

**E-content for B.A. Philosophy**  
B.A.Honours I Paper–II & B.A. Subs. I  
**Magadh Mahila College, P.U., Patna**

--- Dr.Md. Ziaul Hassan

## NATURE OF EPISTEMOLOGY

### OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this e-content is to introduce you to epistemology and to determine its nature and scope. We will explore what it means to say that someone knows, or fails to know something and how much do we, or can we know. We will see both an etymological and traditional definition of knowledge, together with a general understanding of the term 'to know'.

### INTRODUCTION

Aristotle begins his work *Metaphysics* with the observation 'All men by nature desire 'to know.' Kant raises the question 'What can I know?' The drive to know is fundamental to being human. Epistemology tries to fulfil this desire. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, origin and scope of knowledge. Epistemology focuses on our means of acquiring knowledge and how we can differentiate between truth and falsehood. The term 'epistemology' was coined by the Scottish Philosopher James Fredrick Ferrier (1808-64). It comes from the Greek word 'episteme' (knowledge) and 'logos' (theory or science). It addresses the following questions:

What is knowledge?

What can we know?

How can we know it?

How is knowledge acquired?

Can knowledge be certain?

Is there a distinction between knowledge and belief?

What is the scope of knowledge?

Why do we believe certain claims and not others?

## EXPLAINING THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE

Before we go into the traditional definition of knowledge we should know what ‘to know’ means. An analysis of the concept of knowledge has to be done to see how this term is used in everyday language. Expressions such as ‘know that,’ ‘know how,’ ‘know why,’ ‘know him,’ ‘know where,’ and ‘know whether,’ needed to be examined in detail. In the English language the word ‘knowledge’ is used in a variety of senses. It is used in the sense of ‘being acquainted with’ or ‘being familiar with’. We commonly speak of ‘knowing’ a person, place or a thing in this sense. We also use it in the sense of ‘being aware’ of something. Sometimes it is used as an expression of ‘psychological conviction’. Philosophers give multiple senses of knowledge such as: i. ‘knowing that,’ ii. ‘Knowing which,’ iii. ‘Knowing how,’ iv. ‘Knowing what,’ v. ‘knowing what it is like.’ Plato, used the term *techné* or skill for ‘knowing how’ (to do something), and the term *episteme* for a more forceful kind of knowledge in which claims can be true or false. There is a difference between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’. ‘Know how’ is used to refer to a kind of skill or ability, such as knowing how to swim. Here even if one knows what it is, he may not be able to explain the rules or laws of a skill. However, the expression, ‘know that,’ in contrast, seems to denote the possession of a specific piece of information, and the person who has knowledge of this sort generally is able to convey this knowledge to others. Philosophers are mainly concerned with ‘knowing that’ something is the case and it is in this sense of the word that a claim is either true or false. This meaning of ‘to know’ is called ‘propositional knowledge’. Epistemologists from ancient Greeks to the present have focused on propositional knowledge—that is, the ‘knowing that’ kind of knowledge. Propositional knowledge encompasses ordinary perceptual knowledge, scientific knowledge, geographical knowledge, ethical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, religious knowledge, self-knowledge, and knowledge about any field of study whatever.

A proposition is a declarative sentence which purports to describe a fact or a state of affairs, such as 'Dogs are mammals,' '2+2=7.' A proposition may be true or false; that is, it need not actually express a fact. Propositional knowledge, then, can be called 'knowing-that.' Statements of propositional knowledge are properly expressed using 'that'-clauses, such as 'He knows that Delhi is in India.' Not all sentences are propositions. For example, 'what is the time?' This sentence is not a proposition because one cannot ask whether what the sentence expresses is true.

Propositions can be doubted and believed. They are to be either true or false. Hence, they can be asserted or denied and such an assertion or denial is called a judgment. On this level the question of truth and certitude arises and the question of knowledge is posed.

#### **DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE**

Plato suggested that to 'know' something is to believe it and to provide an adequate account of its essential features. Knowledge is therefore belief plus understanding. The definition is based on Plato's *Theaetetus*, and holds that there are three essential components of knowledge. They 4 are: *justification, truth and belief*. Hence, propositional knowledge is 'justified true belief'. One implication of this definition is that just because one believes something and it turns out to be true, it does not mean that one 'knew' it, because belief lacks justification.

#### **BELIEF**

Beliefs crowd our minds. We have various types of beliefs like perceptual, scientific, moral, political, and theological beliefs. Belief is defined as a conviction of the truth of a proposition without its verification. There are two different meanings of belief that must be distinguished. In the first sense it is to 'believe in', that is 'to trust'. I might believe in my cousin while lending a loan. That is I trust that he will pay it back. Often, statements of 'belief' in this sense predict that something will prove to be useful or successful in some sense. In the second sense, to believe something means to think that it is true. To believe P is to believe that P is the case. Here the cognitive content is held as true. For example, to believe that

the sky is blue is to think that the proposition 'The sky is blue' is true. It is this sort of belief that is discussed with regard to knowledge.

However, merely true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Many true beliefs obviously do not qualify for knowledge. If you believe that your uncle will come to see you this evening and this turns out to be true, it does not become knowledge. The belief turned out to be true coincidentally but lacked supporting reasons. If one has to have knowledge of something one has to have true justified belief about it. Knowledge is distinct from belief and opinion. We can be mistaken about our beliefs but in knowledge there is no place for falsehood. With regard to opinion there is room for falsehood, as it is a hesitant assent. For something to count as knowledge, it must be true. Hence, mere belief is not sufficient for knowledge, because many beliefs turn out to be false. Hence, a second condition for knowledge is truth, that is, 'We know that P only if P is True.'

#### TRUTH

As we saw above, knowledge requires belief but not all beliefs constitute knowledge because sometimes we are mistaken in what we believe. In short, some of our beliefs are true and some are false. In the process of acquiring knowledge we get rid of false beliefs and increase the number of our true beliefs. The purpose of belief in acquiring knowledge is to describe reality as it is. However, some of our beliefs fail to do this role of representing the world accurately and turn out to be false and those that represent the world accurately are true or factual. Here we are assuming an objective truth. Hence it is possible for beliefs to match or fail to match with reality. Truth is a condition of knowledge and if belief fails to be true then it cannot constitute knowledge. However, merely belief and truth do not as yet constitute knowledge. For that we need one more criterion to be involved, that is, justification

#### JUSTIFICATION

Merely true belief does not constitute knowledge. The satisfaction of our belief condition has to be appropriately related to the satisfaction of the truth condition.

Genuine knowledge requires that a knower has an adequate indication that a believed proposition is true. Hence, only those true beliefs that are arrived in a right way constitute knowledge. The right way is a way of *sound reasoning and solid evidence* to acquire knowledge. A lucky guess, even if it turns out to be right on certain occasions, cannot constitute knowledge. A belief is justified if it is based on sound reasoning and rock-solid evidence. This kind of justification is called epistemic justification. The justification of belief does not mean that knowledge requires absolute certainty. Such a demand would lead to absolute scepticism.

The requirement of the condition of justification is to ensure that knowledge is based on solid evidence rather than on luck or misinformation. It is interesting to note that an unjustified belief can be true because of luck, but a justified belief can be false because of human fallibility. For example, the astronomers before Copernicus were justified in holding their geocentric model of the universe even though it was false. The way the world actually is need not agree with what our best evidence indicates. This goes to show that truth and justification are two independent conditions of belief. True belief does not tell us whether it is justified or not, similarly a justified belief does not tell us whether it is true or false. However, a justified belief is more likely to be true than to be false. In summary, what we see in these conditions is that thought passes from belief to knowledge.

One first believes and only then arrives at knowledge. So only when belief is confirmed by justification can it become knowledge. Therefore, for a belief to become knowledge it must correspond to reality and must be derived from valid evidence and argumentation.

It is appropriate to end this section with a reference to the ‘the Gettier problem.’ In 1963, Edmund Gettier in a short article criticised Plato’s definition of knowledge by pointing out situations in which a believer has a true belief justified to a reasonable degree, but not to a certainty, and yet in the situations in question, everyone would agree that the believer does not have knowledge. After this article some epistemologists revised the traditional definition of knowledge and added a

fourth condition. They held that the three conditions are not sufficient for knowledge and a fourth condition needed to be added, namely, ‘no false beliefs be essentially involved in the reasoning that led to the belief’. However, for our introductory purposes, we may define knowledge for the most part as ‘justified true belief’.

### Check Your Progress

1) What is Epistemology?

.....

.....

.....

2) What is your reflection on importance of Epistemology.

.....

.....

.....

### FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Moser, Paul K. *The Theory of Knowledge: A Thematic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Pollock, John L. *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*. New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1986.

