

The Idea of Knowledge: A Philosophical Attempt Towards a Provisional Definition

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Abstract

The concept of knowledge is one of the key concepts of philosophy. Here we argue that giving an independent definition of knowledge is not possible. To define knowledge we need the attempts to define information and wisdom. The process of knowing and knowledge understood as the products of this process are different yet the definition of knowledge cannot be independent of the process of knowing. Human existence is imbedded in a network of social relationships and this network has a biological root too. They constitute a context and knowledge is deeply embedded in this context. The idea of knowledge is not a context free idea. It is not much helpful to understand knowledge as either logically indefinable or logically primitive in nature. A definition of knowledge can at most be open ended and it has a functional workability.

Keywords : Knowledge, context, wisdom, justification, condition, logos.

The concept of knowledge is one of the key concepts of philosophy. Information, fact, inference, knowledge, cognition, wisdom etc. collectively constitute a cluster. One word of this cluster is related to the other words of the cluster. All these words are ultimately connected with certain activities which constitute the identity of humans. Therefore, it is very difficult to give a definition of knowledge independent of the definitions of the other concepts of this cluster. Philosophers often put emphasis upon propositional knowledge. To have knowledge and at the

same time to be incapable of giving linguistic or propositional expression to this knowledge is often thought to be a contradiction. Philosophers have recognized that there is a practical dimension of knowledge. Often knowing is associated with the mastery of unarguable skills or the ability to perform unarguable acts. This distinction is behind Ryle's famous distinction between knowing how and knowing that. All these have made presenting the definition of knowledge a complicated issue.

Knowledge, Information and Wisdom

We attempt to point out in the very beginning that an independent definition of knowledge is not possible. We would like to offer the following observations to support our point –

First, we may point out that many philosophers have presented a distinction between knowing that and knowing how (Russell, Bertrand, 1959, pp.25-32). Knowing that is often regarded as provisional knowledge. An independent definition of knowledge in this context is not possible to present. The definition of knowledge here is related with the definition of proposition. Again knowing how is generally connected with performance and acts. Here an independent definition of knowledge is not possible. To define knowledge in this context means to refer to the idea of performance. This definition of knowledge in other words is connected with the definition of performance.

Secondly, to define knowledge we may have to refer to a gradation of the cognitive process. In this gradational process factual information, knowledge and wisdom form a hierarchical order. Factual information is for one reason or another placed at the lowest level. The synthetic activity of the mind is not very much operative in the level of factual information and that is why perhaps it is placed at the rock bottom. Sometimes knowledge is placed a bit above factual information, perhaps because discrimination as a cognitive process is very much operative in this level. It is in this level inter relationships are discovered and / or established. Wisdom is generally placed at the highest point of this hierarchical order. A sense of depth is usually present in wisdom and also a sense of the mystical is often presented in wisdom. In such a situation an independent definition of knowledge is not possible. Every definition of knowledge which is attempted will

necessarily have definitions of 'information' and 'wisdom'. Wisdom is a very complex concept and repeated attempts in diverse fields to offer a definition has failed (Curnow, 2015, p. 8).

Thirdly, right down from the days of Plato knowledge is defined as 'Justified true belief' in his book the Theaetetus (Plato, Theaetetus). It is one of the four definitions of knowledge found in the Theaetetus of Plato. In that dialogue Socrates examined this definition of knowledge apart from the other three definitions which were comparatively of lesser scope. But Socrates found this definition of knowledge also to be unsatisfactory. Let us for the moment take this definition to be a satisfactory one. If we examine this definition we find that it refers to three concepts. They are the concepts of truth, justification and belief. So here we find the definition of knowledge dependent upon the definitions of 'belief', 'justification' and 'truth.' Belief is a mentalistic concept in the sense that it is not simply a product but also imbedded in the process of believing. Justification is connected with ascertainment and this ascertainment is possible when some objective, mind independent criterion (or criteria) is involved. Truth is one element of a binary pair, the other being falsehood. Thus we see here that definitions of belief, mentalistic processes, products of mentalistic processes, justification, objective criteria of ascertainment, truth, falsity etc. All these collectively constitute, to use a phrase by Wittgenstein, family resemblances (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 2009, pp. 66-67). Here also we see that independent definition of knowledge is not possible.

Fourthly, the concept of knowledge is also found to refer to such concepts as perception, demonstration and intuition. At various times different philosophers have attempted to write about the gradations of knowledge. At this point we may briefly mention Locke's account of knowledge (Woozley, 1964, pp. 325-331). Locke stated that it is by means of ideas we acquire knowledge. This is not exactly a definition of knowledge. It is simply a statement about the process by which knowledge is obtained. Locke stated that knowledge is basically the perception of agreement or disagreement of our ideas. Agreement is here understood as 'connection' and disagreement is understood as 'repugnancy'. If this is accepted as a definition of knowledge then this definition is found to be related to the concepts of 'agreement', 'disagreement', 'connection', 'repugnancy' and 'idea'. Locke states about the 'direct perception' of agreement and disagreement of two ideas. This he called intuitive knowledge. Here we find the additional concept of 'direct perception'. Here Locke also writes about the knowledge produced by intervention of ideas and calls it demonstrative knowledge. 'Intervention', 'demonstration' etc. are further concepts by which a form of knowledge is sought to be understood and defined. Sensitive knowledge as understood by Locke involves confirmation given by perception. The analysis of this form of knowledge as given by Locke leads to two concepts. One is 'confirmation' and the other is 'perception'. In the definition of sensitive knowledge we find the idea of 'confirmation by perception'. This analysis shows us that Locke's definition of knowledge is presented in the context of a network formed by a large number of related ideas and concepts. A totally autonomous definition of knowledge is not found in the philosophy of Locke.

Definition of Knowledge and the Process of Obtaining Knowledge

Indian philosophers always attempted to draw a distinction between knowledge and the way of obtaining knowledge. In the Nyaya system we find various terms which are related to the concept of knowledge. These terms are jnana, buddhi, upalabdhi and anubhava. Generally jnana and buddhi are regarded as equivalence. Jnana or buddhi is defined as the revelation of object. Hence in the Nyaya text we find the definition of knowledge as follows - arthaprakaso buddhish ("buddhi or knowledge is the manifestation of object.") (Chandradhrar Sarma, Delhi, p. 192).

In the Nyaya system the term 'prama' is also frequently used in this context. Prama is defined as the right apprehension of object. The right apprehension of object is called in Indian philosophy 'yatharthanubhava'. In Indian epistemology the means of obtaining valid knowledge is studied in details. At least six major ways of obtaining valid knowledge is discussed in Indian philosophy. The definition of knowledge in Indian philosophy is closely related with the means of obtaining knowledge (pramana). In western philosophy also there is a detailed discussion of the means of obtaining knowledge. The emphasis is here upon perceptual knowledge. In the empiricist tradition it is held that all knowledge is ultimately reducible to perceptual knowledge. Analytic reasoning also gives knowledge, specially the type of knowledge found in mathematics

and logic. But there is an important difference between the Indian view about the means of knowledge and the western view. Memory and hypothetical reasoning are both regarded as means of knowledge in western epistemology. But in Indian epistemology memory and hypothetical reasoning are not included within knowledge.

In the type discussion which we have just entered into there is often no drawing of distinction between knowledge and means of knowledge. When we say that memory is not included in knowledge by the Indian philosophers we mean that memory is not regarded as a means of knowledge. In such statements the distinction between knowledge and the means of knowledge becomes blurred. This is not simply a matter of semantic impression. It indicates the deeper problem of the difficulty of keeping apart knowledge and the means of knowledge.

In logic there is a fallacy called the 'genetic fallacy' (Ted Honderich, 2005). Genetic fallacy is that fallacy which arises out of our attempt to explain something (some phenomenon, some theory, some hypothesis etc.) in terms of the origin of it. For example if psycho analysis is sought to be explained in terms of its origin in mental makeup of its founder, Freud then the genetic fallacy is committed. Similarly if a mathematical theorem is sought to be explained in terms of the socio economic setting in which the mathematician, who is the originator of this theory works, then we have the genetic fallacy. Logicism, that was advocated by Russell and Whitehead cannot be explained in terms of the socio economic condition of England prevalent in the time in which 'Principia Mathematica' was written.

To a certain extent the genetic fallacy is committed when knowledge is sought to be explained in terms of its origin. But this is a qualified statement. Knowledge as understood as an epistemological concept has intimate link with the means through which it arises. The means through which knowledge arises are not to be understood in terms of the general makeup of the specific originator of knowledge or the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which the particular bit of knowledge arises. Here the origin of knowledge refers to the general and not specific conditions of the origin of knowledge. These general conditions are connected with the epistemic cartography of the human mind. So when it is said that to define knowledge we have to bring in the conditions that are generally responsible for the emergence of knowledge we have not committed the genetic fallacy. The genetic fallacy is committed when specific (that means with particular reference to socio temporal locus) conditions responsible for the origin of something are employed to exclusively account for some phenomenon. Perception, inference etc. as the origin of knowledge are often brought into the definition of knowledge because the nature of perceptual knowledge can be explained only with reference to the process of perception that is responsible for the origin of it or the nature of inferential knowledge can be explained only with reference to the process of inference that is involved in the origin of it. The genetic fallacy is here not committed simply because of the idea of genetic fallacy is not relevant here.

To explain something exclusively in terms of its origin may be regarded as a form of reductionism. But when we try to understand the nature of knowledge in terms of the origin of it then it cannot be regarded as a form of reductionism. There are various forms of knowledge generated through the fulfillment of different conditions. Perceptual knowledge arises when there is a contact between the sense organ and the object of knowledge. There is also a constitutive role played by sensibility and hence many philosophers mention two stages of this type of knowledge – the first stage in which the constitutive role of the mind is absent and the second stage in which this constitutive role is present. The cognitive conditions required to be fulfilled in inferential knowledge are different from those conditions that are required to be fulfilled in perceptual knowledge. So while defining perceptual knowledge we have to refer to one form of generative condition and while defining inferential knowledge we have to take into account another type of generative condition. There is hardly any scope for reductionism here. It is not possible to overlook the constitutive process of knowledge while trying to have an account of the nature of knowledge and a definition of knowledge on the basis of this nature.

Knowledge and its Context

The concept of knowledge is a context oriented concept. There are certain conditions that are to be fulfilled if knowledge is to arise. These conditions are presentable in a graded series.

First, there is a neurological basis of the act of knowing and the product of this act that we call knowledge. The external world through our sense organs produces certain chemical and electrical changes in the nerves which ultimately impacts upon the central nervous system and the bio – chemical changes are synthesized somehow in the central nervous system and as a result knowledge is produced. It is the extraneous behavioral dimension of knowledge; but it has not to be confused with any analysis of the intentionality or the context – dimension of knowledge.

Secondly, there are certain broad biological factors responsible for the origin of knowledge. Man is after all an ape. But as an ape it has the ability to contemplate upon the course of the entire universe and to find out an appropriate way of maintaining its proper relationship with the others. Biologically knowledge may be understood as a tool or an instrument by which man hopes to survive successfully in the universe this instrumentalist explanation of knowledge as found in the philosophy of John Dewey (Dutta, Hirendramohan, 1970, pp. 198 ff) is not a total explanation of knowledge but it specially brings to focus the biological dimension of knowledge. This point also brings to focus the issue that biologically the process of knowing is not exclusively a human process. Man shares this process with other living beings including plants. But in the case of many other living beings the process of knowing is controlled by certain messages that are genetically transmitted and which might be called instincts. In the case of man a higher and critical level is attained in the process of knowing. In the course of his biological development man found that this higher level of knowing beyond the compulsion of instincts has greater value.

Thirdly, there is a social dimension of knowledge and this dimension cannot be reduced without any residue to the earlier two dimensions. Society is a network and in this network various relationships mutually crisscross. Man as a social being has to pay sufficient attention to such networks and these networks are further rooted in what Wittgenstein called different forms of life (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 2009, pp. 19, 23, 241, 345). There are broad social context within which the significance of knowledge is to be sought.

Fourthly, there is a broad goal – oriented context of knowledge. This concept of goal or telos was very much present in the philosophy of Aristotle. But many philosophers under the influence of scientism have set aside this aspect of goal. The teleological is mistakenly thought to be unscientific. But when we try to give a holistic explanation of knowledge in which the context of knowledge and the origin of knowledge are sought to be understood in terms of some goal then the teleological dimension gets its due acknowledgement. Even a narrow understanding of factual knowledge has to take in the ultimate analysis an adequate account of this holistic aspect of knowledge.

Fifthly, knowledge has an inner subjective dimension. It is not just one objective focal point among others. When Plato introduced the idea of resemblance in his account of knowledge then he specially took note of this subjective dimension of knowledge. A sense of certainty generally accompanies knowledge but by itself it is not enough to establish a belief to be knowledge. The individual subjective dimension of knowledge is a very noteworthy dimension of it. Our analytic failure is that all our tools of analysis are generally designed to analyse objective co – relates and inter relationships. The analytic tools simply cannot do justice to the subjective and the intentional dimension of knowledge.

All the above dimensions collectively constitute the context in which knowledge emerge and in which the significance and context of knowledge are imbedded. It is this broad context which is always to be kept in mind when we try to understand the nature of knowledge. No understanding of knowledge is possible outside of and independent of this context. The basic point is the determination of the elements belonging to this context. The elements belonging to the context in which factual knowledge arises cannot be identical with the elements in which demonstrative knowledge arises or intuitive knowledge arises. But there are definitely certain common factors. When knowledge was defined by some philosophers as justified true belief then there

was an attempt to bring forth certain common elements. Belief, truth and justification are thought to be these common elements. Plato introduced the idea of ‘logos’ to emphasize the nature of knowledge. The Greek word ‘logos’ has been found to be a complex word that defy translation. Anthony Kenny has pointed out that there are different English words that are employed to translate the Greek word ‘logos’ (Kenny, Anthony, 2010, p. 125). These words are – (i) ‘word’, (ii) ‘sentence’, (iii) ‘discourse’ and (iv) ‘reason’. Kenny pointed out that “ One way in which one can give a ‘logos’ of a thought is by expressing it in words. But being able to articulate a thought in this sense cannot be what makes the difference between true thought and knowledge, since anyone who is not dumb is capable of doing so (Kenny, Anthony, 2010, p. 125). Kenny suggested that “ a logos maybe a kind of analysis.” ‘Logos’ may mean giving a description of something that is uniquely true of the thing that we claim to know. But there are other possible meanings of ‘logos’ and these possible meanings include, ‘justification’, ‘reason’ and ‘evidence.’ All these are important factors in the determination of the context in which knowledge emerges. But we cannot point out that there is just one factor belonging to the context in which knowledge emerges.

In philosophy there is a strong tendency to abstract a concept out of the context in which it is imbedded. The word ‘abstract’ is employed here in the sense of “take out of ; extract ; remove” (Pearsall, Judy and Trumble, Bill, 2008). The general focus of philosophy is upon conceptual analysis and this perhaps necessitates such a form of abstraction. This form of abstraction is present when philosophers try to understand and define the concept of knowledge. But this should not make us neglect the context out of which knowledge emerges. There is a broad biological, social and individual context (almost akin to what Husserl called the ‘life – world’) in which knowledge emerges and without reference to which the entire concept of knowledge as well as the process of knowing cannot be understood. The social character of this context has been specially emphasized by philosophers like Habermas (Habermas, 1987).

This context with reference to which knowledge has to be understood is a complex structural realm. The elements of this structured realm are manifold. The biological struggle for existence requires an adaptive and success oriented mechanism for the special kind of ape that we are and the biological struggle is the reference point of many phenomenon that are included in knowledge. The structured realm which constitutes the living context of knowledge contains within it diverse beliefs, feelings, values and cultural practices. The process of knowledge is functionally dependent upon the changes of these beliefs, values, cultural practices etc. The employment of the scientific method has given a certain amount of objectivity and universality to the process of knowing. This structured realm (or realms) forms the context of knowledge and knowledge cannot be understood and defined outside of and independent of this living context. Gadamer pointed out that prejudices are present in all our understanding. Our knowledge is deeply imbedded in our culture (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 277 ff). A completely context independent concept of knowledge is not possible under these circumstances.

Is Knowledge Logically Indefinable

At this point we may briefly discuss the idea of the indefinability of knowledge. We would like to leave the question of the definition of knowledge an open question. In the sense that the attempt to define knowledge has to be kept open. But we will argue that within the existing framework of the idea of definition knowledge cannot be brought within an definition what so ever.

We are not here concerned with the lexical definition of knowledge. The lexical definition of knowledge will simply report the meaning of the word knowledge as actually used by the English – speaking people. For that we may consult any standard English dictionary. But it is clear that a dictionary is not the replacement of philosophy. Philosophy is generally concerned with conceptual analysis, while a dictionary is concerned with recording the meanings of words as actually being used by certain language speaking communities at a specific period of time.

We are not also concerned with the stipulative definition of the word 'knowledge.' "A writer or speaker is free to use a word (or phrase) in any sense he likes. This word will mean what the writer or speaker wants it to mean. Such definitions are called stipulative definitions. In a stipulative definition we deliberately assign a meaning to a word" (Basantani, K.T., 1971, p. 296).

We are not looking for a persuasive definition of the word knowledge. The aim of persuasive definition is to influence attributes but such an emotive factor can at most be accidental to a definition of knowledge and hence it is clear that we are not here attempting to provide a persuasive definition of knowledge.

Aristotle stated that definition is the statement of genus and differentia of that which is being defined (per genus et differentiam). If knowledge is understood as a species then what is the genus to which it belongs? What are the other species of that genus? What are the attributes (differentia) that distinguish knowledge from the other species that are included in this genus? There are no adequate answers to these questions and therefore it is clear that an appropriate definition of 'knowledge' is not possible. Moreover the belief that there is some 'essence' represented or indicated by the 'knowledge' and it is our task to find out that essence might turn out to be an essentialist philosophy. Terms like 'knowledge' are family resemblance terms depending on diverse contexts and usages and therefore the attempt to find out some hidden core might turn out to be a futile exercise.

We may consider two options. One is treating knowledge as indefinable and the other is treating knowledge as logically primitive. We have found that knowledge is connected with a number of modes of cognition like wisdom, information etc. and hence it has a host of linguistic and conceptual relatives and therefore it is not possible to treat it as logically primitive. Moreover the conceptual of logical primitive is not very helpful when we have a broad network of contents to place the knowledge. When we consider a concept to be logically primitive then thereby we mean that this concept cannot be placed within any other concept or cannot be subsumed within some other concept. But the concept of knowledge has to be placed and understood always in a context and this context is constituted by diverse factors. The process of subsumption is not relevant here and hence the idea of treating knowledge as logically primitive is not an acceptable idea.

Almost for a similar reason it is not useful to treat knowledge as indefinable. When we attempt to define knowledge (even though these definitions are ultimately not acceptable) we refer to a network of concepts and a number of functions performed by knowledge. A strict definition of knowledge is not possible but the idea of definition has various ramifications. More specifically knowledge may be loosely defined by placing the process of knowing it in a network of activities serving certain biological and cognitive functions. But such an open ended definition of knowledge is subject to revision and accommodation.

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