

---

## **UNIT 2 REVOLT AGAINST MIRRORING MIND (KIERKEGAARD, POSTMODERN TRENDS, FEMINISTS)**

---

### **Contents**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Revolt against the Mirroring Mind
- 2.3 Kierkegaard and the Existentialistic Revolt
- 2.4 Postmodernism
- 2.5 Feminist Epistemology
- 2.6 Let Us Sum up
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Further Readings and References
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

---

In this unit we study different epistemological trends emerged as reactions against the subject oriented epistemology of the modern philosophy, particularly of the idealist tradition.

The first systematic revolt against the aforementioned idealistic conception of knowledge came from the existentialistic corners, with Kierkegaard to pioneer it.

Postmodernism and feminism are subsequent forms of such revolts.

In this unit we try to study these revolts against the mirroring mind conception of the idealist or subjectivist epistemologists.

---

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

---

Epistemology can be generally divided into two broad schools; realistic epistemology and idealistic epistemology. The realist epistemologists, like realists in general, share the view that the mind is capable of knowing external realities as they independently exist. But, as in the case of idealism, idealistic epistemology offers the view that the knower is unable to know anything objectively of the external realities and the object of his knowledge is only the mental representation of them. The mind represents external realities inasmuch they are present before the mind; mind mirrors them. Idealist epistemology generally assumes that mind, by the speculative and dialectical use of reason, is capable of mirroring the world, the phenomena.

The idealistic epistemology opens up a subjectivist version of epistemology. The rationale of the subjectivist approach to knowledge is that the source and foundation of knowledge is something internal to the subject, namely the self-conscious of the subject. A subject knows something only when he/she is conscious of himself/herself. The foundation of knowledge is thus reduced to the subjectivity of the knower. This subjectivist turn in epistemology was the salient features of almost all philosophers since Descartes, who is the father of modern epistemology. Ever since Descartes, there had been a tendency to conceive knowledge and its acquisition as an enterprise of the subject alone.

This tendency was at its height in the philosophy of Hegel. We find in the history of philosophy that Hegel has an extreme idealist view of knowledge. According to Hegel, perfect knowledge is possible only in the self-knowledge or in the consciousness of the individual that there is no distinction between him (the subject) and the object of his knowledge. This self-knowledge can be attained only by the mind through the use of reason. This use of reason is a dialectical process, i.e. a procedure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. However, the Hegelian dialectical activity of the mind was considered to be a passive conceptual activity that mind passively reflects the world not demanding any existential involvement of the individual knower and his interactions with different historical or material situations.

---

## **2.2 REVOLT AGAINST THE MIRRORING MIND**

---

The first systematic revolt against the aforementioned idealistic conception of knowledge came from the existentialistic corners, with Kierkegaard to pioneer it. Postmodernism and feminism are subsequent forms of such revolts. While Kierkegaard's revolt is against pure rational, speculative and impersonal account of the subject as the knower, postmodernists and feminists rejects the metaphysical conception of knower as a self-present or conscious subject. For Kierkegaard, the subject is the very existing individual, who does not depend on the rational objectivities and proof, rather is open to the manifold uncertain possibilities that his existence brings forth and the world presents before him. For postmodernists and feminists, on the other hand, the knower is no more any self-present subject, rather he is a product of various factors, such, culture, power, society, history etc. In what follows we examine these revolts against the subjectivist conception of knowledge held by idealistic traditions.

---

## **2.3 KIERKEGAARD AND THE EXISTENTIALISTIC REVOLT**

---

Sören Aabey Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher. Kierkegaard's style (of philosophy) is highly personal. He thought that philosophy at his time tended to misconstrue the relation of thought to reality; this was largely due to the influence of Hegelian idealism. Philosophy was trying to assimilate reality to thought, which for the idealist is the product of mind. Such a philosophy, for Kierkegaard, was merely an exercise of abstract reflection. According to him habits of abstract reflection and passive response had blinded people to their true concerns as self-determining agents ultimately accountable for their own decisions and destinies. He sought to counter such trends, exploring different approaches to life with a view to opening his reader's eyes both to where they themselves stood and to possibilities of opting for radical change. Thus, individual was the

sole criterion for Kierkegaard. He implied that decisions of the individual lay beyond the scope of general rules, each being essentially a problem for the individual alone. However, his account of the individual's passionate search for the meaning of his life was set within a psychological perspective that laid stress upon freedom as an inescapable condition of action and experience.

Kierkegaard sharply contrasts his existentialist philosophy with abstract speculation. Abstract philosophy is concerned with logical possibilities and hypothetical knowledge, whereas genuine philosophy's concern should be to achieve truth about actual, concrete individual. Unlike the idealism's cold and impersonal conception of truth, the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard sees truth as the passionate inner commitment of the individual to something which is objectively and theoretically uncertain, but at the same time which should be the highest truth attainable by an existing individual. Kierkegaard is philosopher of subjectivity. Unlike the subjective idealists whose subject is a passive and impersonal knower, Kierkegaard's subject is the existing individual who is capable of going beyond the certainties of objective and speculative reasoning.

### **The Limits of Objectivity: Kierkegaard's Epistemology**

Kierkegaard felt dissatisfaction at the prospect of a life purely devoted to the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge and understanding. 'What good would it do me', he then asked himself, 'if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not?' He was not interested in impersonal or disinterested thinking in studies comprising scholarly research or the scientific investigation of nature; although such an approach was quite in order when adopted within the limits set by determinate fields of enquiry. Kierkegaard considered Hegel to be the foremost contemporary representative of such an ambition.

According to Kierkegaard, Hegel's philosophy ultimately rested upon a central error of identifying essence with existence: thought with reality. Hegel had endeavored to exhibit the world, and the place of humanity within the world, in terms of logical categories that rendered its overall structure fully intelligible from the impersonal standpoint of pure reason. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, insisted that thought was not the same as reality. In raising such objections Kierkegaard was evaluating Hegel's treatment of specifically human existence. The Hegelian dialectics presupposed the possibility of adopting an absolute from which everything was seen as contributing to an interlocking and rationally determined totality. Thus, a particular person's life and actions were immersed into an all-encompassing and impersonal historical process that overshadowed and transcended them.

Questioning such philosophies, Kierkegaard suggested that the notion of an impersonal 'knowing subject' was symptomatic of a corresponding inclination to forget that the speculative philosopher was himself an 'existing human being' whose status and situation imposed necessary limits upon his outlook and cognitive credentials. Kierkegaard convinces us that even a philosopher who holds such an impersonal view about the knowing subject, inescapably belongs to the world of concrete realities and not to one of abstract thoughts and reasons. He does so in his capacity as a finite empirical individual who 'sleeps, eats, blows his nose' and who has 'to face the future.'

Kierkegaard termed this state of philosophy 'illusions of objectivity' which exercised a pervasive and corrupting influence. He considered his age to be one wherein

people had lost a clear sense of their identity as individuals who are ultimately responsible for their own characters, outlooks and modes of living. Kierkegaard's argument is that the individual, fallible as he is, can never claim any sort of objective knowledge whatsoever, because his existence is not grounded on the so-called logical categories and possibilities which are closed in themselves, rather on the undetermined existential potentialities, which each individual has to actualize as far as he can. Kierkegaard, therefore, felt that it was necessary to 'make people aware' of the limitations of their present condition and to awaken them of the possibility of subjective self-determination and change. This awareness and awakening was a matter of religious faith; of Christian faith.

### **The Religious Consciousness**

Central to Kierkegaard's account of religion is his treatment of the concept of faith. Faith in the religious sense pertains to what exceeds the limits of human rationality and understanding recurs. This theme is dealt with in two writings of Kierkegaard, namely, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In these books Kierkegaard rejects the feasibility of trying to provide religious tenets with an objective foundation. He held on the contrary that it was not to the spheres of impersonal judgment and dispassionate assent that the religious consciousness rightfully belonged, but to those of individual choice and inner commitment, similar to that of Abraham in the Old Testament.

### **Faith and Subjectivity**

Kierkegaard seemed to suggest that writers who tried to justify religious belief on cognitive grounds were more confused about its true nature than some of their sceptically minded critics and to that extent posed a greater threat to it. The religion that crucially concerned him was Christianity. Unlike other thinkers who were skeptical about Christianity, Kierkegaard believed that both its official representatives and its academic apologists might have entertained the hope of making it rationally acceptable to a believer, but in doing so they showed themselves to be the victims of a fundamental misapprehension. He held that neither knowledge nor even understanding was possible here, the proper path of the Christian follower lying in the direction, not of objectivity, but of its opposite, of subjectivity. It was only by 'becoming subjective' that the import of Christianity could be grasped and meaningfully appropriated by the individual. Faith 'inheres in subjectivity' and it, as such, was in essence a matter of single-minded resolve and inward dedication rather than of intellectual contemplation; it should be result of passion rather than of reflection. Faith in this sense could only be achieved in the course of a person's life at great cost and with the utmost difficulty.

Faith essentially involves personal venture or risk, because one who believes is at the pain of embracing objective uncertainty. Objective uncertainty derives from the absence of rational support, which the so-called religious thinkers hold in the hope of making faith rationally acceptable. Kierkegaard thought that to hold fast to one's faith in the absence of objective justifications was not the same as giving assent to something that appeared to be intrinsically contrary to reason. It is rather risking one's thought in order to embrace its reality. It was in the light of such a requirement that the level of faith could be said to constitute 'the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity.'

Although Kierkegaard discusses subjectivity in relation to Christian faith, his concern

was to affirm the importance of the subject as an individual; and not as abstract thinking faculty or as an impersonal knower. Kierkegaard calls this process a “crucifixion of the understanding.”

### Check Your Progress I

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

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

1) What are the major revolts against the idealist epistemology, i.e., the mirroring mind.

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Briefly elucidate Kierkegaard’s attack on the objectivity of knowledge.

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 2.4 POSTMODERNISM

Postmodern thoughts make a thorough critique of the subject as a knowing agent. This critique is associated primarily with the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze. These thinkers question the subject’s ability to declare itself self-evidently independent of the external conditions of its own possibility, such as the language in which it expresses clear and distinct ideas, the body whose deceptions it fears, and the historical or cultural conditions in which it perceives. For their critique of the subject as self-evident they draw inspirations from two sources:

1. Their philosophy primarily draws upon Marxist, Freudian and Nietzschean insights that consciousness of the subject depends upon its material conditions and some unconscious roots or constituting ‘outside’.
2. They have, however, a common fidelity to Kant’s search for the ‘conditions of possibility’ underlying subjective experience, as well as his scepticism regarding our capacity to know the self as an “objects in itself.”

Drawing on these two philosophical traditions, philosophers in the postmodern tradition portray the subject differently as there are different ways of postmodern thinking. We are, however, not examining all the postmodern portrayal of the subject; we limit our analysis only to Foucault and Derrida.

### Michel Foucault

Foucauldian critique of the subject explores the historical conditions making possible various conceptions of subjectivity. He questions the ontological unity and the

identity of the subject, which was the very central to both classical and modern thinkers. Cartesian “cogito” is the classical example for the assertion of the ontological unity and identity of the subject as the cognitive agent. But for Foucault what makes the subject aware of himself as a thinker, artist, speaker etc., is not his self-consciousness as an ontologically independent self, rather it is the social conventions that renders subject aware of his identity as a thinker, knower, artist etc. In sum, man as knower becomes aware of his identity not as a self-subisting individual, but he achieves the consciousness of his identity through every day social impact of institutions such as the school (intellectual), prison (ethical), social welfare systems ( social) etc.

### **Jacques Derrida**

Like Foucault, Derrida is best known for his critique of the notion of self-as self-present in the language of its thought. ( cogito ergo sum). He is suspicious of any metaphysical claim that an epistemological analysis of the subject’s thought can “bring thought back to some sort of ‘original’ position. Derrida seems to hold that there can be no original positions from which thinking begins and to which it could return.

Traditional metaphysics affirm self-presence as the paradigm of truth. At the heart of this tradition is the definition of ‘man’ as that being who can signal his self-presence to himself through language. Against this pretension Derrida argues that no thought, not even that of an ‘I think’, can ever be immediately present to itself.

Derrida thinks that the traditional philosophical claim about the self-presence of the subject would be proved to be baseless if we deconstruct such claims. He charges that in order to maintain the value of self-presence, traditional philosophy tended to ignore the degree to which thinking is dependent on language. Traditional philosophers make their claim about the self-presence of the subject on the basis of the putative distinction between spoken words and written words. Spoken words, since they exist only in the disappearing moment in which they are spoken and they can be heard ‘in the head’ of the speaker, would seem to be directly expressive of thought. Written words whereas do no express thought, because they can function even in the absence of their producer. Thus spoken word presupposes a producer, the speaker or the subject: a kind of self-evident presence of the subject. This presumed distinction between “phonocentrism” (spoken words) and “logocentrism” (written word) is refuted by Derrida.

Derrida’s argument is that it seems impossible to say what counts as spoken (phonetic writing) and what counts as written (non-phonetic) words. More significantly, Derrida argues, it is impossible to make sense of an ideal language (spoken word) which is expressive of the self-presence of the subject, without presupposing that very non-expressive element which has traditionally been ascribed to written words. Thus, Derrida seems to conclude that there is simply no basis for drawing a rigorous distinction between ‘speech’ and ‘writing’.

Derrida’s deconstruction results in the rejection of the traditional conception of the subject as metaphysically self-present. The traditional concept of the subject as self-present rests fundamentally on the phonocentric language, i.e. the spoken words. But if we cannot individuate any clear distinction between spoken words and written words, then the assumption that spoken words de facto presupposes the self-presence of the subject is at stake.

The hierarchical privilege that spoken words supposed to enjoy over written words thus turns out to be but one of an indefinite series of hierarchical oppositions, i.e., the spoken word is in opposition to the written words. Derrida's conclusion is that the spoken words which would function as the basis for the pretension to self-presence is excluded by being accorded the same 'fallen' status that non-phonetic writing is said to have. Derridean deconstruction thus envisages the eclipse of subject as the self-present.

Derrida's deconstruction purports that thinking is like writing, which does not presupposes a subject. Thus, Derrida seems to introduce a new way of conceiving thought as having no origin whatsoever. Thus, the thinking subject becomes an insignificant notion for philosophy.

### Check Your Progress II

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

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

1) What is Foucault critique of the subject?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Describe briefly Derrida's critique of the subject.

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 2.5 FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Feminism is a complex movement. Although it is generally based on the belief that women are oppressed, it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine or as implying an agreed political programme. From the philosophical point of view, feminism is an attempt to liberate philosophy from the male dominance in the western history of philosophy. When we come to the question of epistemology, it tries to emancipate the use of knowledge and its construction from the same dominance.

Feminist epistemologies have grown out of critical interrogations of the universalistic presumptions of the theories of knowledge. While rejecting the very possibility of developing a theory of knowledge universal in nature, feminist epistemologists have insisted on the constitutive role that epistemic contexts plays in the making and evaluating of knowledge claims. Their argument is that many of the best-established theories of knowledge, with their conceptions of reason, epistemic agency, objectivity, experience and knowledge, tacitly draw their conceptual and theoretical foundation from an idealized view of the knowledge produced and

validated by a male dominant social, political and economic situations. Feminist argue that male dominant western epistemological tradition's portrayal of the subject's self-presentation tended to be male, though the specificity of their identity and circumstances are usually effaced in their self-presentation as 'representative' human subjects.

In such situations women and other 'others' occupy the least authoritative positions. Genevieve Lloyd charges that although ideals of reason have been consistent even across centuries of historical variation in yielding a regulative conception of rationality, the traits, values and activities commonly associated with 'the feminine' are systematically suppressed. Evelyn Fox Keller and Susan Bordo also share the same view. Avoiding these traditional approaches, feminists are producing critical and even self-critical analyses of what variously embodied and contextually 'situated' knowers actually do.

Feminist epistemologists consider that the question 'Whose knowledge are we talking about?' should occupy the central position in any epistemological inquiry. As a result, they are producing conceptions of knowledge that are quite specifically contextualized and situated. The subject or the knower is no more the self-existing individual as conceived by the male dominated metaphysics of western philosophy; rather he/she is a socially responsible epistemic agent. Feminists epistemologist have elaborated epistemic methods from a neutral position. As a part of their neutral positions they have advocated reconstructions of empiricism and have articulated different epistemological standpoints. The principal argument of feminist epistemology is that the cognitive status and circumstances of the knower(s) are central among conditions for the possibility of knowledge.

However, there is no exact classification of feminist epistemologies which present an accurate picture of these projects. Yet there are some strands running through some epistemological projects which share some common features. Among many feminists epistemological strands, empiricist strand, standpoint position, and genealogical and interpretative practices are a few important ones.

### **Feminist Epistemology and Empiricism**

The relationship between feminism and empiricism has been uneasy. It is with the abstract individualism of empiricist orthodoxy and its residues within everyday conceptions of knowledge that many feminists take issue. Feminists argue that according to such empiricism, the knowers are not concrete individual, rather it gives a picture of knowers as interchangeable in every epistemic projects. Such knowers as 'individuals' have only the status of place-holders in epistemic analysis; they are not individuated and concrete individual. Consequence of such an empiricism in epistemology is that knowledge is objective, universally valid, available impartially and indiscriminately to everyone in identical observation conditions. Knowledge is simply reduced to discrete propositions of the form 'S knows that p'. This naturally leads to the assumption that propositional knowledge alone merits the title 'knowledge'.

For feminist empiricists the goal of inquiry is to produce knowledge that is neither androcentric nor marked by sexist, racist, classist or other biases. They contend that a contextualized yet rigorous empiricism can yield more adequate knowledge than any traditional empiricism in which the knower is an abstract individual. Knowers are not anonymous, isolated and silent spectators. They become



answerable for their interventions and epistemic negotiations. All the more the details about an inquirer's epistemic location and interests are likewise subject to empirical scrutiny. The central idea of feminist empiricism is that contextually-informed inquiry fosters a better empiricism.

According to Lynn Nelson, a leading feminist empiricist, one of the salient features of feminist empiricism is that it is communities, not individuals, who are knowers and knowledge claims are entangled in and shaped by webs of belief, testable always against communal experience. It amounts to a contention that there could be no knowledge, no appropriately justified beliefs, without communal standards of justification and critique. In this contextual empiricism evidential or empirical reasoning is context-dependent, and knowledge construction is a thoroughly social practice.

Feminist epistemologists apply empiricism even in psychological analysis about the knowing subject. This empirical study of the knowing subject is proposed by Lorraine Code. Here the monologic individualism of orthodox empiricism as well as that of post-positivist theories gives way to a picture of contextualized, socially embedded knowers conducting epistemic negotiations across multiple spaces of the social-political world. Thus, knowing other people is exactly the epistemic activity as knowing medium-sized physical objects. Code even goes for an ecologically modelled epistemology that draws on narrative analyses to position human knowing within interconnected systems of social, natural and other environmental relations.

### **Standpoint Theory**

Another stream in feminist epistemology is standpoint theories. Such theories are advocated by Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and Hilary Rose. They contend that neither orthodox nor feminist empiricists can adequately address the historical and material conditions that produce both epistemic agency and knowledge itself.

A standpoint is more than merely a perspective. It is an achieved intellectual and embodied political position, forged out of painstaking analyses of the systems that legitimate oppressive practices, and firmly located in the main stream. It can be described as follows. Almost all modern cultural as well as intellectual movements are characterized by some kind of oppression; less privileged classes such as women and non-whites are oppressed and marginalized by the so-called privileged class of whites and intellectuals. Such oppression is prevalent not only in social set up, but also present in knowledge acquisition and scientific inquiries. Standpoint point theorists consider oppression as an opportunity: it is possible to transform oppression into epistemic advantage. The oppressed class (of women) can resonate with the epistemologies of subordinate groups in a multitude of disparate locations. It values wisdom over knowledge more propositionally conceived.

### **Interpretive and Genealogical Inquiries**

Feminist epistemology adopts yet another method, namely the interpretive method. Main proponents of this project are Linda Alcoff and Susan Hekman. Taking origins in Gadamerian hermeneutics they contest any claim to the effect that experience, evidence or texts speak for themselves. Along with Gadamer they

hold that it is philosophy's task to interpret the cultural-historical experiences, events, texts etc. out of which knowledge necessarily comes into being.

With genealogical inquiry feminist epistemologists situate knowledge acquisition within historically changing structures. They maintain that the traditional hegemonic modes of understanding, legitimating, and establishing knowledge claims is radically contingent on historically changing structures. Consequently they claim that there cannot be any universal claim with regard to knowledge.

### **Check Your Progress III**

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

1) Describe briefly feminist epistemology and empiricism.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) What is Standpoint theory?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

3) What is interpretive and Genealogical approach to knowledge?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

## **2.6 LET US SUM UP**

Idealist epistemology generally assumes that mind, by the speculative and dialectical use of reason, is capable of mirroring the world, the phenomena. The mind represents external realities inasmuch they are present before the mind; mind mirrors them. This subjectivist turn in epistemology was the salient features of almost all philosophers since Descartes, who is the father of modern epistemology. Ever since Descartes, there had been a tendency to conceive knowledge and its acquisition as an enterprise of the subject alone. This tendency was at its height in the philosophy of Hegel.

The first systematic revolt against the aforementioned idealistic conception of knowledge came from the existentialistic corners, with Kierkegaard to pioneer it. Postmodernism and feminism are subsequent forms of such revolts. While

Kierkegaard's revolt is against pure rational, speculative and impersonal account of the subject as the knower, postmodernists and feminists rejects the metaphysical conception of knower as a self-present or conscious subject. For Kierkegaard, the subject is the very existing individual, who does not depend on the rational objectivities and proof, rather is open to the manifold uncertain possibilities that his existence brings forth and the world presents before him. For postmodernists and feminists, on the other hand, the knower is no more any self-present subject, rather he is a product of various factors, such as, culture, power, society, history etc. In what follows we examine these revolts against the subjectivist conception of knowledge held by idealistic traditions.

In this unit we have tried to study these revolts against the mirroring mind conception of the idealist or subjectivist epistemologists.

---

## 2.7 KEY WORDS

---

- Postmodernism** : Postmodern thoughts make a thorough critique of the subject as a knowing agent. This critique is associated primarily with the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze. These thinkers question the subject's ability to declare itself self-evidently independent of the external conditions of its own possibility, such as the language in which it expresses clear and distinct ideas, the body whose deceptions it fears, and the historical or cultural conditions in which it perceives.
- Feminism** : Feminism is a complex movement. Although it is generally based on the belief that women are oppressed, it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine or as implying an agreed political programme. From the philosophical point of view, feminism is an attempt to liberate philosophy from the male dominance in the western history of philosophy.

---

## 2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Copleston, Frederick S.J. *History of Philosophy*. Vol. 7. New York: Image Books, 1994.

Cutrofello, Andrew. "Jacques Derrida". In: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 2.

Hengehold, Laura. "Post Modern Critique of Subject". In: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 9. 1995

Lorraine, Code. "Feminist Epistemology." In: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 3, 1995,

---

## 2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

---

Revolt against Mirroring  
Mind (Kierkegaard,  
Postmodern Trend,  
Feminists)

### Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The first systematic revolt against the aforementioned idealistic conception of knowledge came from the existentialistic corners, with Kierkegaard to pioneer it. Postmodernism and feminism are subsequent forms of such revolts. While Kierkegaard's revolt is against pure rational, speculative and impersonal account of the subject as the knower, postmodernists and feminists rejects the metaphysical conception of knower as a self-present or conscious subject. For Kierkegaard, the subject is the very existing individual, who does not depend on the rational objectivities and proof, rather is open to the manifold uncertain possibilities that his existence brings forth and the world presents before him. For postmodernists and feminists, on the other hand, the knower is no more any self-present subject, rather he is a product of various factors, such as, culture, power, society, history etc. In what follows we examine these revolts against the subjectivist conception of knowledge held by idealistic traditions.

- 2) Kierkegaard's Epistemology

Kierkegaard felt dissatisfaction at the prospect of a life purely devoted to the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge and understanding. 'What good would it do me', he then asked himself, 'if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not?' He was not interested in impersonal or disinterested thinking in studies comprising scholarly research or the scientific investigation of nature; although such an approach was quite in order when adopted within the limits set by determinate fields of enquiry. Kierkegaard considered Hegel to be the foremost contemporary representative of such an ambition.

According to Kierkegaard, Hegel's philosophy ultimately rested upon a central error of identifying essence with existence: thought with reality. Hegel had endeavored to exhibit the world, and the place of humanity within the world, in terms of logical categories that rendered its overall structure fully intelligible from the impersonal standpoint of pure reason. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, insisted that thought was not the same as reality. In raising such objections Kierkegaard was evaluating Hegel's treatment of specifically human existence. The Hegelian dialectics presupposed the possibility of adopting an absolute from which everything was seen as contributing to an interlocking and rationally determined totality. Thus, a particular person's life and actions were immersed into an all-encompassing and impersonal historical process that overshadowed and transcended them.

Questioning such philosophies, Kierkegaard suggested that the notion of an impersonal 'knowing subject' was symptomatic of a corresponding inclination to forget that the speculative philosopher was himself an 'existing human being' whose status and situation imposed necessary limits upon his outlook and cognitive credentials. Kierkegaard convinces us that even a philosopher who holds such an impersonal view about the knowing subject, inescapably belongs to the world of concrete realities and not to one of abstract thoughts and reasons. He does so in his capacity as a finite empirical individual who 'sleeps, eats, blows his nose' and who has 'to face the future.'

Kierkegaard termed this state of philosophy ‘illusions of objectivity’ which exercised a pervasive and corrupting influence. He considered his age to be one wherein people had lost a clear sense of their identity as individuals who are ultimately responsible for their own characters, outlooks and modes of living. Kierkegaard’s argument is that the individual, fallible as he is, can never claim any sort of objective knowledge whatsoever, because his existence is not grounded on the so-called logical categories and possibilities which are closed in themselves, rather on the undetermined existential potentialities, which each individual has to actualize as far as he can. Kierkegaard, therefore, felt that it was necessary to ‘make people aware’ of the limitations of their present condition and to awaken them of the possibility of subjective self-determination and change. This awareness and awakening was a matter of religious faith; of Christian faith.

### The religious consciousness

Central to Kierkegaard’s account of religion is his treatment of the concept of faith. Faith in the religious sense pertains to what exceeds the limits of human rationality and understanding recurs. This theme is dealt with in two writings of Kierkegaard, namely, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In these books Kierkegaard rejects the feasibility of trying to provide religious tenets with an objective foundation. He held on the contrary that it was not to the spheres of impersonal judgment and dispassionate assent that the religious consciousness rightfully belonged, but to those of individual choice and inner commitment, similar to that of Abraham in the Old Testament.

### Faith and subjectivity

Kierkegaard seemed to suggest that writers who tried to justify religious belief on cognitive grounds were more confused about its true nature than some of their sceptically minded critics and to that extent posed a greater threat to it. The religion that crucially concerned him was Christianity. Unlike other thinkers who were skeptical about Christianity, Kierkegaard believed that both its official representatives and its academic apologists might have entertained the hope of making it rationally acceptable to a believer, but in doing so they showed themselves to be the victims of a fundamental misapprehension. He held that neither knowledge nor even understanding was possible here, the proper path of the Christian follower lying in the direction, not of objectivity, but of its opposite, of subjectivity. It was only by ‘becoming subjective’ that the import of Christianity could be grasped and meaningfully appropriated by the individual. Faith ‘inheres in subjectivity’ and it, as such, was in essence a matter of single-minded resolve and inward dedication rather than of intellectual contemplation; it should be result of passion rather than of reflection. Faith in this sense could only be achieved in the course of a person’s life at great cost and with the utmost difficulty.

Faith essentially involves personal venture or risk, because one who believes is at the pain of embracing objective uncertainty. Objective uncertainty derives from the absence of rational support, which the so-called religious thinkers hold in the hope of making faith rationally acceptable. Kierkegaard thought that to hold fast to one’s faith in the absence of objective

justifications was not the same as giving assent to something that appeared to be intrinsically contrary to reason. It is rather risking one's thought in order to embrace its reality. It was in the light of such a requirement that the level of faith could be said to constitute 'the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity.'

Although Kierkegaard discusses subjectivity in relation Christian faith, his concern was to affirm the importance of the subject as an individual; and not as abstract thinking faculty or as an impersonal knower. Kierkegaard calls this process a "crucifixion of the understanding."

## Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Foucauldian critique of the subject explores the historical conditions making possible various conceptions of subjectivity. He questions the ontological unity and the identity of the subject, which was the very central to both classical and modern thinkers. Cartesian "cogito" is the classical example for the assertion of the ontological unity and identity of the subject as the cognitive agent. But for Foucault what makes the subject aware of himself as a thinker, artist, speaker etc., is not his self-consciousness as an ontologically independent self, rather it is the social conventions that renders subject aware of his identity as a thinker, knower, artist etc. In sum, man as knower becomes aware of his identity not as a self-subsisting individual, but he achieves the consciousness of his identity through every day social impact of institutions such as the school (intellectual), prison (ethical), social welfare systems (social) etc.
- 2) Derrida is best known for his critique of the notion of self-as self-present in the language of its thought. ( cogito ergo sum). He is suspicious of any metaphysical claim that an epistemological analysis of the subject's thought can "bring thought back to some sort of 'original' position. Derrida seems to hold that there can be no original positions from which thinking begins and to which it could return.

Traditional metaphysics affirm self-presence as the paradigm of truth. At the heart of this tradition is the definition of 'man' as that being who can signal his self-presence to himself through language. Against this pretension Derrida argues that no thought, not even that of an 'I think', can ever be immediately present to itself.

Derrida thinks that the traditional philosophical claim about the self-presence of the subject would be proved to be baseless if we deconstruct such claims. He charges that in order to maintain the value of self-presence, traditional philosophy tended to ignore the degree to which thinking is dependent on language. Traditional philosophers make their claim about the self-presence of the subject on the basis of the putative distinction between spoken words and written words. Spoken words, since they exist only in the disappearing moment in which they are spoken and they can be heard 'in the head' of the speaker, would seem to be directly expressive of thought. Written words whereas do not express thought, because they can function even in the absence of their producer. Thus spoken word presupposes a producer, the speaker or the subject: a kind of self-evident presence of the subject. This presumed distinction between "phonocentrism" (spoken words) and "logocentrism" (written word) is refuted by Derrida.

Derrida's argument is that it seems impossible to say what counts as spoken (phonetic writing) and what counts as written (non-phonetic) words. More significantly, Derrida argues, it is impossible to make sense of an ideal language (spoken word) which is expressive of the self-presence of the subject, without presupposing that very non-expressive element which has traditionally been ascribed to written words. Thus, Derrida seems to conclude that there is simply no basis for drawing a rigorous distinction between 'speech' and 'writing'.

Derrida's deconstruction results in the rejection of the traditional conception of the subject as metaphysically self-present. The traditional concept of the subject as self-present rests fundamentally on the phonocentric language, i.e. the spoken words. But if we cannot individuate any clear distinction between spoken words and written words, then the assumption that spoken words de facto presupposes the self-presence of the subject is at stake.

The hierarchical privilege that spoken words supposed to enjoy over written words thus turns out to be but one of an indefinite series of hierarchical oppositions, i.e., the spoken word is in opposition to the written words. Derrida's conclusion is that the spoken words which would function as the basis for the pretension to self-presence is excluded by being accorded the same 'fallen' status that non-phonetic writing is said to have. Derridean deconstruction thus envisages the eclipse of subject as the self-present.

Derrida's deconstruction purports that thinking is like writing, which does not presupposes a subject. Thus, Derrida seems to introduce a new way of conceiving thought as having no origin whatsoever. Thus, the thinking subject becomes an insignificant notion for philosophy.

### Answers to Check Your Progress III

- 1) The relationship between feminism and empiricism has been uneasy. It is with the abstract individualism of empiricist orthodoxy and its residues within everyday conceptions of knowledge that many feminists take issue. Feminists argue that according to such empiricism, the knowers are not concrete individual, rather it gives a picture of knowers as interchangeable in every epistemic projects. Such knowers as 'individuals' have only the status of place-holders in epistemic analysis; they are not individuated and concrete individual. Consequence of such an empiricism in epistemology is that knowledge is objective, universally valid, available impartially and indiscriminately to everyone in identical observation conditions. Knowledge is simply reduced to discrete propositions of the form 'S knows that p'. This naturally leads to the assumption that propositional knowledge alone merits the title 'knowledge'.

For feminist empiricists the goal of inquiry is to produce knowledge that is neither androcentric nor marked by sexist, racist, classist or other biases. They contend that a contextualized yet rigorous empiricism can yield more adequate knowledge than any traditional empiricism in which the knower is an abstract individual. Knowers are not anonymous, isolated and silent spectators. They become answerable for their interventions and epistemic negotiations. All the more the details about an inquirer's epistemic location and interests are likewise subject to empirical scrutiny. The central idea of

feminist empiricism is that contextually-informed inquiry fosters a better empiricism.

According to Lynn Nelson, a leading feminist empiricist, one of the salient features of feminist empiricism is that it is communities, not individuals, who are knowers and knowledge claims are entangled in and shaped by webs of belief, testable always against communal experience. It amounts to a contention that there could be no knowledge, no appropriately justified beliefs, without communal standards of justification and critique. In this contextual empiricism evidential or empirical reasoning is context-dependent, and knowledge construction is a thoroughly social practice.

Feminist epistemologists apply empiricism even in psychological analysis about the knowing subject. This empirical study of the knowing subject is proposed by Lorraine Code. Here the monologic individualism of orthodox empiricism as well as that of post-positivist theories gives way to a picture of contextualized, socially embedded knowers conducting epistemic negotiations across multiple spaces of the social-political world. Thus, knowing other people is exactly the epistemic activity as knowing medium-sized physical objects. Code even goes for an ecologically modelled epistemology that draws on narrative analyses to position human knowing within interconnected systems of social, natural and other environmental relations.

- 2) Stand Point theory can be described as follows. Almost all modern cultural as well as intellectual movements are characterized by some kind of oppression; less privileged classes such as women and non-whites are oppressed and marginalized by the so-called privileged class of whites and intellectuals. Such oppression is prevalent not only in social set up, but also present in knowledge acquisition and scientific inquiries. Standpoint theorists consider oppression as an opportunity: it is possible to transform oppression into epistemic advantage. The oppressed class (of women) can resonate with the epistemologies of subordinate groups in a multitude of disparate locations. It values wisdom over knowledge more propositionally conceived.
- 3) Main proponents of this project are Linda Alcoff and Susan Hekman. Taking origins in Gadamerian hermeneutics they contest any claim to the effect that experience, evidence or texts speak for themselves. Along with Gadamer they hold that it is philosophy's task to interpret the cultural-historical experiences, events, texts etc. out of which knowledge necessarily comes into being.

With genealogical inquiry feminist epistemologists situate knowledge acquisition within historically changing structures. They maintain that the traditional hegemonic modes of understanding, legitimating, and establishing knowledge claims is radically contingent on historically changing structures. Consequently they claim that there cannot be any universal claim with regard to knowledge.