
UNIT 3 METHODS IN PHILOSOPHY

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Western Methods
- 3.3 Indian Methods
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Key Words
- 3.6 Further Readings and References
- 3.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we explain the basic points of method in philosophy. The main methods developed by philosophers of the West and India will be briefly explained here. We will also detail the common meaning of each method and their general characteristics. This is an overview of the major philosophical methods.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to:

- understand the meaning of method in philosophy;
- describe the various methods in philosophy;
- comprehend the complementary function of different methods; and
- explain the method of philosophizing as the core philosophy.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘method’ is derived from the Greek ‘methodos’ (‘road to’). Hence etymologically the term refers to the way of doing something, the system of procedure to obtain or reach the end intended. It is the way of procedure from the known to the unknown, from a given starting point to final propositions in a determined field of knowledge. In speculative sciences it indicates the road to propositions concerning that which exists or is thought to exist; whereas in normative sciences it indicates the road to the norms governing the doing of something. In the sciences, the use of correct methods is most important in order to make certain that the conclusions are correctly connected with the starting point and the foundation. Every scientific method is the road from the known starting point to a result which in one or the other is linked to this starting point. This connection can be established through logical reasoning or deduction, or through induction, synthesis, or analysis. The characteristic feature of the discipline of philosophy is the existence of different methods in it. When there was no distinction between science and philosophy and all knowledge was philosophy, it was thought that the task of philosophy was to give a complete and coherent account of the universe as a whole. This view originated in ancient Greece and lasted for several centuries in the West until alternatives to it were developed. This Unit includes brief overviews of a few of the prominent Western

and Indian philosophical methods with the humble proposal of an alternative view that might take into account some of their concerns.

3.2 WESTERN METHODS

Speculative Method

The intellectual development reached its climax in Athens as the various streams of Greek thought converged there during the fifth century B.C. The age of Pericles saw Athens at the peak of its cultural creativity and political influence. The development of democracy and technical advances in agriculture and navigation encouraged humanistic spirit and speculative method. Pre-socratic philosophers had been relatively isolated in their speculations. Now in Athens such philosophical speculation became more representative of the city's intellectual life as a whole, which continued to move toward conceptual thought, critical analysis, reflection, and dialectic.

Dialectic Method

Dialectic method of Socrates and Plato was essentially a method of discussion and debate in which the participants progressed from one point to another, each one disputing the point of the other until they could reach an undisputable point. It consisted in reasoning through rigorous dialogue as a method of intellectual investigation intended to expose false beliefs and elicit truth. The strategy was to take up a sequence of questions with whomever one was in discussion, relentlessly analyzing one by one the implications of the answers in such a way as to bring out the flaws and inconsistencies inherent in a given belief or statement. Attempts to define the essence of something were rejected one after another as being either too wide or too narrow. Often such an analysis ended in complete perplexity. Yet such times it was clear that philosophy was concerned less with knowing the right answers than with the strenuous attempt to discover those answers. To practice philosophy in the dialectic method was continually to subject one's thoughts to the criticism of reason in earnest dialogue with others. Genuine knowledge was not something that could simply be received from another, but was rather a personal achievement, won only at the cost of constant intellectual struggle and self-critical reflection.

Dialectic takes a different turn in Hegel. Hegelian dialectic is not merely epistemological, but ontological too. The method of dialectic involves thesis-antithesis-synthesis in which thesis, antithesis and synthesis are only different 'moments' in the movement of thought resulting in both continuity and difference. The very birth of the thesis is the birth of the antithesis as well as the synthesis. The thesis carries the seeds of the antithesis within itself and the two together carry in them the seeds of synthesis. Dialectic is not a one time movement. It does not stop once a synthesis is reached out of a thesis and an antithesis. It moves on to a higher level in the next stage to a new moment when the synthesis of the previous level itself becomes the new thesis which generates its antithesis and from which yet another synthesis emerges. In this new synthesis, something of the previous synthesis remains, but with something from its antithesis added on. This novel synthesis again becomes the thesis for the next level of dialectical movement and it goes on like this.

Retortive Method

Towards the end of the patristic period, St. Augustine tried to answer the problem of certainty with his method of retorsion. He held that the skeptics are mistaken in

assuming that certainty of knowledge is impossible and that human can achieve only “probable knowledge,” i.e., ideas whose validity is highly probable. Since any degree of probable knowledge implies an approach toward completely certain knowledge, the assumption of probably valid truths presupposes the existence and attainability of absolute truths. If the skeptic argues that no real objects of his sensory experience exist, nevertheless he cannot doubt the fact that his perception does exist. The person who doubts all truths is caught in a logical dilemma, for one must exist in order to doubt; in fact, no matter what else one doubts, one proves one’s own existence through the act of doubting. Nor is it of any use to suggest that one might err in thinking that one exists, for ‘even if one errs, one exists’ (*Si fallor, sum*).

Scholastic Method

The scholastic method – a creative synthesis of several previous methods – of Thomas Aquinas further supported the Augustinian view of certainty. Thomas was certain of concepts having their foundation in sense perception. He accepted Abelard’s view of the relationship between universals and particulars, including the Aristotelian thesis that Plato’s universals can be found only in particular things which thus become actualities detectable in sense experience. For Aquinas too, the universal nature, the essence, of a thing exists immanently in the object itself as part of the real world, but this universal characteristic (this substantial form of an object) is also an idea or concept separated from its object when it is abstracted by the human mind. As a part of the real world, the universal essence never exists independently of its object. Yet, before nature was created, these universals (essences) existed in the mind of God as archetypes or ideas which God used in creating the universe. Thus the Moderate Realism of Aquinas accepts not only Aristotle’s view that universals exist in individual objects (*universalis in re*) but also asserts that universals exist in the mind of God prior to the particular objects (*universalia ante rem*) and in the mind of human (as concepts) after the particular object has been created (*universalia post rem*). Thus truth is understood as the conformity between mind and object.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

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

1) Explain clearly the difference between Greek and Hegelian dialectical methods.

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2) What do you understand by retortive method?

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Cartesian Method

Descartes was also bothered by the same question of certainty. He became fascinated by the question of whether there was anything we could know for certain. He distinguished between certainty and truth. For him, certainty is a state of mind, whereas truth is a property of statements which usually relates to the way things are out there in the external world. But Descartes believed that only if one had grounds for certainty could one know that one had hold of the truth. The pursuit of truth involves the pursuit of certainty. He wanted that the method he was looking for would have to be one which not only delivered the goods in the form of worthwhile conclusions but could also defend itself against the arguments of sceptics. So he engaged himself in what might be called *pre-emptive scepticism* by which he wanted to put the foundations of knowledge beyond the reach of scepticism. He did it in three stages. First, he laid aside things that just on ordinary commonsensical grounds one might possibly find doubtful. For instance, he reminded himself of such well-known facts as that straight sticks can look bent in water. But he wanted to go beyond such ordinary kind of doubt. Second, he doubted that at any given moment he was awake and perceiving anything at all. For he had often dreamt in the past that he was perceiving things, and when he was dreaming, he had thought that he was seeing people, or tables, or whatever, around him. But, of course, he had woken up and found it was all illusion. Third, he imagined a malign spirit whose sole intent was to deceive him as much as it could. However, the point at which the doubt stops is the reflection that he is himself engaged in thinking. No malicious demon can ever make one to believe that one is thinking when one is not. If one has a false thought, that is still a thought. So his fundamental first certainty was 'I think, therefore I am' (*Cogito ergo sum*).

Empiricist Method

The empiricist method of philosophy advocated by Locke, Berkley, and Hume held that *all* essential truths about the world were discoverable only by empirical experience. Thus, reason was substituted by empirical experience. It was above all John Locke who set the tone for empiricist method by affirming the foundational principle of empiricism: 'There is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses' (*Nihil est in intellectu quod non antea fuerit in sensu*). All knowledge of the world must rest finally on human's sense experience. Through the combining and compounding of simple sense impressions or 'ideas' (defined as mental contents) into more complex concepts, the mind can arrive at sound conclusions. The mind is at first a blank tablet, a passive receptor of its experience. The mind possesses innate powers, but not innate ideas as cognition begins only with sensation.

Critical Method

The intellectual challenge that faced Kant was a seemingly impossible one: on the one hand, to reconcile the claims of science to certain and genuine knowledge of the world with the claim that experience could never give rise to such knowledge; on the other hand, to reconcile the claim of religion that human was morally free with the claim of science that nature was entirely determined by necessary laws. With these several conflicting claims, an intellectual crisis of profound complexity had emerged. Kant's method of resolution of that crisis was equally complex, brilliant, and weighty in its consequences.

According to Kant, the human mind does not passively receive sense data, but it actively structures them. Human, therefore, knows objective reality to the extent that reality conforms to the fundamental structures of the mind. All human knowledge of the world is channelled through the mind's own categories. The necessity and certainty of scientific knowledge are embedded in the mind's perception and understanding of the world. The mind does not conform to objects; rather, objects conform to the mind. Human can attain certain knowledge of the world, not because one has the power to penetrate to and grasp the world in itself, but because the world is saturated with the principles of one's own mental organization. Hence, human could know things only as they appear, not as they are in themselves. A genuine philosophical method should investigate the formal structure of the mind and analyze the nature and limits of human reason. Although reason cannot decide matters transcending experience, it can determine what cognitive factors are intrinsic to all human experience and inform all experience with its order.

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) Briefly interpret the statement that Descartes engaged himself in *pre-emptive scepticism* by which he wanted to put the foundations of knowledge beyond the reach of scepticism.

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- 2) Comment on the critical view of Kant that 'mind does not conform to objects, but objects conform to mind.'

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Analytical Method

Analytical philosophy refers to various contemporary methods of analysing the language. Other names for it are 'philosophical analysis,' 'logical analysis,' and 'scientific philosophy.' The names 'logical positivism,' 'scientific empiricism,' and 'neo-positivism,' refer to the tendency within analytical philosophy which has as its main target the 'verification principle,' i.e., the criterion of truth consists in its capacity of being verified by sense experience. The second branch of analytical philosophy is 'linguistic analysis' as it emphasizes the analysis of the language used in philosophy.

The verification principle and language analysis are not incompatible; both can be found in one movement. Furthermore, one should not confuse 'analytical philosophy' with symbolic logic. The latter is a system of expressing the rules of correct thinking

through mathematical symbols, instead of using words as in traditional logic. Symbolic logic is only an instrument of philosophy rather than a philosophical position. Although its use is strongly advocated by most analytical philosophers to avoid some ambiguities proper to conventional words, it is not required by all philosophical analysts.

Pragmatic Method

Pragmatism is a philosophical method founded by three American philosophers: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Peirce argued that the function of inquiry is not to represent reality, but rather enable us to act more effectively. He was critical of the 'copy theory' of knowledge which had dominated philosophy since the time of Descartes. He was also one of the first philosophers to say that the ability to use signs is essential to thought. Peirce's thought was further extended by James, whose *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) broke with the associationism of Locke and Hume. James held that '“The true” ... is only the expedient in our way of thinking.' Truth is what 'works,' and not merely an idea of a harmony between thought and the things, since one could make a judgment about this only by means of thought and the things are accessible only within thought. Ideas are true to the extent that they help us to enter into satisfactory relationships with other parts of our experience. James and Dewey both wanted to reconcile philosophy with Darwin by making human being's pursuit of the true and the good (cultural evolution) continuous with the activities of the lower animals (biological evolution). Dewey criticized the Cartesian notion of the self as a substance which existed prior to language and culture, and substituted an account of the self as a product of social practices. Dewey, whose primary interests were in cultural, educational and political reform rather than in specifically philosophical problems, developed the implications of pragmatism for ethics and social philosophy.

Phenomenological Method

The main objective of the phenomenological method is the enlarging and deepening of the range of our immediate experience under the watchword 'to the things themselves' (*Zu den Sachen selbst*). Its interpretation may vary; but the common concern is that of giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them. Negatively it expresses a revolt against an approach in philosophy that takes its point of departure from crystallized beliefs and theories handed down by a tradition which often perpetuates preconceptions and prejudices. In this respect phenomenology stands for a kind of rebellion against the trend in modern science which begins with simplifying abstractions and ends with a minimum vocabulary of scientific concepts.

Deconstructive Method

In a deconstructive reading the text in question is shown to harbour contradictory logics which are standardly ignored. Very often it is a matter of locating certain clearly-marked binary opposition (as for instance between nature and culture, speech and writing, concept and metaphor, or philosophy and literature) and showing that their order of priority is by no means as stable as the text seeks to maintain. That is to say, there is a counter-logic at work whereby those distinctions can be shown to break down, or to generate a reading markedly at odds with author's overt intent. This leaves open the possibility that texts may mean something other and more than is allowed for by any straight-forward appeal to the authorial intention.

Transcendental Method

Transcendental method is a way of reflecting upon and interpreting the previous conditions of the possibility of an act of knowledge. Such a way of interpreting has been understood by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason: "I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*." The method aims at discovering and explaining the knowledge which is prior and which makes possible every knowledge of objects. This knowledge is not explicitly available before all other kinds of knowledge. It is a pre-knowledge, a basic knowledge, which is implicit in every kind of empirical knowledge, and it can be made explicit only thorough a reflection upon the previous conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge by both transcendental reduction and transcendental deduction. *Transcendental reduction* is a thematic uncovering of the conditions and presuppositions implied in the immediate data of consciousness. It is a return from that which is thematically known to that which is unthematically co-known in the act of consciousness. It is a return to that which is pre-known (pre-apprehended) as a condition of the act. *Transcendental deduction* is the movement of the mind from this previous datum uncovered reductively. In transcendental deduction, the mind deduces *apriori* the empirical act of consciousness, its nature, its possibility and its necessity from the previous datum uncovered reductively. In other words, *reduction* proceeds from a particular experience to the conditions of its possibility; whereas *deduction* proceeds from these conditions to the essential structures of the same experience. These movements are in constant interaction, influencing each other.

3.3 INDIAN METHODS

Indian epistemology accepts six means of knowledge (*pramanas*): perception, inference, verbal testimony, comparison, presumption, and non-cognition. Srinivasa Rao, in one of his recent articles, discusses these means of knowledge showing the intrinsic relation between metaphysics and epistemology. *Pratyaksha* (perception) is sense perception including mental perception. Perception may be determinate or indeterminate, ordinary or extraordinary, or yogic. This is a method universally accepted by all schools of Indian philosophy, but with their own individually prescribed interpretations. *Anumana* (inference) is necessarily linked with a universal relation and its recognition. The universal relation must have been cognized on a previous occasion, and must be re-cognized for inferential knowledge to occur. It is a process of reasoning by which we are led to what is not given in perception, but is always based on what is given in perception. This inference may be for oneself (*svarthanumana*) as in the case of a person non-verbally inferring within oneself the presence of fire on the hill upon observing smoke there; or, it may be for another person (*pararthanumana*), expressed in language, as when one argues to prove that there must be fire on the hill because smoke is observed. *Sabda* (verbal testimony) is a means of valid knowledge that enjoys a special kind of centrality in many schools. If a person has known things as they really are, his / her testimony should be accepted as a legitimate source of knowledge until we ourselves are able to attain direct knowledge of things. In several fields of knowledge, we accept the testimony of others even without questioning the truth of such testimony. *Upamana* (comparison) yields knowledge derived from judgments of similarity. A remembered object is like a perceived one. "y is like x," where x is immediately perceived and y is an object perceived on a previous occasion that becomes the content of consciousness in the form of memory. For example, if someone has never seen a wild cow but has been

told by others that it looks like a domestic cow, he will know that it is a wild cow when he, later on, sees a wild cow in the forest. *Arthapatti* (postulation or presumption) is knowledge obtained through postulating a fact in order to make another fact intelligible. For instance, a man fasts during the day, but continues to gain weight. Then one must assume, barring physiological problems, that he eats at night. *Anupalabdhi* (non-cognition) is the only means of the cognition of non-existence. It yields knowledge of absence where an object would be immediately perceived if it were there. However, not every instance of the non-cognition of something proves its non-existence. For example, the failure of a person to see a chair in a dark room (i.e., non-apprehension by the person) by no means indicates that the chair is not there. Hence, for non-apprehension to be a sign of absence, the attempt at apprehension must be under appropriate conditions, which are conditions sufficient to perception.

These six ways of knowing have played a very important role in the development of Indian philosophy. For example, if certain forms of verbal testimony like the Vedas were not to be allowed as sources of correct knowledge, the entire system of *Vedanta* would have been impossible. Besides, *pramanas* assume significance because of the inseparable relation between epistemology and metaphysics.

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) Has phenomenology succeeded in its concern of giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them?

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- 2) Explain briefly that Indian epistemology accepts six means of knowledge (*pramanas*).

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3.4 LET US SUM UP

A philosophical method is established through logical reasoning, i.e., through deduction, induction, synthesis, or analysis. The characteristic feature of philosophy is the existence of different methods in it. The Pre-socratic philosophers mainly followed a speculative method that continued to move toward certainty and truth through conceptual thought, critical analysis, reflection, and dialectic. Dialectical method of Socrates and Plato was essentially a method of debate in which the

participants progressed from one point to another, each one disputing the point of the other until they could reach a point of certainty. Towards the end of the patristic period, St. Augustine demonstrated that the skeptics are mistaken in assuming that certainty of knowledge is impossible. The scholastic method of Thomas Aquinas further supported the Augustinian view of certainty. Descartes was also bothered by the same question of certainty. He became fascinated by the question of whether there was anything we could know for certain. The empiricists' response was that *all* essential truths about the world were certainly discoverable through experience. However, Kant argued that no certain and genuine knowledge of the world could be possible only through experience without the *apriori*, categorical structures of the mind. For the analytic philosophers, the criterion of certainty and truth is the 'verification principle,' while the pragmatists hold on to the view that 'truth is what works.' The foundational principle of phenomenological method is the indubitability or certainty of the fact, act and object of consciousness. In a deconstructive reading the text in question is *certainly* shown to harbour contradictory logics which are standardly ignored. Transcendental method, of course, is a way of reflecting upon and interpreting the *necessary apriori* conditions of the possibility of an act of knowledge. The Western philosophy's preoccupation with 'the problem of the bridge', or the problem of dichotomy of the subject and object, probably necessitated its frequent emphasis on certainty and truth, invariably inherent in all its philosophical methods too.

From what we have discussed about Indian philosophical methods, it is not wrong to say that *pramanas*, whether six or three, constitute the method in Indian metaphysical systems. There is also the well-known *purvapaksha-sidhanta* method by which every school first states the rival positions that are then criticized and shown to be untenable. It is evident from our reflection that no one method is adequate to comprehend the whole of reality which is infinite and multidimensional.

3.5 KEY WORDS

<i>A Priori and a Posteriori</i>	: <i>A Priori</i> is knowledge independent of experience and <i>a Posteriori</i> is knowledge based on experience.
Categorical	: Categorical means unconditional statement or principle opposed to hypothetical which is conditional.
Transcendental	: Transcendental means that which goes beyond particular experiences by being present in all experiences as their principle.

3.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Dialectic method of Socrates and Plato was essentially a method of discussion and debate in which the participants progressed from one point to another, each one disputing the point of the other until they could reach an undisputable point. Hegelian dialectic is not merely epistemological, but ontological too. The method of dialectic involves thesis-antithesis-synthesis in which thesis, antithesis and synthesis are only different 'moments' in the movement of thought resulting in both continuity and difference.
- 2) Method of retorsion consists in arguing that any degree of probable knowledge implies an approach toward completely certain knowledge, the assumption of probably valid truths presupposes the existence and attainability of absolute truths. The one who doubts all truths must accept the fact that one must exist in order to doubt. In fact, one proves one's own existence through the act of doubting.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The *pre-emptive scepticism* of Descartes consisted in three stages. First, he laid aside things that just on ordinary commonsensical grounds one might possibly find doubtful. Second, he doubted that at any given moment he was awake and perceiving anything at all. For he had often imagined in the past that he perceived things when he was dreaming. Third, he imagined a malicious spirit who could deceive him. However, no malicious demon can ever make one to believe that one is thinking when one is not. If one has a false thought, that is still a thought. So his fundamental first certainty beyond doubt was 'I think, therefore I am' (*Cogito ergo sum*).
- 2) According to Kant, the human mind knows objective reality to the extent that reality conforms to the fundamental structures of the mind. All human knowledge of the world is channelled through the mind's own categories. The mind does not conform to objects, but objects conform to the mind. Human can attain certain knowledge of the world, not because one has the power to penetrate to and grasp the world in itself, but because the world is saturated with the principles of one's own mental organization. Hence, human could know things only as they appear, not as they are in themselves. A genuine philosophical method, which is critical method, investigates the formal structure of the mind and analyzes the nature and limits of human reason.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) The main objective of the phenomenological method is the enlarging and deepening of the range of our immediate experience under the watchword 'to the things themselves' (*Zu den Sachen selbst*). Its interpretation may vary; but the common concern is that of giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them. It expresses a revolt against an approach in philosophy that takes its point of departure from crystallized beliefs and theories handed down by a tradition which often perpetuates preconceptions and prejudices.
- 2) Indian epistemology in general accepts six means of knowledge (*pramanas*): perception, inference, verbal testimony, comparison, presumption, and non-cognition. *Pratyaksha* (perception), universally accepted by all schools, is sense perception including mental perception. *Anumana* (inference) is a process of reasoning by which we are led to what is not given in perception, but is always based on what is given in perception. *Sabda* (verbal testimony) is a means of valid knowledge. If a person has known things as they really are, his / her testimony should be accepted as valid. *Upamana* (comparison) yields knowledge derived from judgments of similarity. *Arthapatti* (postulation or presumption) is knowledge obtained through postulating a fact in order to make another fact intelligible. *Anupalabdhi* (non-cognition) yields knowledge of absence where an object would be immediately perceived if it were there.