CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL THEORIES VS SOCIAL THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of writing this paper is to examine and analyze issues related to knowledge from traditional and socio cultural perspectives- Social epistemology. Social epistemology or Social theory of Knowledge is an understanding of knowledge from social perspectives and it attempts to answer epistemological questions in a systematic and satisfactory manners. It is argued that traditionally maintained conditions of knowledge are not sufficient since they are more individualistic in nature. Social conditions of knowledge, on the other hand, are based on social values that emphasize more on utility of knowledge in a social context and its connection with the social structures and power relations.

Key Words: Knowledge, Concept, Justified True Belief, Social Epistemology, Positivism, Empiricism, Rationalism

INTRODUCTION

The paper is purposefully divided into four sections. The first section explains the key terms: Concept and Knowledge. The second section discusses traditionally mentioned conditions of knowledge as Justified True Belief (JTB) and its shortcomings that were identified by Gettier in his three pages publication. The third section takes into

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account the criteria of knowledge devised by the enlightenment philosophers to analyze conditions which guide us to acquire beliefs that are true and to avoid the false ones. The fourth section discusses social theory of knowledge that emphasis more on utility of knowledge in a social context and its connection with the social structures and power relations.

**Key Concepts**

To understand the conditions of knowledge either traditional or social, it is necessary to understand, first of all, what is a concept? How we use concepts in the context of proposition? The word concept can be used in many senses. It is used in our day to day life as well as in academic disciplines. In different disciplines, it conveys different meaning and has distinct goals. For Deleuze “Philosophy is the activity of creating concepts”. Not only philosophy creates concepts it also analysis and interprets them. Understanding of concepts is must in all disciplines. For instance, one cannot understand propositions of physics about ‘force’, ‘work done’, and ‘energy’ unless one does not have these concepts.

Whatever theory of knowledge we follow, we express knowledge in propositions/ statements. A proposition is a sentence that can be affirmed or denied. For instance, if we say, ‘four tens are forty’, ‘two plus two equals to four’, ‘earth is revolving around the sun’, and so on. But, before we declare these propositions true or false, we must have concepts. Similarly, we cannot understand even an ordinary sentence until we don’t have the concepts. For example, ‘This tree is tall’. We cannot understand this sentence until we don’t have concepts of a ‘tree’ and ‘tall objects’. There are other conditions as well such as the syntax but they are beyond the focus of this paper.

There are two views about concept: the rationalist view and the empiricist view. The rationalists believe that most of our concepts are innate. For example, the concept of redness, the concept of causality, the concept of triangle and the concept of God are innate. Empiricists
believe that concepts are not innate but we acquire them from experience. The word ‘idea’ is synonymously used for concept. For them there are two types of experiences that form our ideas, “Some through the ‘outer’ senses, such as sight, hearing, and touch and for these all our concepts involving the physical world are drawn [and some from] inner senses, such as experiences of pain and pleasure, feelings of love and hate, pride and remorse, experiences of thinking and willing.”

Similar to the word, ‘concept’, ‘knowledge or to know’ also has many uses. This paper however, is concerned only with propositional knowledge- “Propositional knowledge is the knowledge of facts or true propositions.”

For example, I know that sky is blue. In this sense what is known, is respectively true proposition. It is very important to distinguish between the sentence and proposition. For example, A and B are two persons and both believe that ‘sky is blue’, but they speak different language, such as one speaks Urdu and other English. Both speak different sentence but have same proposition.

There is a difference between the Acquaintance Knowledge and Propositional Knowledge. I know about Amy, her schooling, her date of birth, her family, her hobbies etc, but it is the Propositional Knowledge. I will have Acquaintance Knowledge of her, if I meet her.

**Traditional Theories of Knowledge**

**Conditions of knowledge: JTB model and Gettier’s criticism**

In Theatetus, Plato said that mere ‘true opinion’ is not sufficient for knowledge because opinions come from perception, which are illusory and give us incomplete information about the world. For example if a lawyer presents his fallacious argument in such a way that he convinces the jury to believe that what he said is true, but this believing that something is true is not sufficient for the constitution
of knowledge. Plato, in Meno, says it is not possible to say with certainty that one knows the quality of something that it possesses without knowing that thing.\textsuperscript{5} For Plato, ‘knowledge is a justified true belief’ - in order to say that one has knowledge these are the three condition that must be met i.e., one has a Belief, the belief is True and one can Justify his true belief. Following discussion will elucidate the conditions of knowledge given by Plato.

BELIEF- It is the first condition of knowledge. Believing something is very important for knowing something.

“We must believe that p is true. This may be subjective requirement.”\textsuperscript{6}

1. ‘S knows that P implies that S believes that P.’

But believing that something is true is not knowledge. There may be certain cases in which we believe that something is true but in fact it is not true. If a child believes that 2+2=5, then child would know that 2+2=5, but in fact child does not know that it is false. A player might be convinced that he will beat his opponent, but could not win. He might say- he just knew that he would win, but too bad he could not. For John Hospers, believing something is a defining characteristic of knowledge but believing something is not the defining characteristic that it must be true. He says “I know p, implies that I believe p, He knows p implies that He believes p”.\textsuperscript{7}

Believing sometimes seems to be a matter of degree. We believe something with various degrees, for example, how strongly we believe something? A proposition p can be true though neither I, nor someone else believes it. ‘The earth was moving round the sun’ even before anyone believes it. It is not that how firmly you believe but on what grounds and what reason you have believed it. Mere belief is not sufficient for knowledge.
TRUTH- If I have knowledge of $p$, then $p$ must be true. If a person has reason to believe that $p$ is not true. This contradicts a person’s claim that he knows it. It is self-contradictory to say that “I know $p$, but $p$ is not true”, because a statement cannot be true and false at the same time.\(^8\)

If a person says that he knows something, then it must be true. It does not matter how well justified or reason to believe it. If a proposition is false then it cannot be knowledge. Knowledge for Plato is based on truth. Knowledge without truth is not possible. If a person says, I know $p$, but $p$ is false. Hence he did not really know $p$. For Rescher, “The verb ‘to know’ admits of no present continuous: one cannot be engaged in knowing. We can ascribe knowledge without knowing what goes on in people’s heads (let alone in their brains). To know something is a matter not of process but of product.”\(^9\)

2. ‘$S$ knows that $p$’, implies that ‘$S$ believes that $p$ and $p$ is true’.

If one has a ‘belief’ and his belief is true about proposition ‘$p$’ that $p$ is true, then it shows that a ‘person knows that $p$’. But it is mistaken one to having a mere ‘true belief’ that $p$ is sufficient for knowing $p$. Knowledge is not actually having only a ‘true belief’. It may be merely a lucky guess, for example, if one believes that it will rain tomorrow morning. It merely may be a lucky guess that if he awakes early and see outside the window and it is raining. Merely having a ‘true belief’ is not a sufficient condition for knowledge.\(^10\)

The requirement of truth is necessary but not sufficient. There are many statements that are true but we do not know since we are not expert in that area.

For example, most of the statement related to the nuclear physics can possibly be true but we do not know that they are true.

If we know something, and we know it is true, and we believe it is true, then it leads us to the next condition of knowledge.
JUSTIFICATION-This is the third condition of knowledge discussed by Plato. It is very important to know a thing you must have a good reason for it. For example, a guess cannot be knowledge. Knowing something means one has a good reason to believe. To believe p, you must have a justification for it. Merely, believing that something is true is not the same as knowing something.

3. ‘S knows that p’, implies that ‘S believes that p’, ‘p is true’, and ‘p is epistemically justified for S’.

Hence, we can say that the three conditions for knowledge are Justified True Belief. For example, Amer believes that today he will get a lot of money. And he has only believed because he came to know this through her astrologist but he has no reason for believing this. His claim is not justified.

A problem arises here that whether the evidences that we have is enough and how much evidences must be there. There should be adequate evidences that give us good reason to believe something. Adequate evidences mean that the evidences that make us enable to know something.11

“To know that p, it is not enough to be sure that p and happen to be right. One’s confidence must be justified and that justification must be disinterested.”12

If a belief is justified and we have to see up to which degree is it justified? There are two types of evidences that guarantee the truth value of proposition the ‘conclusive’ and ‘non-conclusive’. The Conclusive evidences promises and certifies that the proposition is true- it fully supports it. Non-conclusive, however, does not guarantee and does not fully support the proposition.13

Gettier-type objections to the JTB model

Unfortunately, problems of knowledge are not so simple. The explanation behind this is that this tripartite theory of knowledge,
which is also known as JTB model, has itself been appeared to be totally untenable. Edmund Gettier criticizes this position. He, in a three pages article, offered an overwhelming set of counter-cases to the tripartite record- the Gettier cases. Generally, what Gettier demonstrated was that you could have defended a genuine belief yet still need learning of what you believe on the grounds that your true belief was at last picked up by means of luck.  

In Gettier cases the connection between the belief that we have and which is true as well is more accidental. A “justified true belief” is relative to the evidences we have about something that’s why only “justified true belief” is not sufficient for knowledge. It does not mean that these conditions are not necessary. The point is that we need other things as well besides justified true belief.  

**A Pathway to Empiricist and Rationalists’ criteria of Knowledge**

HUME: It is commonly said that Hume logically concluded the British empiricists’ epistemological principles. He was the first who formulated precise principles of epistemology.

Hume was in agreement with Berkeley's claim that any property of the world outside us cannot be experienced directly, yet this view did not lead him to acknowledge idealism- the view that only ideas are real and physical objects has no existence. He was thoroughly skeptical about the mind's existence.

For Hume, one cannot have an idea or a concept unless one has not experienced it- has not perceived it. He divides perceptions of mind into two categories depending on the degree of force and vivacity. When one is having a direct experience of something such as experiencing pain of heat or pleasure of something, it is the impression; and when one remembers these sensations using his memory, it is the ideas. This way Hume wielded the rationalistic philosophy of Descartes with the Locke's Empiricism, contended that
knowledge comes to us either from impressions or ideas, the earlier emerge out of external stimulus and the later are intrinsic.

All our knowledge is based on impressions and ideas that work as foundations for knowledge which are the genuine building squares of all our insight. Impressions contain the sensations and sentiments that are strong and clear. Impressions constitute impressions of sensation that are derived from senses, or impressions of reflection that we get from the experience of our mental states. On the other hand, ideas contain concepts, beliefs, memories, mental pictures, and so on. We get them from impressions and are comparatively faint and unclear. The distinction between impressions and ideas is vivacity and forcefulness. While, listening music is impression, remembering the listened music is idea.

Hume also denies causal knowledge. He maintains that our mind makes a relationship between two events, which is customary and habitual, that has been experienced by us in succession of time or in contiguity. We think that future will resemble the past on the bases of this and we do not expect that the physical laws will be abruptly changed.

Bertrand Russell, a twentieth century philosopher, further elucidated this idea: “The mere fact that something has happened a certain number of times causes animals and [people] to expect [instinctively] that it will happen again.”

Hume denies the knowledge about our own self because it is customarily or habitually known to us and there is no evidence that self can be known to us through experiences and made of non-physical substance. For Hume, self or mind is merely a bundle of impressions.

KANT: Kant started with rationalism and uncritically accepts that a priori knowledge is possible, but later on he was inspired by Hume’s
writings. Kant builds up a consolidate theory of rationalism and empiricism.

Kant contended that true knowledge is only gained through the conjunction of rational and empirical knowledge. He argues that relaying only on rationalism beyond sense experiences is not enough. Before Kant it was believed that only rationalism can explain analytic knowledge which is derived from the statements that are true by its very definition. Kant expressed that "all bodies are extended" is an instance of ‘analytic statement’, in the light of the fact that being "extension" in space is the constituent of the definition of being a body. Different illustrations are 'all bats are mammals' and 'all rectangles have four sides'. This is on account of being a mammal is not excluded of the definition of being a bat, and having four sides is a constituent of definition of being a rectangle.18

On the other side synthetic statements are those that give us new information about the world that comes through experiences. But for Kant some synthetic statements can be a priori; knowledge of mathematics is synthetic a priori. For example, 7 plus 4 equal to 12-12, by definition, is not in ‘7’, ‘5’ and in ‘plus’.

Kant came up with the example from physical science which is synthetic a priori. ‘A straight line is a distance between two points’. In which predicate is not the part of the subject.

Kant further argues that our mind is limited and cannot go beyond certain limitations. External objects exist out of ‘space’ and ‘time’, while space and time both are purely mental which cannot be learned from experiences. Mind applies ‘space’ and ‘time’ on the “things-in-themselves” through the process of sensation and then applies twelve categories to understand it. Therefore, he said that we see the world on our own term.

POSITIVISM: Positivism generally views that empirical data and scientific method is the only way through which we can have
authentic knowledge of the external world. For positivists a theory will be true on the basis of positive affirmation of it which is completely observable and experimental. The regularities of the world that it has are detectable and its knowledge must be inferred through observing it. Comte as a founding father of positivism draws a demarcation line between the normative and empirical knowledge. The knowledge if it’s not empirical then it will be outside the realm of the science.\textsuperscript{20}

Brain Fay identifies four basic tenets of the positivist’s theory of knowledge of social science: “First, drawing on the distinction between discovery and validation, its deductive nomological account of explanation and concomitant modified. Hume an interpretation of the notion of ‘cause’; second, its belief in a neutral observation language as the proper foundation of knowledge; third, its value-free ideal of scientific knowledge; and fourth, its belief in the methodological unity of the sciences.”\textsuperscript{21}

Positivists using these principles established their criteria of knowledge. Their epistemology based on the principle that is employed by science and derived from Comte’s hierarchy of science; the last stage of which is positive stage that is scientific and more related to the individual rights. Firstly, all the sciences either natural or social will have the same method of logical inquiry. Secondly, the aim of this inquiry will be to explain, interpret, and predict the phenomenon and also to know the causal conditions either necessary or sufficient. Thirdly, the inductive methodology must be adopted by the researchers which can be open for testability and it must be based on observational data. Fourthly, the science based on empirical knowledge. Fifthly, the scientific knowledge must be value-free such as politics, ethics etc. Sixthly, the organization of social institution will be based on the scientific principles and all the related issues such as social and political will be open to its logical analysis through the applicability of scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{22}
Social theory of knowledge

Some philosophers argue that traditional conditions of knowledge are not sufficient for having knowledge. Human knowledge is mostly related to social transactions. They do not argue that the conditions mentioned by traditional philosophers are not required. But they think that the traditional theories have ignored one of the basic factors: the social factor. Absence of this factor makes traditional theories more individualistic. As, Martin Kusch suggests, “Traditional epistemology is excessively individualistic.”

Cohen argued that social condition is the most important factor of knowledge, for the reason that the truth conditions of knowledge explicitly depend on social standards. If social standards are not met then one cannot claim that he knows something. Thus social practices /processes are deeply involved in the truth claim of knowledge because a statement cannot be justified unless it is produced by reliable processes. For Goldman social practices ensure that under what conditions the knowledge will be promoted. Therefore, social practices positively contribute to determine ‘epistemic values’ that derives from social exchange.

The most important part of the social epistemology is the expansionist part of the knowledge which states that acquiring of knowledge is based on the propensities of the various social practices. The proportional tendencies of different practices enable us to distinguish true beliefs from the false one. These social practices are the outcome of the social behaviour that leads us to the conceptual contents or meaning of belief and mastery of that concept enable us to apply it in different and diversified situations.

Aristotle said “All men by nature desire to know”. Seeking knowledge is the important activity of human life. And it has material impact on human life. Weather updates, scientific experiments, observations, even newspaper readers do not want to read the reports based on misinformation. Similarly, in social life we seek truth.
Asking the question is very important feature of human communication- asking for the purpose to learn the answer and to know the truth. There are many types of questions asked by the researchers. The teachers ask questions, the students ask questions, different quiz-shows- the purpose is to know.

Social epistemology is social path to knowledge. It believes in interaction with other groups and agencies and focuses on team work and some sort of group activity. For this purpose we need language to communicate knowledge and to engage in argumentation; hence, language has a very important place in social epistemology. Social epistemic activities are basically social rather than individual qua individual. It is true that the epistemic standards come from epistemology but it also cannot be denied that standards of speech comes from the cooperative undertaking that is socially established and to share information.  

Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigation*, introduced the conception of “language game”. The very essence of human language is based on words and these words are the names of the objects that depict it. The word carries with its meaning that is used by the agents in a particular social context. For instance, animals such as ants are also social animals and behave socially but distinct from human due to lack of conceptual content or meaning- which implies that the rule in hand enables us to distinguish correct from incorrect concepts. 

The meaning of a word is determined by the social practices. The rules of language are not in opposition of the social-rules. Language being a socially fabricated tool used for communication is widely used to exchange information. Meaning of words is not intrinsic but extrinsic which are based on the social practices. For example the word ‘pillar’, can be interpreted differently in various situations; in the case of constructing a building it has one meaning but in the case of the ‘Pillars of Islam’ it conveys a different meaning.
CONCLUSION

Plato maintains that one has knowledge of something when one has a belief which is true and one is in position to justify it. Other philosophers emphasized and forwarded either empiricism or rationalism or both. Social epistemology considers all such theories more individualistic in nature. These theories have ignored a very important factor-the social factor; the use and utility of knowledge in our lives. They argue that the medium through which we communicate knowledge, the language, is strictly social in character. Perhaps, this was the reason that most of the 20th century philosophers were working on language. For instance, Wittgenstein argues that language, an activity and a part of life, has social reference. This activity is used to establish standards for knowledge-either when we are giving command to someone or accepting a command from someone- either making a joke or telling a story-either describing a phenomena or analyzing data/occurrences etc.

Knowledge cannot be individualistic; therefore, social condition of knowledge cannot be ignored. It covers almost every aspect of life and contributes to its growth. It involves co-operative process among different individual of a society to transmit their knowledge to the next generation.
Bibliography


Notes and References

7. Ibid, p. 145


