UNIT-1 SCEPTICISM AND KNOWLEDGE AND ITS VARIETIES

UNIT STRUCTURE:

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 Knowledge and its varieties

1.4 What is scepticism

1.5 The history of scepticism and its varieties

1.6 Let us sum up

1.7 Further Readings

1.8 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- explain the concept of Scepticism
- discuss the history of skepticism and its varities

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Epistemology has often been regarded as the most central area of any philosophical enquiry. It is the scientific study of knowledge: its nature, its requirements, and its limitations. It is an enquiry into the nature, origin, validity and extent of knowledge. In brief, epistemology is the study of:

(a) The defining components,

(b) The substantive conditions or sources, and

(c) The limits of knowledge and justification.

What sort of knowledge can one obtain and what sort of knowledge one cannot. Can one arrive at knowledge of all kind or there is any limitation of attaining its level? The thought of one's limitedness to arrive at certainty of knowledge generates doubt to the process or outcome of knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that one of the fundamental problems of epistemology is doubt or denial of certainty. Doubt arises in human mind

because different dogmatic systems arrive at different conclusions which contradict each other. The doubt that arises in human mind asks the question if knowledge is attainable at all. Russell gives the following definition of knowledge: “what we firmly believe, if it is true, is called knowledge.”

1.3 KNOWLEDGE AND ITS VARIETIES

Everyone has a different opinion about what knowledge is, or knowledge is not. Philosophers are of diverse views regarding the varieties of knowledge. A priori and a posteriori are two of the original terms in epistemology. A priori literally means “from before”. This is because a priori knowledge depends upon what a person can derive from the world without needing to experience it. This is better known as reasoning. A posteriori literally means “from what comes after.” This is a reference to experience and using a different kind of reasoning to gain knowledge. This kind of knowledge is gained by first having an experience and then using logic and reflection to derive understanding from it. In philosophy, this term is sometimes used interchangeably with empirical knowledge, which is knowledge based on observation.

Russell draws a distinction between two sorts of knowledge, viz. knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. Knowledge of things is again divided into two kinds, viz. ‘Knowledge by Acquaintance’ and ‘Knowledge by Description.’ Knowledge of truths is divided into intuitive knowledge and derivative knowledge. Russell holds that all our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation.

Ordinary knowledge of things admits of degrees, i. e. we speak of knowing someone well, or not so well, depending upon the extent of our information about them. Russell holds that only such type of knowledge capable of providing the firm foundation for all other knowledge. Russell says, “We shall say that we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.” On the contrary, our knowledge of the table may

be described by means of the sense-data. When we know a table as a physical object, we know it through description. While explaining knowledge by description, Russell tries to show how the complicated theory of knowledge by description actually works. The most conspicuous things that are known to us by description are physical objects and other people's minds.

According to Donald Davidson, there are three types of knowledge, namely knowledge of our own minds, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of an external reality. In other words, they are Subjective, Inter-subjective and Objective knowledge. Davidson writes: "I know, for the most part, what I think, want, and intend, and what my sensations are. In addition, I know a great deal about the world around me, the locations and sizes and causal properties of the objects in it. I also sometimes know what goes on in other people's minds. Each of these three kinds of empirical knowledge has its distinctive characteristics."

The popular division of the varieties of knowledge is found into three categories: personal, procedural, and propositional. It is the last of these, propositional knowledge, that primarily concerns philosophers. However, understanding the connections between the three types of knowledge can be helpful in clearly understanding what is and what is not being analyzed by the various theories of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge is **personal knowledge** or knowledge by acquaintance. This is the kind of knowledge that we are claiming to have when we say things like "I know Mozart's music."

The second kind of knowledge is **procedural knowledge** or knowledge how to do something. It is also known as **ability knowledge**. For example, one may claim to know how to drive a car. To know how to drive a car is to have a certain ability—the ability to drive a car. In doing that one is not simply claiming that one understands the theory involved in those activities. Rather, it is claimed that actually, one possesses the skills involved or one is able to do the activity. This "ability account" of know-how is often

attributed to Gilbert Ryle. Ryle holds that knowing how to do something is simply having the ability to do it. Knowing how to do something entails having the ability to do it. Likewise, it seems that if you have the ability to do something, it follows that you know how to do it.

claiming to have propositional knowledge. With propositional knowledge, one claims to have knowledge of different things. It is also known as Descriptive or Declarative Knowledge.

1.4 WHAT IS SCEPTICISM

Scepticism is a method of philosophical enquiry that questions on the certainty of knowledge. As like as dogmatism is a method without a prior criticism of knowledge, scepticism is a method that doubts the possibility of knowledge. The rise of scepticism as a method has come as a first effect of the failure of dogmatism. The reason is that the conflict of two opposite dogmas produces a “sense of hopelessness.”In other words, whatever can be asserted may be with equal reason denied. Thereby, there arises a sense of doubt on the certainty of knowledge or on the common standard of what is the truth. Scepticism questions the possibility of ultimate knowledge and stresses on the limitedness of the grasping capacity of reality. It doubts the possibility of our cognitive achievements and as such challenges our ability to obtain reliable knowledge. In the history of epistemology, scepticism sets itself as a good antidote to self-satisfied dogmatism. Its importance lies in the fact that a healthy scepticism helps to keep one’s mind always open to criticism.

The method of philosophy which holds that knowledge of ultimate reality is not possible has been considered as scepticism. Scepticism denies the universal and necessary knowledge of, and hence certainty in the field of knowledge. It regards all knowledge only as probable. A sceptic criticises the very existence of knowledge instead of making endeavours to prove it. It retains a negative attitude to the problem of knowledge and is opposite to the dogmatic attitude of rationalism.

Rationalism affirms its faith in the possibility of valid knowledge regarding the real things underlying experiences. In contrast, scepticism goes to the other extreme of doubting the very possibility of knowledge. It says that we can affirm nothing. It sets a limit to ignorance.

Scepticism is considered as a thesis about the human condition. It is understood as the view that we know nothing or that nothing is certain or that everything is open to doubt. According to A. J. Ayer, the sceptic does not question our actual acceptance of the truth of the statements referring to experience but questions the very grounds for this acceptance. What philosophical scepticism calls in question is not the way in which we apply our standards of proof, but these standards themselves. The Sceptics believe that things appear differently to different and differently to different members of the same species and differently to the same person at different times The Sceptic counters by asking how we can tell which appearances are cognitive appearances. It is no good defining them as ones which compel assent since people often feel compelled to assent to appearances which turn out to have been misleading.

Wholesale scepticism is said to be impossible on the basis of two arguments: the argument from polar concepts and the paradigm case argument. The argument from polar concepts points out that certain concepts come in pairs such that a given member of any pair gets its sense by way of its contrast with the other. As Norman Malcolm says, real/unreal, knowledge/belief, and many other examples are polar in this sense. Thus, if there is a belief, there must also be knowledge. As Ryle says, there cannot be counterfeit coins unless there are genuine ones. But as Hamlyn points out, it seems conceivable that in a country genuine coins should exist if there are to be counterfeit ones. On the other hand, it must be possible to know what it is for something to be a genuine coin if it is to make sense to speak of counterfeit ones. So a sceptic can quite properly claim that there are no cases of knowledge as long as he gives some sense to be the concept of knowledge.

At this point, the paradigm-case argument holds that if a given term is to be meaningful, there must be instances to which the concept and the term are applied as paradigms. But Hamlyn says that it cannot be inferred simply from the fact that a term supposedly has a meaning that anything answers to it. From the fact that the term 'knowledge" has to mean, it does not follow that there must be knowledge.

The sceptic directs his doubts against the alleged knowledge of physical objects, the past and other minds. Rationalism seeks to answer the sceptic by discovering truths that are indubitable. The most explicit instance of a belief in this procedure is the philosophy of Descartes. His "cogito ergo sum" is a necessary and indubitable truth. But, as Ayer puts it, the sense in which I cannot doubt the statement that I think in just that my doubting it entails its truth and in the same sense I cannot doubt that I exist. The fact that I cannot without absurdity doubt that I exist does not mean that the proposition "I exist" is in any way a necessary truth; indeed it seems manifestly a contingent matter that I exist.

According to Ayer, even statements formulating immediate experiences can be mistaken but that our doubts tend naturally to come to rest after the evidence have been traced back to certain lengths; and if we are willing to accept such evidence as are available to us, we can in a legitimate sense be said to have genuine knowledge in all three of the areas against which the sceptics direct us to attack, viz. physical objects, past and other minds.

Concerning physical objects, it is conceivable that such objects are s we see them, though evidence for this is hardly available and abundant evidence is at hands to show that with respect to some of their characteristics physical objects are not as see them. Ayer admits that physical objects cannot reasonably be reduced to sense data for they endure when there are no sense data. Nevertheless, we can through approved inductive procedures know something about physical objects in terms of sense data for the reason that the concept of a physical object is so framed that sensory

experiences are evidential with reference to such objects. Concerning our knowledge of the past Ayer points out that by following the best authenticated inductive procedures we can both know the past and support our own memories. If the sceptic says that our inability to recapture any past experience leaves it an entirely open question whether any statement about the past is true, Ayers's reply is that the sceptic is irrational. But this will not worry the sceptic, for he objects to our standard of rationality. Ayer says that the proof that the sceptic requires of us is something which is logically impossible for us to give. It is no discredit to our proofs that they do not imply that we can achieve the impossible; it would be a discredit to them, rather, if they did. Concerning knowledge of other minds, Ayer points out that another mind seems to be other by definition and that we cannot reduce other minds to our own experiences. But the term 'other' is systematically ambiguous and there is no distinct class of other minds as such. Accordingly, we may legitimately make reasonable inferences concerning other minds on the basis of the analogy of our own experiences together with the variety of indirect evidence.



ACTIVITY: 1.1

Write three questions which you think as to be a sceptical question

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1.5 THE HISTORY OF SCEPTICISM AND ITS VARIETIES

Any view involving doubt about whether something exists, or about whether we can know something, or about whether we are justified in arguing in certain ways. Throughout the ages, many philosophers have held that

unless we know some things for certain we cannot know anything at all, or even legitimately think anything probable. Many of them, especially the Greek sceptics and Descartes, have therefore sought a sure mark or 'criterion' of when a proposition is true.

Xenophanes (c. 570–480 B.C.E.) declared that, even if the truth were stated, it would not be known. Gorgias (c. 485–380 B.C.E.) stated, "There is no reality, and if there were, we could not know of it, and even if we could, we could not communicate our knowledge." Heraclitus (c. 535–475 B.C.E.) had the idea that, just as you cannot step into the same river twice, everything is in flux; this theory suggests it is impossible to discover any fixed truth beyond what is expressed in the theory itself. Pyrrho (c. 365 – 270 BC) of Elis is considered as the founder of Scepticism. He had served as a soldier in the army of Alexander the great. It is said that Pyrrho campaigned with Alexander to India and could see the diversity of countries and the opinions of people during his tour. He could experience the beliefs of one section of people which is totally opposite of another section. Most astonishingly, a set of argument is equally good with another set of argument believed by its opposite section. In such circumstance, one is to go with one's direct experience in support of own set of argumentation. But an experience may be deceptive. As such, one can never assume the truth of one explanation rather than any other. Pyrrho suggests going with the flow of customs and practices prevail in the circumstance one happens to find oneself in. Consistently with that view, he said that nothing could be known.

Pyrrho's pupil, Timon of Philus (320 – 230 BC) tried to establish this with more substantial intellectual arguments. Timon denied the possibility of finding any self-evident principles to serve as the foundation of sciences. There is no premise grounding on which truth can be established. The reason is that all premises need some supportive premise or proof. In other words, if one seeks to demonstrate the truth of a proposition one needs the truth of its supportive premise or premises. The absence of such axioms becomes very clear. In this process, one is to go ad infinitum and all lines

of reasoning must be either circular or endless. As such, it is concluded that no ultimate ground of certainty can ever be reached.

After the death of Timon, his successor Arcesilaus (315 – 240 BC) became head of the Platonic Academy. It is pertinent to mention that Plato's Academy remained in the hands of sceptics for two hundred years. Arcesilaus propounded two important teachings. Firstly, one was to expound equally powerful argument on both sides of a question. Secondly, to offer to refute any case put forward by one of his students. Plato also stressed on the un-attainability of absolutes in our knowledge of this world. He himself, like Socrates, used to demolish theses put forward by his pupils; the proper attitude for the philosopher was to suspend judgment on all important topics. Plato began with the Myth of the Cave, which shows how and why human beings are in the dark about the truth of things. And this ignorance is almost universal.

Descartes expanded the realm of what was doubtful. Descartes begins by noting that the senses have deceived him on some occasions and that it is never prudent to trust what has occasionally misled one. But that ground for doubting the deliverance of our senses can be neutralized because, as he points out, we seem to be able to determine when our senses are not trustworthy. To neutralize a ground for doubt, d, is to grant that d is true but conjoined with something else worthy of assent such that the conjunction no longer provides a basis for doubt. So, the proposition that my senses have deceived me on some occasions is not a genuine ground for doubt because, even if it were granted as true, there is a way of neutralizing its effect.

Descartes started his journey from a mathematician to a philosopher by worrying the state of philosophy in his times. He believed that there is no firm and solid foundation of philosophy as like as mathematics. According to him, it was a method and not subject matter for which mathematics attains certitude. Therefore, Descartes advocated an introduction of a proper method in philosophy to bring forth certain lofty philosophical principles.

Therefore, he adopted the method of doubt in his philosophy. He employed two famous conjectures, the dream conjecture and the evil demon conjecture. For all I know, I might now be dreaming. This is Descartes' dream conjecture. And further, he said, for all I know, some malevolent demon devotes himself to deceiving me at every turn so that I regard as true and certain propositions that are in fact false. That supposition is Descartes' evil demon conjecture. Descartes begins by noting that the senses have deceived him on some occasions and that it is never prudent to trust what has occasionally misled one. But that ground for doubting the deliverance of our senses can be neutralized because, as he points out, we seem to be able to determine when our senses are not trustworthy. The proposition that my senses have deceived me on some occasions is not a genuine ground for doubt because, even if it were granted as true, there is a way of neutralizing its effect. Cartesian scepticism is only a starting point to find out the indubitable truth.

Hume's tendencies of his philosophy have led some to call it Skepticism. He was a sceptic in relation to the belief in the possibility of reason. He considered reason as the slave of passion. As an empiricist, he occupies a significant place in the history of western philosophy. It is said that Hume has been influential in rousing Kant from his dogmatic slumber. Hume opines that certainty is not possible. He made scepticism as the background of his philosophy with a complete display of sceptic arguments. At the same time, he said that obtaining knowledge on the basis of custom and imagination is possible. Hume formed a constructive philosophy of empiricism with the principles of impressions and ideas, the laws of association, imagination and his theory of relations. Particularly, he considered custom as the great guide to human life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Fill in the blanks:

a. …… is considered as the founder of skepticism.

b. This "ability account" of knowledge is attributed to ……..

c. ……. Categorized knowledge into Subjective, Inter-subjective and Objective.

Q 2: What are the three types of knowledge, according to Davidson?

Q 3: What is dogmatism?

Q 4: What is propositional knowledge?

Q 5: Give an example of ability knowledge

Q 6: "There is no reality, and if there were, we could not know of it, and even if we could, we could not communicate our knowledge." Who says

Q 7: What is skepticism?

Q 8: Name the philosopher who employed the method of doubt in philosophy?



1.6 LET US SUM UP

- Epistemology is the scientific study of knowledge. Everyone has a different opinion about what knowledge is, or knowledge is not. Philosophers are of diverse views regarding the varieties of knowledge. Knowledge is found in three categories: personal, procedural, and propositional. Russell draws a distinction between two sorts of knowledge, viz. knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. It is, in fact, a distinction between personal and procedural knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts.

- Scepticism is a method of philosophical enquiry that questions on the certainty of knowledge. The doubt that arises in human mind asks the

question if knowledge is attainable at all. It is understood as the view that we know nothing or that nothing is certain or that everything is open to doubt.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS

1) Descartes, Rene. Meditations. London: Cambridge University Press. 1911

2) Russell, Bertrand. The Problems of Philosophy. London: Oxford University Press. 1959.

3) Ryle, Gilbert. The Concept of Mind. New York: Routledge. 1949.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q No 1: a) Elis b) Ryle c) Davidson

Ans. to Q No 2: According to Donald Davidson, there are three types of knowledge, namely knowledge of our own minds, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of an external reality.

Ans to Q No 3: Dogmatism is a method of knowledge that accepts without a prior criticism of knowledge.

Ans to Q No 4: Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts. Mathematical equations could be an example of propositional knowledge, because it is knowledge of something, as opposed to knowledge of how to do something.

Ans to Q No 5: To know how to drive a car is to have a certain ability, that is, the ability to drive a car.

Ans to Q No 6: Gorgias

Ans to Q No 7: scepticism is a method that doubts the possibility of knowledge.

Ans to Q No 8: Descartes

1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Objective questions

Q 1: Write the literal meaning of scepticism

Q 2: Name one philosopher who are known as sceptic.

Q 3: What is epistemology?

Q 4: What is propositional knowledge?

Q 5: What is ability knowledge?

Q 6: What is skepticism?

Q 7: Name the philosopher who employed the method of doubt in philosophy?

B) Short questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q 1: Briefly explain the concept of skepticism.

Q 2: What are the basic tenets of skepticism? Briefly explain

Q 3: Explain briefly the history of scepticism

Q 4: Give a brief account of the varieties of knowledge.

C) Long questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Explain the varieties of knowledge.

Q.2: What is scepticism? What are its basic tenets? Explain

Q.3: Discuss the history of scepticism.

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