
UNIT 3 KNOWLEDGE

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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’?

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2) Explain briefly the debate on sources of knowledge.

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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'?
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2) How do you explain justification condition?
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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

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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’.