

Philosophical History of Western Epistemology: From Pre-Socratic to Hegelian Era.

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Abstract

This paper aims to elucidate the theological history and expanding dimensions of knowledge through an epistemological perspective. We will explore various philosophers, ranging from Rationalists to Empiricists, contrasting the experiential approach of the latter with the innate perspective of the former. The scarcity of relevant educational content in this area has hindered undergraduate-level discussions on epistemology, which we aim to address through this article. Each thinker presents their unique conception of knowledge, which we have defined in this paper. Our focus lies solely on unraveling the implicit or explicit "knowledge-particle" that these philosophers sought to explain, without delving into the trajectory of

Western philosophy's development. Additionally, we will examine how each school

attempts to refute opposing views and establish their own perspective.

Keywords: Rationalism, Empiricism, Reconciliation, Skeptical-approach, Socrates, Knowledge, Kant

Introduction:

Philosophy is the history of a wide-array of subject fields thriving today in this contemporary world. Plato, a prominent philosopher, exclaimed that philosophy begins to wonder- to think and enquire, the dialectical method of Socrates, method of doubt hailing from Descartes's philosophy and Arjun-krishna samvad which was chained in the pearls of

knowledge only because of unending questions by Parth. ¹Prof. Upendra Kumar, Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Hansraj College, said that “the query posed in philosophy is to iron out the speculative nature and contemplate on the true knowledge” and this he quotes as “ideal of philosophy.”

What constitutes knowledge and its truth value are fundamental questions that can be answered by exploring its diverse fields and domains. Philosophy serves as a primary source in this quest, as it has already provided answers and offers an in-depth methodology to illuminate the subject at hand. Throughout history, knowledge has taken various forms: for Heraclitus, it encompassed the understanding of the "Kosmos," while Socrates and Plato emphasized its connection to virtue. Doubtism introduced a dimension of knowledge through the method of doubt, while skepticism challenged certainty and revealed a non-self-evident dimension. In explaining our perspective, we approach it from an epistemological standpoint, with a focus on the scope of epistemology in philosophy. For this discussion, we will adhere to the Western philosophical outlook.

1. Critical investigation

1.1 Branches of Philosophy

Within the expansive realm of philosophy, akin to the natural sciences, it undergoes significant

subdivisions that extend beyond mere speculation. Broadly speaking, philosophy can be categorized into three distinct parts, namely:

1.1(1) Metaphysics which is the theory and study of reality where the actual reality of the world- our significant surroundings are holistically evaluated and examined to know the true realm as idealized in platonic verse as “world of forms”. Ontology is the study of being- our existence.

1.1(2) Axiology studies concepts like ethics, aesthetics, values, and rules with a systematic dedicated approach entailing the objective to understand them so that there is no discrepancy in these concepts.

1.1(3) Epistemology is the theory of knowledge i.e., the source, origination meaning and deals with the concept of how to attain true knowledge and its respective dimensions. It talks about the difference between a fact and a mere opinion- between belief and truth, validity of knowledge. This is precisely my area of study in this paper. Let us get into rationalist and empiricist debate to understand the dimensions of knowledge from a philosophical perspective.

1.2 Rationalism: critical frontier of knowledge

Rationalism, a branch of epistemology, asserts that reason alone serves as the genuine source of knowledge. Its objectivity and universality are

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guided by rationality, remaining unaffected by personal experiences. It is a priori, detached from subjective perceptual experiences. Rationalism employs our rationality as the key determinant of knowledge, necessitating an intricate analysis. Conversely, empiricism presents a distinct set of ideas wherein knowledge is dynamic, rooted in individual experiences and subjectivity. Subjective knowledge lacks objective reality and lacks consistency, existing only momentarily within the realm of our own sense-perceptions.

Mind, as per Prof. Upendra Kumar has broadly three faculties, the fundamental instruments which can facilitate efficient functioning of the objectives so assigned to the said entity: -

1.2(1) Sensibility- where the sense organs come into play, we receive precepts from taste, touch, hear, feel, and see the things around us, because of our physical sense organs. Through senses, we ascertain sensory information, but these are just in the form of "raw material".

1.2(2) Understanding- We process sensory input from the external world to understand raw information. But, however, it must be clear that we are still trying to reach a conclusion- to the ultimate result of whatever we have been comprehending, the next part will be development in the same direction.

1.2(3) Reason- Using our most superior faculty of thought and reason over the information being processed which was initially received by our sense-perceptions, here we, by virtue of our rationality try to give meaning and decorate and

subtly dictate the terms of our understanding. Reason thereby helps us to categorize things correctly and not leave them to our experience to label themselves and logic thereby is a very pertinent part of the rationalist school of thought. There are dedicated theories that help us in understanding the rationalist school of thought- these theories center around the central theme of rationalism which the empiricist later annihilates i.e., Reason, they are as follows: -

1.2(4) Innate concept thesis- it talks about the fact that there are certain concepts that are innate: these concepts are present before birth, and we use our reason to explain them- experience plays just a minimal role here to bring it on the conscious platform but it is only reason that can validate such concepts. For instance, the concept of God and morality is coming from the innatist school.

1.2(5) Innate knowledge thesis- this theory centers around the fact that if there are certain concepts that are innate since promulgation they must be accompanied by prudential information- details that we can ascertain as knowledge about that specific innate concept. This knowledge is also innate- comes before conception and remains unchanged. For instance, in an innate concept thesis we talked about "god" and the fact that "god is omniscient and all-empowering" can be categorized as its knowledge particle, which is innate.

1.2(6) Intuition and Deduction thesis- Rationalists believed that true knowledge comes from intuitive knowledge- our gut feeling. It's

the voice of conscience which gives us some information that can be brought about, only by reason alone. Deduction is a process of reasoning by which a person can provide a conclusion that warrants a necessary logical and systematic connection to the premises- we use reason to determine this facet.

1.2(7) Indispensability of reason thesis- warrants that reason is very essential in determining the truth value knowledge of a propositional argument and experience can only provide blurry messages in the form of mere sensations that are provided meaning only after the faculty of reason works upon them.

1.2(8) Superiority of reason thesis- warrants that since experience can only provide us with messages which reason decodes and contemplates upon them- reason can provide us with information- knowledge that is of higher value and extremely superior to what a mere sensation can yield us in, thereby providing us with knowledge that experience fails to provide us. To be a rationalist is to agree with these theories which form a very essential part of the Rationalist school of thought.

What makes a concept or its knowledge "Innate"? How can we know that it is "innate"? Such questions are imperative to understand the manifold nature of knowledge which has a direct relation to its various dimensions in philosophy. A concept is said to be innate when it is held to "a priori" which means knowledge that one has prior to any experience, we don't require the faculty of sense-perception to

validate that piece of knowledge. For instance, Descartes, in his meditation book expresses that "ideas of god were put inside our brain by no one but god himself." Experience plays no role here, it's only the reason through which we ascertain ourselves with such knowledge. A posteriori is that piece of knowledge which comes to us after experience- knowledge that can be validated by experience. For instance, all bachelors sitting in room number 10 are from New-jersey. We can only be sure of such information if we experience it, i.e by our senses, verify it. Rationalist ideas only believe in a priori knowledge and not in a posteriori knowledge because no innate knowledge could arise from experience. Another thing comes from Descartes is that our body and mind are radically convergent and they cannot stay in unity, but then he draws a fantastic interactionist account to assert that mind and body which are relative substances, unite, come together and the proper functioning of the human being is the derivative outcome of this, but Spinoza comes in the picture and emphatically declares that this fallacious because, Descartes said that a substance could be differentiated on the basis of its modes, but Spinoza is of the opinion that the substance comes before its own modifications, if there is just one attribute, property of a substance, then this falls into yet another grievous error because a substance as he calls has "infinite perfect essence and infinite attributes, in all times" which clearly makes the mind-body substance (uncompromised) dualism of Descartes a weak claim in front of god- substance monism. This is affecting the

types of realities we have, and we can only gain knowledge of what is real and valid all the time, its dimensions are expanding in this mechanism only.

Now, let us understand the rival theory of Empiricism and its dialects in which it differs from rationalist ideas.

1.3 Empiricism: The experiential frontier of knowledge

“Excessively relying on reason is not sufficient for it cannot provide us with knowledge” is somewhat a resounding idea which concurs with the views held by empiricist philosophers. In Empiricism, experience serves to be the ultimate source of knowledge and knowledge is a posteriori in nature. They don't believe that reason plays any prudential role in determining the content of knowledge. This is because it is the experience that provides us with raw material- with sensation- with pictures that can form ideas in our minds. The reason comes in the end. This knowledge is dynamic, and subjective but it is knowledge of valued importance. Mind, in general, plays a passive role here because it is the experience that determines our perception. *“To be, is to be perceived”* notion of Berkeley, personifies this idea.

The empiricist school has some characteristics that are defining features of this idea and they are as follows: -

1.3(1) Metaphysics- which is the basket where the idea of God. If empiricists rely solely

on experience, then it must follow that whatever they see becomes knowledge for them and whatever they cannot experience through the senses does not exist. How can we perceive God through senses- how can we see God or experience any concept of metaphysics whatsoever through our sense-perception? It is not possible to exercise this, so, metaphysics is next to non-existent for the empiricist philosophers.

1.3(2) Cause-effect relationship- For rationalists, causal relationship is valid and agreed upon. But, for empiricists, the cause-effect relationship does not exist. It is because let us take an example, “sun rises in the east” is a truth, but how exactly? Skeptical Hume would say that it's a mere repetition, we are subjected to see that sun rises from east till now in our life, but this does not guarantee that it will again rise from east tomorrow- or in the year 2098 or 100 years from now.

1.3(3) Stand on “experience”- they believe that experience alone can determine knowledge and reason cannot provide us with anything substantial, as I explained in section 1.2(3) that reason is for beautification alone- it can only decorate the understanding as per the empiricist. It is the experience that alone can provide us with concepts and knowledge that can be substantiated by an example: $1+1=2$; how will a 4-year-old infant know this truth? A rationalist can go from explaining the innatism to a priori argument but an empiricist would simply take, let's say, 1 apple and another apple and showcase that it constitutes 2 apples

together and the child would conveniently learn this thing.

Locke also believes in correspondence theory of truth for determining knowledge and every empiricist stands in non-affirmative of the innatist idea that some concepts and their knowledge are independent of experience, but the empiricist has destroyed the innatist idea for they believe that no idea is innate in itself. Let us understand this by the criticism they have leveled. If any idea is said to be innate that means it must pass certain criteria i.e it must be one common idea which is universally present in everyone's mind in the same manner of expression and is commonly agreed by everyone in the world without an iota of minimal conflict- are those so-called innate knowledge pieces qualifying this standard? The answer is no. Let's just, for the sake of argument, consider, rather hypothetically, that they are innate, but another question, which now confronts us is the fact that how a rationalist showcase that because a particular idea is commonly present in everyone's mind in a universal manner- this very criterion makes an idea to become innate? Is this criterion necessarily enough to call any knowledge innate? Another criticism could be that if this is deep seeded within the reason and inside our well-functioning mind, then what about the people who are mentally unstable and cognitively challenged? They don't have innate ideas, what is the status of innate ideas in them? The rationalist side fails to answer this aspect. Empiricists are clear and certain in their standpoint that innate ideas do not exist and, by

this they have not only destroyed the school of innatism but have left some deep scars on the rationalist idea. The empiricist denies innate knowledge and innate concept thesis completely and are clear when they say that human experience derived solely through sense organs plays the role in determining the knowledge, a human, according to empiricist stand, directly interacts with the material object, and understands the substance as per its qualities which can be divided into primary and secondary qualities respectively.

The empiricists try to declare not analytically but rather experientially. Locke believes that our mind is a "Tabula rasa" is a clean white slate on which the experience writes, and the mind is competent to know only those things. Hume, who supports uncompromised empiricism in which he solely relies on the experience and denies the existence of the world, God, and matter. It is said in the world of philosophy that the simplest theory is the best theory and empiricists try to prove that they fall under this pit only. But the question arises now, from where do our thoughts, ideas and knowledge come from if our mind is a clean white slate devoid of all characteristics? It comes through experience and this faculty is divided into two parts, namely, (i) Sensation comprising what we see, feel, touch, and taste (ii) Reflection, in which elements like, thinking, understanding, comprehending, and various other mental operations of one's own mind are there. John Locke believed that knowledge is the perception, agreement and disagreement in ideas, he also devised three degrees of

knowledge and they are as follows: - the (i) Intuitive knowledge in which the connection between the ideas is immediately seen for example, a circle is not square and in this idea we don't have any doubt (ii) Demonstrative knowledge as that which is not quite so certain and the immediate connection between ideas is not seen. However, reasoning could be employed to understand and comprehend but it can lead to error. For example, we need to "demonstrate" that the sum of inner angles of a triangle is 180 degrees, (iii) is the Sensitive knowledge which is not having certainty. This comprises not the existence of God or our own, but the existence and nature of the objects present outside of our mind i.e., external world.

Similarly, in the case of David Hume, his theory is also having serious implications on the expanding domain of knowledge, because he has focused, primarily, on the method of knowledge and less on the knowledge. He asserts the difference between the knowledge and beliefs by presenting the age-old ancient tradition of differentiating them as the (i) matters of fact and (ii) relation of ideas. The fact that it is based on our ideas that are fainter replicates the impressions which are the representations of the external raw material and mind cannot produce any idea-it can only process ideas, the mind plays a passive role in the receiving of sensations. An important question we must raise here is, how are our thoughts, ideas linked to each other if the mind cannot produce ideas? Hume substantially answers this aspect by stating the principle of association in which he devices three things, (i)

Resemblance- it is when two or more facts are of the same type, they linked with one another, (ii) Contiguity- Imagine, for example, when you think about your apartment, you have thought of a conjoined area, and eventually of the whole building, this is because each of our empirical experience happens in given space and time, so the two ideas are associated together when they are being experienced in the same space and time period, the (iii) is of Causation, believe, for example, you have a thought of a severe wound-cut, the thought of blood dripping out of the cut-open wound will automatically be there, so, when an idea consistently follows another idea then they are clubbed together.

Now, it becomes imperative to explore another dimension so let us proceed to the "reconciliation-dimension."

1.4 Reconciliation: Another Frontier of Knowledge

Hegel created a dialogical model in which we contemplate by understanding it under rationalist-empiricist stand. In his language, "thesis is: rationalism", "anthesis" is empiricism and "synthesis" is the reconciliation philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This holistically summarizes western philosophy and the various dimensions of knowledge as elucidated here, in this paper. Immanuel Kant, embodied himself to provide with conciliatory view on knowledge by explaining the possibility of a-priori synthetic judgments/ knowledge by devising the fact that "knowledge has to novel, universal and necessity should be there" Analytic a priori,

synthetic a posteriori- all have one-sided views, in Kantian way, “knowledge without percept is blind and percepts without knowledge is useless” but “synthetic a priori knowledge” proves to be helpful here. Ever imagined how we can predict the place and time of a solar eclipse far before it has happened? With certainty we can say that this phenomenon is “*synthetic, a-priori in nature.*”

Synthetic here means something that is validated by the experience, not directly present in the subject of the given proposition “all bodies are heavy” for example, is a synthetic proposition for Kant, Analytic is that they are independent of our experience and prior to the experiences itself, “*whole is greater than its part*” is the perfect example for this. This combination is guided by “pure intuition” of time and space and Kant's 12 categories of knowledge. The pure intuition of time is highlighting the fact that we have the necessary intuition of time and space before any given empirical experience, and 12 categories are divided into 4 things, namely, (i) Relation, (ii) Quantity, (iii) Quality, and (iv) Modality.

The fact that “ $7+5 = 12$ ” is a priori; it is also synthetic judgment because “seven plus five is not having 12 in it” Also, there is some processing happening over “ $7+5$ ” that results in response as 12. Although Kant says that it is because of Hume that I have “awakened by the dogmatic slumbers”, he supports Hume and says that our senses can only tell us about something that has happened, but it cannot tell us necessary universal causal relation between

things, adding to this he also points out that the a-posteriori claims are not having element of universality in them. This signifies the possibility of synthetic a priori judgment.

This highlights the contemporary extent of knowledge, encompassing mathematical, geometrical, and scientific assertions that share a similar nature. It underscores the notion that while these claims cannot be empirically derived, they universally and indispensably shape our experiences. Kant's contribution unveils a novel dimension of knowledge through his incontrovertible theory.

Conclusion

The empiricist state that “there was nothing in the intellect that was first in the idea”, I believe that, we provide another claim here” nothing was first in the intellect that was first in the idea, except the very idea of intellect” the rationalist, the empiricist and the reconciliationist are nothing but three of the very intricate, and essential because they along with Emotivism and Descriptivism clearly explains that the dimensions of knowledge are expanding in its manifold.

Spinoza's pantheistic argument, asserting the absence of a personal deity and the presence of God in all things, introduces a distinct dimension to knowledge. In contrast, Hume's empiricist view posits that ideas stem from vivid and distinct impressions of objects. These dimensions differ significantly from one another. However, the history of modern Western philosophy and epistemology called

for an additional revolutionary dimension. Synthetic a priori judgments, unlike synthetic a posteriori one, could not be adequately determined based on experience alone, as universal necessity cannot be ascertained through limited experiences. To address this, synthetic a priori judgments emerged as a unifying force, integrating the dimensions of knowledge into a comprehensive and profound entity.

In conclusion, there exists a fruitful interplay between scientific and empirical foundations, combining both concrete and abstract bases. The discourse on the expanding dimensions of knowledge in the 21st century has already been addressed by philosophers of the 16th century, whose philosophies and treatises serve as concrete evidence of their understanding of knowledge's scope and types. However, the journey towards comprehending the complete truth continues, as the frontiers of knowledge remain ever expansive.

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1.7 Conflict of interest

Dr. Upendra Kumar, Aditya Roy, and Chaitanya Sharma hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest.

1.8 Data availability statement

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