

## **SOCIETY AND KNOWLEDGE**

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### **Abstract**

How do human beings know what they know? It's the simplest way in which the methodological craving for knowledge could be expressed. The Kantian division of things into "things in themselves" and "things as they appear" is the classical depiction of the debate that revolves around Representation versus Reality. The deeper one goes into some of the basic themes in western Epistemology, one without any difficulty, discovers the underlying dialectic in all that is attempted to be explicated. The objective-subjective dichotomy is probably the mainstay of Epistemology in the West. A somewhat similar distinction could be discerned in the ancient schools of thought in India that clearly demarcate methods into "pratyaksh" and "anumiti" that roughly translates as direct observation and inference respectively. Thus, this paper is an attempt to draw a critique of the various ways in which we as a species have tried to make sense of the world around us including a short appraisal of science as a method, especially as applied in the West.

**Keywords: epistemology, pramana, science, objectivity, subjectivity, dichotomy**

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## Introduction

“That all our knowledge begins with experience, there can be no doubt.” (Kant 1781:1). The assertion that Kant (1781) makes right at the beginning of his book, *Critique of Pure Reason* focuses on two fundamental concepts, ‘knowledge’ and ‘experience’. A simple understanding of Kant’s epistemology leads one to the well-known subject-object dyad that forms the base of all epistemology since Kant. Knowledge taken as the condition of knowing involves a real fact that the ‘knowing subject’ has a real world around him or her of which he makes sense. Every piece of knowledge thus acquired gets stored as a set of statements about the world in his or her memory which shall be called into use as and when required. A similitude could be discerned in the Vedic explication of the Rishi-Richa dyad. Rigveda suggests that richas are mostly observed by rishis, but at times they may also be composed by the latter. When richas are nothing but units of knowledge, one can easily identify the necessary link between that which can be known and the knower. What a beautiful congruence between western Epistemology and the ancient knowledge that lay buried in the Vedas! Such knowledge about the world is based on the assumption that there is a reality ‘out there’ that Melvin Pollner (1987) calls ‘mundaneity’.<sup>1</sup>

Idealists such as Hegel attribute it to a mapping with the mind that renders the world intelligible to the knower. The Pramana theorists of the Nyaya-Vaisesika school of Indian philosophy also agree with the principle of a world out there which can be known, that is, there are knowables called ‘prameya’ leading to the knowledge called ‘prama’. Although other pramana theorists differ from this school, the Nyaya-Vaisesika school also believes in the “effability” of the ‘knowable’. The proponents of this school argue that whatever is known could also be named in a language.<sup>2</sup> No matter how one acquires knowledge, it is for sure that there is something which when experienced and perceived stimulates a stream of thought in the human mind. Plato differentiates between ‘episteme’ and ‘doxa’ which roughly translates as the difference between knowledge and

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<sup>1</sup>The idea of mundaneity or Mundane Reason, also the title of his book, is expanded by Melvin Pollner (1987) with insights from the field of social inquiry known as Ethnomethodology that focuses on the obvious and readily known. Mundane reason is an approach to making sense of the world around us on the basis of certain assumptions with regard to ‘objective reality’.

<sup>2</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal provides a detailed discussion on the *Pramana* theory in his book, *Perception* published 1986.

opinion.<sup>3</sup> The classification seems to be another way of explaining the objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy, one of the central themes in Kantian epistemology. Both *episteme* and *doxa* are formed as a result of experience. It's the experience of the knowing subject that determines the nature and characteristic of knowledge. In this context, it becomes essential to analyze the term, 'experience', philosophically as well as sociologically. Taking a cue from German idealism, one can take Dilthey's explanation of 'verstehen'<sup>4</sup> based on 'erleben' or lived experience as one form in which a sociological understanding of the object or event can be attained. There can also be a secondary way of experiencing the world through various 'mediators' in the form of literature, art, music and of course, the mass media in current times in which we live. It could be referred to as 'erfahrung' in the German language. Hence, it may be said that all knowledge is amassed through experience of an externality by the knowing subject.

The concept of externality captures within it the concept of internality or the inner world. It is this that differentiates the knowing subject from the external world. The inner world could be simply understood to be the most characteristic state of consciousness that includes both 'id' and 'ego' when considering Freudian scheme of classifying human personality.<sup>5</sup> Every state of consciousness learns to distinguish between self and others. Even if human consciousness looks at itself as an object as William James<sup>6</sup> and later Mead<sup>7</sup> argued, it still retains a portion of its own self that remains internal to all externality. Although it becomes an object to itself, it can never do so completely. A central concern in the entire field of epistemology could be raised here. A rose does not know or feel its own fragrance; the fire is seldom aware of the heat it radiates and water is ignorant of its fluidity. All these properties are captured by the knowing subject and it is the only basis of truth regarding these properties of matter. Had there been a possibility of 'invertible' observation, the whole notion of knowledge might have undergone some fundamental change. If there could be imagined a dialogue between the 'observer' (subject) and the

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<sup>3</sup> Plato in his deeply deliberated dialogues declares *episteme* to be true, objective knowledge while *doxa* could at the most be qualified to be belief or opinion. Plato also tried to distinguish 'truth' from 'error', a question that was also recently analyzed by Melvin Pollner in the text referred to earlier.

<sup>4</sup> *Verstehen*, which is roughly translated from German as 'Sympathetic Understanding' is actually more complex than that. For a comprehensive analysis and explanation of the term, see *Introduction to the Human Sciences* by Wilhelm Dilthey originally published 1883.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud suggests three axes of human personality – *id*, *ego* and *superego*.

<sup>6</sup> William James propounded a pioneering theory of 'self' in his *Principles of Psychology* published 1890.

<sup>7</sup> *Mind, Self and Society* is a compilation of Mead's ideas on the theory of 'Self' published 1934.

‘phenomenon’ (object) resulting in a dialectical refinement of concepts, the epistemological basis of calling something as knowledge would stand challenged.

### **Modes of Concept-formation**

A certain minimum level of concept is formed with involuntary cognitive effort.<sup>8</sup> Real understanding of ideas and nature around us starts with a combination of both analytical as well as synthetical knowledge<sup>9</sup> when new dimensions revolving around a particular concept evolve, get polished and finally crystallize into a unit of knowledge beyond the scope of criticism with the use of ordinary, everyday language. Analogy can be drawn from the phenomenon of radioactive decay of an element. While it's known with perfect certainty how long it will take to reach half its mass, called half-life period, it can't be said with complete certainty as to when it will vanish completely. Such is the exercise in which we get involved in our attempt to build various blocks of knowledge. Modes of physical experience such as warmth, cold, light and darkness are understood by humans without having to go deep into the properties of these phenomena. The physicist who delves deep into the details of these physical properties can only lay claim to have discovered things that were hitherto unknown to the world. In a similar fashion, the ordinary understanding of social systems and processes come to us in a free, involuntary manner. Every individual carries a set of ideas and thoughts about almost every phenomenon that happens to exist in his or her lifeworld (lebenswelt).<sup>10</sup> Anything beyond this becomes the duty of the social scientists to analyze and build upon. The difference between previously acquired knowledge without the help of any serious academic effort and the final shape that a concept takes after refinement apparently marks the level of modernity that a society has attained.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge is normally considered linear. But it can be a phenomenon with radial lines emanating from the core or centre of the knowledge that may spread across in an imaginary spherical space and may not just propagate linearly. New strands of thoughts may be derivatives of already existing portions of knowledge. The common notion of the human society that each new piece of knowledge or invention is a linear addition to the body of knowledge creates the

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Mannheim (1952) sought to differentiate between ‘immanent’ and ‘non-immanent’ knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> A detailed discussion could be found in *A Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant originally published 1781.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl discussed the concept of *lifeworld* in some detail in his work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* published 1954.

<sup>11</sup> Modernity and knowledge could be viewed as intertwined in thoughts of thinkers such as Talcott Parsons (1964) who believed in the idea of “evolutionary universals” and hence, assumed a linear growth of every particular society till it acquired a particular configuration with respect to institutions and belief systems.

most common misunderstanding regarding modernity. Every new invention does not necessarily enhance the degree of ease in human ways of living and does not help to multiply happiness either. In fact, knowledge has always been an instrument of acquiring and accumulating happiness.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which such effort is directed by those in positions of legitimate power negates the actual potential that it would otherwise have to enhance societal happiness as a whole. Political as well as bureaucratic control coupled with the general will of the people embedded in statutory as well as conventional law draw boundaries around the scope of social action.

### **What is Knowledge?**

Instrumentality has taken a heavy toll on the intellectual capacities of individual human beings. There is a wide disagreement over the question, 'What is knowledge?' Epistemological efforts to this end have created a multitude of perspectives, but there's nothing that could be seen as an all-encompassing definition. Traditionally, it has been the job of the theologians and religious leaders to preach what knowledge is all about. They taught the masses a few things about mysticism and abstract knowledge, something which exists only in belief. The existence of God can only be understood and never realized. The idea of the 'Supreme Being' has been variously interpreted by various thinkers and religious texts. Some attribute a form to it. For others it's just a mental construct, an inner feeling.<sup>13</sup> There are novel explanations that link it with the existence and propagation of energy, thanks to the development of physics. Spinoza makes the concept further complex while trying to simplify it.<sup>14</sup> The Substance of Nature acting as God takes away any chance of understanding God in singular terms. The divinity of nature can be discerned in all geographical features, flora and fauna alike. Thus, in which of these phenomenon God actually dwells remains far from clear.

Leaving aside abstract theories regarding the existence of God, natural sciences have presented us with manifold streams of inquiry. Observing nature and its phenomenon and trying to

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Bacon, according to J. B. Bury (1920) considered the idea of progress as one that contributes to the enhancement of happiness of the masses, of course fuelled by a forward march in the realm of science. He believed in the idea of *commodis humanis inservire* that sums up his understanding that utility is the end of knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> Kant (1781) tried to show the efficacy of 'Speculative Reason' in one's attempt to prove the existence of the Supreme Being.

<sup>14</sup> 'Substance' and 'Mode' is how Spinoza would like to term the categories into which the ways of people's understanding the world could be classified. He considered God to be substance while everything else is 'mode'.

discover its secrets through scientific experiments makes it both interesting and easier for us to comprehend things that were hitherto considered unfathomable. Aristotle and Newton differed in their explanation of things falling on ground. But they certainly observed a phenomenon that was truly existent in nature, made possible by the forces of nature. While Aristotle reasoned out in a metaphysical sense, it was Newton who formulated the famous 'laws of gravitation'. These laws have gone a long way in helping develop the science of astronomy (and the modern Space Science) ever since. The stars and galaxies have been studied in much detail than was earlier possible. The most important utility of the laws has been in the context of the 'Big Bang' theory. The discovery of 'Higgs-Boson' particle and an attempt to find out the beginning of the universe brings us once again close to the same question of the existence of God. If God created the world, then the first particle to be produced by nature must have been the first act of such creation. Not going into the double-header such as 'if God created us, who created God', one can easily understand that what is seemingly two disconnected realms of knowledge, is in reality, somehow closely connected. It can be represented on a two-dimensional coordinate system as a spindle-shaped curve. Two different curves joined together to begin with and converging to embrace each other at the end, undergoing some inflation in the intermediate phase. Therefore, epistemology is certainly not successful in its strife if it overlooks this union which often is the case.

However, the case of human beings is a bit different. A level of 'invertibility' might be achieved. It's the vantage point wherefrom one looks around. The closest object of observation available to an observer is nothing but one's own body. Almost every phenomenon observed in nature could be understood on a minute observation of the human body. Mechanics could be explained by looking at simple bodily movements of one's limbs. The feeling of one's weight while walking makes one aware of the fact that a body of any given mass is attracted by the centre of the earth, of course through gravitational force. Have we ever pondered upon the fact that why do tears from the eyes flow down the cheeks and not upwards through the forehead? Of course, earth's gravitational force has a role to play. Why then did it take so long for mankind and the genius of Sir Isaac Newton to devise the laws of gravitation? Thus, a look at one's own body is just one aspect of invertible observation.

The Kantian notion of time and space as transcendental aesthetic comprising the realm of a priori knowledge governs the volume and content of knowledge to a large extent, though not entirely. It is inarguably accepted that although space can be perceived by a physical space or its representation, time is absolutely a state of the mind and, therefore, completely a priori.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it can be said that everything starting from the movements of heavenly bodies to the expression of human emotions in the form of behaviour are all functions of time. The concept of Geist<sup>16</sup> expounded by Hegel (1837) explains a given epoch in terms of a set of material as well as non-material entities existing at a given period of time. Thus, at any given period in history, the realm of the 'social' carries a set of dominant, prevalent, preponderant and popular ideas that form the body of knowledge for a given society. A Marxian understanding of the term takes us to the concept of ideology that Antoine Destutt De Tracy (1801) defined as the "science of ideas".<sup>17</sup> When Plato (399 B.C.) remarked, "Ideologies rule the world", he tried to emphasize upon the very fact of the power of the dominance of a given set of ideas that go into deciding upon the rules and norms that characterize a particular society at a given point in history. The term knowledge can be held to be falling into two distinct domains: One could be located in the objective-scientific world that tries to maintain aloofness from any personal bias and opinions while trying to make sense of the world. The other resides in the social domain of subjective experience of opinions and beliefs which primarily finds its use as an instrument of governing the minds of others. It is in this context that knowledge is said to be a defining factor in establishing rule over others.<sup>18</sup> While it does not alter the atomic number of the hydrogen atom whether it occurs in a democracy or a monarchy, things definitely change insofar as the ordinary lives of people are concerned under the two forms of government. It is for this reason that there is an agreement among sociologists of knowledge over the fact that knowledge is socially determined.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it is also accepted that there are multiple worldviews (weltanschauung) and forms of knowledge.

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<sup>15</sup> For detailed discussion, see *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant first published 1781.

<sup>16</sup> The Hegelian term could be translated as 'Spirit of the Age'. See his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, translated by Leo Rauch, published 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Although he coined the term in 1796, a fuller explanation of his ideas were published as "Ideology Strictly Defined" which was the first volume of his four-volume work entitled *Éléments d'idéologie* published between 1801 and 1817.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion on Foucauldian thought on the interplay between knowledge and power, refer his book entitled, *Power/Knowledge*, edited by Colin Gordon published 1980.

<sup>19</sup> An argument on similar lines could be found in *Ideology and Utopia* by Karl Mannheim published 1924.

## Methodological Debate over Knowledge and Science

Talking in terms of methodology, Paul Feyerabend (1975) uses the term, 'methodological anarchism' or 'scientific pluralism' based on his acceptance of the idea of multiple truths.<sup>20</sup> He argues that science is not the only and the best way of arriving at the truth, if any. Rather it is one of the multiple ways of inquiry that the faculties of human mind may resort to. Others such as Bruno Latour (1999) and Thomas Kuhn (1962) are more concerned with science as a practice where discovering and establishing an objective reality is dependent on what method and approach is considered appropriate by the community of scientists. Just as he dismissed the scientific method, Feyerabend (1975) is not too appreciative of the interpretative and qualitative methods either. In his opinion, these methods leave too much of ambiguity for others to debate upon and hence, a sound body of knowledge can't be formed based solely upon methods of subjective experience. In order to strike a balance, Feyerabend (1975) adopts a middle path that leads him to a methodologically anarchistic position and attributes equal status to every method of inquiry. Karl Mannheim (1952) arguably favoured this approach when he asked the sociologists of knowledge to be neutral when it came to understanding the domain of knowledge composed of innumerable worldviews. A parallel of Mannheim's caveat could be established with something like the 'bacchanalian revel'<sup>21</sup> which is supposed to be a tussle among various schools of philosophy trying to portray their school to be representing the best way to comprehend the reality that is world. But the 'driver-designate' who is in a sober state keeps him aloof and does not stick to any of the lines of reasoning. Instead he makes use of his own intellectual tools and decides on the best possible way to interpret a world that is dialectical in its very composition.

René Descartes argued that all individuals possess equal power of reasoning, the only difference lying in the interest that each one has. In his own words, "Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed" (Descartes 1637). Thus, the basic approach of all epistemology is based on the assumption of an individual trying to make sense of his or her experiential episodes that reach him through his cognitive faculties. This process involves

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion, refer Paul Feyerabend's book, *Against Method* published 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel explained the concept of 'Bacchanalian Revel' in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* published 1807. A more recent commentary on Hegelian concern with the idea of truth could be found in Howard Kainz's (1995) paper entitled "Hegel on the Bacchanalian Revel of Truth" published in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 28(2): 146-152.

observation, the first step in acquiring all empirical knowledge according to August Comte (Comte 1822). The question to be asked is: Observe what? Hence, it is the discretion of the individual observer to decide upon his object of observation. This exercise asks for a certain amount of concentration on the part of the observer. Freedom is a psychological condition that manifests itself in the social context as and when necessary. Thus there is an intertwining of idea and action through the exercise of freedom. Where does 'free will' come from?<sup>22</sup> Right at the moment that consciousness gives itself to a subject, one starts perceiving things around oneself. There is a minor time lag between the moment we perceive and the moment we make sense of that perception. The faculty of cognition must be filled with a desire in order for the human mind to form a conception. The word, 'desire' is often explained from an empirical point of view with an object towards which it is guided. How about the desire to possess a desire? Can there be a thought without the desire of the subject to concentrate upon some object of appearance?

The term, 'concentration' is itself a manifestation of the first desire of every living being caught up in the quest to make sense of one's ontological experience. If there's anything that stands the test of coming close to 'free will', it is this 'first' desire. Subsequent to this everything else is a transfiguration of what the world around us has to offer. How many times have we observed natural objects in perfectly geometrical shapes? Does the course of a river teach us the meaning of the word, 'straight'? Does a mountain tell us what it means to be 'conical'? It is all an application of the human mind to various objects that it perceives in its everyday experience. Yogananda explains it in the following manner: "A master bestows the divine experience of cosmic consciousness when his disciple, by meditation, has strengthened his mind to a degree where the vast vistas would not overwhelm him. The experience can never be given through one's mere intellectual willingness or open-mindedness. Only adequate enlargement by yoga practice and devotional BHAKTI can prepare the mind to absorb the liberating shock of omnipresence." (Yogananda 2014:89).

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<sup>22</sup> *The Critique of Practical Reason* by Kant (1787) tries to raise questions regarding the degree of freedom enjoyed by "Free Will". Kant contends that even free will is seldom free.

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