UNIT 2 DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND ITS BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Contents

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To provide the students with some basic notions of knowledge;
- To introduce some complex issues of epistemology, like knowledge truth, certainty and justification; and
- To see the relationship among knowledge, reasonableness and justification.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Before we study epistemology, it is better to have a refined understanding of knowledge and truth. In this introductory unit we try to do precisely that. After having taken up the process of knowing, we relate it to truth and some basic assumptions for both of them.

2.2 'TO KNOW'

Here we are, of course, concerned with a technical (philosophical or epistemological) meaning of the term 'to know'. In fact, most words, in all languages, have more than one meaning but not all of them are useful in a philosophical discourse. In English, 'to know' can mean, for example, 'to recognize or identify', 'to be acquainted with thing, place or person', 'to be versed in language, skill', etc. What are we to understand by 'to know' in an epistemological sense?

Some thinkers point out that it is not possible to give an exact definition of 'to know' (or 'knowledge'). They claim that like the basic words, 'to see' or 'to hear', to 'know' is such a primary fact of experience. So one can

only describe the activity involved by giving examples. To a man born blind it is impossible to tell him what 'to see' means ; similarly to a man born deaf it is impossible to tell him what 'to hear' means. (of course to a man born totally an imbecile, unable to 'know' anything at all, it is not possible to tell him anything.)

Be that as it may, we can always suggest a loose definition for "to know," or at least a description of what we understand by this term. The way we prefer to understand the term is this: 'To know' is 'to be aware that such and such is (or is not) the case.' This, obviously needs explaining.

1. To be aware: to be conscious of, to be alert to, to be cognizant of. For our purposes here, we need not go into a detailed analysis of 'awareness'. Suffice is it to point out that this commonly accepted understanding of 'awareness' implies a duality of subject (the knower) and object (the known). An interesting topic which we can discuss is whether the subject can ever become aware of himself as subject but not as object. In other words whether there is such a state of object-less awareness. Many Indian schools of philosophy maintain that there is, no matter puzzling this may sound. Hence the distinction between *samvedana* or *sanjna* (object awareness) and cit or *caitanya* (object-less consciousness). For the moment, by 'awareness' we shall understand 'object-awareness'.

2. Such and such is (or is not) the case: This phrase refers to the 'object', what is known. It denotes a fact, a 'state of affairs', anything which one knows or claims to know. It includes therefore the existence, properties and relations of things and persons; past, present and likely future events, etc.

3. Is (or is not): this indicates a judgment – an affirmation or negation. In fact, unless and until there is such a judgment, there cannot be knowledge in the way we are meaning the term. To understand this point, we can relate 'knowing' with 'sense-perceiving'. Suppose I am given something in my hand, I can see its shape and colour, I can smell and feel its hardness or softness. Still I may not yet know what it is. Only when I say, "it's a mango." does knowledge emerge. Of course, in the mean time, I have already come to know many things: for example, that I am holding the thing in my hand, that it is round in shape and reddish in colour, that it is soft or hard, even that it is not a baseball, etc. But notice that in all these fragmentary pieces of knowledge there is always entailed a judgement: it is the case that I am holding something in my hand; it is the case that it is round in shape and reddish in colour, etc.

2.3 SOME FURTHER REMARKS

A first remark would be this: the act of judgement implied in 'to know' need not –and often is not – explicit. When I get to know something, I may not be alert to the fact that I in fact am making this fact of judgement. In everyday life, we get to know things spontaneously. Only on reflection can I become alert to the fact that in every act of knowing, an act of judgement is implied. So this act is said to be at least implicitly implied.

A second remark would be this: 'is (or is not) the case' can, obviously refer to the past. Suppose, I say that I know that Jesus lived twenty centuries ago. This means that I am aware that it is the case that Jesus lived twenty centuries ago. Again when I say that I know that all human beings will be finally happy, I am saying that I am aware that it is the case that all humans will be finally happy.

A third remark would be this: to make a judgement is an act, a mental act where as we described 'to know' as 'to be aware'. But is 'to be aware' an act or rather a 'state'? 'To know' can refer either to the precise moment when one gets to know something – and in this case to 'to know' refers to more directly to the mental act. ('To know' would correspond to the moment when one 'understands' something.) But 'to know' can also refer to the time afterwards. Once one got to know something, he keeps on knowing it (till, of course, one is proved wrong or persuaded otherwise). In this case, 'to know' refers more directly to the state of awareness. But this brings us to say something about 'knowledge' (as a noun).

2.4 KNOWLEDGE

We have been speaking, for obvious reasons, of 'to know' and of 'knowledge' in one breath. In our understanding, 'knowledge' is simply the content of one's knowing, of one's understanding. Some Indian philosophers distinguish 'knowledge' from what is stored up, as it were, in 'memory' depending precisely on what each of them understands by the former term.

The question or questions which we would like to discuss here is whether the way we understand 'to know' leads us to understand 'knowledge' as necessarily true and reasonable. In other words is 'knowledge' – to be really 'knowledge' (in our understanding of the term) – either true and reasonable or no 'knowledge' at all? Does it make sense to speak of 'false knowledge' or 'unreasonable knowledge'? Aren't these contradictions in terms? (Later on, we shall discuss the topics of 'truth' and 'certainty', but what we shall be discussing here is necessary to complete our understanding of knowledge itself).

1. Knowledge and truth: For the moment, by 'true' (truth) we understand the following: 'true knowledge is that where what is asserted (or denied) corresponds to what the case is. If I say that the Principal is in his office and in point of fact he is not, my statement is not true but false. If I deny that I went to Mumbai yesterday and in point of fact I did go, my denial is not true but false.

   Now suppose that I say that I know that the author of the one of the books in the Bible is St. John. Later on, in my studies of Scripture, I discover that this is not the case. On my discovery will I be able to say that formerly I knew that the author of this book in the Bible is St. John? Or rather that I thought I knew that this is the case, but that, as a matter of fact I was mistaken and did not know at all? Strictly speaking, then, if knowledge is really knowledge, it has to be true. In common knowledge, however, 'false knowledge' can still make sense but only to the extent that what is meant is that what one thinks one knows is false.

2. Knowledge and reasonableness: A further but connected question is this: Is knowledge, no matter how true, but which is based on false or inadequate reasons, knowledge at all? In other words, is knowledge, to be called knowledge (in our understanding of the term), necessarily reasonable (i.e. based on sufficient or adequate reasons)?

Suppose I say that I know that physical evil exists in the world and the reason I give for this assertion is that God could not have created nature in a way other than He has. Supposing that the assertion is true, but the reason given is false, can I still be said to really know that physical evil exists in the world? Or to take another example: I hear somebody saying that he knows that abortion is morally wrong and the only reason for that is that it is illegal. Can he be said to really know that abortion is morally wrong? Our answer would be the following: in both cases, given that, the claimed knowledge is based on false reasons, the speakers do not seem to know what they are really talking about. Hence, their claimed knowledge is no knowledge at all.

That was the case, when the adduced reasons are false. But let us take the case when the reasons adduced are not false but simply inadequate. My mother says she knows that sacraments confer grace and the reason for this is that the parish priest says so. We shall have to return to such a topic later when one's knowledge is based on the 'witness' of supposedly competent authority. But here our answer to the question raised would be this: given that the reason given is adequate (i.e. reasonable) even if not fully sufficient, the claimed knowledge is real knowledge but insufficient.

'Truth' and 'reasonableness', are therefore essential properties, defining characteristics, of 'knowledge' as we understand the term. But this conclusion raises in its turn another very serious and important question. For if such is the case, can I be said to really know anything unless and until I am certain that what I know is true and reasonable? And is there anything which I can know in such a way? We shall try and tackle this question after we have discussed 'truth' and 'certainty' at some length later.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. How do you define 'to know'?

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2. How is truth related to reasonableness?

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2.5 CONCEPTS AND PROPOSITIONS

We have said that 'to know' implies explicitly or implicitly a judgement – which we defined as an assertion or denial, as an affirmation or denial. We would like here to analyze a little further the nature of a judgment.

1. Unexpressed or expressed judgement: I can make a judgement in my heart of hearts, as it were, or simply 'internally'. When I express it 'externally' (either to myself or to somebody else), I use words which together form a proposition. For example, "God exists". The proposition is therefore the verbal outward expression of a judgement. Obviously this can be done either orally or in writing.

2. Analysis of a proposition: Every proposition is a judgement, an assertion or denial of a fact. Besides the duality of which we have already spoken and implied in 'awareness', there is in every proposition another duality – this time of whom or what something is affirmed or denied (the subject) and what is affirmed or denied (the predicate). The affirmation or denial itself is expressed by the verb 'is' – either explicitly or implicitly. A proposition, in modern Western Philosophy, is therefore to be distinguished from a non-propositional sentence (e.g. a command, an interrogation, an exclamation, etc.) it is clear that only propositions can be proved or said to be true or false.

3. Locutions and Illocutions: In modern Analytic Philosophy such terms have been common and they throw a certain amount of light on the epistemological questions with which we shall have to deal. 'Locution' stands for the utterance itself. 'Illocution' stands for what, besides uttering the words, I am doing. For, example, I utter the words: "God loves you". Besides saying these three words (the first speech-act), I may be able to instill hope in somebody who is depressed. Of course, one locution can have more than one illocution – depending on my intention and the situation. (Another term used is '*perlocution'* – which, to avoid unnecessary complication we shall here overlook).

   Following some philosophers, we can group 'illocutions' under four headings: the '*constatives'*, by which a certain 'state of affairs' is affirmed or denied; '*expressives'* by which certain emotions like wonder, trust, love, gratitude, joy, wish, etc. are expressed; '*commisives'* by which certain commitments, intentions, decisions, are made; and 'prescriptive' by which certain commands, recommendations, appointments, etc., are performed. It is clear that only '*constatives'* correspond to propositions strictly so-called. We have just said, however, that a sentence can have more than one illocution. This means, therefore, that a given sentence may be considered a proposition in view of its '*constative'* locution and a non-proposition in view of its, say, 'prescriptive' locution.

4. Concepts: If we analyze the proposition a little further, or for that matter, language in general, we discover that often we use such general terms as 'man', 'animal', 'soul', 'tree', 'book' etc. Now it is clear that 'man', 'animal' etc. do not exist in reality but only men, animals, etc. And yet we often affirm or deny things about them. For example, "Man is created by God", "The soul of animal is different from that of man". A term

denoting a class of beings we call a 'concept'. In Scholastic Philosophy, it differs from an 'idea' in that this simply stands for a mental representation of an object. Notice, however, that in Western Philosophy, these terms are used differently – often times in accordance with different philosophical assumptions.

Since a 'concept', as said, denotes a class of beings, it is a universal idea (i.e, of that whole class). The question just referred to, namely how is that we can affirm or deny things about realities which, as universal do not exist, has given rise, both in Western and in Indian Philosophy (significantly enough) to what has come down to be known as the "the problem of the universals". All kinds of positions have been taken ranging from that which maintains that concepts are mere word, images of singular objects, constructions of thought (*apohas*) without any objective foundation in reality (Nominalism) to the other extreme position which maintains that concepts correspond to realities existing in themselves (*jati*) (Radical Realism). The problem is treated not only in Epistemology, Psychology and Metaphysics. In Epistemology the question is: "What is the epistemic value of 'concepts'?" In Psychology the question is: "How do we really form 'concepts' in our mind?" And in Metaphysics we ask: "Does the concept refer to a universal reality itself existing in itself, i.e. externally to man's mind? If yes, where and how?"

We shall refrain from discussing this problem. Already in the Middle Ages, an author cynically remarked that philosophers have spent more time discussing the problem of the universals than Alexander spent in conquering the whole world. What would he have said had he lived up to today? It is that kind of problem which has given to Philosophy a bad name and made it seem to many a much ado about nothing. Still, one cannot deny that the assumptions and conclusions of a philosophical stance taken on the problem have important consequences on one's philosophical system as a whole. This will become clearer with an example. Suppose, for example, I say that all we can know are our sense-impressions or the images left on the senses by the objects. I would have to conclude, then, not only that the 'concepts' are mere images but that I cannot know anything at all which is not sense-perceptible. Can I know, then, anything about God? What becomes of my religious belief? Any book or treatise on epistemology usually treats of this problem. As for us, we take the following stance – whose assumptions and conclusions will become clear during the rest of our study on epistemology. It agrees with the stance taken by Scholasticism and other Indian Philosophical Systems including Kumarila's Mimamsa, Dvaita, Saiva Siddhanta and Jaina.

Humans are capable both of having 'percepts' (e.g. when I see a particular, singular person) and of forming 'concepts' (e.g. of 'persons' in general). This is possible because of essential properties common to particular, singular objects. Human being is capable of perceiving these properties, 'abstracting' them from the objects, as it were, and think of them as identities applicable to many. Concepts have epistemic value- i.e. they serve in our knowledge of reality. Without them no language would be possible nor any progress in the natural sciences themselves. To deny this value to concepts would be to deny any cognitive value to the language by which this denial itself is expressed. As such (i.e. as universal ideas), concepts are the result of human being's understanding of reality – of objects in their singularity and in their commonality of properties. Now as the proposition is a verbal expression of a judgement

so a noun is a verbal expression of a concept, a conventional sign which we use to refer to it. It can also be said to be a tool, or instrument, which we use to express the concept. But as in the judgement, so in the forming of a concept, much activity on the part of the knower is involved. By means of concepts and judgments, man 'constructs' reality making it intelligible.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Which are the four headings under which 'illocutions' can be grouped under?

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2. How does a 'concept' differ from 'idea' in scholastic philosophy?

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2.6 KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

In our understanding of the term 'knowledge' is essentially true. We saw that this corresponds to the Indian term '*Prama'*. We can claim that by 'true' we provisionally mean 'corresponding to what the case is'. Now, in the history of Philosophy, both in the West and in the east, we come across various understandings of the term 'true' (or 'truth'). From each we can learn a lot. So, before we definitely settle for what are going to understand by 'true', it is good to examine carefully these various understandings. The question which is usually raised in this context is this: what is the criterion, or test, of 'truth'? That is how am I going to know that what I am affirming or denying is true or false? In any case, an understanding of one means by 'true' can help us answer the question which we already raised in the first chapter whether I can be said to really know until and unless I am certain that what I know is true (and reasonable).

2.7 GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

It is clear that no matter the different understandings of the term 'true' we are here concerned with the term as qualifying a judgment (expressed or unexpressed in a proposition – and of a proposition of the 'constative illocution' type,). In other words, we are here concerned with epistemological truth. In fact the term, 'true' can be used to qualify a person or a thing. (E.g. "he is a true patriot". Or "this is true whisky" – by which is meant, in the first case, 'ideal', in the second 'genuine'). In Metaphysics, one usually distinguishes, between this 'epistemological (or logical) truth' (as opposed to error), from

'moral truth' (as opposed to a lie) and ontological (or transcendental) truth' (as opposed to non-being). In logic, we take pains to distinguish between 'truth' and 'validity'. But please note that often, even in Philosophical Literature, these two words are used inter-changeably.

Now, speaking of the 'criterion' or 'test' of truth, we have to clarify the notion of 'evidence' for clearly that principle or standard (criterion) by which we judge whether a judgment is true or false is precisely 'evidence'. But what is 'evidence'? We have already spoken of a 'self –evident' truth as one which is seen 'directly and immediately', but at that stage, we took 'evident' in the generally accepted meaning of the term. Here we have to clarify the notion a little better. By 'evidence' we, therefore, mean that clarity (obviousness, conspicuity) serving to indicate attest to) the truth of the judgment. Roughly speaking, it can be called 'proof'. I say that Mr. X is in his room. What is evidence – or proof – that what I am saying is true? It may be that I just say him going into his room. For me it is 'clear' (evident) that what I am saying is true. Or it may be that I have just been told by a reliable person. In this case, for me it is 'clear' that what I am saying is true. Now since – as in the latter case – the reliable person may have been mistaken, and therefore what is 'clear' to me (subjectively speaking) may not have corresponded to the facts(i.e. to the truth objectively speaking), the question arises what kind, or degree , of 'objective evidence' is required – if this is at all possible. – For me to say that I am absolutely sure that what I am saying is true. This brings us, once again, to the problem of 'certitude' which we shall be treated later. Still, the notion of 'evidence' as expressed here is sufficient, we think, to follow intelligently the admittedly difficult problem regarding 'truth'.

Apart from the question about 'certitude', two other questions have to be distinguished. It seems to us that a greater agreement on this question regarding 'truth' could have been achieved in the history of Philosophy, whether in the West or in the east, if these questions have been distinguished. The first question (the semantic) is this: what am I going to understand by the term 'true'; the second question (the epistemological) is this: if the criterion of 'truth' is objective evidence, is this 'objective evidence' possible at all and if it is possible, what amount of clarity is sufficient and necessary for me to say that I am certain of what I am affirming (or denying)? These two question (or sets of questions) are so distinct that I could for example find myself able to say that no 'objective evidence', in any field of knowledge, is at all possible.

Whereas in the West, (especially in more modern times) this distinction could have helped the context of the discussion about 'cognition' (*jnana, buddhi*), the question raised and enthusiastically debated was: what is the nature of 'true and valid cognition' (i.e., *Prama*). Most schools of Indian Philosophy agree on many points. But when the vexed question arises as to whether the truth or validity of cognition is 'intrinsic' or 'extrinsic' to it, opinions differ. Some say that cognition as such (*jnana*) can be true or false, valid or invalid and hence truth is extrinsic to it (Nyaya). Others say that cognition as such is always true and valid and it is only accidently (e.g. by the defects of the instrumental cause) that it can be invalid and false, and therefore truth and validity are always intrinsic to it and only falsity and invalidity are extrinsic to it (Mimamsa). Again, others say that cognition as such is always false and invalid and it is only through extraneous factors (e.g. like achieving an intended

aim) that it can be true and valid, and hence truth and validity are always extrinsic where as falsity and invalidity are intrinsic (Buddhism). A very careful perusal of the points at issue can reveal that here the two questions (the semantic and epistemological) are dealt with in one breath whereas it would have been better to distinguish better between the two. In fact to ask whether truth and validity belong to cognition intrinsically or extrinsically can be resolved in to the question: But what are we going to understand by 'cognition' ? This is the semantic question. If we ask, What is the nature of cognition? it becomes a metaphysical question. Now if we agreed to call 'cognition' only true and valid cognition, then the question whether truth and validity belong to it intrinsically or extrinsically would not arise for it would have been solved by the very understanding (definition) of the term. Once we would have agreed what to call 'cognition', then and only then would we pass to the other question regarding the possibility and type of objective evidence sufficient and necessary to meet our already established meaning of cognition (the epistemological question). As we proceed to examine the theories of truth (in the west and in the East) we shall keep the distinctness of the two questions always in mind.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Distinguish different kinds of truth in metaphysics.

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2. What is evidence?

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2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen the four prominent theories of truth and spoken of error as related to and different from truth. 'To know' is 'to be aware that such and such is (or is not) the case.' 'Truth' and 'reasonableness', are therefore essential properties, defining characteristics, of 'knowledge' as we understand the term. A term denoting a class of beings we call a 'concept'. In Scholastic Philosophy, it differs from an 'idea' in that this simply stands for a mental representation of an object. In Metaphysics, one usually distinguishes, between this 'epistemological (or logical) truth' (as opposed to error), from 'moral truth' (as opposed to a lie) and ontological (or transcendental) truth' (as opposed to non-being). By 'evidence' we mean that clarity (obviousness, conspicuity) serving to indicate attest to) the truth of the judgment. Roughly speaking, it can be called 'proof'. We can group 'illocutions' under four headings: the '*constatives'*, by which a certain 'state

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2.9 KEY WORDS

Nominalism : The doctrine holding that abstract concepts, general terms, or universals have no independent existence but exist only as names.

Locution : The act of expressing, conveying, or representing in words, art, music, or movement.

Illocution : The intent or the intention of a speaker in saying a particular thing, e.g. naming, threatening, warning, etc. Illocutions may be further divided into: the '*constatives'*, by which a certain 'state of affairs' is affirmed or denied; '*expressives'* by which certain emotions like wonder, trust, love, gratitude, joy, wish, etc. are expressed; '*commisives'* by which certain commitments, intentions, decisions, are made; and 'prescriptive,' by which certain commands, recommendations, appointments, etc., are performed.

2.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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