reasoning in our thinking and action is needed. Everything human does when executing human acts must be a manifestation of one’s rationality. The power of reason helps human form concepts, pass judgements, organize them in systems and give meaning to reality. Because of his reasoning power human emerges superior to other beings on earth. Therefore, we can rightly describe human as a rational animal as Aristotle puts it.

- 2) Human beings seem to be unique among other creatures of the earth because they not only are fully aware of the inevitable death but also coupled with this awareness they seem to refuse that death is the end. Human, being a unity of body and soul or matter and spirit, death cannot be the end of everything for human. If I was not spirit, death would not exist for me; there would only the corruption of my body. Therefore, death is understood as a separation of the soul from the body. For philosophers like Plato and Aquinas, human is a unity, one substance composed of body and soul. But human soul being spiritual can subsist without matter. Therefore, the soul, for Plato continues to exist even after the death of the body because soul alone is the true reality of human. Etymologically speaking *im* is non and *mortality* is death. So immortality is non-death. It is the continued and perennial existence of human, the soul. This is a unique nature and feature of human alone.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) The merit of giving an adequate first definition of person in the ontological perspective goes to Severin Boethius. He defined person as *rationalis naturae individua substantia* (individual substance of rational nature). This definition of Boethius was revised by Aquinas. Aquinas defines person as *subsistens in rationali nature* (a singular subsistent of a rational nature).
- 2) Human differs from animals as a self conscious being in the cognitive level. Self consciousness and objectivity are the two elements which distinguish human from animals. In fact, animals know objects and know themselves but reach neither self-consciousness nor objectivity, because they do not succeed in separating themselves either from the knowing subject or from the known object. Human has the awareness of the 'I' (subject) and 'non I' (object).

The inter related actions of reason, volition and emotion together constitute the human mind (consciousness). By the existence of these mental functions we become self conscious that we are subjects and not objects. The person not only acts consciously, but is also aware both of the fact that one acts and of the fact that it is oneself who acts. Self-consciousness is the awareness by the self of itself. Self knowledge is the basis of self consciousness.

Answers to Check your Progress III

- 1) In contrast to the purely material, the structure of human as a spiritual being, given intelligence and will, means that one is open to the infinite, tending to supercede every limit. The object of intelligence is being as being. It chooses the finite within the horizon of infinite and has an infinite desire to know, as well as unbounded potential. Similarly, the will is never content with the attained good, but tends towards the greater. Since only the Absolute is infinite and unlimited Truth and Good, only the Absolute can satisfy the quest of the human person.
- 2) Inter-subjectivity does not merely mean collective labour or it is not merely being together either. But it calls for an interaction in a deeper level. It means that I must be willing to put myself at the disposal of the other. Here 'the other' is considered and treated not like an object, but as the subject, as the magnetic centre of presence. At the root of presence there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is regarded by me as taking me into account. Now by definition an object does not take me into account. I do not exist for it.

UNIT 3 KNOWLEDGE

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Definition of Knowledge
- 3.3 Sources of Knowledge
- 3.4 Justification and Certitude of Knowledge
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Key Words
- 3.7 Further Readings and References
- 3.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are:

- To examine the basic nature of knowledge that proceeds from the metaphysical nature of finite being, of rational humans
- To know the basic issues on “knowledge” keeping in mind the two fundamental questions which have been asked throughout the history of philosophy: “What can we know?” and “How can we know it?”
- To reflect on the inseparable relation between being and knowing

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Metaphysics is the science of being as being. Science is systematic knowledge of things. Hence, metaphysics and knowledge are inseparably related. Our knowledge is always knowledge of ‘something’ or Being. According to Bonjour, the best way to start investigating knowledge is by paying attention to a rough list of apparent knowledge from commonsense point of view. The list can include [the list here is not exhaustive]: (a) Facts about subjective experience: I feel an itch in my left thigh, (b) Facts about experience of physical environment: That there are green trees outside my window, (c) My personal past, which I actually experienced: that I had fruit for my breakfast, (d) Facts about the historical past that were not part of my personal experience, though they were experienced at least in part by others: India was liberated from British rule under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, (f) Facts about future events: that I will eventually die, etc. There are various problems and issues that can be raised about each of these apparent categories of knowledge. Among them we enlist the five major ones. First, “What does it *mean* to say that *I know* each of these various things? What conditions or criteria must be satisfied for such a claim of knowledge to be true or correct?” Thus we have the *analytic problem*: the problem of the *nature* of knowledge. Second, “Supposing that I do in fact know these things, *how* do I know them? What is the *source* or *basis* of my knowledge?” We are confronted with the question whether only ‘perception’ and experience or also

intellection and thinking are the sources of knowledge. So we have at hand the *source problem*. Third, “What then is the difference between the two sets of items, the known and the unknown?” Question leads us to the *scope problem*: the problem of the *limits* of knowledge, of *demarcation*. Fourth, “Whether I really do know all of the things that I think I do (or that common sense would say that I do) – or, much more radically, whether I really know any of them at all.” Here we are confronted with the *problem of skepticism* and relatedly the *problem of justification*. One can cite number of examples of apparent but nongenuine knowledge or “failed knowledge”: “Sometimes I turn out not in fact to know something that I thought that I knew.” For example: that a certain student is following the lecture (he has just learnt to judge when to nod or smile, but actually, as will be revealed when he tries to answer the question, has no idea what the professor is saying). It is precisely this concern that apparent knowledge might not be genuine became the impetus for Descartes, at the beginning of his famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The problem of skepticism invariably requires that we justify our beliefs. But the central risk is that in trying to decide whether we really know one thing we will inadvertently appeal to other things that we think we know, but about which we are in fact mistaken! The fifth is the *problem of value*. Here the question is: “How much does it *matter* whether we know what we think we know? Why do we *care* about knowledge – in particular, what is it about knowledge that really matters for our lives?”

3.2 DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE

Traditionally many philosophers have defined knowledge as ‘Justified true belief’ (JTB). The concept of knowledge standardly ascribed to Descartes reads: “Knowledge is a strong or certain *belief* for which the person has a *reason* that guarantees *truth*.” Accordingly traditional analysis enlists three things that are sufficient for knowledge: (a) truth, (b) belief, and (c) justification. So there can be no knowing something false; to know something requires that it be true. Second to know something, one must believe it. If one doesn’t commit oneself to a claim, if one doesn’t consider it as one of his/her beliefs, then he/she cannot said to know it. Finally, knowledge requires justification: if one believes something illegitimately – without any reason and by luck ones belief turns out to be true, then one would not say he/she had knowledge. Further on we shall see how this debate has evolved and whether it is really adequate. [See section: certitude and justification]

3.3 SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Analysis of knowledge aims at sorting out the element of uncertainty by stating ‘individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions’ for knowledge, so as to achieve statements [facts] that are true. Basically it revolves around the questions: What is knowledge or what it means person knows something? The fundamental issue is whether our knowledge originates in, and is therefore dependent upon, the data we receive through our senses or whether the only true certainties are those that come from our own minds – from the way in which we think and organize our experience, from the principles of reason and logic. This debate has given rise to two contrasting approaches as far as the source of our knowledge is concerned viz.: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism starts with the mind; Empiricism starts with experience. The debate between these two approaches can be seen in the history of philosophy by contrasting Descartes’ views (Rationalist) with those of John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume, who are key figures in the development of empiricism.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by ‘Knowledge’?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Explain briefly the debate on sources of knowledge.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.4 JUSTIFICATION AND CERTITUDE OF KNOWLEDGE

Ancient Greeks were divided between those who thought knowledge required certainty and that it was attainable (Socrates and Plato) and those who held more pragmatic view claiming that we should only seek the degree of certainty each subject matter allowed (Aristotle). Nonetheless, certainty has been the central issue as far as knowledge is concerned. The oft repeated questions are: are you sure about that? Is it possible that you were mistaken? The implication is even if one tries to be accurate and honest, the senses may be mistaken. When philosopher asks, ‘what can be known for certain’ or ‘are the senses reliable source of knowledge’? they are trying to sort out the element of uncertainty, so as to arrive at statements / position that are ‘known’ to be true.

We have alluded earlier to the traditional understanding of knowledge as JTB. Its importance in spite of gradual evolution in its interpretation cannot be undermined. Emphasizing the justification or certitude David Lewis, in his *Elusive Knowledge* says:

[...] it seems as if knowledge must be by definition infallible. If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P, it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that P. To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just sounds contradictory.

Alfred Jules Ayer, in his book *The Problem of Knowledge* further emphasizes the justification aspect when he says:

It is indeed true that one is not reasonably said to know a fact unless one is completely sure [fully convinced] of it. [...] whereas it is possible to believe what one is not completely sure of, so that one can consistently admit that what one believes to be true may nevertheless be false, this does not apply to knowledge. [...] To say of oneself that one knew that such and such a statement was true but that one was not altogether sure of it would be self-contradictory.

Let us now look deeper into the three essential conditions for knowledge.

a) **Belief Condition**

Process of knowledge begins by entertaining a proposition. According to Bonjour, to fulfill this condition a person need not require explicit, conscious acceptance of the relevant proposition at the time in question, even though this is the standard way in which the said condition is fulfilled. Ex: 'I am a human being'. I know this claim to be true all the time, even though I almost certainly do not have explicitly in mind. I am 'disposed' to accept or ascent to the fact if the issue were raised. [In opposed to 'disposed' belief there are 'occurrent' beliefs – wherein the person has the proposition explicitly in mind and accepts or ascents to it].

To a question how strongly the person must accept or believe the proposition in question: Cartesian view (JTB*) requires that person has no possible doubt that the proposition is true (person must be certain). This is a very strong version of the belief requirement. However, it is our common experience that most of the things that we seem ordinarily regard as instances of knowledge would not satisfy this condition.

A significantly weaker version (JTB') of the belief condition would require that the person must be fairly confident, reasonably sure in his or her belief or acceptance of the proposition in question. This version seems to agree much better with our commonsense judgment as far as knowledge is concerned.

b) **Truth Condition**

The rational behind the truth condition is simply that 'one cannot know what not the case is'. It seems intuitively wrong to ascribe knowledge where the claim in question is not in fact true. Nonetheless, one must accept that the truth condition is fulfilled by the knower in the process of satisfaction of the other two conditions (belief and justification) and not independently as some would demand it.

The aim of cognitive enterprise is truth, and in traditional account of knowledge, one tries to accomplish this by taking beliefs for which they have good reasons or strong justification. When one indeed succeeds in this task then he has knowledge. If one fails, what he has is mere 'attempted knowledge'. However, to decide between these positions is not easy.

The definite question here is concerning the nature of truth itself: What does truth amount to? It is a metaphysical question and there is no unanimity among the philosophers on this issue. The widely accepted and commonsense view is that of 'the corresponding theory of truth'. It says "proposition is true if it corresponds to or agrees with the relevant aspects or part of reality." (N.B. The 'untenability' of

correspondence theory has led philosophers to propose alternative theories of truth. These theories could be studied as separate sections, closely related to epistemology].

c) Justification Condition

Let us be clear that it is possible for one to consider knowledge merely as true belief and suggest that there is no further condition/ingredient is necessary. However, that a mere lucky guess or hunch does not satisfy for knowledge, even though it might undeniably produce a 'true' belief.

To a question what more then is needed for knowledge than a true belief, the traditional answer is: one needs a 'sufficiently strong reason or justification for thinking that the claim in question is true'. This strong reason and justification is often described as 'truth conducive': one that increases or enhances the likelihood that belief is true. Such a reason is standardly referred to as an 'epistemic reason' or 'epistemic justification'. Simply put it means to have evidence in favour of the truth of the proposition in question. Should this 'evidence' be separate body of information? Can this concept be comfortably applied to all cases of apparent epistemic reasons or justifications? Are there self-evident propositions? These are questions immediately related to justification condition.

First of all the evidence/s involve *a basis* of some sort for thinking that the proposition in question is true or likely to be true. Secondly, this truth conducive basis is something that is *within the cognitive possession of the person* whose belief thereby comes to be justified, that it is something that h/she aware of in some way that would allow to be cited as a reason or as giving justification for the belief in question. Truth conducive basis which is within the cognitive possession of the person can emerge from different sources like: religious tradition, common sense or arbitrarily (luck). Philosophers support belief through good reason excluding luck/chance. Their claims are: if we are able to give good reason we exclude luck, belief can be grounded on religious tradition and common sense but there is no guarantee of truth is assured of.

Once again we are confronted with the issue of how strong the reason or justification must be? JTB* demands that the reason must be *conclusive* so as to *guarantee* the truth. However our common sense shows that there seems to be many cases regarded as cases of knowledge where this condition is not satisfied. If we hold on to this version, much of our knowledge [refer to the list of apparent cases of knowledge] is not possible. On the other hand JTB' demands that justification be *reasonable* – strong enough to make *quite likely* the proposition in question as true.

d) Proposed Alternative: JTB+ (Modified JTB')

Since there is no unanimity on the issue as to how strongly the person must believe and justify the proposition in question to qualify as knowledge, the weak conception (JTB') stands in need of modification. Edmund Gettier in his analysis points out that JTB' is not sufficient for knowledge. He, through series of examples shows that one could believe what is true and be justified in so believing and yet fail to know. According to him cases of intuition are not cases of knowledge. Luck element is to be totally eliminated. Hence he comes up with the JTB+ version, which adds an additional 4th clause to JTB' saying: "It must not be an *accident* that in relation to S's reason or justification that P is true." [Cf: E. Getteier: *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*]

At the end we cannot but agree with Russell, who says that knowledge is a sub-class of true beliefs. According to him every case of knowledge is a true belief but not every true belief is knowledge. Intuitively if we want to include all possible cases of knowledge by common sense we have to opt for JTB'. However, then 'Gettier problem' [accidental knowledge] comes up. Even the fourth clause [JTB+] cannot fully qualify JTB' to knowledge, because there is always some chance that a belief that is only weakly justified will turn out to be false. Some extent a matter of luck or accident will always remain.

In conclusion, according to Bonjour, the traditional conception of knowledge is seriously problematic with regard to the strength of the reason or justification that should be required for knowledge (and also co-relatively belief or acceptance condition). "It is difficult to make a choice between strong and weak conceptions of JTB's. All the same problems remain: Whether we have reasons or justification on the light of which our various beliefs are likely to be true? And secondly how strong or compelling such justification is?"

Check Your Progress II
Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.
1) What do you understand by 'Truth Condition'?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
2) How do you explain justification condition?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3.5 LET US SUM UP

From what we have discussed, we may make the following conclusions on knowledge looking at it from a metaphysical view point:

Knowledge as a Relation: Knowledge is a relation between two beings: *the known and the knower*. Through this relation the knowing subject (knower) *opens* oneself

to the world. One who knows leaves oneself and turns to the surrounding world. However, in knowledge one returns to oneself as the known being 'penetrates' into the subject in some way since knowledge takes place not outside, but inside the subject. **Knowledge as Presence of the Object to the Subject:** In knowledge an object makes itself present to the subject. The known 'reproduces' itself in the knower; e.g., when the colour blue is known, the blue of the thing penetrates into the subject. This process takes place immaterially. The real thing remains unchanged. The mystery of knowledge is that the object, in so far as it is known, does not act as a body on the subject. For we cannot observe the intentional presence of colour in a subject, as the blue colour in a flame is observed. The intentional presence is an unobservable and absolutely private fact. **Knowledge as Possession of the Known by the Knower:** Knowledge is a possession of the known on the part of the knower. There is a certain union of the object with the subject. This union, however, does not cancel the difference between the knower and the known. There would be no knowledge without this union. The known is not transformed itself into another thing; the knower grasps the known as it is. The conformity between the known as it is present in the knower and the real known, is *truth*. What changes is the *mode of being* of the known being. There is a *material* mode of being in the thing in so far as it exists outside the subject, and an *immaterial mode* in so far as it exists intentionally in the subject. The real object is one but its intentional presence multiplies itself according to the number of knowing subjects. **Knowledge as Intentional Assimilation:** In the act of knowing, the knower is the known since the knower assimilates the known (assimilation = make something similar) and appropriates it (the knower appropriates the known). Such an appropriation is the deepest root of knowledge. It satisfies the requirements of absolute idealism. However, absolute idealism exaggerates the identity of the subject and the object which results in a cognitive monism without any distinction between beings. Cognitive assimilation takes place in the immaterial sphere and thus maintain intact the distinction between the knower and the known. There is no real transformation of the object. On the contrary, the knowing subject is transformed by the object which 'acts' on the subject. **Knowledge as the Appropriation of the Being of a Thing:** A thing is known by that which is. To know means to possess a being intentionally. Knowledge is always relative to the mode of being. It does not mean that knowledge is extrinsic to Being. It is also a mode of being. Hence, knowledge is also knowable through reflection. Since knowledge refers to Being we can conclude that a thing is knowable in so far as it is, in the measure in which it is. The reason for the knowability of something is its content of being. That which is not, is not knowable. I can know only that which is. **Being as the Formal Object of Knowledge:** The formal object of knowledge is Being, i.e., insofar as it is, insofar as it possesses Being as an act. If Being is the formal object of knowledge, then it is necessarily contained in the comprehension of every object. The first thing that falls under the domain of knowledge is Being since the comprehension of a being implies the comprehension of the character of Being. The notion of Being is not innate but the result of experience in which human notices Being as soon as one knows intellectually. Anything that is the object of some comprehension is first grasped *sub ratione entis*, under the aspect of Being. The fact that the formal object of knowledge is Being does not mean that human has a perfect notion of everything. Cognitive progress is made through a growing reflection. Of course, explicit and systematic reflection on Being is the task of metaphysics just as the scientific knowledge of light is the task of optics, and not of the common human who, however, sees everything in virtue of light.

3.6 KEY WORDS

- Cartesian** : It is the adjective from ‘Descartes’ – Descartes; just as ‘Thomist’ is the adjective from ‘St. Thomas Aquinas.’ It means “belonging to or pertaining to Descartes.”
- Realism** : It is the view that nature exists independently of mind, that the world of material things has an objective, independent existence. For the realist, if there were no minds at all in the universe, matter would, or could, still exist.
- Naturalism** : Off shoot of realism. Some realists go even further and claim that minds have evolved out of matter and depend upon the material world for their continued existence.
- Materialism** : This is the further development of realism. Some naturalists take a further step and argue that mind is reducible to matter; the mental states and events are nothing but physical states, perhaps states of the brain.
- Idealism** : It is a metaphysical position directly in contrast with materialism. It is a view that there are and can be no such things as physical objects existing independently of all consciousness. Everything that exists is mental
- Skepticism** : The term ‘sceptic’ is generally used of a person who claims that we cannot know anything for certain, and that one view is likely to be as valid as any other.

3.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Audi, Robert. *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Baggini, Julian & Stangroom, Jeremy, eds. *Great Thinkers A-Z*. New York: Mjf Books, 2004.

Bonjour, Laurence. *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Landesman, Charles. *An Introduction to Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1997.

Lehrer, Keith. *Theory of Knowledge*. London: Rouledge, 1990.

Rusell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912.

Sosa, Ernest & Kim, Jaegwon, eds. *Epistemology: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blacwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.

Straaten, V. Zak, ed. *Basic Concepts in Philosophy*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Traditionally many philosophers have defined knowledge as ‘Justified true belief’ (JTB). The concept of knowledge standardly ascribed to Descartes reads: “Knowledge is a strong or certain *belief* for which the person has a *reason* that guarantees *truth*.” Accordingly traditional analysis enlists three things that are sufficient for knowledge: (a) truth, (b) belief, and (c) justification. So there can be no knowing something false; to know something requires that it be true. Second to know something, one must believe it. If one doesn’t commit oneself to a claim, if one doesn’t consider it as one of his/her beliefs, then he/she cannot said to know it. Finally, knowledge requires justification: if one believes something illegitimately – without any reason and by luck ones belief turns out to be true, then one would not say he/she had knowledge. Further on we shall see how this debate has evolved and whether it is really adequate. [See section: certitude and justification]
- 2) Analysis of knowledge aims at sorting out the element of uncertainty by stating ‘individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions’ for knowledge, so as to achieve statements [facts] that are true. Basically it revolves around the questions: What is knowledge or what it means person knows something? The fundamental issue is whether our knowledge originates in, and is therefore dependent upon, the data we receive through our senses or whether the only true certainties are those that come from our own minds – from the way in which we think and organize our experience, from the principles of reason and logic. This debate has given rise to two contrasting approaches as far as the source of our knowledge is concerned viz.: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism starts with the mind; Empiricism starts with experience. The debate between these two approaches can be seen in the history of philosophy by contrasting Descartes’ views (Rationalist) with those of John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume, who are key figures in the development of empiricism.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) The rational behind the truth condition is simply that ‘one cannot know what not the case is’. It seems intuitively wrong to ascribe knowledge where the claim in question is not in fact true. Nonetheless, one must accept that the truth condition is fulfilled by the knower in the process of satisfaction of the other two conditions (belief and justification) and not independently as some would demand it.
- 2) To a question what more then is needed for knowledge than a true belief, the traditional answer is: one needs a ‘sufficiently strong reason or justification for thinking that the claim in question is true’. This strong reason and justification is often described as ‘truth conducive’: one that increases or enhances the likelihood that belief is true. Such a reason is standardly referred to as an ‘epistemic reason’ or ‘epistemic justification’.