Epistemology: A Generic View

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Abstract: Epistemological issues and concerns have been dominating philosophical discourse since the very dawn of philosophical enquiry. Our innate and acquired quest for knowledge implies an analysis of the origin, sources, development and conditions of knowledge. It implies an exploration of the nature of knowledge and of the extent, possibility, scope and limits of human knowledgeability. There are knowledge-claims and counter-claims and then there are many types of knowledge-claims and then there are millions and millions of them. Which of these claims are verifiable, confirmable and justifiable and which are not, has been a challenge to every kind of philosophical enterprise. Consequently, epistemological skepticism has been at the heart of all philosophical theories or systems. All philosophical theories or systems have faced the challenge of skeptics throughout history of philosophy. In fact, all major philosophical achievements have been grounded on radical critiques of previous philosophical accomplishments. Philosophers have often wallowed into radical critical evaluations of their rival philosophical interpretations and more often than not advanced their philosophical positions in contradistinction to those of others. My main endeavour in this present paper will be to discuss nature of knowledge, conditions of knowledge and sources of knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology, Conditions and Sources of Knowledge

Introduction:

Etymologically speaking the world ‘Epistemology’ is comprised of two, words ‘episteme’ and ‘logos’ or ‘knowledge’ and ‘theory’, thus meaning, theory of knowledge or logical investigation of the problems and issues pertaining to knowledge. There are knowledge-claims and counter-claims and then there are many types of knowledge-claims and then there are millions and millions of them. Which of these claims are verifiable, confirmable and justifiable and which are not, has been a challenge to every kind of philosophical enterprise. Consequently, epistemological skepticism has been at the heart of all philosophical theories or systems. All philosophical theories or systems have faced the challenge of skeptics throughout history of philosophy. In fact, all major philosophical achievements have been grounded on radical critiques of previous philosophical accomplishments. The world we encounter seems, to all intents and purposes, devoid of any sense or significance. It is man who imparts to it some sense or significance by recourse to some ontocosmological interpretation. It is man who ascribes a world-view to the world, as well as, a corresponding value-system. Such an exercise is possibly fundamentally based on a vision or an intuition. However, no vision or intuition can be capriciously superimposed upon the world. No weltanschauung can sustain itself in flagrant violation of all cannons of logic, science, methodology and epistemology. Therefore, we need to be knowledgeable about the world in so far as it is humanly possible. Besides, we are both intrinsically and instrumentally inclined and obliged to cultivate a quest for knowledge. In fact this very quest is rooted in our primordial wonder and puzzlement about things, phenomena, objects, events, affairs and features that constitute both our natural and historical realms. We have this innate orientation to formulating or constructing of theories with a view to achieving a basic understanding of the world. As it happens, the complex world we are living in is not amenable to simple explanations. In view of its’ overwhelming complexity, most of the human beings, engross themselves in non-philosophical engagements, finding it extraordinarily difficult to pursue a quest for coherent account of things to their utmost and logical limits. Most of us confine ourselves to a minimum or functional understanding of the world we live in. However, philosophers cannot reconcile themselves to a bare or functional understanding; they go in far formulation of narratives or accounts of the world which can provide consistent, synoptic and true explanations of the phenomena and events across the spectrum. However, additional reflection upon their awed knowledge-claims can disrupt their initial naivity about their claiming. Thus, they can themselves appreciate the uncertain character of their assumptions as well as claims. Their quest for certainty can be seriously jolted once they encounter the complexity of the anomalous features of the world (Paul, 1967, p. 466).

Nature of Knowledge:

The most fundamental problem of epistemology is the very nature of knowledge itself. Throughout history, epistemological philosophers have faced one of the perplexing problems, viz. delineating the concept of knowledge. Many epistemological philosophers have made various distinctions while
outlining their accounts of knowledge. For instance, Russell has distinguished between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. For Russell, knowledge is either based or not based on direct experience. The knowledge that we gather by recourse to direct experience is categorized by him as knowledge by acquaintance. However, the knowledge that we gather from historical accounts or scholarly narratives is categorized by him as knowledge by description. What empiricist epistemologists such as John Locke and David Hume stipulate as knowledge based on sensations or impressions is what Russell calls knowledge by acquaintance. On the other hand, our knowledge of historical events or knowledge about makers and shakers of history, cannot be knowledge by acquaintance. For example, our knowledge of Alexander the Great is knowledge by description for whatever we know about Alexander has been culled from historical narratives advanced by various historians and scholars. Knowledge by acquaintance, for Russell, is our knowledge of objects. Such a knowledge, according to Russell, we gather through sense-data. Such sense-data Russell argues, are mental entities reflecting the characteristics of physical objects. Thus knowledge by acquaintance is identical with the perception of sense-data (Ibid., p. 467).

Similarly, Gilbert Ryle makes a distinction between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’. ‘Knowing how’ refers to some skill as for example, knowing how to dance. A person can have such knowledge without being able to explain such knowledge to someone else. As against, ‘knowing how’, ‘knowing that’ does not refer to some skill or aptitude. Such knowledge is rather both informative and communicative. One has some pieces of information with regard to some phenomena, events and objects and one can communicate or pass on such knowledge to someone else. Such knowledge is propositional knowledge and warrants abiding epistemological questions. Epistemologists have, historically speaking, negotiated deep and abiding debates with regard to such propositional knowledge. They have asked as to whether such propositional knowledge is true or false, valid or invalid, verifiable or falsifiable, justifiable or unjustifiable (Hospers, 2005, p. 39).

Some philosophers have made a distinction between mental and non-mental conceptions of knowledge. Plato regarded knowledge as some kind of a mental state. However, such contemporary philosophers as Wittgenstein and Austin do not accept knowledge to be an appropriation of a mental state. For Wittgenstein, knowledge is not a state of consciousness, our or someone else’s being knowledgeable entails satisfaction of certain complex behavioural conditions. Austin too does not admit knowledge to be a mental state. Any claim to knowledge indicates that the knower has the reasons and credentials to assert a proposition.

Epistemologists have also distinguished between a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge. A statement such as “All Bachelors are unmarried” is a standard example of a priori knowledge. The truth or falsity of such a statement is not dependent upon any empirical investigation. Such a statement can be known without undertaking any factual enquiry. We can know such a statement on the basis of pure reflection or understanding of the subject and predicate terms. As against such statements, there are propositions that are amenable to empirical investigation. For example, “Diamond is the hardest metal” is perfectly understandable. However, knowledge of such propositions entails empirical investigation. A chemist in order to ascertain the truth of such a proposition will have to compare diamond with all other metals and have a complete analysis of their physical and chemical properties. He will then have to carry out a comparative analysis of the physical and chemical properties of the diamond with such properties of every other metal. Only such a detailed investigation will reveal diamond to be the hardest metal. Such propositions as “Lead is the heaviest metal”, “carbon dioxide helps in extinguishing of fire”, “Taj-Mahal is made of marble stones”, “the red book is on the brown table” etc., are examples of a posteriori knowledge. The attainment of such knowledge has got to be bucked up and certified by appropriate empirical research. A priori knowledge can be achieved just by mutual correlation between the subject and predicate terms.

Epistemologists have also worked out other distinctions with regard to the concept of knowledge. Some propositions are necessarily true and others are contingently true. So we can have knowledge that can be categorized as necessary and knowledge that can be qualified as contingent. Thus “all triangles have three angles” is a standard example of necessary knowledge. A triangle is necessarily three-angled geometrical figure. Under no circumstances, come what may, hell or high water, can we conceive a triangle which has either two angles or four angles. A triangle will remain a three-angled figure even when the entire universe can be snuffed out of existence. It has to remain three-angled figure in all possible worlds. On the other hand, a statement like “That rose is red” is a clear example of contingent knowledge. Given certain conditions, a rose can be red, and under other certain conditions it may not be red. It may even be blue or white or of any other colour. All mathematical propositions are examples of necessary knowledge and all empirical propositions constitute the examples of contingent knowledge. Similarly, propositions can be analytic or synthetic. While a propositions priori are analytic, a posteriori propositions are synthetic. When we say all triangles have three angles, we know the proposition merely by the analysis of the triangle,
for a triangle is by definition a figure having three angles. On the other hand, in a proposition, like “That rose is red”, the term rose does not contain the property of redness for a rose can be of any standard colour. So, if it is red, then our knowledge is synthetic in the sense that we add the property of redness to the subject term of rose. All standard logico-mathematical propositions are analytic propositions whereas all standard empirical propositions are examples of synthetic knowledge.

**Conditions of Knowledge:**

The classical, medieval and even modern epistemologists have defined knowledge to be justified true belief. Such a definition entails that a proposition or knowledge-claim must be independently true or true-in-itself in order to count as knowledge. Secondly, any claimant of knowledge must be believing the proposition to be true. Thirdly, the claimant must have adequate reasons or grounds constituting the justification of a knowledge-claim under consideration. Knowledge is not merely true belief, it is adequately or appropriately justified true belief.

Philosophers have been wallowing into countless philosophical disagreements since times immemorial. They have been debating numberless metaphysical, ontological, cosmological, axiological, teleological and epistemological questions. They have hardly agreed upon anything. However, surprisingly enough, right from Plato upto A.J. Ayer, they have been unanimous in agreeing upon three conditions of knowledge: the Truth condition, the Belief condition and the justification condition. The fundamental or the foremost condition of knowledge is that a propositional knowledge - claim must be true. Any knower must believe the proposition under consideration to be true. Furthermore, the person claiming to have knowledge of a proposition or a set of propositions must advance adequate grounds justifying the truth of a propositions or propositions with reference to a given context. If a justified true proposition is believed by a person, then that person can be said to be having the knowledge of that proposition. Such an analysis of knowledge is known as traditional or standard analysis of knowledge (Hospers, 2005, pp. 41-43).

In traditional or standard analysis of knowledge, truth is the defining or characterizing condition of knowledge. It is the essential condition of knowledge. The truth is almost interchangeable with knowledge, or we can say truth is equivalent to knowledge, the traditional or standard analysis of knowledge is largely indicative of the propositional character of truth. Just as we characterize human actions to be either good or bad or objects of the world, to be either attractive or repulsive, so are propositions characterized either to be true or false. However, only descriptive propositions can be categorized as true or false. Various other types of statements such as metaphorical, symbolic, exclamatory, imperative, interrogative and interpretative statements cannot be subsumed under true or false category. Similarly metaphysical or theological statements and various other types of statements are not amenable to true/false categorization. The time-honoured methods of induction and deduction or rational inferences and arguments cannot settle the truth of such statements. The truth or falsity of such statements is beyond the ken of verification, demonstration or proof. Anyways, in order to be part and parcel of our knowledge, a proposition has go to be true. In this sense, even metaphysical or theological statements can be deemed to be conceivably true and to that extent we may concede them to be a possible part of our knowledge-stock. Knowledge is unavoidably and inextricably dependent on Truth. If a statement is true, it can be a component of our knowledge. If a statement is false, it just cannot be deemed to be so. However, truth is independent of knowledge. Such statements “Lead is the heaviest metal”, “Oxygen helps in the burning of fire” and “Akbar was a sixteenth century king of India” etc., are normally deemed to be true statements and therefore also deemed to be integral to our stock of knowledge (Encyclopedia Americana, 1991, pp. 185-86).

For a proposition to be a part of our stock of knowledge, it has to be believed in by someone or the other. While countless statements believed in by countless knowers are true, there can be countless true statements which are not a part of our knowledge as such. True statements can be a part of our knowledge only when they are discovered by someone, verified by someone, appropriated by someone, or believed in by someone. The law of universal gravitation was eternally and universally operating all along. However, when it was discovered by Newton in seventeenth century did it become a part of our knowledge. The same can be said about “Earth is moving round the Sun”. However, we came to know about it only through the investigations of Copernicus and Galileo. It signifies that true propositions become a part of our knowledge only when we understand them to be true and believe them to be true. Thus, belief may also be said to be integrally connected to our knowledge (Hamlyn, 1970, pp. 87-95).

Apart from truth-condition and belief-condition, justification-condition is the real test of human knowledge-claims. Propositions can be true independent of human understanding and any knower can believe in a proposition or set of propositions without knowing the truth of the propositions. The real test is whether a knower has a sufficient set of reasons establishing the truth of propositions under consideration. In order to claim the knowledge of a proposition we must have the capacity to carry out necessary and sufficient research with regard to any proposition. We must be able to mathematically demonstrate proposition
or scientifically a proposition or historically establish the truth of the proposition with the support of authentic evidence. Or, we must be able to establish the truth of a proposition under consideration by recourse to field-survey, data-collection or any other appropriate methodological strategy. Or, we must be able to establish average responses through statistical treatment. What is important is to be aware of the relevant processes of justification of various propositions or truth-claims. Any real knower must be having adequate grounds with a view to establishing a truth-claim such as heliocentric hypothesis or law of universal gravitation or theory of biological evolution etc. Thus, in the light of traditional or standard analysis of knowledge, a person can be said to be having knowledge of a proposition, if the proposition under consideration is true, he believes it to be true and he has adequate or requisite grounds with a view to justifying the truth of a proposition.

Sources of Knowledge:
Historically speaking, epistemologists have advanced three theories of knowledge; empiricism, rationalism and intuitionism. According to empiricists, sense-experience or perception is the primary or fundamental source of knowledge. According to rationalists, human reason is the primary or basic source of knowledge. According to intuitionism it is intuition - an immediate flashlight – that intimates to us the real or authentic knowledge. All these three theories of knowledge, claim that they can furnish us justified true beliefs or true knowledge grounded on solid indefeasible or unassailable arguments or proofs.

(I) Empiricism:
According to empiricism, experience through which we acquire knowledge is sense-experience or what is interchangeably called perception. We may perceive an object, experience a flash of light or feel some hard or warm object etc. Such a perception or experience is the fundamental source of knowledge or the most reliable source of knowledge. As an epistemological theory, empiricism believes in the reliability of sense-experience as a way of knowing. Conversely empiricists have abiding distrust in the validity of conceptual knowledge. Empiricism is radically critical of the claims of rationalists advocating independent powers of reason which can disclose to us knowledge regarding objects, relations, events, processes etc. Empiricism is also highly suspicious of the claims of intuitionism or authoritarianism with regard to knowledge (Stroll, 1961, pp. 94-96).

The father of modern European empiricism was John Locke. He was an eloquent advocate of empiricism and profoundly influenced European philosophy of science. For Locke, the most important source of human knowledge is our sense-experience. He is highly critical of Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas – the doctrine that human mind is naturally endowed with certain innate powers, to furnish us knowledge independent of human sense-experience. Locke is famous for comparing human mind with a clean state which is devoid of all ideas whatsoever. All our knowledge is finally traceable to human sense-experience. The British Empiricists such as Berkeley and Hume followed Locke’s basic epistemological framework. They accepted Locke’s contention that all knowledge is from experience. However, they further interpreted his basic doctrine to the effect that all knowledge is from sense-data. This was a rigorous interpretation of Locke’s basic empiricist contention. From this sensationalistic interpretation of sense-experience, David Hume derived the conclusion that all material objects in minds were clusters of sensations. In this way, Hume turned empiricism into skepticism. Hume’s empiricism was also instrumental in the rise and development of twentieth century logical positivism. They advanced the view that propositions which are cognitively significant must be either formal statements of logic and mathematics or empirical statements derived either from observation or verification. Other statements such as ethical, theological, metaphysical or mystical statements must be cognitively insignificant and neither true nor false but meaningless and nonsense (Hamlyn, 1970, pp. 33-41).

(II) Rationalism:
According to Rationalists the most important and the most fundamental source of knowledge is reason. Greeks were the first who advanced the doctrine of unqualified rationalism both in the epistemological and ontological senses. The pre-Greek civilizations were mostly oriented to mystical, religious and intuitive approaches and reason was deemed to be of secondary importance in the validation of both religious and epistemic beliefs. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were the foremost rationalist trio who laid unqualified emphasis on the capacity of reason to arrive at true ontological, cosmological and epistemological beliefs. Socrates advanced the view that reason is fully competent to discover objective truth and arrive at objective values. Plato defined his Ideas or Universals to be rational and understandable only by a rational intuition. Aristotle defined man to be a rational animal. In modern Europe, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were defined to be Age of Reason or the period of Enlightenment. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz were thorough- going rationalists and deemed reason to be the most important source of knowledge. According to these modern European philosophers human mind was blessed with certain innate capacities or a priori truths, which can serve as a basis or foundation upon which a complex edifice of knowledge can be built up. It is through reason that we can discover scientific, mathematical and logical truths. Reason was also fully competent to discover objective
moral principles and values with a view to guiding us in the multiple situational contexts of life. It is through reason that we can control our impulses, drives and desires. Christian theologians during Medieval Ages employed reason in defence of theological doctrines and values. As against sense-experience reason can provide us conceptual knowledge. It can go beyond perceptual particulars to form general or universal laws. Whereas, sense-experience can furnish us particular instances of knowledge, reason can furnish us general patterns of experience.

Some of the most important philosophers of west such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel were advocates of rationalist epistemology. They were convinced that reason was the only source of true and certain knowledge. As against reason, sense-experience can give us only pieces of perceptual knowledge and intuition or mystical experience can land us into the vortex of obscurantism.

(III) Intuitionism:

Most religious and cultural conditions have anchored themselves on intuitive understanding of their basic beliefs and values. Intuition is deemed to be furnishing us direct, immediate and certain knowledge. Mystical philosophers especially have underlined the supra-logical, supra-rational and supra-empirical sources of knowledge. Intuition signifies an immediate feeling of certain knowledge even when there is no apparent evidence for any knowledge-claim one is convinced about. Historically speaking, various religious and mystical traditions have claimed that highly advanced men of intuition have experienced immediate and direct visions, illuminations, inner voices etc. Such an intuitive knowledge leads to a sudden resolution of metaphysical, moral or religious conflicts within a seeker or inquirer. More often than not a sudden intuitive flashlight has the potential to completely reorient us and overhaul our very mode of being and doing. Mystical philosophers of all ancient traditions have confirmed that we can know the hidden reality behind the veil of the apparent universe by recourse to an intuitive flashlight. Plato underlined that we can understand the real world of ideas through rational intuition. Many Sufis have claimed to have had the experience of One Divine Reality beyond this illusory world. Great artists, philosophers and scientists have achieved excellence in their respective domains through their deep, profound and abiding intuitions. It is through intuition that scientists arrive at revolutionary hypotheses. Great artistic and philosophical accomplishments have been made possible by recourse to intuitive experiences. Great scientific laws are a function of powerful intuitive flashlights rather than a result of perceptual observations, rational demonstrations or scientific inductions and deductions (Cooper, 2003, pp. 191-192).

There are many who have been critical of intuitive knowledge-claims. For example, psychologists have interpreted the so-called intuitive knowledge in terms of complex forms of latent sensory and emotional build-ups. They have not accepted the mysterious faculty called intuition. Many critics of intuitionism have argued that intuitive knowledge is not amenable to public verification. It is essentially a private flashlight.

Conclusion:

Besides perception, reason and intuition, there are other sources of knowledge as well. For example, most of our beliefs we acquire through authority. When we study books, we acquire the knowledge of many things through authority of the author. Our parents, teachers, friends, preachers, leaders, media personalities etc., impart us innumerable beliefs. Each item of our knowledge need not be acquired by each one of us through personal research. Scholars, historians, scientists and teachers transmit to us numberless propositions of unimpeachable validity and authority. They can negotiate various conditions of knowledge, truth and justification and even stipulate various conditions thereof. However, epistemologists especially carry out a relentless struggle with a view to arriving at indubitable and unassailable knowledge. Epistemologists can themselves start with assumptions with a view to achieving unqualified certainty of knowledge with regard to the world.

References: