
UNIT 3 BASIC CONCEPTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Epistemology means knowledge or science of knowledge and is more commonly called theory of knowledge. It raises questions like, “What is knowledge?” or “What is it to know?” “Can we have knowledge?” or “Can we be certain that we know?” Under what conditions can we said to know? How is it different from mere belief? Epistemology also raises questions such as, what are the sources of knowledge: Only perception and experience or also intellection and thinking? or what role does memory have in it? And so on. On the other hand, asking such fundamental questions “Can we have knowledge?” does not mean that we do not know anything. There are plenty of things we know or at least claim to know and the task of epistemology is to critically reflect upon the truth of such knowledge-claims. This takes us to think about the various concepts involved in epistemology. Some of the basic concepts of epistemology are knowledge, justification, certainty and truth.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Anything that we come to know becomes knowledge and Epistemology is that branch of philosophy which studies knowledge. Many thinkers, both past and present, have concentrated on and spent all their time and energy reflecting on knowledge, many even tend to identify philosophy with epistemology. We could get an initial understanding of what knowledge is by analyzing the verb ‘to know’. When we analyze it we see that it could mean different things: sometimes it means “to recognize” or “to identify”, sometimes it would mean ‘to be acquainted with’. But there is also something common to them. To be clear to know is “to be aware that such and such is or is not the case”. Let us look at it in more detail.

To be aware: means ‘to be conscious of’, ‘to be alert to’. We don’t need to go into any detailed analysis of awareness to see that awareness is ordinarily a bipolar concept. By this we mean that ordinarily awareness has a subject-object

structure. It implies a duality of subject and object, of the knower and the known. Ordinarily, we always take an awareness to be an awareness of something. But it may also be noted that there are some who hold that there can also be pure consciousness. Many Indian schools of philosophy maintain this and they call 'cit' or 'Caitanya'. It would be an interesting topic to discuss whether there can be such a state of "pure", object-less awareness. But for our purpose, we shall take awareness here in its ordinary sense as involving an object, having a subject-object structure. And when so taken, it is to the subject pole of this structure that the term awareness applies.

Such and such is (or is not) the case: Since we have taken awareness as a bipolar concept, this phrase indicates the objective pole of awareness. It denotes a fact of state of affairs, anything that one claims to know. We may also say that it is the content of awareness. When we say "Today is Monday", our awareness that today is Monday is the subjective pole whereas the content of that awareness is "today is Monday". This is the objective pole. In the formula "S knows that..." the description that follows after "that" is the state of affairs that forms the object pole of awareness.

Is or is not: This indicates a judgment, an affirmation or a negation. We see an object moving in the sky and we judge it as something: bird, an aeroplane, a kite etc. Such judgment is an essential element of what we mean by knowledge. Suppose I am given something in my hand, I can smell it and feel it, I can see its shape and colour, and yet I may not know what it is. It is only when I am able to say, "It's a mango", can I be said to *know* what it is. Of course, in the meantime I have come to know many things: e.g., that I am holding an object in my hand, that it is round in shape, that it is yellowish in colour, etc. But notice that all these involve judgments: it *is* the case that I am holding an object in my hand, that it is round etc. Thus we can say that knowledge always involves a judgment. On the other hand, the judgment involved in knowledge need not always be explicit. The fact that knowledge implicitly or explicitly involves a judgment (an assertion or denial) leads us to some further considerations about the nature of a judgment. We may make a judgment 'internally', to ourselves. This simply means that in the heart of hearts we are convinced that such and such is the case, irrespective of whether we say it to someone or not. When it is not expressed we have an unexpressed judgment. It remains our conviction; others are not likely to know anything about it. But we may choose to express our judgment. In that case our judgment is no longer an inward affair; it is available to others for their scrutiny. And the means by which it becomes available is language. An expressed judgment takes the form of a sentence (either oral or written) in language. This also means that in as much knowledge involves judgments theory of knowledge becomes intimately linked with problems of language and meaning.

3.2 SKEPTICISM

We know our lives are based on knowledge; another factor which adds to the importance of epistemology is the skepticism. The things which we claim could be countered with a question: Is it really so? Do we really know that such is the case? And this brings us to the point that no matter what is it that we claim to know it can always be countered with the question: "how do you know?" or "is it really so?" Take some examples: first from the area of perception: ordinarily

our sense knowledge is reliable. But we also know of cases where our senses have deceived us and we have misjudged and claimed a piece of rope to be a snake; or other times when we judge against what we perceive, as in the case of a stick in water which I see as bent, but say that it is not really bent, only looks bent and so on.

In a sense, it is skepticism regarding knowledge that gives rise to epistemology. Skepticism, in the ordinary sense, is the refusal to grant that there is any knowledge. It may say either that we lack knowledge or that even if we know we cannot be sure that we know. This fundamental doubt (sometimes, an explicit assertion) raised by skeptics regarding the possibility of knowledge forces us to raise such questions as: Is knowledge possible? And what makes knowledge possible? What reasons can be given for claiming that we know? In raising and trying to answer such questions we are already doing epistemology.

Throughout the history of philosophy we find some or other form of skepticism raising its head and these can be traced to conflicting views of reality. The pre-Socratic philosophers generally did not pay much attention to problems of knowledge. They took the possibility of knowledge for granted and speculated more on cosmological problems. But they came up with conflicting theories: The Eleatics (PARMENIDES and ZENO) considered reality to be one and immutable whereas the Ionians (HERACLITUS) held the opposite view: that reality is change. The earlier Ionians held reality to be made up of earth or water or fire, whereas the Pythagorians held the essence of things to be numbers and numerical relations. These conflicting theories gave rise to the earliest form of philosophical skepticism propounded by the sophists (Protagoras and Gorgias). In modern philosophy we see Descartes concentrating exclusively on the problem of certain knowledge. He was not a skeptic but his whole philosophy is an attempt to overcome skepticism. We know from the history of philosophy that he begins with the problem: "Can I know anything for sure?" And this is a tradition that has remained with us till today. Descartes is rightly considered the father of modern philosophy.

Skepticism in an explicit form may be self-contradictory, but the difficulty is that skepticism need not always be so explicit. It is more an attitude and the fact is that there is a skeptic in all of us. All of us know that we know a lot of things, much of it that we have learned from others, mainly from our parents, teachers and elders. But there are moments when we begin to ask how much of what I have learned is true. It arises from ordinary facts of life. Sometimes we discover that things we thought we knew but found out that we were mistaken. Is it also the case with what we presently think we know? Therefore, just to assume that we know does not seem sufficient. What about the view that in our age, the age of science, we don't need to bother about epistemology because science tells us the truth? This again is quite a naïve view of science. If we are ardent admirers of modern science we may not want to question the truth of its findings but the fact is that the same sort of problems we find in our ordinary everyday knowledge is also found in science. At one time every one thought that the earth is flat and that the sun goes around it. Now we hear the same science tells us that such is not the case. In our own century we live with the revolution brought about by the theories of Einstein's theory of relativity. Much of what we held to be true till now are put into question. Can we be sure that what we hold to be true today will not be proved wrong tomorrow? Therefore, a blind reliance on the science of the day is no solution to the problem of knowledge either.

Faced with this problem of divergent claims to truth we may take one of the three attitudes of dogmatism, skepticism, or critical acceptance. We may not want to take these divergent claims seriously and dogmatically believe that this and that (my religious view or the present scientific view for example, is the truth). The other extreme is to take these divergent claims very seriously and become skeptics ourselves. If we do not want to take either of these extreme positions, there is a third possibility. These divergent views concerning what is true and what is not true may lead us to take a critical look at knowledge. If we do take a critical attitude to knowledge we are already in the realm of epistemology, we are already doing epistemology.

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 do you mean by knowledge?

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2) How do you explain the concept skepticism?

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3.3 JUSTIFICATION

Whatever we know has to be justified. Knowledge needs to be reasonable or justifiable. Epistemic justification is the process of giving reasons or of gathering evidence for a knowledge-claim. To begin with, if we look at epistemic justification as it is traditionally done we can see two of its features. Let us take the case of Descartes, the father of modern epistemology. His demand for justification arose in the context of skepticism. He asked, can I justify or be sure- of this claim? The importance of this way of raising the question lies in the fact that it ties up justification with certainty. Indeed, justification becomes the process or activity of attaining certainty: of assuring oneself that one can be sure of one's knowledge. And this is done by giving reasons or adducing evidence for our knowledge claim.

The second feature relates to the structure of justification and this can also be seen by looking at the Cartesian practice. He begins by doubting all that we ordinarily take to be knowledge and keeps up with his methodic doubt until he comes across something that is indubitable, that which cannot be doubted. Upon those indubitable truths he sought to build up all knowledge. In other words, in order to attain certainty for the body of knowledge we have, first get hold of

those truths that are absolutely certain and then taking these as the firm foundations secure certainty for the rest. For this reason this manner of justification has come to be called foundationalism. Both these features of Cartesian epistemology have been maintained even to the present day; indeed, it has become that standard practice in epistemic justification to look at it in terms of attaining certainty and see the structure of justification in a foundational manner. This makes foundationalism and certainty important issues.

3.4 FOUNDATIONALISM

We saw how Descartes went about the task of justification: find out truths that are indubitable and deduce other truths from these. This is the rationalist procedure of justification. Besides Descartes, there are others like Spinoza and Leibnitz who are clear examples of such rational justification. Rationalists hold that the only source of sure knowledge is reason. We all know that senses sometimes deceive us and we make perceptual errors. In contrast $2+2 = 4$ can never be false. Therefore, they contend that all true and certain knowledge comes from our reason. They take mathematics as the model of knowledge and hold that certain knowledge is *a priori*. *A priori* means knowledge which is justified or known to be true independent of experience. On the other extreme we have the Empiricists who hold that all genuine knowledge comes from (genetic empiricism of Locke and Hume) or is justified by (justificatory empiricism of the logical positivists) sense experience. Of course, the difference between rationalists and empiricists consists in whether reason or sense experience is considered as the primary and most reliable source of knowledge.

In spite of this difference there is one thing that is common to the empiricists and rationalists: both see knowledge in the manner of a house build upon foundations that are certain. Hence this view of justification is called Foundationalism. And this is the strategy that is traditionally followed in epistemology for the justification of knowledge-claims. The very term 'foundationalism' gives the idea of what is involved in this. It considers all our knowledge like a house. Just as a house needs a foundation that is firm and strong so too our knowledge is to be built on some basic truths which function as the foundation for the rest of our justified beliefs. According to foundationalism there are two types of beliefs: the ones that can be classified as certain knowledge and the ones that are less certain. The less certain are justified by the more certain ones. The foundationalist view of justification can be described more formally as follows: (1) There are two types of beliefs or truth: basic and non-basic; and (2) there is an asymmetrical or one-way relationship between them such that it is always the basic beliefs that justify the non-basic ones and not the other way. For Descartes these foundations were indubitable, self-evident truths like "I exist", "whatever is distinctly and clearly perceived is true", "nothing can be without a cause" etc. It is from these that he sought to justify our knowledge concerning the existence of God and the world. Descartes was a rationalist who took mathematics as the model for his philosophy and deduces his whole system from some basic principles. Similarly empiricists like Hume are as much foundationalists as Descartes. For them the foundations are our sense experience and not reason. Both the empiricism and rationalism are foundationalist in this sense. They differ only in what they consider to be the foundations: empiricists hold the data of experience to be foundational whereas the rationalist gives that role to innate ideas.

The argument for foundationalism is very simple. If knowledge is to be reasonable and our beliefs justified, then those justified beliefs must be based on some other beliefs which are reasonable and they on further beliefs and so on. But ultimately this process of justification must end up in some beliefs that require no justification or are self – justified or self-evident. Or else, our knowledge would be like a house built on sand, beliefs that are themselves built on unjustified beliefs. Hence the view that a foundational structure is indispensable for epistemic justification.

3.5 CERTAINTY

We saw that the very manner in which the question of justification is traditionally raised in epistemology, i.e., in terms of foundations that are certain, ties up justification to the certainty accorded to beliefs. Certainty or certitude is defined in scholastic philosophy as ‘the firm assent of the mind to the truth, based on evidence’. Assent here is not to be taken to mean as an act performed consciously here and now; it is rather a psychological state. The property of being certain is obviously a psychological property of persons in the sense that a person can be said to be certain with regard to a belief if s/he has no doubt at all about the truth of that proposition. Hence certitude can be defined as ‘the conviction that such and such is the case’. If knowledge is the awareness that such and such is the case, certitude adds to the strength of this awareness. But there is a problem here. Certainty as psychological state is subjective whereas normally we take truth to be objective. A person can be absolutely certain that such and such is the case, but in reality it may just be the opposite. That is to say that we can also be mistaken in our convictions. If so, can it really lead us to truth the objective state of affairs, irrespective of what I think is the case? This has made philosophers – hard headed as they are – feel uneasy with the psychological approach to certainty. Therefore, they have sought to distinguish the psychological sense of certainty from the epistemological sense. In the epistemological sense, certainty is the property of a proposition and not of a person. Such certainty is based on evidence. However, it is not easy to keep the two apart since certainty seems to be primarily a psychological concept. Hence the two are sought to be combined by saying that person has the right to be certain about a proposition just in case that proposition is warranted or is based on evidence. It is same idea that lies at the heart of the scholastic definition where they qualify their definition of certitude with the clause ‘based on evidence’.

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) Clarify the terms epistemic justification and foundationalism.

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2) How do you explain certainty?

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3.6 TRUTH

Truth to be the correspondence of what is asserted (or denied) with what is the case. For example, if I say, “It is raining outside”, the sentence would be true if it corresponds to facts, i.e., if it is indeed raining outside. Or if it is said “There are 100 students in the class”, it would be true if there are indeed 100 students in the class.

Truth is a characteristic of knowledge. This can be analysed by taking a concrete example. Suppose I believe that there are 100 students in the class and accordingly I make a judgment to that effect; but after counting I find that there are only 99. I make enquiries to see if there are any absentees and find none. Consider now the judgment I made. Will it be appropriate for me to say that I *knew* that there are hundred students in the class? Rather will it not be more appropriate to say that I thought there were 100 students in the class, but as a matter of fact I was mistaken and therefore, I did not really know? Strictly speaking, therefore, knowledge is knowledge only if it is true. In other words, truth is ordinarily taken to be a necessary characteristic of knowledge, and we shall take knowledge to be such.

But in Indian Philosophy there is a distinction made between *j na* and *pram*. *j na* may be translated as cognition. We might be true, false or doubtful and may apply even to mere conceptual thinking (*kalpan*). *Pram*, in contrast, applies only to true cognition. Since we have taken truth to be essential characteristic of knowledge it is only *pram* that can be knowledge in the strict sense.

Truth, we saw, is an essential characteristic of knowledge. But what is it for something to be true? The notion of ‘truth’ seems so obvious as not to require any further analysis. In fact Aristotle who dwells at length on various philosophical problems had been content to deal with it in one sentence: “To say of what is that it is, or of what it is not, is true...” It is this same idea we find in the provisional definition that truth as correspondence with what is the case.

3.7 THE FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTION: THE UNIVERSALITY OF TRUTH

If epistemology defines itself in the context of skepticism, there is a fundamental assumption that epistemology takes for granted. This assumption is the Universality of Truth. This can be seen by asking ourselves a very simple question: Yes, there are divergent claims to truth, but why bother? Should we not remain content with such divergent truth-claims even if they are contradictory? Can we adopt such

an attitude? The answer would seem to be clearly in the negative. And the reason for it lies in the universality assumption regarding truth and knowledge. They are assumed to be universal, not in the impossible sense that everyone possesses or should know all that is true, but in the sense that anyone can come to know it with sufficient effort. In other words, truth is not relative to any person or place though the knowledge of truth may be so relative. My ignorance of the relativity theory, for example does not make it less true or lead me to conclude that it is true only for the physicists and not for others. Similarly, truth is not relative to place or time either. Though this statement needs further qualification for statements about historically dated information, as a general principle this remains valid. (E.g. The Statement “No one has set his foot on moon” for example was true before 1969, but no longer. But here the problem lies in the inaccurate formulation of the statement. “No human has set his foot on moon till today” uttered at time t , would be universally true when t is replaced by the appropriate variable.) It is this universality assumption that demands epistemology. If we were to assume that truth is relative to such factors as persons, place and time there would be no need for epistemology.

Since it is the task of epistemology to resolve cognitive dispute let us consider what a cognitive dispute is and when such a dispute can be said to be resolved. A cognitive dispute is disagreement that concerns knowledge. It is a situation where there are competing descriptions of what the case is or what exists as a matter of fact. Two descriptions would be competing with each other if both are claimed as descriptions of one and the same subject matter from the same perspective and are mutually incompatible. If someone describes a person as intelligent and another disagrees with the judgment and chooses to describe the same person as an idiot, the two descriptions are in conflict. In such a case, there is a cognitive dispute involved. Put differently, in order to have a cognitive dispute, there must be a cognitive difference, i.e., a difference between two descriptions. The general problem of epistemology then is how to choose rationally between competing descriptions.

Such a dispute can be said to be settled when both parties to the dispute come to an agreement in either of the three ways: one, that the subject matter is not the same (the descriptions are not of the same person); two, the perspective is not the same (as when both descriptions are about the same person, but one describes the person as an excellent academician and the other as a poor financial manager or a poor family man; Gandhiji would seem to be an excellent example of a great leader and a poor father to his children). In both these cases there is no real incompatibility between descriptions, and the conflict is only apparent. It would be resolved by demonstrating to the satisfaction of both sides that there is no real conflict between them. The third situation under which the dispute can be said to be settled is when there is a real conflict and at the end of the epistemic process it is recognized by both that one of them has been wrong. The most important factor in all the three cases is that both the contending parties agree either that there was really no conflict between their descriptions and that the conflict was only an apparent one, or that one of them was mistaken. If neither is able to convince the other in either of these ways the dispute remains unsettled.

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) What is truth?

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2) Explain the fundamental assumption of epistemology.

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to explain the basic concepts and the fundamental assumption of epistemology. While explaining the subject we have clarified some of the terms like knowledge, skepticism, justification, certainty, truth and universal truth. While going through the entire issue we have come to know that epistemology can be understood clearly only when we know the basic concepts and its fundamental goal. Therefore, primarily we should know what is to know; are we certain about what we know; how can we justify our claim; we need to give reasons and that will take us to the final goal of the epistemology that the truth is universal which can be arrived at with sufficient effort.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Dogmatic	: Dogmatic is one who holds that his/her knowledge claim beyond doubt
Cognitive	: Cognitive is relating to the knowledge acquired through perception and intuition.
Epistemic	: Epistemic is the process of coming to know or knowing the truth.

3.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Knowledge is to be aware that such and such is or is not the case. Knowledge involves subject-object awareness and a judgement or affirmation or negation of something. It is a conviction that such and such is a case irrespective of whether one says or not. It is the judgement one makes about the case and which can be expressed in language.
- 2) Skepticism, in the ordinary sense, is the refusal to grant that there is any knowledge. It may say either that we lack knowledge or that even if we know we cannot be sure that we know. A sceptic stance is this fundamental questioning or doubting or having a critical attitude towards knowledge claims. In doubting and trying to answer the questions with regard to knowledge is like doing epistemology. Throughout the history of philosophy we find philosophers raising questions and find an answer to the conflicting views of reality.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Epistemic justification is the process of giving reasons or of gathering evidence for a knowledge-claim. Justification is a process or an activity of attaining certainty of assuring oneself that one can be sure of one's knowledge. And this is done by giving reasons or adducing evidence for our knowledge claim. The second feature relates to the structure of justification can also be seen by looking at the Cartesian practice. He begins by doubting all that we ordinarily take to be knowledge and keeps up with his methodic doubt until he comes across something that is indubitable, that which cannot be doubted. Upon those indubitable truths he sought to build up all knowledge. Foundationalism is a system where one takes up something to be basis or reason for the justification of knowledge. There are rationalists who hold that the only source of sure knowledge is reason. We all know that senses sometimes deceive us and we make perceptual errors. In contrast $2+2=4$ can never be false. Therefore, they contend that all true and certain knowledge comes from our reason. They take mathematics as the model of knowledge and hold that certain knowledge is *a priori*. *A priori* means

knowledge which is justified or known to be true independent of experience. On the other extreme we have the Empiricists who hold that all genuine knowledge comes from (genetic empiricism of Locke and Hume) or is justified by (justificatory empiricism of the logical positivists) sense experience. Of course, the difference between rationalists and empiricists consists in whether reason or sense experience is considered as the primary and most reliable source of knowledge. In spite of this difference there is one thing that is common to the empiricists and rationalists: both see knowledge in the manner of a house built upon foundations that are certain. Hence this view of justification is called foundationalism. And this is the strategy that is traditionally followed in epistemology for the justification of knowledge-claims.

- 2) Certainty or certitude is defined in scholastic philosophy as ‘the firm assent of the mind to the truth, based on evidence’. Assent here is not to be taken to mean as an act performed consciously here and now; it is rather a psychological state. The property of being certain is obviously a psychological property of persons in the sense that a person can be said to be certain with regard to a belief if s/he has no doubt at all about the truth of that proposition. In the epistemological sense, certainty is the property of a proposition and not of a person. Such certainty is based on evidence. However, it is not easy to keep the two apart since certainty seems to be primarily a psychological concept. Hence the two are sought to be combined by saying that person has the right to be certain about a proposition just in case that proposition is warranted or is based on evidence.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

- 1) Truth to be the correspondence of what is asserted (or denied) with what is the case. Truth is a characteristic of knowledge. Strictly speaking, therefore, knowledge is knowledge only if it is true. In other words, truth is ordinarily taken to be a necessary characteristic of knowledge, and we shall take knowledge to be such. But in Indian Philosophy there is a distinction made between *jñāna* and *pramāṇa*. *Jñāna* may be translated as cognition. *Pramāṇa*, in contrast, applies only to true cognition. Since we have taken truth to be essential characteristic of knowledge it is only *pramāṇa* that can be knowledge in the strict sense.
- 2) The fundamental assumption. This assumption is the Universality of Truth. This can be seen when there are divergent claims to truth, should we remain content with such divergent truth-claims even if they are contradictory. And the reason for it lies in the universality assumption regarding truth and knowledge. They are assumed to be universal, not in the impossible sense that everyone possesses or should know all that is true, but in the sense that anyone can come to know it with sufficient effort. In other words, truth is not relative to any person or place though the knowledge of truth may be so relative. When there is disagreement that concerns knowledge such dispute can be said to be settled when both parties to the dispute come to an agreement in either of the three ways: one, that the subject matter is not the same (the descriptions are not of the same person); two, the perspective is not the same (as when both descriptions are about the same person) and third situation under which the dispute can be said to be settled is when there is a real conflict and at the end of the epistemic process it is recognized by

both that one of them has been wrong. The most important factor in all the three cases is that both the contending parties agree either that there was really no conflict between their descriptions and that the conflict was only an apparent one or that one of them was mistaken. If neither is able to convince the other in either of these ways the dispute remains unsettled.