UNIT-1: PLATO: THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- Know what is Plato's theory of knowledge
- Know that Knowledge is not perception
- Know that Knowledge is not opinion.
- Know that all knowledge is knowledge through concept
- Know Four Grades of Knowledge
- Know that Knowledge is Justified true belief

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The theory of knowledge consists of the philosophical study of the nature, origin and, scope, and the conditions of its validity and the limitation of knowledge. The fundamental issue that remains unsolved in epistemology is the definition of knowledge. Philosophers at different time have proposed different definition of knowledge. Plato opens the discussion of knowledge

by telling first what knowledge is not. In defining knowledge his main object is to refute the false theories regarding knowledge.

1.3: PLATO'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE:

The first false theory which Plato refutes is that knowledge is perception. To refute this is the main object of the "Theaetetus."

1.4: KNOWLEDGE IS NOT PERCEPTION:

1. That knowledge is perception is the theory of Protagoras and the Sophists. What it amounts to is that what appears to each individual true is true for that individual. In other words, what appears to me is true for me, and, what appears to you in perception is true for you. But this is at any rate false in its application to our judgement of future events. For example, it may appear to me that I shall be Chief Justice next year. But instead of that I find myself, perhaps, in prison.

2. Perception yields contradictory impression. The same object appears large when near, small when removed to a distance. To know which is true, we must be able to exercise a choice to prefer one to another, to accept this and reject that. But if knowledge is perception, then we have no right to give one perception preference over another. For all perceptions are knowledge. All are true.

3. This doctrine renders all teachings, all discussion, proof, or disproof, impossible. Since all perceptions are equally true, the child's perceptions must be just as much the truth as those of his teachers. For if so, there is nothing to dispute about.

4. If perception is truth, man is the measure of all things, in his character as a percipient being. But since animals are also percipient beings, the lowest brute must be, equally with man, the measure of all things.

5. The theory of Protagoras contradicts itself. For Protagoras admits that what appears to me true is true. If, therefore, it appears to me true that the doctrine of Protagoras is false, Protagoras himself must admit that it is false.

6. It destroys the objectivity of truth and renders the distinction between truth and falsehood wholly meaningless.

7. If perception is knowledge and memory is not, and then it results is absurd. If a man shuts his eyes after seeing something, but remembers it, then he has no knowledge of what he remembers.

   So on the basis of above discussion we can conclude that knowledge is perception is an absurd doctrine.

1.5: KNOWLEDGE IS NOT OPINION:

The second false theory that Plato seeks to refute is that knowledge is opinion. Wrong opinion is clearly not knowledge. But even right opinion cannot be called knowledge. We often feel intuitively, or instinctively, that something is true, though we cannot give any definite grounds for our belief. The belief may be quite correct, but it is not, knowledge according to Plato. It is only right opinion. To possess knowledge, one must not only know that a thing is so, but why it is so. One must know the reasons. Knowledge must be full and complete understanding, rational comprehension, and not mere instinctive belief. It must be grounded on reason, and not on faith. It may chance that my belief or opinion turns out to be true. Suppose I believe that it will rain tomorrow. Tomorrow it rains. But still my belief is not knowledge, because I based my belief on intuition or instinct, not on reason-Right opinion or belief may often be a blind guess. According to Plato, it is not knowledge. To possess knowledge, one must not only know that a thing is so, but why it is so. One must know the reasons. Belief is false when it does not correspond to fact. It is true when it corresponds to facts. But even true belief is not always knowledge, in the proper sense of the terms. May be it

is a lucky guess. Belief, when supported by evidence and rational justification only, rises to the level of knowledge. I may believe that tomorrow it will rain. My belief is not supported by evidence. So even if it comes to be true and rains tomorrow my belief is not knowledge. But when the meteorological departure announces that it will rain tomorrow, it is knowledge, because this statement is supported by sufficient evidences. Only true belief is not knowledge. Again, opinion or belief may be true or false. But knowledge is always true. Again the object of opinion or belief is particular things and beings. But the object of knowledge is reality, the Ideas, or the Forms. The false theories being refuted, Plato passes on to the positive side of his theory of knowledge.

1.6: ALL KNOWLEDGE IS KNOWLEDGE THROUGH CONCEPT:

If knowledge is neither perception nor opinion, what is it? Plato adopts without alteration, the Socratic doctrine that all knowledge is knowledge through concepts. A concept, being the same thing as a definition, is something fixed and permanent, not liable to mutation according to the subjective impressions of the individual. It gives us objective truth. The concept 'man' does not change with individual human beings. Individual man may come and go, but the concept 'man' remains unchanged-knowledge has for its objects these concepts which are fixed and permanent. These are the same as definitions. Concepts are not subjective. These do not vary with individuals. This gives us objective truth. Knowledge is founded on reason, and reason is the faculty of concepts. Plato thus believed that genuine knowledge means knowledge of concepts. But he differs from Socrates when he says that these concepts not only belong to our minds, but they really exist outside our mind. Our concepts are true according as they correspond to the real concepts or Ideas or Forms. Knowledge is for Plato "the correspondence of thought and reality or being."

1.7: FOUR GRADES OF KNOWLEDGE:

In 'Republic' Plato speaks of four grades of knowledge corresponding to four knowing abilities of human mind. These are following:

The first two levels make the level of opinion or belief (perception). The second two levels are super-sensible levels of reason.

(1) The lowest grade of knowledge is connected with our imagination. It deals with illusion and dream images of particular things and beings, e.g., the so called knowledge of the image or copy of particular 'man'- this or that man. This level of knowledge is not at all 'knowledge' in the true sense.

(2) The next higher level of knowledge consists in perceptual belief and opinion, e.g., knowledge of a particular man. This we get through perception. Individual man is the copy of the Idea 'man'. Here the object of knowledge is copy of concepts.

According to Plato neither of these two levels are knowledge proper.

(3) The next higher level of knowledge consists in knowledge of numbers and figures as is found in Mathematics and Geometry. Here the knowing ability is understanding or intellect. Which is inferior to reason according to Plato? This knowledge, though rational, is based on some self-evident principles that intellect cannot justify categorically but takes them for granted hypothetically.

(4) The highest level of knowledge is based on Pure Reason. Here we have knowledge of the Ideas or Forms e.g., the knowledge of 'man' in general, or the Idea or Form 'Man'. This knowledge is infallible, and is of Reality.

1.8: KNOWLEDGE AS JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF:

One most widely held definition of knowledge is knowledge is justified true belief. Plato in his book "Theaetetus" discussed this definition of knowledge. This definition of knowledge entails three conditions of knowledge.

The first condition is that truth condition of knowledge. This condition simply implies that what we claim to know must be true.

The second condition of knowledge is belief condition. We must not only know that something is true but we must also believe that it is true. One cannot legitimately say that I know that P is true, but I don't believe it.

The third condition of knowledge is the justification condition. If someone claims that he knows P than he must have a evidence for P or he must have a reason to believe P. we may formulate these conditions as follows _ " If S knows that P" then s is completely justified in believing that P". Here letter S stand for subject of knowledge and letter P stand for proposition. On the basis of this definition, conditions for knowledge can be provided in the following way.

S knows that P iff (1) P is true

(2) S believes that P

(3) S is justified in believing that P

But the definition of knowledge as justified true believe is criticised by various philosopher. The most famous criticism was put forwarded by the Edmund Gettier in his paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" which is published in 1963. In this paper Gettier through various counter examples tried to show that even though all the three conditions of knowledge are satisfied, we cannot claim to have knowledge. For example let us consider one counter example. Someone may look at clock to see the time. Normally the clock gives the right time. But the clock happens to have stopped. But

it stopped at 12.00 PM and co- incidentally he looks at the clock at 12.00 PM itself. But he got accidently correct time. So here all the three conditions are fulfilled, but still we will not say that he has knowledge. But in spite of such criticism this definition of knowledge has continued to remain highly influential.

1.9: CONCLUSION:

On the basis of the above analysis we can conclude that although Plato has started his theory of knowledge negatively by saying that what knowledge is not. He concluded his theory of knowledge by giving positive definition of what knowledge is. First positive definition is that he accepted the Socrates definition of knowledge that all knowledge is knowledge through concept. Plato believed that genuine knowledge means knowledge of concepts. Knowledge is founded on reason, and reason is the faculty of concepts. In "Theaetetus" Plato give another definition of knowledge that knowledge is justified true belief. This definition of knowledge remains highly influential in epistemology although it faces some criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: "Knowledge is perception"- who said this?

Q2: "Man is the measure of all things"- who said this?

Q3: "Knowledge is opinion"- who rejected this?

Q4: "All Knowledge is Knowledge Through concept"- who first define this?

Q5: What is the definition of knowledge according to Plato?

Q6: "Knowledge as Justified True Belief" who gives counter example to this definition?

Q7: what are the three conditions of knowledge according to Plato?



7.10: LET US SUM UP

- In defining knowledge, first of all Plato tried to refute the false theories regarding knowledge.
- The first such false theory which he refutes is that knowledge is perception.
- That knowledge is perception is the theory of Protagoras and the Sophists.
- Perception yields contradictory impression. The same object appears large when near, small when removed to a distance.
- If perception is truth, man is the measure of all things.
- "Knowledge is perception"- this doctrine destroys the objectivity of truth
- That Knowledge is opinion is the second false theory that Plato seeks to refute.
- Wrong opinion is clearly not knowledge.
- But even right opinion cannot be called knowledge. We often feel intuitively or instinctively, that something is true, though we cannot give any definite grounds for our belief. The belief may be quite correct, but it is not, knowledge according to Plato. It is only right opinion.
- To possess knowledge, one must not only know that a thing is so, but why it is so. One must know the reasons.
- After refuting the false theories Plato passes on to the positive side of his theory of knowledge
- Plato adopts without alteration, the Socratic doctrine that all knowledge is knowledge through concepts.

- A concept, being the same thing as a definition, is something fixed and permanent, not liable to mutation according to the subjective impressions of the individual. It gives us objective truth.
- In 'Republic' Plato speaks of four grades of knowledge corresponding to four knowing abilities of human mind.
- The highest level of knowledge is based on Pure Reason. Here we have knowledge of the Ideas or Forms
- The lowest grade of knowledge is connected with our imagination.
- The next higher level of knowledge consists in perceptual belief and opinion, e.g., knowledge of a particular man
- The next higher level of knowledge consists in knowledge of numbers and figures as is found in Mathematics and Geometry.
- Plato in his book "Theaetetus" gives the definition of knowledge as knowledge is justified true belief.
- The first condition is that truth condition of knowledge.
- The second condition of knowledge is belief condition. We must not only know that something is true but we must also believe that it is true
- The third condition of knowledge is the justification condition. If someone claims that he knows P than he must have a evidence for P.
- Edmund Gettier in his paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" which is published in 1963 criticized the definition of knowledge as justified true belief.

7.11: FURTHER READING

1) Feldman, Richard. (2003). Epistemology. Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River.

2) Gettier, Edmund L. (1963). "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Analysis 23(6):121-123

3) Masih, Y. (1993). A Critical History of Western Philosophy. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Pvt Ltd.

4) Russell, Bertrand.(2004). History of Western Philosophy. London, Routledge Classics.

5) Thilly, Frank.(1983)). A History Of Philosophy. New Delhi, SBE Publishers.

1.12: ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: "Knowledge is perception"- Protagoras said this.

Ans to Q 2: "Man is the measure of all things"- Protagoras said this.

Ans to Q 3: "Knowledge is opinion"- Plato rejected this.

Ans to Q 4: Socrates. Plato accepted Socrates definition.

Ans to Q 5: Plato adopts without alteration, the Socratic doctrine that all knowledge is knowledge through concepts. Plato in "Theaetetus" defines knowledge as Justified True Belief.

Ans to Q 6: Edmund Gettier in his paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" which is published in 1963.

Ans to Q 7: 1.Truth Condition

2. Belief Condition

3. Justification Condition

1.13: MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions:

Q 1: What is the first condition of knowledge?

Q 2: What is the second condition of knowledge?

Q 3: What is the third condition of knowledge?

Q 4: What is the highest level of knowledge?

Q 5: what is first false theory about knowledge that Plato refutes?

Q 6: what is second false theory about knowledge that Plato refutes?

B. Short Questions: (Write in about 150 words)

Q 1: Write briefly why perception is not knowledge according to Plato?

Q 2: Write briefly why knowledge is not opinion according to Plato?

Q 3: Briefly explain what are the four grades of knowledge according to Plato?

Q 4: What is the counter example to the definition of knowledge as justified true belief?

C. Long Questions: (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Explain the Plato's theory of knowledge.

Q 2: Explain broadly how Plato refutes the false theories regarding knowledge.

Q 3: Explain broadly the concept that all knowledge is knowledge through concept.

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