

# Epistemology

PHI201



University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre  
Open and Distance Learning Course Series Development  
Version 1.0 ev1



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*General Editor:* Prof. Bayo Okunade

**University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre**

University of Ibadan,  
Nigeria

Telex: 31128NG

Tel: +234 (80775935727)

E-mail: [ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

Website: [www.dlc.ui.edu.ng](http://www.dlc.ui.edu.ng)

## Vice-Chancellor's Message

The Distance Learning Centre is building on a solid tradition of over two decades of service in the provision of External Studies Programme and now Distance Learning Education in Nigeria and beyond. The Distance Learning mode to which we are committed is providing access to many deserving Nigerians in having access to higher education especially those who by the nature of their engagement do not have the luxury of full time education. Recently, it is contributing in no small measure to providing places for teeming Nigerian youths who for one reason or the other could not get admission into the conventional universities.

These course materials have been written by writers specially trained in ODL course delivery. The writers have made great efforts to provide up to date information, knowledge and skills in the different disciplines and ensure that the materials are user-friendly.

In addition to provision of course materials in print and e-format, a lot of Information Technology input has also gone into the deployment of course materials. Most of them can be downloaded from the DLC website and are available in audio format which you can also download into your mobile phones, IPod, MP3 among other devices to allow you listen to the audio study sessions. Some of the study session materials have been scripted and are being broadcast on the university's Diamond Radio FM 101.1, while others have been delivered and captured in audio-visual format in a classroom environment for use by our students. Detailed information on availability and access is available on the website. We will continue in our efforts to provide and review course materials for our courses.

However, for you to take advantage of these formats, you will need to improve on your I.T. skills and develop requisite distance learning Culture. It is well known that, for efficient and effective provision of Distance learning education, availability of appropriate and relevant course materials is a *sine qua non*. So also, is the availability of multiple plat form for the convenience of our students. It is in fulfilment of this, that series of course materials are being written to enable our students study at their own pace and convenience.

It is our hope that you will put these course materials to the best use.



Prof. Abel Idowu Olayinka

Vice-Chancellor

## **Foreword**

As part of its vision of providing education for “Liberty and Development” for Nigerians and the International Community, the University of Ibadan, Distance Learning Centre has recently embarked on a vigorous repositioning agenda which aimed at embracing a holistic and all encompassing approach to the delivery of its Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. Thus we are committed to global best practices in distance learning provision. Apart from providing an efficient administrative and academic support for our students, we are committed to providing educational resource materials for the use of our students. We are convinced that, without an up-to-date, learner-friendly and distance learning compliant course materials, there cannot be any basis to lay claim to being a provider of distance learning education. Indeed, availability of appropriate course materials in multiple formats is the hub of any distance learning provision worldwide.

In view of the above, we are vigorously pursuing as a matter of priority, the provision of credible, learner-friendly and interactive course materials for all our courses. We commissioned the authoring of, and review of course materials to teams of experts and their outputs were subjected to rigorous peer review to ensure standard. The approach not only emphasizes cognitive knowledge, but also skills and humane values which are at the core of education, even in an ICT age.

The development of the materials which is on-going also had input from experienced editors and illustrators who have ensured that they are accurate, current and learner-friendly. They are specially written with distance learners in mind. This is very important because, distance learning involves non-residential students who can often feel isolated from the community of learners.

It is important to note that, for a distance learner to excel there is the need to source and read relevant materials apart from this course material. Therefore, adequate supplementary reading materials as well as other information sources are suggested in the course materials.

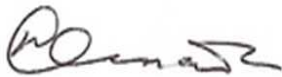
Apart from the responsibility for you to read this course material with others, you are also advised to seek assistance from your course facilitators especially academic advisors during your study even before the interactive session which is by design for revision. Your academic advisors will assist you using convenient technology including Google Hang Out, You Tube, Talk Fusion, etc. but you have to take advantage of these. It is also going to be of immense advantage if you complete assignments as at when due so as to have necessary feedbacks as a guide.

The implication of the above is that, a distance learner has a responsibility to develop requisite distance learning culture which includes diligent and disciplined self-study, seeking available administrative and academic support and acquisition of basic information technology skills. This is why you are encouraged to develop your computer skills by availing yourself the opportunity of training that the Centre’s provide and put these into use.

In conclusion, it is envisaged that the course materials would also be useful for the regular students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria who are faced with a dearth of high quality textbooks. We are therefore, delighted to present these titles to both our distance learning students and the university's regular students. We are confident that the materials will be an invaluable resource to all.

We would like to thank all our authors, reviewers and production staff for the high quality of work.

Best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bayo Okunade', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Bayo Okunade

Director

## Course Development Team

Content Authoring

Bolatito A. Lanre-Abass Ph.D

Content Editor

Prof. Remi Raji-Oyelade

Production Editor

Dr. Gloria O. Adedaja

Learning Design & Technologist

Folajimi Olambo Fakoya

Managing Editor

Ogunmefun Oladele Abiodun

General Editor

Prof. Bayo Okunade





# Contents

## About this course manual 1

How this course manual is structured.....	1
---	---

## Course Overview 3

Welcome to EpistemologyPHI201.....	3
Course outcomes.....	3
Timeframe.....	3
How to be successful in this course .....	4
Need help?.....	5
Academic Support.....	5
Activities .....	5
Assignment .....	6
Assessments.....	6
Bibliography.....	6

## Getting around this course manual 8

Margin icons.....	8
-------------------	---

## Study Session 1 9

The Nature of Epistemology.....	9
Introduction .....	9
1.1 Defining Epistemology .....	9
1.2 What is Knowledge?.....	10
1.3 Kinds of Knowledge.....	11
1.4 Sources of Knowledge .....	11
1.5 How is Knowledge related to Belief and Justification?.....	22
Study Session Summary .....	22
Assessment.....	23

## Study Session 2 24

Scepticism .....	24
Introduction .....	24
2.1 What is Scepticism? .....	24
2.2 Historical Background of Sceptical Tendencies .....	24
2.3 Methodological and Philosophical Sceptics in Philosophy .....	25
2.4 Sceptical Arguments in Philosophy .....	27

Study Session Summary .....	30
Assessment .....	30
<b>Study Session 3</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Plato's Theatetus .....	31
Introduction .....	31
3.1 A Review of the Theatetus .....	31
Study Session Summary .....	35
Assessment .....	35
<b>Study Session 4</b> .....	<b>36</b>
The Philosophy of Perception .....	36
Introduction .....	36
4.1 What is Perception? .....	36
4.2 Levels of Perception .....	36
4.3 Processes of Perception .....	37
4.4 Principles of Perception .....	37
4.5 Factors influencing Perception .....	38
4.6 Theories of Perception .....	39
Study Session Summary .....	41
Assessment .....	42
<b>Study Session 5</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Traditional Account of Knowledge .....	43
Introduction .....	43
5.1 Standard Account of Knowledge .....	43
Study Session Summary .....	48
Assessment .....	48
<b>Study Session 6</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Theories of Truth .....	49
Introduction .....	49
6.1 Coherence Theory of Truth .....	49
6.2 Correspondence Theory of Truth .....	50
6.3 Pragmatic theory of Truth .....	51
Study Session Summary .....	52
Assessment .....	53
<b>Study Session 7</b> .....	<b>54</b>
Foundationalism .....	54
Introduction .....	54
7.1 What is Foundationalism? .....	54
7.2 Infinite Regress Problem in Epistemology .....	55
7.3 Foundationalism as a Theory of Knowledge .....	56
7.4 Foundationalism as a Theory of Justification .....	57
7.5 Classical Foundationalism versus Fallibilist Foundationalism .....	58

Study Session Summary .....	60
Assessment .....	60
<b>Study Session 8</b>	<b>61</b>
Coherentism .....	61
Introduction .....	61
8.1 What is Coherentism? .....	61
8.2 Coherentism, Foundationalism and the Problem of Infinite Regress .....	63
8.3 Coherentism as a Theory of Justification .....	64
8.4 Critique of Coherentism .....	65
Study Session Summary .....	67
Assessment .....	68
<b>Study Session 9</b>	<b>69</b>
Contextualism .....	69
Introduction .....	69
9.1 Defining Contextualism .....	69
9.2 David B. Annis on Contextualism .....	70
9.3 Keith DeRose Contextualist Argument .....	71
9.4 Objections to Contextualism .....	73
Study Session Summary .....	74
Assessment .....	74
<b>Study Session 10</b>	<b>75</b>
Naturalized Epistemology .....	75
Introduction .....	75
10.1 What is Naturalized Epistemology? .....	75
10.2 Development of Naturalized Epistemology .....	77
10.3 Features of Traditional Epistemology .....	77
10.4 Contrasts between Naturalized Epistemology and Traditional Epistemology .....	78
10.5 David Hume and Naturalized Epistemology .....	78
10.6 Three Distinctive Features of Quine's Naturalized Epistemology .....	79
Study Session Summary .....	82
Assessment .....	83
<b>Study Session 11</b>	<b>84</b>
Social Epistemology .....	84
Introduction .....	84
11.1 What is Social Epistemology? .....	84
11.2 Classically-Oriented Social Epistemology .....	84
11.3 Historical Account of Truth-Oriented Social Epistemology .....	85
11.4 Applied Social Epistemology .....	86
Study Session Summary .....	93
Assessment .....	93
<b>Study Session 12</b>	<b>94</b>
Feminist Epistemology .....	94
Introduction .....	94

---

12.1 The Basis Feminist Epistemology.....	94
12.2 Issues in Feminist Epistemology.....	95
12.3 The Essential Arguments in Feminist Epistemology.....	97
12.4 Aims of Feminist Epistemology.....	100
12.5 Stages in the Development of Feminist Epistemology .....	101
Study Session Summary .....	104
Assessment.....	104
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Feedbacks on Self Assessment Questions (SAQS)</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>117</b>
	<b>117</b>

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# About this course manual

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Epistemology PHI201 has been produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre. All course manuals produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre are structured in the same way, as outlined below.

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## How this course manual is structured

### The course overview

The course overview gives you a general introduction to the course. Information contained in the course overview will help you determine:

- If the course is suitable for you.
- What you will already need to know.
- What you can expect from the course.
- How much time you will need to invest to complete the course.

The overview also provides guidance on:

- Study skills.
- Where to get help.
- Course assignments and assessments.
- Margin icons.

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We strongly recommend that you read the overview *carefully* before starting your study.

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### The course content

The course is broken down into Study Sessions. Each Study Session comprises:

- An introduction to the Study Session content.
- Study Session outcomes.
- Core content of the Study Session with a variety of learning activities.
- A Study Session summary.
- Assignments and/or assessments, as applicable.
- Bibliography

## Your comments

After completing Epistemology we would appreciate it if you would take a few moments to give us your feedback on any aspect of this course. Your feedback might include comments on:

- Course content and structure.
- Course reading materials and resources.
- Course assignments.
- Course assessments.
- Course duration.
- Course support (assigned tutors, technical help, etc.)

Your constructive feedback will help us to improve and enhance this course.

# Course Overview

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## Welcome to Epistemology PHI201

This course, PHI 201- Epistemology, is designed to help learners develop the capacity to critically reflect on many of the knowledge claims they make about themselves, somebody else, and the external world. The course therefore attempts to facilitate the understanding of distinction between knowledge and belief, knowledge and opinion and knowledge and perception. The course will also go beyond this to look at some social issues in philosophy.

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## Course outcomes



Upon completion of Epistemology PHI201 you will be able to:

- *discuss* the word “epistemology”
- *identify* principles underlying the concept of epistemology
- *analyse* the extent to which we can know
- *provide* answers to philosophical questions on what constitute knowledge
- *point-out* ways of justifying knowledgeable claims

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## Timeframe



How long?

This is a 15 week course. It requires a formal study time of 45 hours. The formal study times are scheduled around online discussions / chats with your course facilitator / academic advisor to facilitate your learning. Kindly see course calendar on your course website for scheduled dates. You will still require independent/personal study time particularly in studying your course materials.

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## How to be successful in this course



As an open and distance learner your approach to learning will be different to that from your school days, where you had onsite education. You will now choose what you want to study, you will have professional and/or personal motivation for doing so and you will most likely be fitting your study activities around other professional or domestic responsibilities.

Essentially you will be taking control of your learning environment. As a consequence, you will need to consider performance issues related to time management, goal setting, stress management, etc. Perhaps you will also need to reacquaint yourself in areas such as essay planning, coping with exams and using the web as a learning resource.

We recommend that you take time now—before starting your self-study—to familiarize yourself with these issues. There are a number of excellent resources on the web. A few suggested links are:

- <http://www.dlc.ui.edu.ng/resources/studyskill.pdf>

This is a resource of the UIDLC pilot course module. You will find sections on building study skills, time scheduling, basic concentration techniques, control of the study environment, note taking, how to read essays for analysis and memory skills (“remembering”).

- [http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter\\_march13\\_how\\_to\\_self\\_study.html](http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter_march13_how_to_self_study.html)

This site provides how to master self-studying, with bias to emerging technologies.

- <http://www.howtostudy.org/resources.php>

Another “How to study” web site with useful links to time management, efficient reading, questioning/listening/observing skills, getting the most out of doing (“hands-on” learning), memory building, tips for staying motivated, developing a learning plan.

The above links are our suggestions to start you on your way. At the time of writing these web links were active. If you want to look for more, go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and type “self-study basics”, “self-study tips”, “self-study skills” or similar phrases.



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## Need help?



As earlier noted, this course manual complements and supplements PHI201 at UI Mobile Class as an online course.

You may contact any of the following units for information, learning resources and library services.

**Distance Learning Centre (DLC)**

University of Ibadan, Nigeria  
Tel: (+234) 08077593551 – 55  
(Student Support Officers)  
Email: [ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

**Head Office**

Morohundiya Complex, Ibadan-Ilorin Expressway, Idi-Ose, Ibadan.

**Information Centre**

20 Awolowo Road, Bodija, Ibadan.

**Lagos Office**

Speedwriting House, No. 16 Ajanaku Street, Off Salvation Bus Stop, Awuse Estate, Opebi, Ikeja, Lagos.

For technical issues (computer problems, web access, and etcetera), please send mail to [webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng).

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## Academic Support



A course facilitator is commissioned for this course. You have also been assigned an academic advisor to provide learning support. The contacts of your course facilitator and academic advisor for this course are available at [onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

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## Activities



This manual features “Activities,” which may present material that is NOT extensively covered in the Study Sessions. When completing these activities, you will demonstrate your understanding of basic material (by answering questions) before you learn more advanced concepts. You will be provided with answers to every activity question. Therefore, your emphasis when working the activities should be on understanding your answers. It is more important that you understand why every answer is correct.

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## Assignment



### Assignment

This manual also comes with tutor marked assignments (TMA). Assignments are expected to be turned-in on course website. You may also receive TMAs as part of online class activities. Feedbacks to TMAs will be provided by your tutor in not more than 2-week expected duration.

Schedule dates for submitting assignments and engaging in course / class activities is available on the course website. Kindly visit your course website often for updates.

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## Assessments



### Assessments

There are two basic forms of self-assessment in this course manual: in-text questions (ITQs) and self assessment questions (SAQs). Feedbacks to the ITQs are placed immediately after the questions, while the feedbacks to SAQs are at the back of manual.

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## Bibliography



### Readings

For those interested in learning more on this subject, we provide you with a list of additional resources at the end of this course manual; these may be books, articles or websites.





# Getting around this course manual

## Margin icons

While working through this course manual you will notice the frequent use of margin icons. These icons serve to “signpost” a particular piece of text, a new task or change in activity; they have been included to help you to find your way around this course manual.

A complete icon set is shown below. We suggest that you familiarize yourself with the icons and their meaning before starting your study.

			
Activity	Assessment	Assignment	Case study
			
Discussion	Group Activity	Help	Outcomes
			
Note	Reflection	Reading	Study skills
			
Summary	Terminology	Time	Tip

# Study Session 1

## The Nature of Epistemology

### Introduction

This Session will introduce to you issues in epistemology after which you will be introduced to concepts in epistemology. Defining these concepts will enable you understand them better as we go through the course. You will also have an insight into the historical background of epistemology.

### Learning Outcomes



#### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 1.1 *define* and *use* correctly the terms in bold.
  - **epistemology**
  - **knowledge**
- 1.2 *discuss* the forms of knowledge.
- 1.3 *describe* the sources of knowledge.
- 1.4 *discuss* how knowledge relates to beliefs and justification

### 1.1 Defining Epistemology

The term 'epistemology' is coined from two Greek words- episteme (knowledge) and 'logos' (logic or rationale). The two words then form the definition of epistemology, which simply can be defined as the theory of knowledge.

**Epistemology** The scope, nature, extent and limits of human knowledge

As a branch of philosophy, **epistemology** deals with the scope, nature, extent and limits of human knowledge. It also deals with the certainty and reliability human knowledge. As a matter of fact, an epistemologist (John Locke) while discussing his objective concerning the theory of knowledge explains that his aim is to 'enquire into the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge' (Stumpf, E.S 1975:274). Also, epistemology centres around the fact of wanting to know, to understand and consequently to offer a well considered explanation of why things are the way they are (Ozumba, G.O. 2001:15).

Since epistemology is about human knowledge, the main subjects of human knowledge are human cognizers and the objects of human knowledge are external objects. The questions that come to mind now as they relate to epistemology are: what is knowledge? How do we arrive at reliable knowledge, granted that sometimes our senses do deceive us to take triangular objects to be rectangular? How does one determine genuine knowledge as distinguished from mere opinion or belief? Differently put, what are the basic criteria for determining knowledge? Can we ever have certain knowledge?

## ITQ

## Question

- What is the etymology of the word 'epistemology'?

## Feedback

- Epistemology is derived from two Greek words, '**episteme**' which means knowledge, and '**logos**' which means logic or rationale

Central to all these questions is the idea of certainty which is significant in determining knowledge. We should not lose sight of a major epistemological problem as pointed out by Ozumba (2001). This is the fact that the objects of knowledge are unlimited while the human subject is limited and almost ill-equipped for a reliable quest into matters of knowledge. This problem has led to a major divide between philosophers. For some, genuine knowledge is impossible (philosophical sceptics). While for others, we can have knowledge of some external objects only if we employ the method of doubt (methodological sceptics).

## Hint

We shall have a detailed discussion of scepticism in study two. Right now, it is pertinent to define what knowledge is and some of the issues surrounding this definition.

## 1.2 What is Knowledge?

Ozumba (2001: 16) defines **knowledge** as a state of awareness of a given factor information. Knowledge can also be defined as the fact of understanding, information acquired through learning or experience. To know, therefore, involves being aware of something, being certain about it, learning and remembering something, having an understanding of the object of knowledge, being familiar with something, being able to recognise or identify something, being able to distinguish between things, having enough experience and training and finally being intimate with something.

Philosophically, the standard account of knowledge, around which all recent epistemological works have been done, defines knowledge as justified true belief. This definition has it that Mr A knows that P if and only if:

1. P is true
2. Mr A believes that P
3. Mr A is justified in believing that P.

Because there are three parts to this definition, it is popularly called the tripartite definition or account of knowledge. We can describe the three accounts as: **the truth condition, the belief condition and the justification condition**. These three conditions must obtain for a person's knowledge claim to count as knowledge. A person cannot be said to know if one of these three conditions is absent when making a knowledge

claim. At this point, we can say that the question of what is knowledge, which seems to be about a phenomenon in the world, becomes transformed at least partly into a linguistic question, a question about the definition of the word 'know'. The next question then is **what** and **how** can we know?

## 1.3 Kinds of Knowledge

In telling us something about the kinds of knowledge that there are, most epistemologists have drawn a distinction between a posteriori (empirical) knowledge and a priori knowledge. A posteriori (empirical) knowledge is knowledge derivable only from experience and a priori knowledge is knowledge gained by reason alone. The questions that I expect somebody to ask are: Are there really these two kinds of knowledge? Is it easy to produce examples which seem to show that there must be? If I come to know that a particular blackboard is black by looking at it that is knowledge that I have gained by experience, in this case by my visual experience. And, if I know that if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C, or that no statement can be both wholly true and wholly false at the same time, surely that is something that my reason tells me when I reflect on what the statement is saying (Fisher, A and Everitt, N 1995: 2). Yet, some philosophers have wanted to deny that **experience** by itself can be a source of knowledge and others have denied that **reason** alone can be.

Descartes (1596-1650), a popular French thinker, is an example of a philosopher who denies that the senses alone can be a source of knowledge. By contrast, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) took an opposing position. For him, all knowledge is empirical. It is on the basis of this that he denies the existence of any a priori knowledge (knowledge derived from reason). Mill thinks that even the principle of noncontradiction (the principle that no statement can be both wholly true and wholly false at the same time) is known empirically.

In order to better understand the distinction between deriving knowledge from experience and deriving knowledge from reason, it is important for you to ask these questions again: what are the arguments for and against claiming that there are two sources of knowledge? What are the implications of accepting either view?

## 1.4 Sources of Knowledge

### 1.4.1 Empiricism

**Empiricism** The school of thought that holds that our knowledge of the external world is derived from our five senses; these senses are the avenues through which the mind receives information about the external world.

It is natural when we start reflecting on where our knowledge comes from to pick on sense experience as the main and, perhaps, the only source of knowledge. We know about the things around us because we can use our senses to see them, touch, hear them, and so on. This school of thought is known as **empiricism**. Empiricism is the school of thought that holds that our knowledge of the external world is derived from our five senses; these senses are the avenues through which the mind receives information about the external world (Ozumba, G.O, 2001: 49). We have empiricists

like John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley. They are all British empiricists. Though they differ in their empiricist conceptions, they all agree that all knowledge comes from experience. John Locke, for instance, maintains that what we perceive are ideas and they are received through sensation and reflection. For him, there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. For George Berkeley, 'to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*); what cannot be perceived does not exist. For David Hume, all the materials of knowledge, no matter how fantastic they are, must be traceable to experience or else they are mere phantoms and fabrications of the mind. Ideas that are regarded as the faint copies of impressions are taken seriously if they derive from a clear impression; otherwise, they are chimerical. Let us then examine the views of each of these empiricists in turn.

### John Locke as an Empiricist



Locke's empiricist's principle centres on the rejection of the claim that ideas are innate. His position on this is that all ideas are derived from experience.

He claims, for example, that 'it is an established opinion among some men that there are in the understanding certain innate principles stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first beginning and brings into the world with it' (Ayer, A.J and Winch, R., 1965:35). Locke calls this opinion a mistaken one, denying that ideas are innate and that those who hold such views are wrong.

Having denied the existence of innate ideas, Locke established the philosophical basis for his empiricist arguments. All ideas arise from experience, and this experiential ideas provide us with two types of knowledge; namely, **sensation** and **reflection**. The first knowledge is that of sensation. This occurs when the mind receives different perceptions through the senses. Through this process, the mind becomes used to these objects. From this, the mind has the ideas of cold, yellow, hardness, taste and other sensible qualities. This is what Locke calls sensation. The second type of knowledge furnished by experience is reflection. This is an activity of the mind, which produces ideas, but this production of ideas is based on the first set of ideas furnished by the senses. These mind activities include perception, thinking, doubting, and reasoning, knowing, and willing, and so on. It is this reflective power of the mind that works on the sensible ideas given to the mind by experience (Ayer, A.J and Winch, R., 1965: 47). The first set of ideas can be said to be **simple ideas**. This is the chief source of the materials the reflective mind works on. The second set of ideas is **complex ideas**. These are a compound of simple ideas put together by the active power of the mind.

Having explained that ideas are derived from experience, Locke makes a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Before this distinction, he distinguishes between idea and quality. He says: '*whatsoever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding, that I call ideas*' (Edward, 1967:



491). He calls quality the power to produce any idea in our mind, quality of the subject wherever that power is. In distinguishing between primary and secondary qualities, Locke explains that the primary qualities of bodies are ‘those which are utterly inseparable from the body in what state whatsoever it be (O’Connor, 1985: 210). This includes qualities like solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest and number. They cannot be deprived of these qualities by any mechanical deformation. Ideas of secondary qualities include colours, sounds, taste and so on. The qualities themselves ‘in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce the various sensations in us by their primary qualities’ (O’Connor, D.J., 1985: 210).

Having distinguished between primary and secondary qualities, Locke held the view that qualities need adequate support and substance is that something which provides this support. The notion of substance was taken from the common sense point of view. Though inevitable to common sense, Locke was still unable to describe it precisely saying that ‘if anyone will examine himself concerning the notion of pure substance in general, he will find that he has no other idea of it at all, only a supposition for he knows not of what support such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us. (Stumpf, 1994: 269).

### **George Berkeley as an Empiricist**

The central empiricist claim of Berkeley is based on his account of reality. First, Berkeley claims that objects of human knowledge are ideas. For example, he says that:

*As several ideas are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name and to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing signified by the name apple as other collections of ideas constitutes a stone, a tree, a book and the like sensible things (Berkeley, G., 1965:178).*

There is something which perceives these ideas or objects of, knowledge. In line with this, Berkeley claims that ‘to be is to be perceived’ and to be perceived is to be perceived as an idea. On this claim, he argues that:

*It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men that house, mountains, rivers and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But this opinion, according to him, involves a manifest contradiction. For what are the fore mentioned objects but ideas or sensations; and it is not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived (Berkeley, 1965 179).*

These two claims of Berkeley show his own account of reality. The first argument that objects are collection of ideas rests on Berkeley’s claim that what are perceived are ideas. And, if what are perceived are collections of ideas, it follows that objects that are perceived are collections of ideas. Let us take a car, for example. On Berkeley’s

account, a car is a collection of ideas of a certain figure, a certain colour, a certain texture and so on. All these are ideas that are perceived when the car is perceived. This is applicable to any other object. The argument is a derivation of the empiricist tradition to which Berkeley belongs. That is, if what are perceived are ideas, it follows that an account of reality rests on what is perceived and not on what is not perceived. To test the truth or falsity of the existence of an object, therefore, such verification proceeds on the basis of what is perceived. For example, if there is an object, say tomato, on the table and there are two persons, if one claims that he sees a red object called tomato and the other person denies this, on Berkeley's account, this can be verified only by an examination of what is perceived. The first person that claims he perceives the object will show that he perceives the idea of colour, the idea of figure and the idea of a size. All these are because he stands in a sensory state of perception. The justification for the claim that the object, tomato, is on the table is based on experience. Although, this object exists only as an idea that is perceived. A relevant question that may be asked is why did Berkeley claim that objects are collections of ideas? Likely answers are:

1. Because objects are collections of qualities.
2. Qualities are ideas
3. Objects are collections of ideas.

Berkeley's second argument is an advancement of the first. His argument here shows that what is not perceived does not exist. Jonathan Bennet (1971:139) gives an understanding of Berkeley's second claim. He states that Berkeley hopes to connect 'what there is' with 'what is perceived'. Based on this, Bennet claims that it is inevitable for Berkeley to equate 'X has an idea belonging to object O, with X is perceiving O'. This equation is what yields Berkeley's conclusion that no object can exist unless someone perceives it.

### **David Hume as an Empiricist**

Two empiricist claims of David Hume will be discussed under this heading. One is his meaning of empiricism, which is also his general epistemological principle, and the other is his account of causation. For David Hume:

*All our ideas, the contents of our thoughts are derived from impressions, the contents of our sense experience which are correspondent to them and which they exactly represent (Baier, 1998:546).*

What this means is that all our knowledge are derived from empirical impressions. There are two arguments that Hume often defends in his meaning-empiricism thesis. One is that wherever one has a simple idea, one also has impression(s) which correspond(s) to the idea one has. For an idea to correspond to an impression, it means that the idea resembles the impression in all its material, and the resemblance is not a matter of coincidence or chance. This is why Hume himself argues that:

*Such a constant conjunction, in such an infinite number of instances can never arise from chance but clearly*

*proves a dependence of the impression on the ideas and of the ideas on the impressions (Hume, 1975:56-60).*

What this means is that our simple ideas are copies of our impressions. Given that these impressions are not innate, it follows that these impressions are derived from experience.

The second argument that Hume tenders for his meaning-empiricism is that whoever does not have impressions due to certain defects cannot have simple ideas. This is why Hume argues that 'if due to defect of the organ, a man is not able to have sensation, we will realise that he also lacks the corresponding ideas. For Hume, 'a blind man can form no notion of colours, a deaf man of sounds'. From this claim, what we can deduce is that whoever does not have impressions cannot have simple ideas. This is to foreclose the possibility of simple ideas arising from sources different from impressions.

However, Hume's second empiricist claim is his account of causation. The focus here is on the philosophical problem of the connection between a cause and its effect. The issue is about whether the connection between a cause and its effects is a necessary connection or whether it is a connection derived from experience. Hume does not deny that there can be a connection between a cause and its effect. But his argument is that the connection between a cause and its effects is not that of necessity. This is why he argues that, after experience of the constant conjunction of certain objects, we reason in the following manner. Such an object is always found to produce another:

*It is impossible it could have this effect, if it was not endowed with a power of production. The power necessarily implies the effect; and therefore there is a just foundation for drawing a conclusion from the existence of the one object to that of its usual attendant. The past production implies a power, the power implies a new production and the new production is what we infer from the power and the past production (Ayer and Winch, 1965; 412).*

Hume's argument is that the relation between a cause and its effect is that of constant conjunction. This conjunction is a regular one often found between two events, and there is nothing in any object, considered in it, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it. Even after the observation of the frequent or constant conjunction of objects, we have no reason, or we are not justified to draw any inference concerning any object beyond those of which we have had experience. Hume's argument here is that we know about the frequent conjunction of objects through experience but we cannot actually comprehend any connection between them. Also, Hume explains that what we often observe amongst events are regularities but that we erroneously, having observed these regularities for sometime, attach a necessary connection amongst the events.

Beside this account of causation, Hume makes a distinction between what he calls **relation of ideas** and **matters of fact**. Knowledge of algebra and mathematics belongs to relations of ideas, while knowledge from

experience belongs to matters of fact. He states this in his argument by dividing all the objects of human reason or enquiry into two kinds, relation of ideas and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of geometry, algebra and arithmetic, and in short, every affirmation that is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Matters of fact are not ascertained in this same manner, nor are our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. It is possible to have the contrary of matter of fact; the affirmation of such a proposition with its contrary can never imply a contradiction.

Following this distinction is the distinction between analytic statements and synthetic statements. Synthetic statements are statements about matters of fact that can be confirmed or refuted by experience, while analytic statements are statements about the relation between the subject and the predicate. They are not about matters of fact. Therefore, they cannot be confirmed or refuted by experience. Given this account of relation of ideas and matters of fact, one can say that 'cause' belongs to matters of fact because whatever connection there is between a cause and its effect is derived from experience and observation.

#### **Common Characteristics of Empiricism**

In light of the discussion above, a common characteristic which may be attributed to the empiricists is their emphasis on the role of experience. But experience, as interpreted by the empiricists, is limited to perceptual experience rather than phenomenal experience. According to the empiricists experience is intelligible in isolation, or atomistically, without reference to the nature of its subject. Hence an experience can be described without saying anything about the mind that has it; the thoughts that describe it, or the world that contains it. This type of experience is pure and untainted. It is this type of atomistic experience that feminists' epistemologists reject. According to them, experience should be perceived in a more inclusive manner to involve all areas of human consciousness. They viewed the empiricists' conception of knowledge as too narrow because it fails to recognize that the experience of a subject is mediated by the location in terms of time, place, culture and environment.

Against this background, feminist epistemologists stress phenomenal experience rather than perceptual experience. This type of experience recognizes the concrete activities and contextual details of individual experiences particularly women. These experiences, for women, include pregnancy, childcare and nursing. These are experiences that are felt and acknowledged only by the subject involved. They are subjective but real. Hence, they should be seen as epistemologically significant.

Again, the empiricists commonly hold that the person who undergoes experience is in some sense the recipient of data that are imprinted upon his intelligence irrespective of his activity; the person brings nothing to experience but gains everything from it. John Locke, for example, held that knowledge is derived from sensation and that knowledge is the perception of the agreement or the disagreement of two ideas. For him, the simple ideas that we get from sensations are the foundation of all our beliefs and from these simple ideas all other complex ideas are derived.

Because empiricists reject attempts to decide issues on the basis of pure reason, they try to answer as many questions as possible by using information gathered by the senses. This is based on the assumption that all legitimate knowledge must be derivable from sense experience. Feminist epistemologists question this empiricist assumption. They opine that the empiricists' emphasis on experience makes it difficult to give a clear analysis of 'experience'. We shall have an extensive discussion of this in Study session Twelve.

### 1.4.2 Rationalism

Another source of knowledge is **reason** or **intellect**; philosophers have argued that it is our intellect that tells us of the truths of logic and mathematics. We just 'see' (in a non-visual sense of the term) that certain things are true, or that one thing follows from another. The school of thought that holds this view is called **rationalism**. Rationalism is the school of thought that holds that knowledge is derived through logical-mathematical reasoning. Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza and Gotfried Leibniz are continental rationalists, and they all hold the belief that knowledge comes not from experience but from a mental process that is intuitive and deductive. They also jointly maintain that there are certain innate principles that exist prior to experience. For instance, all mathematical axioms are taken to be true. They are accepted not experienced and are only proved using deductive procedures. For these rationalist philosophers, the mind has the innate capacity to unveil these mathematical truths without necessarily experiencing them. We need to further discuss these continental rationalists.

#### Descartes as a rationalist

Descartes sets out to give philosophy a new starting point, breaking away with the philosophical traditions of his day. Being a mathematician of distinction, he saw the solution to problems of epistemology in the systematization of knowledge in geometrical form. This involved starting from axioms whose truths were clear and distinct. He describes the ideal method in the second chapter of the *Discourse on Method* (1980) as:

1. Not to accept as true anything of which we do not have a clear and distinct idea;
2. To analyze the problem;
3. To start from simple and certain thoughts and proceed from them to the more complex; and
4. To review the file so thoroughly that no considerations are omitted (See Anscombe, 1980: 20-21 for these four points).

The question then is: of what do we have clear and distinct ideas? To deal with this problem, Descartes employs the method of doubt, a form of scepticism. This method involves setting aside anything that can be supposed false until one arrives at something that cannot be supposed false.

Understood in this way, Descartes' *Discourse on Method* has some very interesting features; it results in knowledge that is completely certain, and it imposes a certain structure on knowledge. This hierarchical structure of knowledge with which this work is closely connected the idea that

knowledge is grounded in a structure of successively more metaphysically basic truths, ultimately terminating in an intuition remained basic to his thought (Garber, D, 1998:6).

Pointedly, certainty was central to Descartes' epistemology and the path to it begins with doubt. In *Meditation I* entitled 'what can be called into doubt', Descartes says that:

*I realised that it was necessary once in the course of my life to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last (Griffith, 1997:134)*

Following that, he presents a series of three sceptical arguments designed to eliminate his past and current beliefs in preparation for replacing them with certainties. The strategy is to undermine the beliefs, not one by one but by undermining 'the basic principles' on which they rest.

The first argument is directed at the naive belief that everything learned through the senses is worthy of belief. Against this, Descartes points out that he has found that the senses often deceive, and it is wise never to completely trust the senses that do sometimes deceive. The second, the famous dream argument, is directed against the somewhat less naive view that the senses are at least worthy of belief when dealing with middle-sized objects in our immediate vicinity. Descartes conceives that there is no clear way of distinguishing between a dream state and the state of being awake. He explains that even if he doubts the reliability of what the senses seem to be conveying to him at present, the dream argument still leaves open the possibility that there are some general truths, not directly dependent on his present sensations, which he can know. Descartes replies to this with his deceiving God argument; the argument that God may deceive him to take things that are true to be false.

In a bid not to rub off the goodness of God, Descartes opines that God cannot deceive him to believe a proposition to be true when in fact it is false. Rather, it is an evil genius that has employed all his energies to deceive him. This separate argument helps to prevent the return of the former beliefs called into doubt.

These arguments have a crucial function in Descartes project; they free us from all our preconceived opinions and provide the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses (Griffith, (1997:130). In this way, the sceptical doubt of *Meditation I* prepares the mind for certainty to which Descartes aspires.

Having completed the sceptical argument in *Meditation I*, Descartes moves to his general principle of inquiry which is to accept only propositions that he understands with clarity and distinctness to be true. While he regards the existence of physical objects (including his own body) as uncertain, he finds the reality of his mind uniquely secure against all doubts.

However determined his scepticism, he cannot doubt that he is doubting. In his most famous statement (I think therefore I am—Cogito ergo sum), he expresses the certainty of his own existence as a thinking being and



identifies the point from which his efforts to reconstruct his beliefs could proceed.

Consequently, the discovery of the existence of the self serves as the first step towards certainty; it is the Archimedean point from which the whole structure of knowledge will grow. He hopes to uncover a proposition that would prove itself immune to even the most relentless scepticism and that could provide a firm foundation for the reconstruction of his system of beliefs.

### Spinoza as a Rationalist

The defining feature of Spinoza's thought is its uncompromising rationalism. Like other philosophers of his time, Spinoza is a rationalist in at least three different senses: metaphysical, epistemological and ethical. That is to say, he maintains that the universe embodies a necessary rational order, that, in principle, this order is knowable by the human mind and that the true good for human beings consists in the knowledge of this order and a life governed by this knowledge (Allison, 1998:91). For the purpose of this course, we shall concentrate on the epistemological aspect of his rationalism.

Spinoza distinguishes three grades of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge which he called **imagination** is an experientially determined knowledge, which can be based either on the perception of particular things or sign, which for Spinoza includes both sensory and memory images.

Spinoza calls **reason** the second kind of knowledge. This is best described by distinguishing it from the first kind of knowledge, which is knowledge derived from vague experience called opinion or imagination. This corresponds roughly to sense experience. From sense experience, we gain confused ideas of things with respect to their place in the general order of things.

**Full knowledge**, which he refers to as the third kind of knowledge, is characterized as intuition. This kind of knowledge according, to him, 'proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things (Allison, 1998:22). Spinoza calls this kind of knowledge intuition because in its essence, it consists of seeing the world as a coherent whole bound by necessary connections. To have this knowledge is the aim of philosophy, that is, to see things as conforming to a kind of necessity.

Because the second and third kinds of knowledge involve adequate ideas, they cannot give rise to falsity. Sense experience alone can be the source of falsity. Through sense experience, we can have only confused ideas, since ideas reflect particular modifications of reality in some finite respect, not in relation to the infinite attributes of God. Sense experience is ordinarily thought of as a passive form of knowledge due to its inadequacy as opposed to forms of knowledge, which demand the use of reason.

The consequence of Spinoza's view about these kinds of knowledge is that it is possible to have knowledge which is not perfect without having a true idea. Spinoza says that such knowledge is knowledge from what

one may render as ‘uncertain’ or ‘inconstant’ experience. By this, he meant that the ideas involved are fragmentary and without rational order. This in essence implies that there is a kind of knowledge namely, imagination which involves inadequate or false ideas.

It is to be noted that although reason and **intuition** are sources of adequate knowledge, Spinoza recognizes a major sense in which intuition is superior. Whereas the province of reason concerns general truths based on common notions and consequently is abstract and general, that of intuition concerns the individual case and consequently is concrete and particular.

Thus, for Spinoza, the goal of all knowledge is seeing the world as a single whole. The way to this is reason or science, which attempts to reveal things as subject to necessity by means of self-evident necessary truths

### **Leibniz as a Rationalist**

Leibniz’s rationalism has its basis in the claim that all ideas are innate. He argues that there are certain particular ideas that are innate to the mind and do not and cannot come through the senses. The ideas of being, possibility, and infinity are so thoroughly innate that they enter into all our thoughts and reasoning hence he regards them as essential to our minds. He supports his argument for innate ideas with the claim that nothing can enter the mind from outside and nothing can be taught to us whose idea we do not already have in mind. In spite of his claim that all ideas are innate, Leibniz distinguishes between the ideas of sensation that in a certain sense come to us from outside and the ideas that do not and cannot do so. He explains that we receive knowledge from outside by way of the senses, maintaining that ideas derived from the senses are always confused.

In line with the above, Leibniz makes a distinction between ideas of the intellect and those of **sensation**. The distinction according to him is a matter of distinctness and confusion and it is this confusion that explains and underlies sensation.

Also, he distinguishes between two types of truth: **truth of reasoning** and **truths of fact**. The first type of truth can be known with certainty by a finite demonstration consisting of a finite number of steps containing simple ideas, definitions and postulates. These truths are necessary and can be known a priori (Garber, 1998:541). They depend on the principle of contradiction since their necessity derives from the fact that their denial would result in a contradiction. Mathematical truths are of this kind. According to Leibniz, such truths are innate and we have an innate capacity to recognize them.

Truths of facts, on the other hand have their basis in a separate principle, the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz tends to formulate the principle by reference to the universe. He argues that since there is infinity of possible universe in God’s ideas and since only one of them can exist, there must be a sufficient reason for God’s choice, a reason which determines him towards one thing rather than another. This he calls the principle of sufficient reason. Any contingent truth about this world has for its justification the fact that in choosing this world, God chose it as the



best of all possible worlds. The truth remains contingent because it is dependent on God's choice, but a sufficient reason for its truth is that God chose it as part of the best of all possible worlds. This principle (the principle of sufficient reason) entails that the universe is in principle rational and intelligible: God must always act for a reason and as a consequence, there must be a reason for everything. This doctrine of creation underlies all his philosophy.

#### Common Characteristics of Rationalism

All rationalists emphasize the role of reason in the acquisition of knowledge. Descartes, for example, explains that sensory evidence is never in itself conclusive. For him, the certain knowledge of his existence as a thinking being, which he arrives at by the use of reason, enables him to make a conceptual distinction between the existence of his body which might be subject to doubt and the mind that does the doubting.

Also, all rationalists believe in the universality of rational knowledge. Spinoza, for example, classifies three types of knowledge viewing knowledge of the second kind which is reason, as universal. Reason according to him, does not explain the essence of any particular thing. Rather, it perceives things under certain species of eternity, that is, universality. The rationalists came to this conclusion based on their claim that ideas are not gained from experience but are rather innate. The innate idea principle can be found in Leibniz's distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact. Truth of reason, according to him, can be known with certainty; they are necessary and can be known *a priori*. Mathematical truths are examples of such truths. They are innate and we have an innate capacity to recognize them.

Again, rationalists see the best form of knowledge as knowledge by intuition. Intuition has features similar to reason. Like reason, intuition is regarded as a reliable way of knowing the truth that is, truths known by intuition are necessarily true. Also, intuition and reason conceive and understand things under specie of eternity (universally). Descartes, for example, recognizes his existence as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind.

It is with the rationalists' over-emphasis on reason that feminist epistemologists take issue. According to these feminists, rationalists attempt to apply their reason-centred epistemology at the expense of any other type of epistemology. Apart from the gendered impact of reason, reason also has the feature of universality. Reason, according to these feminists has regularly been portrayed and understood in terms of images that involve the exclusion or denigration of elements like body, nature, passion, emotion—elements which are cast as 'feminine'. The consequence of this, according to feminist epistemologists, is the projection of the 'maleness of reason'. This conception of knowledge is therefore partial. We shall have an extensive discussion of feminist epistemology in lecture twelve.

It is important to note that the rationalists' conception of reason has been conceived as abstract. Reason is conceived as a universal criterion without attention to context. This is the problem of abstract universality. Consequently, feminist epistemologists argue that the rationalist conception of knowledge is narrow because it leaves an important aspect of human experience untouched, which is emotion. This experience is also real whether or not the rationalists recognize it as such.

**ITQ****Question**

- Differentiate between empiricism and rationalism.

**Feedback**

- Empiricism is the school that holds that we gain knowledge of the external world through our senses. It is these senses that transmit information to our mind. On the other hand, rationalism is the school that holds that our knowledge of the external world is not through our senses but through reason or logico-mathematical method.

## 1.5 How is Knowledge related to Belief and Justification?

Epistemology is concerned with related concepts such as belief and justification. In virtually every traditional account of justification, belief and justification are components of knowledge. This is a major reason why epistemologists are interested in these concepts. Another reason is that there are certain areas where knowledge is difficult to come by, and yet where some well founded or justified belief is possible. In such areas, justified belief takes on for us the action-guiding role that knowledge can play for us in other areas. Indeed, some philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell (1872-1969), who are in general doubtful about the possibility of many kinds of knowledge, would maintain that the idea of justified belief is of more importance and interest than the idea of knowledge itself.



### Discussion Activity

Look at the positions of each of the empiricists and the rationalists discussed in this session and make a critique of each philosopher's position. Which of the positions would you subscribe to, and why?

**Post your response on Study Session 1 forum page on course website.**

## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined epistemology as one of the branches of Philosophy. We looked at how the term 'epistemology' can be defined. We learnt that there are two sources of knowledge. These are: experience and reason. These two sources are viewed as ways of deriving knowledge by two different schools of thought: empiricism and rationalism. You also learnt that knowledge is related to concepts such as belief and justification.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

**SAQ 1.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 1.1 and 1.4)**

Is there any relationship between epistemology, knowledge, beliefs, and justification?

**SAQ 1.2 (tests Learning Outcomes 1.2 and 1.3)**

Describe the sources and forms of knowledge.

## Study Session 2

# Scepticism

## Introduction

In Study Session one, we examined the nature of epistemology, and saw how knowledge is related to belief and justification. In this Study Session, we will examine scepticism: the claim that knowledge is impossible both locally and globally.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 2.1 *define* and *use* correctly the term “scepticism”.
- 2.2 *discuss* the history of scepticism.
- 2.3 *distinguish* between philosophical scepticism and methodological scepticism.
- 2.4 *appraise* at least two major sceptical arguments.

## 2.1 What is Scepticism?

### Scepticism

The philosophical attitude, which expresses doubt about the possibility of certainty or knowledge.

Scepticism is any philosophical attitude, which expresses doubt about the possibility of certain, reliable or any knowledge whatsoever. Any philosophical position which doubts the possibility of human knowledge can be described as scepticism. A philosopher who claims that knowledge is impossible is a philosophical sceptic. Hence, we can say that philosophical scepticism is a position which claims that we cannot know anything about anything based on the following arguments:

To know something is to be certain that something is the case. But we can never be certain of anything, that is, we can never be certain that something is the case therefore we cannot be said to know anything.

If the above argument is valid, it will challenge all that we have claimed to know. If we accept it, then science is an illusion. It will then turn out that our day to day or ordinary claims that we know are false. We can conclude here that the sceptical argument is a challenge not only too ordinary commonsense which is convinced that we know something but also to science which we usually look up to as reliable knowledge.

## 2.2 Historical Background of Sceptical Tendencies

Let us have an insight into sceptical tendencies in the past which dates back to the pre-Socratic period. Sceptical tendencies are not new in philosophy. In the history of philosophy, some sceptical arguments have been based on the unreliability or relativity of our senses. Heraclitus, a

Greek philosopher says that we cannot step into the same river twice. This means things are constantly changing with the implication that they cannot be known. His disciple, Cratylus further explains that we cannot step into the same river once. This is so because fresh water is ever evolving on and upon us. Central to their position is the view that all things are in a state of flux.

There is also an extreme sceptical view expressed by Gorgias of Leontini, another Greek philosopher. For him, nothing exists, if it exists, it cannot be known and if it is known it cannot be communicated. We also have Protagoras relativist position which can be described as partial scepticism. For him, man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not that they are not. The implication of Protagoras statement is that human beings determine what is true, real and acceptable to them and what is false, unreal and unacceptable to them. Hence what is true to you is true to you and what is true to me is true to me. In contrast, what is false to me is false to me and what is false to you is false to you. Hence we cannot say there is any absolute standard through which truth can be determined.

We can make a distinction between a **philosophical sceptic** and a **methodological sceptical**. As we noted earlier, a philosophical sceptic holds that knowledge is impossible. Not just knowledge in a particular sphere, but knowledge in general. But a methodological sceptic does not hold that knowledge is impossible. Rather, he maintains that the method of doubt is needed in order to arrive at knowledge.

### ITQ

#### Question

- How does Prothagoras' relativist statement qualify for a skeptical position?

#### Feedback

- Prothagoras' statement that man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not, is a relativist statement. However, this statement also qualifies as a skeptical position. This is because the import of the statement is that each man determines what is true to him and so no one can say that his position is final and universal. In other words, what is true to me may be false to you and we will both be right. It thus means that we cannot lay claim to knowing anything for certain.

## 2.3 Methodological and Philosophical Sceptics in Philosophy

An example of a methodological sceptic is Rene Descartes who wanted to find a firm foundation for knowledge. In order to do this, he proceeded as follows: he examined all the principles which we appeal to as sources of knowledge, that is, the principle that knowledge comes from our senses and the principle that knowledge comes from reason. Descartes tried to

show that we can doubt our claims to know through the senses and through reason and proceeded to look for something which we cannot doubt, something which is certain. Through this procedure, Descartes came to doubt not only all our scientific knowledge but also all our mathematical knowledge. He arrived at the conclusion that there is only one thing that he is certain he cannot doubt. This is the fact that he thinks, he doubts and he believes and if he thinks, he doubts and he believes, it follows that the person who thinks, who doubts and who believes must exist. He therefore concluded that he exists as a thinking being, an immaterial substance called the mind. Therefore Descartes finds the foundation of all knowledge in the individual mind.

An example of a philosophical sceptic is David Hume. Sometimes we claim that we know that because something has been happening in the past, then that thing will happen in the future. For instance you may claim that the sun has been rising in the east and setting in the west for one thousand years therefore tomorrow, the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. You may also claim that all metals that you have seen have conducted electricity; therefore the next metal that you will see will conduct electricity. You may further make another claim that all the pieces of gold that you have seen are yellow; therefore the next piece of gold you shall see will be yellow.

For David Hume, there is no rational basis for thinking that all these beliefs are true. This is because it is logically possible that the sun will not rise tomorrow or that the sun may rise in the west tomorrow and set in the north. It is also possible that we will come across a metal that does not conduct electricity.

What is central to the above examples is that so long as what we believe to be true may turn out to be false then we do not know such thing. This view is known as **scepticism by inductive inference**. It is a view commonly held by philosophical sceptics.

Inductive knowledge is knowledge that is based on reasoning from the past to the future or from what we have observed to what we have not observed. If for instance I infer from what I have observed in the past that the same thing will happen in the future, I have assumed that the future will be like the past. Or that the unobserved will look like what I have observed. My assumption then is that nature is uniform but David Hume has argued that we do not have any reason or any justification to believe that nature is uniform or that the future will be like the past. It is possible that the future will not resemble the past. We may wake up one day and find out that contrary to our past experiences, a magnet repels iron rather than attracts it. In other words, it is possible that the course of nature may change.

You may want to ask the question that why then do we always believe that the future will be like the past. David Hume would want to reply that it is due to the habit of the mind and our customs; it is not due to reason or to the nature of things themselves.

We should note from what we have discussed about scepticism that truth, certainty and the possibility of reliable knowledge are central to the sceptic's position. We may then want to raise questions such as: can we

have knowledge of things in the physical world? What kind of knowledge do we have? Can we ever be certain of any knowledge, claim or anything whatsoever?

Certainty is so central to any sceptical debate and it is on the basis of this that the extreme sceptic would deny the possibility of all forms of knowledge based on the following arguments highlighted by Ozumba, (2001: 42-43):

1. That man does not have the capacity, the equipment to know things in a certain manner.
2. That our senses cannot penetrate the nature of things.
3. That the senses are deceptive and as such are unreliable in eliciting information about external object or any other object for that matter.
4. All we have are appearances and these appearances are themselves mutable, changing, in a state of flux, unreal, fleeting unstable and uncertain.
5. That our human judgments are incapable of attaining certain truth, our human judgements are always prone to error. We never can be sure that we are judging right.

There are other sceptical arguments apart from the above listed ones.

### ITQ

#### Question

- Differentiate between philosophical skepticism and methodological skepticism.

#### Feedback

- Philosophical skepticism is the philosophical position that we cannot know anything for sure; hence, the need to cast a doubt on what we believe. This is different from methodological skepticism. Methodological skepticism involves casting a doubt on all other methods or notions with a view to arriving at a method that is indubitable and viable. This is what Socrates employed in his dialogue with his discussants.

## 2.4 Sceptical Arguments in Philosophy

Three major sceptical arguments will be examined below. This is to enable you have an insight into why the sceptics hold the position that knowledge is impossible.

### 2.4.1 The Brians-in-vats-argument

This argument has it that you do not know that you are not a brain, suspended in a vat full of liquid in a laboratory and wired to a computer which is feeding you your current experiences under the control of some ingenious technician/scientists. For if you were such a brain, then, provided that the scientists is successful, nothing in your experience could possibly reveal that you were: for your experience is ex hypothesi

identical with that of something which is not a brain in a vat (Dancy, 1991:10). Since you have only your own experiences to appeal to and that experience is the same in either situation, nothing can reveal to you which situation is the actual one.

In essence, since you do not know that you are not a brain-in-a-vat, you cannot know any proposition P of which you know that if P were true, you would not be a brain in a vat.

The above argument is a major sceptical argument which attempts to show that we have no knowledge of the world around us. The argument hinges on the claim that we are not in a position to rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat being artificially stimulated to have just the sensory experience we are actually having. We have no basis for ruling out this possibility since if it were actual; our experience would not change in any way. The sceptic then claims that if we cannot rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat, we cannot know anything about the world around us.

It is important to let you know that as we often have in philosophy, arguments are not conclusive. They are open-ended because for any argument, there are counter-arguments such that one cannot conclusively say that he has arrived at the one true correct answer to questions. It is in the light of this that there have been responses to the brains-in-vats-arguments.

The first response by some philosophers is that we can rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat. Another response is by those philosophers who have also argued that we do not need to be able to rule out this possibility in order to have knowledge of the world around us.

### **2.4.2 The Justification of Argument from Experience**

This argument is similar to David Hume's scepticism by inductive inference which we examined earlier in this lecture. Going by our earlier explanation we may want to ask this question: do we have any knowledge of events which we have not experienced or we are not now experiencing? We normally suppose that our experience is a reliable guide to the external world specifically physical objects within it and that in favourable cases, it gives us knowledge. For instance, I can know what is in the bottom of my desk or what I shall eat for breakfast tomorrow by some form of inductive inference from what I have observed or am now observing.

David Hume, a Scottish historian and philosopher raised in a special way, the question of whether this is really so. He argued that I cannot know that my diary is in the closed bottom drawer of my desk unless I have reason to believe that my experience makes that proposition probable; we can suppose perhaps, that my relevant experience is that I remember having put the diary there five minutes ago and that I do not remember having touched the drawer since, together with my general knowledge of the consistent behaviour of the experienced world (Dancy, 1991).

But I only have reason to believe that my experience makes that proposition probable if I have reason to believe quite generally that events which I have not observed are similar to events which I have



observed. And Hume's point is that it is impossible to have any reason for that last belief. For that belief is not analytically or necessarily true; no contradiction is implied by supposing it false (Dancy, 1991; 15). And I cannot suppose that experience itself has given me reason to believe that the unobserved will resemble the observed, since the appeal to experience begs the question asked; it argues from the crucial belief that our experience is a reliable guide, or that the unobserved will resemble the observed. Therefore, I can have no reason to believe that my experience is a reliable guide, and hence have no reason for any belief about events beyond my experience and so cannot have knowledge of them.

It is worth stressing that Hume's argument is meant to stress the fact or general belief that experience as a reliable guide cannot be justified since all promising justifications assume what is at issue by supposing that experience can reveal that our experience is a reliable guide.

We then say that central to scepticism which Hume's argument creates is the idea that we have no reason in what is observed for any beliefs about the unobserved.

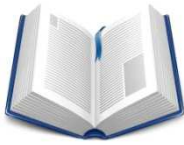
### **2.4.3 The Argument from Error**

We all have sometimes made simple mistakes in whatever position we find ourselves. In mathematics for example, we make simple mistakes but there is nothing you can point to in your present situation which tells you that this situation is not one in which you are mistaken.

Suppose I claimed yesterday to know that it would rain in the afternoon on the grounds of weather forecast, gathering clouds and so on but unfortunately it turns out that I was wrong. At the time of my claim, the fact that it was not going to rain is evidence-transcendent, as all claims about the future must be. This means that if on the same grounds I claim today to know that it will rain in the afternoon, I must continue to assert that I knew yesterday that it would rain that afternoon (based on the same evidence). If on the other hand, I abandon my claim to have known yesterday, I cannot make the claim to know today. For the only fact which would justify such a difference in claim is one which is not available to me; facts about the afternoon's weather are evidence-transcendent in the morning. Hence my acceptance that yesterday I did not know prevents me from claiming knowledge today.

The conclusion seems to be that if I recognize that I have once wrongly claimed to know that P, then I cannot ever claim to know that P unless I can show a relevant difference between the two cases. And no one else can say of me that I know in one case and not in the other because for all I know, I am wrong both times.

Going by our analysis of these sceptical arguments, we need to reflect on them for some time. When we think about sceptical arguments, we often find ourselves pulled in opposite directions. We feel the pull of the sceptical argument and yet we remain reluctant to give up our claims to know. We can accept or reject scepticism depending on the arguments we want to put forward. We can reject scepticism because it conflicts with our intuitions about our everyday knowledge claims. On the other hand, we may also decide to accept scepticism because truly, our senses are



### Reading Activity

**Time required:**  
30 minutes

sometimes deceptive and as a result, we may sometimes be deceived to take object A to be object B.

Pick up any Philosophy text on the history of philosophy (Modern Philosophy in particular) and read up Rene Descartes attempt to arrive at indubitable knowledge.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed arguments that are central to scepticism. We started by defining scepticism after which we made a distinction between philosophical scepticism and methodological scepticism. We learnt that sceptical tendencies are not new in philosophy by examining the historical background of scepticism. We also learnt that because our senses are sometimes deceptive, we cannot be certain about our knowledge claims and it is on this note that any sceptic would express his position about the impossibility of knowledge.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

**SAQ (tests Learning Outcomes 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4)**

From what you have learnt, can you critically discuss the idea of skepticism.

## Study Session 3

# Plato's *Theatetus*

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will discuss the dialogue between Socrates and Theatetus with Plato acting as the mouthpiece of Socrates. The dialogue consists of various ways of defining knowledge; this is contrary to the sceptic's claim that knowledge is impossible.

## Learning Outcomes



Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

3.1 discuss Theatetus view on Knowledge

## 3.1 A Review of the *Theatetus*

The *Theatetus* is one of the dialogues of Plato who was Socrates' student and Aristotle's teacher. In the *Theatetus*, Socrates converses with *Theatetus*, a boy and Theodorus, his mathematics' teacher. Although this dialogue features Plato's most sustained discussion on the concept of knowledge, it fails to yield an adequate definition of knowledge, thus ending inconclusively. But in spite of this inconclusive attempt at arriving at a definition of knowledge, *Theatetus* has been the source of endless scholarly attraction especially in discussing epistemological issues.

The dialogue examines the question what is knowledge and it is divided into four sections in which different answers to this question are proffered:

1. Knowledge is the various arts and sciences.
2. Knowledge is perception
3. knowledge is true judgement
4. Knowledge is true judgement with an account (logos).

### 3.1.1 Knowledge as Arts and Sciences

*Theatetus* responds to Socrates definition of what is knowledge by giving a list of examples of knowledge; namely, geometry, astronomy, harmonics and arithmetic as well as the crafts and skills of cobbling ([www.stanford.edu](http://www.stanford.edu)). These he calls knowledge presumably thinking of them as the various branches of knowledge. Socrates objects to this definition of knowledge stating that first, what he is interested in is the

one thing common to all the various examples of knowledge, not a multiplicity of different kinds of knowledge.

Second, Socrates also claims that *Theatetus* response is circular because even if one knows that cobbling is knowledge of how to make shoes, one cannot know what cobbling is, unless one knows what knowledge is. Lastly, Socrates was of the view that *Theatetus*'s answer was too long. All he needed according to him is a short definition of knowledge for instance the definition of clay is 'earth mixed with water' is representative of the type of definition needed.

Because Socrates was dissatisfied with the first definition, *Theatetus* then offered to give another definition of knowledge.

### 3.1.2 Knowledge as Perception

Encouraged by Socrates intervention, *Theatetus* came up with another definition of knowledge claiming that knowledge is perception. Though Socrates was partly satisfied with this type of definition, he employed Protagoras dictum that 'man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not'. Socrates effects the complete identity between knowledge and perception by bringing together two theses: (a) the interpretation of Protagoras doctrine of meaning (how things appear to an individual is how they are for that individual, for instance if the wind appears cold to X then it is cold for X).

It is important at this point to stress the importance of Protagoras dictum (**man is the measure of all things**). His doctrine is meant to emphasize not only the fact that no two persons' perceptions can ever be the same but also that no one can ever refute another person's perceptual judgement. This is because our perceptions are the product of instantaneous perceptual relations obtaining between ever-changing perceiving subjects and ever-changing perceived objects.

As it is the case with Socrates, he attacked the Protagorean doctrine from within the standpoint afforded him by two main arguments:

1. Socrates asks how, if people are each the measure of their own truth (some among whom is Protagoras himself), can some be wiser than others?
2. Also, Socrates stresses the need to be aware of the existence of false beliefs when we make knowledge claims.

Hence, the fact that there are false beliefs is inconsistent with Protagoras doctrine. Hence if there are false beliefs, Protagoras 'truth' is false. But since the doctrine proclaims that all beliefs are true irrespective of those who hold them, if there are false beliefs like Socrates claimed, then the doctrine, according to Socrates, is manifestly untenable.

### 3.1.3 Knowledge as True Judgment

Having rejected the definition of knowledge as perception, Socrates went on to ask *Theatetus* to give another definition of knowledge. *Theatetus* did this by defining knowledge as true judgment. Judgment is being defined as the soul's internal reasoning function (ww. But Socrates

contends that one cannot make proper sense of the notion of 'true judgment' unless one can explain what false judgment is. In order to examine the meaning of false judgment, Socrates highlighted several ways of looking at how false judgment can be defined. They are:

1. false judgment as mistaking one thing for another
2. false judgment as thinking what is not
3. false judgment as other-judgment
4. false judgment as the inappropriate linkage of a perception to a memory (www.stanford.edu).

Socrates also rejected this definition of knowledge for, according to him, we sometimes make false judgments and if this is the case, this cannot amount to knowledge. He explains that the human mind is like an aviary full of birds of different kinds. The owner possesses them in the sense that he has the ability to enter the aviary and catch them, but does not have them unless he literally has them in his hands. The birds are pieces of knowledge. To hand them over to someone else is to teach, to stock the aviary is to learn, to catch a particular bird is to remember a thing once learned and thus potentially known. The possibility of false judgment emerges when one enters the aviary in order to catch, say a pigeon, but instead catch, say a ring-dove.

Pigeon and ring-dove both represent knowledge and ignorance respectively. A man who catches a piece of ignorance (ring-dove) would still believe that he has caught a piece of knowledge (pigeon) and therefore would behave as if he knows. The man must have mistaken a piece of ignorance for a piece of knowledge when making his judgment but acts as if he has activated his capacity for knowing. The problem therefore according to Socrates is that we may have to posit another aviary to explain how the judgment-maker mistakes a piece of ignorance for a piece of knowledge.

Socrates therefore rejected *Theatetus's* definition of knowledge as true judgment based on the above reasons and examples. Due to Socrates dissatisfaction, the next step is to construct another plausible definition of knowledge.

### **3.1.4 Knowledge as True Judgment with an Account (Logos)**

Turning to the fourth definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account, Socrates examined the meaning of the term, *logos* and came up with three definitions. (1) Giving an account of something means making one's thought apparent, vocal by means of words and verbal expressions. The problem with this definition is that *logos* (an account) becomes something that everyone is able to do more or less readily; unless one is deaf or dumb, so that anyone with a true opinion would have knowledge as well. To give an account of a thing is to enumerate all its elements. Giving an account is defined as being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things. As an example, Socrates uses the definition of the sun as the brightest of the heavenly bodies that circle the earth. But here again, the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account (*logos*) has been criticized.

The first criticism is that to add logos to true judgment is meaningless because logos is already part of true judgment and so cannot itself be a guarantee of knowledge. For instance, if someone is asked to tell what distinguishes *Theatetus*, a man of whom he has a correct judgment, from all other things and such a person says *Theatetus* is a man with a nose, mouth, and eyes his account would not help to distinguish *Theatetus* from all other men? But if he had not already in his mind the means of differentiating *Theatetus* from everyone else, he could not judge correctly who *Theatetus* was and could not recognize him the next time he sees him.

Since the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account cannot be sustained, *Theatetus* had no other definition of knowledge and the dialogue ended inconclusively. But despite its failure to provide a viable definition of knowledge, the *Theatetus* has exerted considerable influence on modern philosophical thought.

### ITQ

#### Question

- Which of the following is Thaletus view on knowledge?
  - a) Knowledge as the view of the majority.
  - b) Knowledge as the opinion of the minority.
  - c) Knowledge as true judgment.
  - d) Knowledge as the ability to carry out an assignment.

#### Feedback

- The answer is not (A) because Thaletus never expressed knowledge as being the view of the majority; it is not (B) because knowledge is not viewed in the dialogue as the opinion of the minority; it is (C) because the notion of knowledge as true judgment is the third view of knowledge expressed by Thaletus; it is not (D) because we are dealing with propositional knowledge and this about knowledge that and not knowledge of a skill that this option is about.



#### Reading

#### Time required

- 1) Read Plato's *Thaetetus*. You may access the *Thaetetus* online by clicking visiting <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-theaetetus/>.
- 2) Summarize the discourse into five pages.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the conversation between Socrates and *Theatetus* in the dialogue known as the *Theatetus*. We learnt that there are four different ways of defining knowledge as highlighted in this dialogue. We also learnt that this dialogue ended inconclusively because the four different definitions of knowledge are beset with various problems and this has led to Socrates criticisms of these different definitions. We concluded by stressing that in spite of these criticisms, the *Theatetus* is central to any discourse on epistemology.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 3.1(tests Learning Outcome 3.1)

Explain Thaetetus view on knowledge.

## Study Session 4

# The Philosophy of Perception

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine philosophical perception and its principles. Also, we will discuss the theories of perception and factors that influence it.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

4.1 *define and use* correctly the following terms in bold:

- **perception**
- **detection**
- **recognition**
- **discrimination**

4.2 *outline* the process of perception.

4.3 *explain* the principles of perception.

4.4 *discuss* factors that influence perception.

4.5 *explain* theories of perception in epistemology.

## 4.1 What is Perception?

**Perception** The process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting and organizing sensory information

The process by which we observe and find meaning in objects, events and people around us can be described as perception. Put in another way, perception is the process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting and organizing sensory information. Methods of studying perception range from essentially biological or physiological approaches through psychological approaches to the often abstract thought experiments of mental philosophy. Our knowledge of the world comes through our sense organs which react to various forms of energy and physical signals. Our eyes respond to certain wavelengths of light, our ears sense certain kinds of vibrations in the hair, nose and tongue are sensitive to certain chemical signals. Sense organs in our skin respond to pressure, temperature and pains; sense organs in our joints, tendons and muscles respond to body movement and position.

## 4.2 Levels of Perception

In order for us to better understand perception and its processes, we need to look at the levels of perception and its complexities. Perception has three levels of complexity. These are: **detection, recognition and discrimination**.

1. **Detection**: refers to whether people can sense that they are being stimulated by some form of energy. For example, a light may be so dim that people can barely see it.



2. **Recognition:** means being able to identify as well as detect a particular pattern of stimulation.
3. **Discrimination:** means being able to perceive patterns of stimulations as different. For example, a person may hear slight differences between two similar musical tones.

## 4.3 Processes of Perception

The process of perception can be described in the following ways: sense organs change the various physical signals into nervous impulses and these impulses then travel to the brain. Through the physical process of perception, the patterns of signals come to exist in our minds as objects, events people and other aspects of the world.

Perception involves an active process of ‘working on’ sensory data to produce objects and events. This work involves many physical and psychological factors. For example, there is music or noise in the vibrations that stimulate the ear. The brain organizes and interprets nervous impulses from the ears as sound. Together, the sense organs and the brain transform physical energy from sound waves and other environmental stimuli into information about events around us.

The philosophy of perception is concerned with how mental processes and symbols depend on the world internal and external to the perceiver. Our perception of the external world begins with the senses which lead us to generate empirical concepts representing the world around us within a framework relating new concepts to pre-existing ones. Perception therefore leads to an individual’s impression of the world.

A major issue in the philosophy of perception is the possibility of discrepancies between the external world and the perceiver’s impressions which are sometimes referred to as qualia. The questions that should come to mind at this point are: Do our perceptions allow us to experience the world as it really is? Can we ever know another person’s point of view the way we know our own?

Having examined the definition of perception and the processes of perception, we should note that perception does not operate in isolation, there are factors affecting perception.

## 4.4 Principles of Perception

There are a number of general principles that help us understand the processes of perception. One of such principles is the **principle of closure**. Closure is the general psychological tendency to perceive things as complete and unified.

Another principle is the **principle of constancy**. This principle states that we tend to perceive objects as constant in size, shape colour and other qualities in spite of changes that occur in stimulation. For example, an orange will be perceived to have its characteristic colour under different kinds of light. The opposite of the principle of constancy is also important. Sometimes, an object or pattern of stimulation will remain constant but the perceived effect will vary. For example, look at the gray

and black colours of any perceived object, let's say a cube. At one moment, you may see three complete cubes, but at another moment you may see five.

Another important principle relates to **perceptual context**. The perception of an object or event depends in part on the context (surrounding conditions).

### ITQ

#### Question

- From what you have studied thus far, can you outline at least two principles of perception?

#### Feedback

- You have learnt three principles of perception in this section and so we expect your answers to include any of the principles of constancy, the principle of closure, and the principle of context.

## 4.5 Factors influencing Perception

Both physical and psychological factors affect perception. One of the most important physical factors is the structure of the human nervous system. Important psychological factors include our emotions, needs, expectations and learning.

1. **The Nervous System:** Each sensory system such as vision, hearing or touch has its specialized detectors. These detectors are called receptors and they function in various ways to change energy into nervous impulses. For example, the human eye has two major kinds of receptors in the retina (the light-sensitive part of the eye). These receptors are called rods and cones. Rods and cones each contain particular chemicals that respond to light in different ways. As a result, rods detect shapes, movements, and shades of gray but do not respond to colours. Cones detect the full range of colour by responding to different frequencies of light. These differences in structure and function help determine the perceptual effects related to rods and cones. Rods enable us to see in dim light and cones enable us to see colours and sharp details in bright light.
2. **The Brain:** certain physical and functional features of the brain also influence perception. The part of the brain that interprets visual signals has different kinds of cells that respond only under certain conditions. Some of these cells respond only when a light is lit, but they stop responding if the light stays on. Others respond only when a light turns off. These cells are also arranged in special ways that are related to how we perceive. For example, some cells occur in columns or in clusters that are related to how we perceive edges and forms.
3. **Learning, Emotion and Motivation:** Much evidence supports the conclusion that learning, emotion and motivation are important influences on perception. Part of this evidence comes from experiments that compare how people in different culture

perceive things. The perception of form, colour, pain, touch and other experiences may differ from culture to culture depending on habits, customs and training of children. Visual effects called illusions can also demonstrate the influence of learning and past experience. An illusion is not a false perception as many people believe but one that is inconsistent with another perception.

4. **Emotions and Motivations:** these two can have important influence on perception. At times, severe emotional disturbance can prevent perception completely. For example, some people who are robbed are unable to remember anything about the appearance of the robber. Motivation can also affect the way we perceive. For example food may seem unusually large or colourful to hungry people.

#### Hint

Having considered all these factors, we will now move to theories of perception. These theories are myriad but to avoid confusion, our focus will be on just three: these are realism, anti-realism and phenomenalism.

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## 4.6 Theories of Perception

### 4.6.1 Realism

In modern philosophy, realism is applied to the doctrine that ordinary objects of sense perception such as tables and chairs have an existence independent of their being perceived. In broad terms, realism is concerned generally with the relation of knowledge to its object. Hence the question of sense perception is of utmost importance.

More often than not, philosophers make a distinction between **direct realism** and **indirect realism**. Direct realism assumes that what is consciously given to us in perception are the real things or the things themselves. Indirect realism, on the other hand, regards what is immediately given in consciousness as no more than a copy of the real thing. In essence, one can say that realism undoubtedly expresses man's attitude to the knowledge he possesses. An extreme version of realism is known as **naïve realism**. This theory of perception holds that the things perceived by the senses are believed to be exactly what they appear to be. There is the belief that there is a real external world and that our perceptions are caused directly by that world. It has its foundation in causation because an object being there causes us to see it. Thus, it follows that the world remains as it is when it is perceived. When it is not being perceived, a room is still there once we exist. Reality is here taken to correspond exactly to what is perceived.

### 4.6.2 Anti-Realism

There are two variants of anti-realism, these are **idealism** and **phenomenalism**. **Idealism** holds that we can only be aware of mental things. It is an anti-realist theory of perception which holds that knowledge is derived from ideas. This version of anti-realism holds that reality consists of only minds and ideas. **Eliminative idealist**, for instance, holds that there is no such thing as material objects, they are

nothing but experiences in our minds, ideas or sensations. **Reductive idealist**, on the other hand, holds that there are material objects but they are nothing other than complexes of experience. One of the most influential proponents of reductive idealism was Bishop Berkeley who maintained that everything was mind-dependent. He reduced all physical objects to ideas either in the mind of God, or the mind of a human being.

### 4.6.3 Phenomenalism

**Phenomenalism** The philosophical theory stating that knowledge of the external world is limited to appearances, so that we know what our senses tell us about things, not what they are.

**Phenomenalism** claims that statements regarding physical objects can be translated into statements about what was, is and would be experienced under certain conditions. To say for instance that a physical object of a certain type exists is to say that certain sorts of sense data have been, are being and would be experienced under certain conditions. In Ayer's terminology, phenomenalism claims that physical objects are logical constructions and their objects are sense data. This does not mean that physical objects are constructions of sense data for such a view will be similar to the view held by idealism. But the central idea of phenomenalism is that the content of propositions about physical objects can be translated without loss into propositions about sense data. There are two famous defences of phenomenalism: Mill's phenomenalism and Ayer's linguistic phenomenalism.

#### Mill's Phenomenalism

Mill derives his account from empiricism about ontological questions (what there is) and his associationist psychology. We have only our experience to go on in establishing what there is. He famously describes physical objects as 'permanent possibilities of sensation'. When we come in contact with physical objects for example, when we are looking at something on a desk, we are presented with a series of new sensations. Certain sensations which are possible come about. I could move this piece of paper and experience a new shape of the colour beneath it. These are all sorts of possible sensations that would occur under certain conditions. We have come, from experience, to expect this sequence of sensations. You could say that we are certain it will happen. And so we come to think of certain possibilities of sensation as being permanently available under certain conditions. The certainty we have is not unwarranted—it is grounded in our experience.

We associate the permanent possibilities of certain sensations together since whenever I have one, the conditions of having another associated with it are to hand. These clusters of possible sensations are what physical objects are. A piece of paper is the permanent possibility of certain sensations that we associate together. Only some of the sensations in fact occur; but the physical object is a collection of those that do and those that could occur.

#### Ayer's Linguistic Phenomenalism

Ayer makes a different case. He defends phenomenalism through his analysis of statements concerning physical objects. He claims that the function of philosophy is to give definitions in use, showing how the sentences in which a symbol or type of symbol (such as words for

physical objects) occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences that do not contain it or its synonyms. He contrasts this with dictionary definitions in which symbols are defined in terms of synonyms.

Philosophical definitions then can deepen our understanding of terms in a way dictionary definitions do not. That is, they can still be informative to someone who already knows what all the terms mean in the dictionary sense. Our initial understanding of terms may amount to no more than practical ability to use them and know how to verify them; but philosophical analysis can reveal unsuspected logical complexity. Since the analysis translates sentences containing the term under analysis into sentences that do not, we come to see how the term is 'standing in for' something more complex. Such terms denote logical constructions; the introduction of symbols which denote logical constructions is a device which enables us to state complicated propositions about the elements of these constructions in a relatively simple form.

### ITQ

#### Question

- Differentiate between realism and anti-realism?

#### Feedback

- Realism is the school that holds that the external world has an existence that is independent of its being perceived. In other words, the external world exists whether or not we perceive it. On the other hand, anti-realism is the school that holds that the external world only exists as a creation of our minds. In other words, the external world does not exist independently of our senses or perception.



#### Discussion Activity

How will you define perception?

[Post your response on Study Session 4 forum page on course website.](#)

## Study Session Summary



#### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined philosophy of perception and the principles of perception which led us to how we can better understand perception and its processes. We also examined the factors that affect perception; after which we identified three theories of perception which are central to any discourse on perception.

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## Assessment



Assessment

**SAQ 5.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 5.1,5.2,5.3,5.4, and 5.5)**

What do you understand by perception?

## Study Session 5

# Traditional Account of Knowledge

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will be focusing on the traditional account of knowledge. This is how knowledge was traditionally conceptualized. We will also be looking at the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 5.1 *state* the traditional account of knowledge.
- 5.2 *discuss* the analysis of S knows that P.
- 5.3 *point out* the condition for knowledge.

## 5.1 Standard Account of Knowledge

The need to arrive at a set of conditions, which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for knowledge has led a philosopher called Gettier (1963) to formulate the traditional account of knowledge. The standard account of knowledge, around which all recent works in epistemology have been done, defines knowledge as justified true belief; it holds that S knows that P if, and only if:

1. P is true
2. S believes that P
3. S is justified in believing that P.

These three parts are called the tripartite definition of knowledge or the justified true belief account of knowledge (JTB). Gettier's position concerning the tripartite conception of knowledge is that it is possible for someone not to know even when all the three conditions are satisfied. Also, he allows that they are individually necessary and argues that they need supplementing.

Gettier's counter-example is one in which S has a justified but false belief by inference from which he justifiably believes something which happens to be true and so arrives at a justified true belief which is not knowledge.

What we need here is an analysis of S knows that P.

### 5.1.1 Analysis of S knows that P

The **first condition**, generally called the truth condition says that you cannot know that something is true if in fact it is false. So if you are to know that P, then P must be true. The **second condition** needs thorough explanation. The mere fact that P is true does not guarantee that S knows

it. There must be some connection between S and P. S must have some sort of mental relation to P. But this relation has to be of a certain kind. It is no use, for instance if S wonders whether P, or fears that P, or hopes that P. These are all attitudes which S might have towards P, but they are incompatible with S knowing that P. If S is to know that P, S must accept that P is true, or, as the second condition says, S must believe that P (Everitt and Fisher, 1995:18).

It is easy to misunderstand this second condition because in ordinary life, we often seem to contrast knowledge with belief as if they are mutually exclusive. John might say 'I don't believe that my name is John, I know that it is and this seems to suggest that knowledge and belief are incompatible states. The term 'belief' in ordinary use often carries suggestions about the inconclusive nature of the evidence which we have, as when people contrast matters of belief with matters of fact. Sometimes it carries religious connotations. A person who describes himself as a believer does not mean that he holds a belief of one kind or the other. He means that he accepts some religious claims but none of the ordinary associations of the word 'belief' is present in the second condition of the traditional account of knowledge. The condition is not implying that S is uncertain of the truth of P or that she lacks evidence for P, or that P has a religious content. All it is saying is that she accepts P—what his grounds are, if any, and what the strength of her conviction is, is left undetermined by the second condition. In this usage, believing something covers the spectrum of cases ranging from thinking that it is more probable than not to being absolutely certain of it.

One may want to ask at this point that are these two conditions by themselves sufficient for the truth of S knows that P? Can we in other words equate knowledge with true belief?

According to the JTB analysis, there are possible cases which show that true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. For sometimes, a person's belief is true just by chance or by luck. If a person bets regularly on horses and says 'I just know that one day, I am going to have a big win' we would not say that she knew what she claimed to know, even if one day she did have a big win (Everitt and Fisher, 1995:19). We might say that she believed that she would have a big win, or that she was sure that she would have a big win. But intuitively, we think that such a case would not be an example of knowledge (Everitt and Fisher, 1995:19)

Do we then need another condition that is capable of turning belief into knowledge? It seems another condition is needed to prevent cases in which a knower's true belief is true just by chance, or just a matter of luck. There must be some sort of connection between the fact that the knower believes that P and the fact that P is true. According to the JTB account, this connection is supplied by the idea of a good justification. The trouble with the gambler from the point of view of knowledge is that she has no justification for her belief that she will win. Unless she has a good justification for her belief, she is guilty of wishful thinking.

When we talk about justification in epistemology, we are talking about epistemic justification in which one is justified in holding a belief if and only if one has some good reasons to think that the belief is true, and indeed a better reason to think that it is true than that it is false.



## ITQ

**Question**

- Can you state the standard account of knowledge?

**Feedback**

- The standard account of knowledge holds that a knowledge claim can be made if and only if there is a belief which is true and the claimant has justification for believing that his belief is true.

### 5.1.2 Gettier-Style Example

Gettier provided a criticism of the traditional account of knowledge in a short but very influential paper. He provided examples of beliefs which were both true and apparently adequately justified, but which did not amount to knowledge. If his argument is correct, then we know that the traditional account as it stands will not do as a complete analysis of propositional knowledge, for it would not be giving sufficient conditions for the truth of ‘S knows that P’ (the conditions could be met and the knowledge claim would still be false).

Let us then see what a Gettier-style example is like. Suppose that Mr John’s son tells him that he has just bought a car. Mr John knows that his son is an honest person and can think of no reason why he should be deceiving him in this matter. So, on the basis of what his son has told him, Mr John comes to believe that his son has just bought a car. So when Mr John meets his friend and his friend says to him ‘I heard that someone in your family has just bought a car’, Mr John replies ‘Yes, I know that someone in my family has just bought a car. But there are two facts unknown to Mr John. The first is that very unusually; his son on this occasion was lying: he had not just bought a car. The second fact unknown to Mr John is that his wife, Mrs John, has just bought a car—but secretly. The question now is: when Mr John says to his friend ‘I know that someone in my family has just bought a car, is what he says true? Does he really have knowledge?

As far as our discussion goes, we can see that in the above example, the three conditions specified by the traditional analysis are all met. First, it is true that someone in Mr John’s family has just bought a car, namely Mrs John. Secondly, Mr John certainly believes that someone in his family has just bought a car. Thirdly, it appears that Mr John has adequate justification for his belief, since his source of information is his son, who we are told is very honest and who, further has no motive that Mr John knows of for being deceitful in this particular case. So Mr John does have an **adequately justified true belief** that someone in his family has just bought a car: and yet, so Gettier objection goes, Mr John does not know this. So knowledge cannot be equated with justified true belief.

The aim of Gettier’s objection is to show that the three conditions offered by the traditional account of knowledge are not sufficient for knowledge. This Gettier did by trying to show that there can be cases (our intuition tells us that there are possible cases) in which the three conditions are met

and yet in which we still do not have a case of knowledge. There is therefore the need for a fourth condition.

## ITQ

### Question

- What is the aim of the Gettier counter-example?

### Feedback

- The aim of the Gettier counter-example is to show the inadequacy of the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. It aims to show that it is possible to have JTB and still not have knowledge.

### *The need for a fourth condition of Knowledge*

Since the three necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge as specified by the traditional account of knowledge is inadequate, there is therefore need for a fourth condition. A possible candidate for the fourth condition is **infallibilism**. To qualify as an item of knowledge, a belief must not only be true and justified, the justification of the belief must necessitate its truth. In other words, the justification for the belief must be infallible.

Another possible candidate for the fourth condition of knowledge is **indefeasibility**. Defeasibility theory maintains that there should be no overriding or defeating truths for the reasons that justify one's belief. For instance, suppose Mr Ken believes he saw Daniel steal a book from the library and uses this to justify the claim that Daniel stole a book, a possible defeater or overriding proposition for such a claim could be a true proposition like, 'Daniel's identical twin, Robert, is currently in the same town as Daniel. So long as a defeater of one's justification exist, a subject would not be epistemologically justified.

In the case of Mr. John, when we look at what is it about him that prevents him from having knowledge, we will realise that he is unaware that his son is lying to him. If he became aware of this fact, then he would no longer be justified in believing that someone in his family has just bought a car. His belief (that someone in his family has just bought a car) would, of course, still be true (remember that it is Mrs. John who has bought a car). But it is his belief that his son has just bought a car which functions as his justification. If he were to discover the truth about his son, this would undermine or defeat the justification he has for thinking that someone in his family has bought a car. What knowledge requires is not that one should have a well-justified true belief, but further that one's belief should not be susceptible to being undermined or defeated by any truths of which one is currently unaware. In short, that one's justification should be 'undefeatable' (or indefeasible) (Everitt and Fisher, 1995: 25). We can define indefeasible justification in a more formal way like this:

*S's belief that P is indefeasibly justified if and only if there is no further fact Q such that if she came to believe Q, she would no longer be justified in believing that P.*

*(Everitt and Fisher, 1995; 25).*

The third candidate for the fourth condition is **reliabilism**. Reliabilism is a theory advanced by philosophers such as Alvin Goldman (1986),

according to which a belief is justified (or otherwise supported in such a way as to count towards knowledge) only if it is produced by processes that typically yields a sufficiently high ratio of true to false beliefs. According to ‘reliabilist’ accounts of knowledge, what makes a true belief a case of knowledge is not that the knower has a justification for it, but that it has been produced in a certain way:

*For a belief to count as knowledge, it must be caused by a generally reliable process.*

*(Goldman, 1986: 51).*

Everitt and Fisher (1995: 33) define the reliability of a method as the tendency or disposition of the method to give right answers in general. So the reliability of a method attaches to the run of answers which the method yields: it cannot attach to any individual answer. What attaches to any individual answer is correctness (or incorrectness). And a method which is only reliable in general will on occasion give incorrect answers.

The final candidate for the fourth condition is the **causal analysis**. This condition explains that what distinguishes cases of knowledge from cases of true belief is not just justification as seen in the justified true belief account of knowledge, but the causal connections of the belief. If a true belief has the right sort of causal connections, then it is knowledge; if it has the wrong sort of causal connection, it is merely true belief. And what makes the causal connections of a belief the right sort of causal connections is that they connect the belief to the event which the belief is about.

In the case of Mr John’s family and their car, Mr John’s belief that someone in his family has bought a car is caused by his son’s telling him that he has bought a car, in combination with his background belief that his son is very honest and reliable. Why the son lies in this case does not matter, but we were told that the son did not buy a car, and so it could not have been the event of the son’s buying a car which caused Mr. John’s belief that someone in the family had just bought a car. By contrast, the event which does make Mr John’s belief true (namely that Mrs John has just bought a car) is causally unconnected with Mr John’s belief that someone has just bought a car. It is not because of Mrs John’s purchase that Mr John holds this belief that he does.

By contrast, imagine that the position slightly changed. Suppose that Mr John’s son did buy a car and told his father so. Then given the honesty of the son and his lack of motive for lying in this particular case, we surely would say that Mr. John knew that someone in his family had just bought a car. On the causal analysis, Mr John’s true belief would amount to knowledge in this case because it is directly caused by the very event which makes it true. It is caused by what the son says to Mr John, and that in turn is caused by the son’s purchase of the car. So Mr John’s belief that someone in the family has bought a car is caused by someone in the family buying a car.

The two contrasting examples above suggest that a causal analysis might be able to explain why some cases of true belief are cases of knowledge and some are not, by reference to the causal connections of the belief.

This implies that the causal origin of a true belief is more important from the point of view of knowledge.



### Discussion Activity

Review Edmund Gettier's '*Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*'

Post your presentation on Study Session 4 forum page on course website.

## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, you learnt that traditional account of knowledge specified three necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. We learnt that these three conditions are inadequate by looking at the Gettier-style examples which serves to explain that the three conditions for knowledge may obtain and still a person may not be said to know. As a result of this inadequacy, we saw the need for a fourth condition. We examined four concepts for this fourth condition, these are: infallibilism, indefeasibility, reliabilism and the causal analysis.

## Assessment



### Assessment

#### **SAQ 5.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 5.1 and 5.2)**

State and analyze the traditional account of knowledge.

#### **SAQ 5.2 (tests Learning Outcome 5.3)**

Discuss the Gettier problem and the quest for a fourth condition.

## Study Session 6

# Theories of Truth

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine the various theories of truth as we have them in epistemology. These are: coherence theory, correspondence theory and pragmatic theory respectively.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

6.1 analyse the following theories of truth:

- coherence theory of truth
- correspondence theory of truth
- pragmatic theory of truth

## 6.1 Coherence Theory of Truth

A set of two or more beliefs are said to cohere if they 'fit' together or agree with one another. Typically, then, a coherence theory of truth would claim that the belief of a given individual are true to the extent that the set of all their beliefs is coherent and a set of belief coheres if and only if each member of the set is consistent with any subset of the others. The coherence theory of truth is often attributed to Brand Blanshard: coherence is the sole criterion of truth. There is therefore an implied condition of consistency in any system of belief before it will count as true.

The implication of the above is that a purely true system would be one that gives us a complete picture of the world. This theory can be expressed in the following formula:

*For each belief B, B is purely true if and only if B is a member of a consistent set of beliefs that among them give a complete picture of the world and each of which entails each of the others (Edward Craig, 2003: )*

But pure truth has never been attained, so Blanshard (typical of a coherence theorist), proposes that truth comes in degrees. 'A given judgement is true in the degree to which its content could maintain itself in the light of a completed system of knowledge, false in the degree to which its appearance there would require transformation'. This is captured in the formula:

*For each belief B, B is true to degree N if and only if N percent of the content of H would be present in a purely true system of beliefs.*

As it is the case in philosophy, all positions are subject to criticisms. The most common objection to coherence theories is that the conditions they place on truth are too weak.

### ITQ

#### Question

- Who is the Coherence theory of truth associated with?

#### Feedback

- It is often associated with Brand Blanshard.

## 6.2 Correspondence Theory of Truth

This theory of truth is often summed up with the slogan ‘truth is correspondence with the facts or truth is agreement with reality’. In an attempt to define truth, Aristotle has it that ‘to say that (either) that which is, is not or that which is not, is, is falsehood and to say that that which is, is and that which is not, is not is true. Correspondence theories are of two types: **correspondence as correlation** and **correspondence as congruence**.

**Correspondence as Correlation:** asserts that every truth bearer (proposition, sentences, belief and so on) is correlated to a possible fact. If the possible fact to which a given truth bearer is correlated actually obtains, the truth bearer is true, otherwise it is false. In essence, what correspondence as correlation claims is that a truth bearer as a whole is correlated to a possible fact as a whole?

**Correspondence as Congruence:** claims that truth bearers and the possible facts to which they correspond have parallel structures. Austin has offered a correspondence as correlation theory. Truth is considered as a single, four-term relation between a statement, a sentence, a state of affairs (that is a possible fact) and a type of state of affairs. For Austin, a statement is the information conveyed by a declarative sentence. So a sentence is the medium in which a statement is made. And the meaning of statements is a matter of two kinds of convention that have evolved in our language (Edward Craig, 2003). First, there are descriptive conventions correlating sentences with types of states of affairs. Second, there are demonstrative conventions correlating statements to particular states of affairs. Thus, a statement is said to be true when the historic (that is, particular) state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it refers) is of a type which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions.

Hence, the correspondence between the truth bearer and the world is absolutely and purely conventional. For example the cat is on the mat would in an ordinary context refer to the present state of affairs in which speaker and hearer find themselves, along with a cat and a nearby mat. Therefore, if a cat is on a mat in the state of affairs in which the speaker is located, the statement is true because the present state of affairs is of just the type described by the sentence.

## ITQ

**Question**

- State the two types of Correspondence theory you know.

**Feedback**

- The two types are:
  - 1) the correspondence as congruence, and
  - 2) correspondence as correlation.

## 6.3 Pragmatic theory of Truth

The pragmatic theory of truth can be classified into two. There is the **consensus theory** of C.S Peirce, according to which a true proposition is one which would be endorsed unanimously by all persons who had had sufficient relevant experiences to judge it. Second, there is the **instrumentalist theory** associated with William James, John Dewey and F.S.C. Schiller, according to which a proposition counts as true if and only if behaviour based on a belief in the proposition yields (in the long run and all things being considered) beneficial results for the believers (Edward Craig, 2003). Both theories imply that the facts of the matter are not relevant to the truth-value of the proposition.

### 6.3.1 Consensus Theory of C.S Peirce

C.S Peirce believes that any two minds investigating a given question would tend eventually to arrive at the same answer even if they used different methods and different pools of evidence, ‘let any human being have enough information and exert enough thought upon any question and the result will be that he will arrive at a certain definite conclusion which is the same that any other mind will reach’. Moreover, this one answer that all would reach is by definition the true answer; the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by truth (Edward Craig, 2003). Indeed, in principle, consensus embodies the truth no matter what method was used to bring about consensus.

An important question that is likely to come to our mind here is that what gives Peirce the confidence that investigators would move towards a common conclusion: ultimately our evidence takes the form of perceptions and these perceptions are controlled by a single fixed reality which is public to all. Since there is just one objective reality and it is driving all of us to beliefs that accurately reflect it, we are driven to agree with one another. So, in the long run, the only propositions with which everyone would agree are those that accurately reflect reality. Hence ‘is true’ is equivalent to accurately reflect reality. Specifically, what is real is just whatever we would come to agree is real; the real is the idea in which the community ultimately settles down and everything therefore which will be thought to exist in the final opinion is real, and nothing else. Peirce called this his social theory of reality.

The problem with Peirce’s account which he also noted is that we cannot be quite sure the community will ever settle down to an unalterable conclusion upon any given question nor can we rationally presume that



any overwhelming consensus of opinion will be reached upon every question (Edward Craig, 2003).

### 6.3.2 William James's Instrumentalism

James accepts the definition of truth embodied in correspondence theories of truth, namely that a true belief or statement is one that agrees with reality. But for James, the reality to which true ideas must agree is mind-dependent. James wants to give the word agree in the phrase 'agree with reality' a different sense from the typical correspondence theorist. Given that reality is just useful mental constructs of the collection of past and present minds, a belief agrees with reality by proving useful to those who believe it. According to James, useful beliefs are those that:

1. Enable us to manipulate the objects of the world
2. Allow us to communicate successfully with our fellows
3. Provide good explanations for other occurrences and
4. Lead to accurate predictions.

It is important for us to note that James identified truth with beliefs that are useful over the long run and all things considered. 'The truth', to put it very briefly is only the expedient in the way of our thinking. Just as the 'right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experiences in sight will not necessarily meet all further experiences equally satisfactory (Edward Craig, 2003).



#### Discussion Activity

How can you ascertain "what is truth"?

Post your response on Study Session 6 forum page on course website.

## Study Session Summary



#### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed the theories of truth, which includes: correspondence theory of truth, coherence theory of truth and the pragmatic theory of truth. We also examined the ideas of various philosophers who had contributed to these theories of truth.



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## Assessment



Assessment

### **SAQ 6.1 (tests Learning Outcome 6.1)**

From what you have learnt in this study session, appraise the theories of truth.

## Study Session 7

# Foundationalism

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will be discussing foundationalism as a theory of justification. It is pertinent to note that theories of justification include; coherentism and contextualism. We will explain these theories as they evolved in the history of epistemology.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 7.1 *define* and *use* correctly the term “foundationalism”
- 7.2 *explain* infinite regress problem.
- 7.3 *present* foundationalism as a theory of knowledge.
- 7.4 *discuss* foundationalism as a theory of justification.
- 7.5 *distinguish* between classical foundationalism and fallibility foundationalism.

## 7.1 What is Foundationalism?

### Foundationalism

The response to the criticisms and challenges raised by the sceptics in epistemology

**Foundationalism** is a response to the criticisms and challenges raised by the sceptics in epistemology. Like we saw in Study Session two, the sceptics have doubted the possibility of knowledge and its certainty. For the sceptics, nothing can be known for certain and we can never attain objective and unbiased knowledge.

Foundationalism tries to prove that certain, incorrigible, indubitable and infallible knowledge is attainable, only if our knowledge is based on a firm and unshakeable foundation. Apart from being an answer to the sceptic, foundationalism attempts to solve the infinite regress problem in epistemology. How did the infinite regress problem arise?

Foundationalism reminds us of a building. A building has a foundation which we normally call the ‘base’ or ‘substructure’ and the ‘superstructure’. This foundation or base is what carries the superstructure and keeps the building standing. This analogy also applies to our beliefs. ‘Basic’ or ‘foundational’ beliefs are said to have epistemic privileges like infallibility, indubitability, and incorrigibility. Basic beliefs are justified by virtue of their intrinsic value. We should note here that we have two types of beliefs: foundational or basic beliefs and non-foundational beliefs. The non-foundational beliefs are based on foundational beliefs. Foundationalists hold that any knowledge claim must be based on a basic belief which is the foundation of all other beliefs. Foundationalism is an attempt to find an ultimate justification of knowledge and certainty (Omeregbe, 2002: 50). Foundationalism is therefore any theory in epistemology (typically theories of justification but also of knowledge) that holds that beliefs are justified or known based

on what we call ‘basic beliefs’ (also commonly called foundational beliefs).

Basic beliefs are beliefs that give justificatory support to other beliefs but do not require other beliefs to be justified. This is because they are self-justifying, self-evident and they enjoy a non-inferential warrant or justification. These beliefs are also infallible.

Typically, foundationalists have held that basic beliefs are justified by:

- a. mental events or states such as experiences that do not constitute beliefs (these are called non-doxastic mental states) or
- b. they are simply not the type of thing that can be or needs to be justified.

Foundationalism and coherentism are rival theories. While foundationalism gives some basic beliefs a privileged position, saying that they are self-justifying, and confer justification on other non-foundational beliefs, coherentism holds that all beliefs are justified through their relationship to other beliefs (Grayling, 1995:21). For the coherentist, all beliefs are justified through coherence with other beliefs. The coherentist does not believe that any belief has a position such that it can confer justification on other beliefs; but that all beliefs should mutually support each other in a coherent belief set.

### ITQ

#### Question

- What is foundationalism?

#### Feedback

- It is an epistemological position that our beliefs are justified by virtue of their being justified by the basic beliefs. It is a response to the allegation of the skeptics that we cannot know anything for sure as well as the solution to the infinite regress problem.

## 7.2 Infinite Regress Problem in Epistemology

From the traditional definition of knowledge (knowledge as justified true belief), it follows not only that there must be a justification for all our beliefs. It follows then that if belief ‘B’ is justified by belief ‘A’, belief ‘A’ must itself be justified (since unjustified belief cannot confer justification on other beliefs) and belief ‘B’ can in turn justify belief ‘C’. Belief ‘C’ must itself be justified and it can confer justification on belief ‘D’ and this can continue ad infinitum.

This chain of beliefs deriving justification from other beliefs may continue forever leading us to an infinite regress. Where then should be the terminating point of our beliefs? Should we allow this regress to continue forever? Let us look at four possibilities.

- First, the series of justified beliefs each based upon the other, continues infinitely.
- Secondly, the series of justified beliefs circle back to its beginning (such that ‘A’ is based on ‘B’, ‘B’ on ‘C’, ‘C’ on ‘D’ and ‘D’ on ‘A’).

- Thirdly, the series of justified beliefs begin with an unjustified belief.
- Lastly, the series of justified beliefs begin with a belief which is justified but not by virtue of being based on another justified belief.

To solve the infinite regress problem therefore, foundationalism adopts the fourth possibility where all our beliefs are based on a justified belief that does not require justification from other beliefs. The terminating point of our belief is our 'foundational beliefs'.

## 7.3 Foundationalism as a Theory of Knowledge

As a theory of knowledge, foundationalism holds that what we claim to know must be based on certain basic beliefs or foundational beliefs which we can know through the senses or through reason. There are two varieties of foundationalist theories under this group. They are empiricism and rationalism.

### 7.3.1 Empiricism

**Empiricism** The epistemic theory that maintains that sense experience is the source and criterion of knowledge.

**Empiricism** is that epistemic theory that maintains that sense experience or sensational reports are the source and criterion of knowledge. These reports are self-evident and infallible and therefore, worthy of serving as epistemologically basic propositions. On the empiricist account therefore, foundationalism can be defined as the doctrine that all knowledge rests on a foundational belief that is justified by experience (Lanre-Abass 2006:69). John Locke, David Hume and George Berkeley all subscribe to this view.

Locke's foundationalist thesis is that all our ideas come from experience. He made a distinction between simple and complex ideas. He rejected the idea of innate ideas saying that, we gain all knowledge through sense experience. George Berkeley held that we get to know things in the world through our senses (*esse est percipi* which means to be is to be perceived). Things exist because they are perceived and they exist as ideas in our minds. The empiricists are only concerned with perceptual knowledge; they have no business with phenomenal knowledge. David Hume made a distinction between ideas and impressions. An impression is an immediate sensation of reality while an idea is a recollection of such an impression. Sense perception as source of knowledge is central to the positions of these three philosophers. Primarily for them, sense perception provides the foundational basis of knowledge.

### 7.3.2 Rationalism

**Rationalism** The epistemic theory which maintains that reason is the source and criterion of knowledge

**Rationalism** is the epistemic theory which maintains that reason is the source and criterion of knowledge. 'Truths of reason' are the most important epistemologically basic propositions. Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza are seventeenth-century rationalist.

Descartes believes that our senses could deceive us. He wanted to build a foundation of knowledge strictly on human reason. Through his methodic

doubt, he came to know that he exists. Popularly known as the ‘cogito ergo sum’ (I think, therefore I exist), the cogito became the foundation of all other beliefs for him. By deduction, he came to know that other things in the world exist.

Leibniz, a rationalist, identifies two forms of truth: necessary and contingent truths. In the rationalist epistemology of Leibniz, there is the influence of God; he relied on the efficacy of God as the source of all reasons (Ali, 2007:77)

Spinoza believes in the supremacy of reason over sense experience. He holds that there are three degrees of knowledge: *knowledge from sense perception*, *knowledge at the level of reason* which is limited to scientific knowledge and *intuitive knowledge*. Knowledge from sense perception according to him is not true and indubitable knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is the highest degree of knowledge. They all unanimously agree that reason provides the foundation and basis of knowledge.

### ITQ

#### Question

- What is the infinite regress problem?

#### Feedback

- This problem arises out of the need to justify all our beliefs. In traditional epistemology, it is taken that all our beliefs have to be justified by another belief and the implication of this is that a belief is justified by another and we will go on and on till infinitum. This going on till infinitum is the infinite regress problem.

## 7.4 Foundationalism as a Theory of Justification

As a theory of justification, foundationalism holds that a belief is epistemologically justified if and only if: (1) it is justified of a basic belief or beliefs (2) it is justified of a chain of beliefs that is supported by a basic belief or beliefs on which all the others are ultimately based.

From this, foundationalism as a theory of justification holds that there is an asymmetrical relationship between any two beliefs, if A is based on B, then B cannot be based on A.

### 7.4.1 Internalism

Internalism holds that justification depends solely on factors internal to the believers mind. According to internalism, the only factor that is relevant to the determination of whether a belief is justified or not is the believers other mental states ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu)). According to internalist foundationalism, for a belief to be immediately justified, the subject must justifiably believe that it is immediately justified (Bernecker, 2006:123). The question we then need to ask is: what counts as internal to a person? One’s internal states could be one’s bodily states, one’s brain states, or one’s mental states (if these are different from brain states) or one’s reflectively accessible states. Our internal states are either reflectively accessible (accessibilism) states or mental states (mentalism).

Internalist accessibilism has been championed by Roderick Chisholm and Laurence Bonjour and Mattias Steup. Steup holds that the justificatory factors of a belief must be directly recognizable on reflection. This implies that it is both a priori and introspective. It is also deontological and evidential, which could include perpetual introspection, memorial states, and states of rationally comprehending abstract matter such as conceptual, arithmetical or geometrical connection and of course beliefs. Wishful thinking also qualifies as a justificatory factor.

**Accessibility internalist:** claim that the believer has or enjoys a special kind of access to justificatory factors and these are recognizable on reflection

**Mentalist internalist:** holds that a belief is justified because of factors based on the mental states of that person. Evidentialism is an instance of internalism. It holds that one is justified in believing 'P' if one has evidence regarding 'P' and these evidences consists of one's mental states.

### 7.4.2 Externalism

**Externalism** is an alternative to **internalism**. It generally holds that some factors external to the believer's determine whether or not a belief is justified. **Reliabilism** is a version of externalism. Reliabilism suggests that we consider the source of a belief before it can be justified.

Alvin Goldman, Fred Dretske and John Nozick are proponents of reliabilism. In order for a belief to be justified, it must be reliably produced. Alvin Goldman suggested a number of processes which he believes are reliable ones; perception, remembering, good reasoning and introspection in contrast with a hunch, wishful thinking and bad reasoning. It therefore means that a person's belief is justified if and only if (a) it is produced by a reliable cognitive process and (b) there is no alternative reliable process that would have caused that person belief not to be formed. So while the externalists are concerned about reliabilism, the internalists are concerned about evidentialism.

## 7.5 Classical Foundationalism versus Fallibilist Foundationalism

The classical foundationalism of Rene Descartes is in sharp contrast with the fallibilist foundationalism of Roderick Chisholm. Descartes held that the basic or foundational belief is *infallible, indubitable and reliable*. Our psychological states are self-evident to us and they hold that there is no mediator between the knower and what is known. There is no likelihood of error creeping in.

The fallibilist argue that man by nature is fallible and to desire an infallible basic proposition from a fallible source is absurd. They contend that there is nowhere that human beings are entirely immune to the possibility of error in his perceptual judgment/experience. What then makes Chisholm a fallibilist and at the same time a foundationalist?

Chisholm admits that our set of beliefs rest on or is based on our psychological states but he denies that such psychological states are infallible. While Descartes was talking about clear and distinct ideas, Chisholm talked about basic propositions, beliefs that are self-evident, self-presenting and intuitively derived like Descartes Cogito. Chisholm says that although the self-presenting is known immediately by reflection, it is fallible.

Cartesian foundationalism posits that knowledge is absolute, immutable, constant and unrevisable but Chisholm holds that knowledge is subject to change from time to time. Knowledge is not beyond revision. A person can be said to have knowledge about something if he has true beliefs greater in number than having false beliefs. He talked about *epistemic preferability*.

### 7.5.1 Critique of Foundationalism

One major critique of Foundationalism is that it does not solve the infinite regress problem which it was originally meant to solve. Looking at the regress problem from the foundationalist approach, it is obvious that the regress will still continue because our foundational belief has to be justified too.

Classical foundationalism posits that our basic beliefs are infallible. The main reason for saying this is that they believe that if our basic belief is infallible, our whole system of beliefs will be infallible as well, because we infer our non-basic beliefs from our basic beliefs.

The fallibilists have greatly attacked foundationalism. They argue that there is no such thing as infallible belief. They say that we are nowhere entirely immune from the possibility of error (Dancy, J., 1991). Ayer for instance explains that even though our sensory states are self-evident and clear to us, error creeps in when we start to describe them in language. Considering man's fallible nature, it is impossible for him to attain an infallible basic belief.

Wilfrid Sellars refers to the 'basic beliefs' or 'foundational beliefs' as the 'given'. In his *myth of the given*, he argues that knowledge is part of the logical space of reason and that there is no such thing as a non-inferential justified basic belief. There should be a justification for the so-called foundational beliefs which foundationalism holds to be self-evident, self-justifying and non-inferential.

Even Richard Rorty criticized foundationalism and the whole of traditional epistemology. He held that there should be no a priori foundation to our beliefs. In his epistemological behaviourism, he explains that our beliefs should be justified based on two grounds. First, when they are consistent with other beliefs (conversational justification) and we should choose truth as what is good for us to believe within the scope of our social conditions. Rorty held that our social, cultural and historical conditions shape our beliefs.

It is obvious that foundationalism has not been able to solve the infinite regress problem and justification. Neither has foundationalism been able to give a convincing answer to scepticism. Since foundationalism has failed, are there other alternatives? Coherentism is one alternative,

foundherentism as proposed by Susan Haack is another; her theory is a synthesis of foundationalism and coherentism. It admits the relevance of experience to justification of empirical beliefs and allows for a persuasive mutual dependence among beliefs. Contextualism is also another alternative. This theory holds that the validity of a belief depends on the context that generates it. Contextualism generally maintains that whether one knows or not depends on the context.

Recently, Quine came up with his naturalized epistemology. He proposed that we should ignore questions about epistemic support and justification which traditional epistemology is concerned with. Traditional epistemology investigates the causal connection between our sensory evidence and our beliefs about the world. Quine posits that we should concern ourselves with how we go about moving from our sensory data to the formation of our beliefs. And this is within the bounds of psychology. We shall attempt a thorough examination of each of these alternatives in subsequent study sessions.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed foundationalism as a theory of knowledge and a theory of justification. We learnt not only that foundationalism is a response to the sceptical challenges that knowledge is impossible but also that foundationalism has not been able to resolve the infinite regress problem. As a result, we examined briefly, other alternatives.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### **SAQ 7.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 7.1 and 7.2)**

How does foundationalism resolve the infinite regress problem?

#### **SAQ 7.2 (tests Learning Outcome 7.5)**

Differentiate between classical foundationalism and fallibility foundationalism.

#### **SAQ 7.3 (tests Learning Outcomes 7.3 and 7.4)**

Discuss foundationalism as a theory of knowledge and as a theory of justification.



# Study Session 8

## Coherentism

### Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine coherentism as a theory of justification. We will also examine the impasse between these two theories of justification: foundationalism and coherentism.

### Learning Outcomes



#### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 8.1 *analyse* the basic idea behind coherentism.
- 8.2 *discuss* coherentism and foundationalism in relation to the problem of infinite regress.
- 8.3 *give* a detailed account of coherentism as a theory of justification.
- 8.4 *appraise* the theory of coherentism.

### 8.1 What is Coherentism?

A set of two or more beliefs are said to cohere if they ‘fit’ together or agree with one another (Olu-Owolabi). The word ‘coherence’ is a systematic or methodological connectedness or interrelatedness especially when governed by logical principles. The phrase ‘coherence theory’ is the theory that the ultimate criterion of truth is the coherence (the holding together or the systematic connectedness or interrelatedness) of all its separate parts with one another or with experience. Proponents of epistemic **coherentism** of one version or another include Wilfrid Sellars, Nicholas Rescher, Gilbert Harman, Keith Lehrer and Lawrence Bonjour.

There are two distinct types of coherentism. One refers to the coherence theory of truth which we discussed in study six which states that the truth of any proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of (true) propositions. The other is the coherence theory of justification, an epistemological theory opposing foundationalism and offering a solution to the regress problem. It is therefore a theory about how beliefs can be justified.

A prominent coherentist is Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars argued that no belief is self-justifying; beliefs can be justified only by appeal to other beliefs. He was particularly forceful in his criticism of what he calls the ‘myth of the Given, which holds that beliefs about our own sense experience cannot be mistaken, since these experiences are directly presented or given to us. Sellars summarizes his anti-foundationalist position in the following passage:

*There is clearly some point to the picture of knowledge as resting on a level of propositions—observation reports—which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of foundation is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former (See Craig, 1998).*

## ITQ

### Question

- Who referred to foundationalism as the ‘myth of the Given’?

### Feedback

- Wilfred Sellars regarded foundationalism as the myth of the Given. The Given in this instance refers to the notion of foundationalism that the basic beliefs are self-justifying and so are to be taken as given that cannot be queried.

## 8.1.1 The Main Idea of Coherentism

The basic idea behind coherentism is that the better a belief system ‘hang together’, the more coherent it is. How then should we conceive of ‘hanging together’ or coherence?

In order to answer the above question, it is important to note that coherence is taken to involve some components like **logical consistency** and **explanatory relations**. In terms of **logical consistency**, it is often held that our beliefs should not clash; they must not be logically inconsistent, we should not believe P and believe that not P.

However, more than mere logical consistency is required. One could imagine a set of beliefs that consisted of the belief that  $2+2=4$ , the belief that Agnes is a great actress and the belief that yellow clashes with pink. Although these beliefs are logically consistent, they do not form a particularly coherent belief set since they do not have any bearing on each other at all. For coherence therefore, some kind of positive connection between one’s beliefs is required. Such a positive connection is that of inference. A maximally coherent set is one that is logically consistent and one within which the content of any particular belief can be inferred from the content of certain other beliefs that one holds. Conversely, the coherence of a set of beliefs is reduced if there are subgroups of beliefs that are inferentially isolated from the whole.

Explanatory coherence relation is obtained when some of one’s beliefs effectively explain why some other of one’s beliefs is true. For example, my belief that it is raining outside might effectively explain the truth of my belief that my office windows are wet.

So what exactly does coherentism say about how our beliefs are justified? The strongest form of coherentism says that belonging to a coherent system of beliefs is necessary for a belief to be justified and by itself

sufficient for a belief to be justified. This view is called strong coherentism.

## 8.2 Coherentism, Foundationalism and the Problem of Infinite Regress

Both coherentist and foundationalist theories of justification attempt to answer the regress argument. Coherentism tries to show that a justified set of belief need not have the forms of a superstructure resting on a base; the idea here is that the foundationalist programme is bound to fail, so that the base is left groundless, resting on nothing. If this were the result, and if the foundationalists were right about the structure of a justified belief set, the only possible conclusion would be the sceptical one that none of our beliefs are in fact justified. Coherentists reject the base/superstructure distinction; there are no beliefs which are intrinsically grounded and none which are super-structured. Let us take a look at this infinite regress process again:

Given some statement P, it appears reasonable to ask for a justification for P. If that justification takes the form of another statement P, one can again reasonably ask for a justification for P and so forth. There are three possible outcomes to this questioning process:

1. The series is infinitely long with every statement justified by some other statement.
2. The series form a loop, so that each statement is ultimately involved in its own justification.
3. The series terminates with certain statement having to be self-justifying.

An infinite series offers little help since it is basically impossible to check that each justification is satisfactory. As a result, Coherentism denies the soundness of the infinite regress argument. The regression argument makes the assumption that the justification for a proposition takes the form of another proposition:

P justifies P which in turn justifies P.

For coherentism, justification is a holistic process. P is not justified as a part of some inferential chain of reasoning, but because it coheres with some system of which it forms a part. Usually, the system is taken to be the complete set of beliefs of the individual or group. It is therefore necessary for coherentism to explain in some detail what it means for a system to cohere or for a system to be coherent.

### ITQ

#### Question

- What are the components of coherence?

#### Feedback

- The two components of coherence theory are logical consistency and explanatory relations.

## 8.3 Coherentism as a Theory of Justification

As a theory of justification, coherentism implies that for a belief to be justified, it must belong to a coherent system of beliefs. For a system of beliefs to be coherent, the beliefs that make up that system must 'cohere' with one another (Craig, 1998:159).

Coherentists disagree with the basic positions of foundationalism that beliefs are hierarchically arranged and that some beliefs are superior to others. Their position is that beliefs are justified by their coherence with the system to which they belong. Beliefs according to this theory are related because all beliefs belong to a particular system of beliefs. In as much as all beliefs are within a system, then justification is a matter of locating the exact system to which a belief belongs and checking whether the belief is constant and coherent with beliefs within it.

Coherence theories of justification recognize one sort of justified belief. According to coherence theories, all beliefs are justified through their relationship to other beliefs. This view has no room for foundational beliefs. Rather, coherence theories maintain that all beliefs are justified through coherence with other beliefs.

According to coherence theories, S's belief in P is justified if and only if S's belief in P coheres with the rest of what S believes. But this raises a new question: what is it for a belief to cohere with the rest of what one believes? To answer this question, Scott Sturgeon stated three ways or options about how coherence could be understood:

**Option 1:** Coherence can be understood in a purely negative way.

**Option 2:** Coherence can be understood in a purely positive way.

**Option 3:** Coherence can be understood in both positive and negative ways (Sturgeon, S, 1995: 21).

**Option 1:** generates a negative coherence theory. Sturgeon explains that beliefs are justified until and unless one has evidence against them. He however seems to think this is wrong. This is because beliefs should be adopted and maintained on the basis of evidence.

**Option 2:** generates a positive coherence theory. When adopting a new belief on the basis of evidence, that evidence plays a positive role. Hence when we retrieve a belief in light of new evidence, that evidence plays a negative role and this is the difficulty of positive coherence theory, they fail to make room for defeasibility of evidence.

S's belief in P coheres with the rest of S believes if and only if:

- a. S's belief in P is based on adequate evidence E and
- b. E is undefeated relative to the rest of what S believes

**Option 3:** which is mixed coherence theories has the best of both worlds. They incorporate what seems right about foundational theories and also what seems right about coherence theories. They do so by utilizing lines of evidential support which, to be effective in producing justified belief, must fit properly into the background setting of one's other beliefs. Hence,

S's belief is justified if and only if:

- a. S's belief in P is based on adequate evidence and
- b. E is undefeated relative to the rest of what S believes.

## 8.4 Critique of Coherentism

Coherentism has been criticized on many grounds

### ***The first argument employed to criticize Coherentism is the input and isolation argument***

This argument explains that coherentism fails to recognize the indispensable role that experience plays in justifying our beliefs about the external world. That coherentism gives no essential role to experience follows from the fact that the states that suffice to justify our beliefs are, on this view, limited to other beliefs. That this is a ground for rejecting coherentism is spelt out in many ways. One way appeals to a lack of connection to the truth; since the view does not give any essential role to the central source of input from the external world, namely experience, there is no reason to expect a coherent system of beliefs to accurately reflect the external world. The line of attack is often referred to as the isolation objection.

One way of thinking about the isolation objection is in terms of the idea that coherent systems of belief can be completely cut off from reality, in the same way that a good piece of fiction can be, and once such severance occurs, likelihood of truth must go as well. If coherentists are able to find a role for experience in their theory, then coherentism cannot be criticized for failure to provide a suitable theory of truth any more than foundationalism can.

### ***The second argument is the argument against alternative coherent system***

According to this argument, for each system of coherent beliefs, there are multiple alternative systems, alternative because they include beliefs with different, logically incompatible contents that are just as coherent. However, if there are plenty of highly, equally coherent, but incompatible systems and if few of these systems do an adequate job of faithfully representing reality, then coherentism is not a good indicator of truth. Since his line of reasoning is readily knowable, beliefs that coherently fit together are not at least by virtue of the coherence alone, justified. The exact number of alternative systems that are equally coherent depends on the exact detail of what constitutes coherence. But like most of the standard arguments for and against coherentism, the soundness of this argument is not thought to turn on their details ([www.iep.utm.edu/c/coherentism.html](http://www.iep.utm.edu/c/coherentism.html)).

### ***The third argument is the argument in relation to truth connection***

A long standing objection to coherentism can be expressed by noting that a good piece of fiction will display the virtue of coherence, but it is obviously unlikely to be true. The idea is that coherence and the likelihood of truth are so far apart that it is implausible to think that coherence should be conceived of as a guide to truth at all. This concern

over the truth connection is sometimes put in form of the alternative systems objection, according to which there is always some coherent system to fit any belief into, so that if a person were to make sufficient changes elsewhere in the system, any belief could be justified. Hidden behind the explicit language of the alternative systems objection, however is a deep concern relying on the idea that justification is somehow supposed to be a guide to truth, and mere coherence is not a likely indicator of truth. The issue of truth connection has not been resolved for coherentism. In a way, this fact should not be surprising since the issue of the truth connection is a fundamental issue in epistemology as a whole and it affects not only coherentism but its competitors as well.

***The fourth criticism is the one that arises from the feasibility problem***

It is highly plausible that human beings have plenty of justified beliefs. So if justification requires coherence, it must be psychologically realistic to think that each of us has coherent systems of beliefs. But one would want to know how psychologically realistic this might be. Again, the answer depends, in part on the makeup of the coherence relation. As we saw, coherence at a minimum requires logical consistency.

Christopher Cherniak considers using a truth-table to determine whether a system of 138 beliefs is logically consistent. If one were so quick that one could check each line of the truth table for long conjunctions, in the time it takes a light ray to traverse the diameter of a position; it would still take more than 20 billion years to work through the entire table. Since 138 beliefs is hardly an inordinate number of beliefs for a system to have, it appears that coherence cannot be checked for in any humanly feasible way ([www.iep.utm.edu/c/coherence.html](http://www.iep.utm.edu/c/coherence.html)).

***Another criticism is that arising from the preface paradox***

This argument questions whether logical inconsistency, an obvious mark of incoherence, really entails a lack of justification. Imagine an historian who has just completed her life-long book project. She has double checked each claim that she makes in the book. For each of the claim she makes,  $C_1$  through  $C_N$ , she has a justified belief that it is true: she has the justified belief that  $C_1$  is true, the justified belief that  $C_2$  is true and the justified belief that  $C_N$  is true. At the same time, she is fully aware of the fact that historians make mistakes. In all likelihood, her book contains at least one mistake. For this reason, she is justified in believing that at least one of the claims that she makes in her book is false. But this yields a set of beliefs that is not logically consistent since it includes the belief that  $C_1$  is true,  $C_2$  is true,  $C_N$  is true and the belief that at least one of  $C_1$  through  $C_N$  is false. Some epistemologists have argued that the historian is justified in believing this set of logically inconsistent claims. And all of these beliefs remain justified even if she knows they are logically inconsistent.

In response, the coherentist might appropriate any or a number of views on this argument. John Pollock has suggested a simple reason for thinking that the historian's beliefs cannot be both logically inconsistent and justified. Since a set of inconsistent propositions logically implies anything whatsoever, adding a widely accepted principle concerning

justification will yield the result that one can be justified in believing anything whatsoever.

***The last criticism is that arising from the problem of counter examples***

There appears to be straight forward counter examples to coherentism. Introspective beliefs constitute an important class of such cases. On a broad interpretation of 'empirical', that encompasses belief in addition to the sensory modalities (one that contrasts with the a priori), introspective beliefs count as empirical. Consider then, my introspective belief that I am in pain, or my introspective belief that something looks red to me. These beliefs are not inferred from any other beliefs; I did not arrive at either of them by inference from premises. They are not based on any other beliefs.

In response, Lehrer suggested that a coherentist identify one or more background beliefs and claim that, though the introspective belief is not inferred from this background belief, the introspective belief is justified because it coheres with the background belief. For example, to handle the introspective belief that something looks red to me, Lehrer points to the background belief that if I believe something looks red to me, then unless something awkward is going on, the best explanation is that there is something that does look red to me. But it is not clear that this response works.

As a way of concluding therefore, one may want to ask the question: is coherentism a better form of providing justification for our beliefs? For some epistemologists the answer is yes. The reason for supporting this theory they say is that if we take a look at foundationalism, there are non-inferential beliefs on which to erect a superstructure of beliefs. But any change made in any part of the structure will definitely bring down the whole structure. There is the possibility of having a foundational belief that is fallible, but if some error is detected in the basic belief what happens? The whole structure crumbles like a building with a faulty foundation.

But with coherentism, the risk is minimal. Epistemologists have likened foundationalism to a pyramid and coherentism to a raft. Any change within a raft, cannot do any damage to the whole set or system of belief. Hence it allows for improvement. Each set of belief is replaceable provided it properly aligns and coheres with the system of belief it has come to belong.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed coherentism, as another theory of justification. We saw that coherentism is a rival theory of justification to foundationalism, a theory which was adopted due to the failure of foundationalism. We learnt that coherentism also beset with some problems like foundationalism but that these problems are not enough to deny the plausibility of coherentism.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

**SAQ 8.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4)**

Critically discuss the Coherentist theory of justification.



## Study Session 9

# Contextualism

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine contextualism, which is another theory of justification. Our focus will be on the contextualist theories of David Annis and Keith DeRose.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 9.1 *define and use* correctly the term “contextualism”.
- 9.2 *discuss* David B. Annis contribution to Contextualism.
- 9.3 *appraise* Keith DeRose contextualist argument.
- 9.4 *discuss* the objections to contextualism.

## 9.1 Defining Contextualism

Contextualism describes a collection of views in philosophy which emphasize the context in which an action, utterance or expression occurs. It holds that in some important respects, actions, utterances or expressions can only be understood relative to that context. It also holds that philosophically controversial concepts such as ‘meaning P’, ‘knowing that P’, ‘having a reason to A’ and possibly even ‘being true’ or ‘being right’ only have meaning relative to a specified context.

**Contextualism** The collection of views in philosophy which emphasize the context in which an action, utterance or expression occurs

In epistemology, **contextualism** treats the word ‘know’ as context-sensitive. Context-sensitive expressions are those that express different propositions relative to different contexts of use. For example, some terms that are relatively uncontroversial considered context-sensitive are indexical such as ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’. While the word ‘I’ has a constant linguistic meaning in all contexts of use, whom it refers to varies with context.

The main tenet of contextualist epistemology, no matter what account of knowledge it is linked to, is that knowledge attributions are context-sensitive. That is when we attribute knowledge to somebody, what matters is the context in which we use the term ‘knowledge’.

The standards for attributing knowledge to someone, the contextualist claims, vary from one user’s context to the next. Thus if I say ‘John knows that his car is in front of him’, the utterance is true if and only if:

1. John believes that his car is in front of him
2. The car is in fact in front of him
3. John meets the epistemic conditions.

## ITQ

**Question**

- What is contextualism?

**Feedback**

- It is a collection of views in epistemology in which knowledge attributions are claimed to be context-sensitive. In other words, context plays a vital role in determining a claim to knowledge.

## 9.2 David B. Annis on Contextualism

According to David Annis (1978:215), ‘the most neglected component in justification theory is the actual social practices and norms of justification of a culture of community of people’. To determine whether S is justified in believing H, we must consider the actual standards of justification of the community of people to which he belongs. More specifically, we determine whether S is justified in believing H by specifying an issue-context raised within a community of people G with certain social practices and norms of justification (Annis, 1978: 215). It is only this that determines the level of understanding and knowledge S is expected to have and the standards he is to satisfy.

In an attempt to further explain contextualism as a theory of justification, David Annis opines that when asking whether S is justified in believing H, this has to be considered relative to an issue-context. Using his example, suppose we are interested in whether Jones, an ordinary non-medically trained person, has the general information that polio is caused by a virus. If his response to the question is that he remembers the paper reporting that Salk said it was, then this is good enough. He has performed adequately given the issue-context. But suppose the context is an examination for the M.D degree. Here we expect a lot more. If the candidate simply said what Jones did, we would take him as being very deficient in knowledge. Thus relative to one issue-context, a person may be justified in believing H but not justified relative to another context (Annis, D., 1978:215).

The issue-context is what specific issue involving H is being raised. It determines the level of understanding and knowledge that S must exhibit, and it determines an appropriate objector-group. For example in the context of the examination for the M.D degree, the appropriate group is not the class of ordinary non-medically trained people, but qualified medical examiners.

The importance attached to the outcome of accepting H when it is false or rejecting H when it is true is a component of the issue-context. Suppose the issue is whether a certain drug will help cure a disease in humans without harmful effects. In such a situation we are much more demanding than if the question were whether it would help in the case of animals. In both cases, the appropriate objector-group would be the same, namely qualified researchers. But they would require more proof in the former case. Researchers do in fact strengthen or weaken the justificatory conditions in relation to the importance of the issue. If accepting H when

H is false would have critical consequences, the researcher may increase the required significance level in testing H.

David Annis (1978) described man as a social animal and this fact must not be neglected when it comes to justification of beliefs. Therefore going by the contextualist model of justification as seen above, when asking whether some person S is justified in believing H, we must consider this relative to some specific issue-context which determines the level of understanding and knowledge required.

This in turn determines the appropriate objector-group. For S to be justified in believing H relative to the issue-context, S must be able to meet all current objections falling into A and B which express a real doubt of the qualified objector-group where the objectors are critical truth-seekers. Thus, social information—the beliefs, information and theories of others—plays an important part in justification, for it in part determines what objections will be raised, how a person will respond to them and what responses the objectors will accept.

David Annis stressed neither (Annis, D. 1978: 216) point that the fact that justification is relative to the social practices and norms of a group does not suggest that they cannot be criticized nor that justification somehow subjective. The practices and norms are epistemic and hence have as their goals truth and the avoidance of error and in so far as they fail to achieve these goals, they can be criticized. For instance if the people of a particular group rely on the authority of the elders, this authority can be questioned if they find out that it leads to so many false perceptual beliefs. An objection to a practice must not only be real but must also be local as opposed to global.

## 9.3 Keith DeRose Contextualist Argument

“Contextualism” refers to the position that the truth-conditions knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences (sentences of the form “S knows that P” and “S doesn’t know that P” and related variants of such sentences) vary in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that S must meet (or, in the case of a denial of knowledge, fail to meet) in order for such a statement to be true. In some contexts, “S knows that P” requires for its truth that S have a true belief that P and also be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to P, while in other contexts, the very same sentence may require for its truth, in addition to S’s having a true belief that P, only that S meet some lower epistemic standards. Thus, the contextualist will allow that one speaker can truthfully say “S knows that P”, while another speaker, in a different context where higher standards are in place, can truthfully say “S doesn’t know that P”, though both speakers are talking about the same S and the same P at the same time (DeRose, K., 1999).

According to Keith DeRose, the character of ‘S knows P’ requires that S should believe P, that P should be true and that S should be in good enough epistemic position with respect to P. But what is good enough varies with context, hence the context of a knowledge attribution is the level of epistemic position that counts as good enough in that context. For

example, the character of know in Clara knows there is water in the glass will require that Clara should belief there is water in the glass, that this belief should be true and that Clara should be in a good enough position to determine that there is water in the glass.

But whether Clara is in a good enough position will vary with the attributor's context. Where the attributor's interest is in watering plants, the content of knowledge in 'Clara knows that there is water in the glass' requires that Clara's position is good enough if she has the typical person's ability to identify water, in which case 'Clara knows that there is water in the glass' is true. If however the attributor is engaged in important experiments, the content of 'know' in 'Clara knows that there is water in the cup' requires that Clara's position is good enough only if she performed a chemical analysis in which case Clara knows that there is water in the cup is false (assuming that she has not done the analysis).

Keith DeRose proposes a conditional theory which has it that suppose S has a true belief P, where S would not belief P if P were false, the belief is 'sensitive' where S would belief P even if P were false, the belief is 'insensitive'. DeRose endorse a rule of sensitivity: whenever someone asserts that S knows that P, standards of knowledge are raised to require S's belief P to be sensitive and the resulting standard applies for all beliefs in that context.

The "invariantist" — Peter Unger's good name for one who denies contextualism — will not subscribe to the above. According to her, there's a single, invariant set of standards which, at least as far as truth-conditions go, govern the use of knowledge attributions regardless of the context in which they're uttered; thus, the two speakers can't both be speaking a truth (Unger, P., 1984). She does not endorse contextualism so construed. In spite of Unger's non-endorsement, it is important to point out that in different conversational contexts; quite different standards govern whether ordinary speakers will say that someone knows something: What we're happy to call knowledge in some ("low-standards") contexts we'll deny is knowledge in other ("high-standards") contexts. The invariantist need not deny this, and if she is wise, she won't deny it. Neither would deny that this is a very useful feature of our use of the relevant sentences. What she must deny is that these varying standards for when ordinary speakers will attribute knowledge, and/or for when they're in some sense warranted in attributing knowledge, reflect varying standards for when it is or would be true for them to attribute knowledge, for, again, according to the invariantist, the truth-conditions of the relevant sentences do not vary in the relevant way.

Contextualism, so understood, then, is a position about knowledge attributions (sentences attributing knowledge to a subject) and denials of knowledge — precisely, a thesis about their truth-conditions. This has been known to give rise to the following type of outburst: "Your contextualism isn't a theory about knowledge at all; it's just a theory about knowledge attributions (DeRose, 1999). Contextualism, as described thus far can be viewed as a thesis about knowledge attributing and denying sentences.

We can construe contextualism, regarding justification, as an analogue of what we're calling contextualism about knowledge: According to the

contextualist about justification, the standards for justified belief that a subject must meet in order to render true a sentence describing a belief of hers as justified vary with context. The relation between knowledge and Justification is controversial, and neither of these forms of contextualism clearly implies the other. If one holds that a belief's being justified is a necessary condition for its being a piece of knowledge, then one may believe that the two forms of contextualism (contextualism about knowledge and contextualism about justification) are closely related: Perhaps it's because the standards for justification vary with context that the standards for knowledge so vary. However, it's widely accepted today that more is needed for knowledge than simply justified true belief, and it may be varying requirements for that something more that's reflected in the varying standards for knowledge — in addition to, or instead of, varying standards for justification.

Contextualism's greatest advantage is its response to scepticism. Sceptics raised radical possibilities such as that we might be dreaming. The contextualists grant that such doubts are legitimate in every situation.

### ITQ

#### Question

- Differentiate between invariantism and coherentism?

#### Feedback

- Invariantism is the position that there are some invariant sets of standards that govern knowledge attributions regardless of the context in which they fall into. Invariantism rejects the notion of coherentism. Coherentism holds that context is important in knowledge attributions.

## 9.4 Objections to Contextualism

- a. ***Straight forward relativists about truth:*** those who claim a proposition may be true for one group, yet false for another group appear to hold that a single proposition can be both true and false. This seems incoherent: the notion of truth is no longer in play but has been replaced by 'truth for' or 'truth from a point of view'.

**Subject-based contextualism** escapes this worry, for while 'S knows P' is true or false depending on S's context, 'S knows P in context C' is true from all points of view.

**The attributor-based contextualist** however holds that truth of statements having the form 'S knows P' or 'S knows P in context C' where C refers to the subject, S's contexts are relative to attributor's context. It seems that there is no truth about whether S knows p, but only 'truth for' or 'truth from a point of view'.

- b. ***Warranted Assertability objection:*** The issue dividing invariantists and contextualists is not whether in different conversational contexts, quite different standards govern whether ordinary speakers will say that someone knows something. Of course, what we're happy to call knowledge in some ("low-standards") contexts we'll deny is knowledge in other ("high-standards") contexts. The

issue is whether these varying standards for when ordinary speakers will attribute knowledge, and/or for when they're in some sense warranted in attributing knowledge, reflect varying standards for when it is or would be true for them to attribute knowledge (DeRose, 1999).

The contextualist will appeal to pairs of cases where the standards for knowledge seem to vary: Low standards cases in which a speaker seems truthfully to ascribe knowledge to a subject will be paired with high standards cases in which another speaker in a quite different and more demanding context seems truthfully to describe that same subject as a non-knower (Malcolm, 1952:178-189). If the contextualist has chosen her pair of cases well, there will be a quite strong intuition about each assertion, at least when it is considered individually, that it is true. The invariantist, of course, cannot accept that both of the speakers' assertions are true, and so must deny a quite strong intuition. But it is often argued, the idea of varying standards for the warranted assertability of knowledge attributions can help the invariantist explain away the intuition that is hostile to her.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined contextualism both as a theory of justification and as a theory of knowledge. We saw that our knowledge claims and the justification for them can be done within a relevant context and also depending on the attributor's context.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### **SAQ 9.1 (tests Learning Outcome 9.1, 9.2, and 9.3)**

Discuss the contributions of David Annis and Keith DeRose to contextualism.

#### **SAQ 9.2 (tests Learning Outcome 9.4)**

Discuss some of the objections to contextualism.

## Study Session 10

# Naturalized Epistemology

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine naturalized epistemology, its features and developments that led to naturalized epistemology. We will also make some distinctions between naturalized epistemology and traditional epistemology and explore both David Hume and Quine's features of naturalized epistemology.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 10.1 *define* the term “naturalized epistemology”.
- 10.2 *explain* the development of naturalized epistemology.
- 10.3 *highlight* the features of naturalized epistemology.
- 10.4 *distinguish* between naturalized epistemology and traditional epistemology.
- 10.5 *appraise* David Hume position on naturalized epistemology.
- 10.6 *discuss* the three distinctive features of Quine's naturalized epistemology.

## 10.1 What is Naturalized Epistemology?

As we discussed earlier, the central idea of epistemology is not only to arrive at truth (certainty) that would withstand the sceptical challenge but also to find a foundation for our epistemic belief. It has been argued that traditional epistemology is known for setting for itself a task which it cannot accomplish within its frame of reference. It is in this sense, argued Ozumba (2001:132) ‘that epistemology is unnatural and it is in this regard that the call for a naturalized epistemology derives urgency and strength’.

### Naturalized

### Epistemology

The scientific study of perception, learning, thought, language acquisition and the transmission and historical development of human knowledge, everything we can find out scientifically about how we come to know what we know

**Naturalized epistemology** is best seen as a cluster of views according to which epistemology is closely related to natural science. Barry Stroud (1985: 71) describes naturalized epistemology as a ‘scientific study of perception, learning, thought, language acquisition and the transmission and historical development of human knowledge, everything we can find out scientifically about how we come to know what we know’.

In epistemology naturalized, Quine divided epistemology symmetrically into two sorts: conceptual and doctrinal. The former is concerned with meaning that is, with clarifying concepts by defining them, some in terms of others; while doctrinal approach focuses on truth, establishing laws by proving them, some in terms of others. Relating this dichotomy to Cartesian philosophy, he argued that the Cartesian quest for certainty has been the remote motivation of epistemology both in its conceptual and



doctrinal usage. This quest according to Quine is a lost cause. Jaegwon Kim in the same vein opines that 'in our characterization of classical epistemology, the Cartesian program was seen as one possible response to the problem of epistemic justification and determining what beliefs are in fact justified according to those criteria' (Kim, 1988: 270).

Quine's radical reaction is that we give up the Cartesian justification-centred epistemology and put in its place a purely descriptive, causal nomological science of human cognition. He emphasized the descriptive character of his naturalism. According to him:

*The stimulation of our sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has to go on with ultimately in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceed? Why not settle for psychology (Quine, 1969: 75)*

He advocates that we abandon the claim that we do in fact have knowledge and that we study the ways we form beliefs; psychological processes which take us from sensory stimulation to belief about the world. For Quine:

*Naturalized epistemology studies natural phenomena, viz a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded experimentally controlled input, certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies for instance and in the fullness of time, the subject delivers as output, a description of the three dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meagre input and torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for some what the same reason that always prompted epistemology namely in order to see how evidence relates to theory and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence' (Quine, 1967: 82-83).*

Quine's ground for rejecting traditional epistemology is based on the fact that its attempt to discover a relation between evidence and theory which would make the theory justified has proved to be unsuccessful. Also, he argued that the question whether there is a disproportionate gap between input and output is empirical, and it is to be resolved by the naturalistic study of the causal relations between inputs, conceived of as a sensory stimuli and output, conceive of as the neuro-physical states of the brain that are the physical correlates of beliefs. His conclusion therefore is that we should study rather how we go about moving from our data to the formation of belief.

## ITQ

### Question

- What is Quine's ground for rejecting traditional epistemology?

### Feedback

- Quine's position for rejecting traditional epistemology stems from the failure of traditional epistemology to find a relation between evidence and theory which in turn makes the theory



justified.

## 10.2 Development of Naturalized Epistemology

In epistemology naturalized, Quine argues for conceiving epistemology as a chapter of psychology and for seeing epistemology and empirical science as containing and constraining one another. Epistemology being a part of psychology means that we cannot have meaningful discourse beside the private internal reactions which comes by the way of responses to externally motivated stimulations. Quine's principal argument against traditional epistemology is based on the claim that the Cartesian foundationalist program and the whole

Of traditional epistemological goal has failed and that the continuous search for certainty is a lost cause. While this claim about the hopelessness of the Cartesian quest for certainty is nothing new, using it to discredit the very conception of normative epistemology is new (Kim, 1988: 265).

To understand the Quinean project, we have to revisit the features of traditional epistemology, the removal of which he is advocating.

## 10.3 Features of Traditional Epistemology

According to Stich (1993), 'much of traditional and contemporary epistemology can be viewed as pursuing one of the following projects: belief formation and revision, providing a definition or characterization of knowledge, explaining how knowledge differ from mere opinion, as well as ignorance and error, and lastly the refutation of the sceptics' (Stich, 1993: 2).

In traditional epistemology, a general epistemological account of how we should arrive at our belief must precede a commitment of any substantive belief about our world around us. Traditional epistemology is seen as a normative discipline that is concerned among other things with questions about how reasoning ought to proceed. Traditional epistemology holds that such questions can be answered independently of investigating into the processes that in fact occur when reasoning takes place (Kornblith, 1985:115). This traditional status of epistemology was rejected by Quine who argued that epistemology should understand how human beings generate their beliefs, how perception works and how the brain processes sensory input. In other words, epistemology should not be based on ideal conditions or on how we think we know based on introspection, but on the real processes of human perceiving and knowing.

This new approach makes epistemology a branch of the sciences. In the words of Stich, instead of asking how we ought to go about forming beliefs and building theories on the basis of evidence, we should ask, how do people actually go about it? The answer to the latter, purely psychological questions will tell us what we have really wanted to know all along in epistemology (Stich, 1993:2).

## 10.4 Contrasts between Naturalized Epistemology and Traditional Epistemology

One striking contrast with naturalized epistemology is what we might call super-naturalized epistemology, that is to say, an epistemology which invokes a supernatural being like God in its account of how human knowledge is possible. The seventeenth century French Philosopher Rene Descartes produced such an epistemology. He argued that it is only because there is a non-deceiving God that we have any ground for thinking that our perceptions of reality more-or-less match reality itself. It is God alone who ensures that my perceptions are reliable guides to the nature of the world around me. So if there were no God, we could never know what reality was like. We might have beliefs about it, but we could never be justifiably certain of the truth of any of those beliefs. So one thing that naturalized epistemology is rejecting is an epistemology in which a supernatural being like God has any role to play.

Another strand in non-naturalized epistemology invokes evaluative ideas (good reason, justified belief, right to be sure, legitimate inferences and so on) and then insists that these values go beyond any facts which science can study. The idea that there is radical contrast between moral values and the world of science is a common one in much modern thought (which is not to say that it is a correct idea); and this version of non-naturalized epistemology posits a similar contrast between epistemological values and the world of science. After the scientists has established all the scientific facts of the case, there still remain (on this view) the further non-scientific questions about the values with which the epistemologists is concerned.

A third feature of non-naturalized epistemology and one which has been very influential in the twentieth century is what we might call the 'armchair approach'. This is used by those who think that epistemology properly relies only on a priori reflection including for example, the technique of logical analysis. It is part and parcel of this approach that epistemology is completely insulated from the findings of science.

Given these contrasts with naturalized epistemology, we can expect any version of naturalized epistemology to reject epistemologies which either go beyond the realm of science (for example by appealing to a God-like being or to a set of science-transcendent values), or fail to utilize the findings of science.

## 10.5 David Hume and Naturalized Epistemology

Naturalized epistemology is a continuation of David Hume's critique of Cartesian theory of knowledge. The Human project, as it were, is an investigation of the mind and its operations including the operation that we perform in our reasoning. We should note that naturalist like Hume rejected Descartes' vision of epistemology as the attempt to convert our beliefs into an edifice resting on a foundation about which we have complete certainty. They also rejected the idea of equating knowledge

with certainty as well as the assumption that knowledge is available via a priori theorizing without the use of experience.

There are certain features in Hume's philosophy that place him closer to the contemporary naturalist. First, Hume modelled his epistemology after the emerging natural science where empirical confirmation served as the basis for claims. This is evident in his bothering question: 'show me the impression'? He thought that knowledge encompasses everything we can discover by using all our mental faculties including experience. Also, like the naturalist, he was prepared to say that some knowledge are products of purely causal mechanisms rather than reason since via introspection, Hume thought he could detect a causal mechanism at work (Craig, 1998: 722). The mechanism he arrived at provided knowledge of causal connection, on the basis of which we believe in matters of fact. Again, Hume explains some of the mechanisms responsible for knowledge in terms of survival value. The linking of causes and effect is so important to human survival that it would have been a mistake for nature to entrust it to some instinct which may be infallible in its operations. Lastly, Hume is with the naturalist in their reaction to scepticism. He mentioned scepticism and simply acknowledges that truly global doubts could be entirely incurable.

With the above preliminary reflections, let us now turn to see in detail, what Quine has to tell us about the distinctive features of his epistemology.

## 10.6 Three Distinctive Features of Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

### *Naturalized Epistemology assumes that there is an external world*

One of the questions which traditional epistemology tried to answer was 'can we know anything? Is knowledge possible at all? Or can we know whether there is an external world and what it is like? In answering this second question, it was always regarded as illegitimate to call on the resources of science for example, to say that science has proved the existence and nature of many things in the external world. For our knowledge that science has done this presupposes that we have knowledge of the existence of scientists, laboratories, books recording scientific findings and so on. And if the question is 'Can we know anything about the existence of the external world?', we do not get an answer by presupposing that we know of the existence of some things in the external world, and using them as evidence for the existence of other things. For our initial question applied as much to the existence of scientists, laboratories and books as to the existence of X-rays, viruses, and distant galaxies. Epistemology, then, had to start without any assumptions that there was an external world and show how that assumption could be justified.

Quine's naturalized epistemology appears not to operate under this constraint. The way in which Quine usually describes the epistemologist's task already presupposes that there is an external world. The epistemologists like the psychologist, is to start with the assumption

that there is an external world containing a person (in fact, lots of people who receive various kinds of data, such as retinal radiation and who produce a physical output in the form of behaviour, both verbal and nonverbal. Given this starting point, the epistemologist then has to explain what processes intervene between the data which the person receives and the worldview which she then acquires on the basis of those data. Speaking of the traditional epistemological concern with the relation between science and sense impressions, Quine writes:

*I approach it as an input-output relation within flesh and blood denizens of an antecedently acknowledged external world, a relation open to enquiry as a chapter of the science of that world (Quine, 1990:19)*

What this implies is that the naturalized epistemologist simply does not address one of the questions which traditional epistemology dealt with and that would be a reason (though not yet a strong reason for saying that Naturalized Epistemology is not really epistemology at all.

***Physical stimulations not conscious states are the data of Naturalized Epistemology***

A second difference between traditional epistemology and naturalized epistemology focuses on Quine's conception of the data which the subject receives. In traditional epistemology, the data were thought to be mental states of some kind. Descartes in his cogito takes 'I think' to be something of which we can be certain, he assumes that some other beliefs about the contents of his own consciousness can be similarly certain, and that these other beliefs can form the foundation on which he can try to build an equally certain theory about the nature of the universe at large. In traditional Empiricism, the data were usually construed as sense impressions, as modes of awareness or consciousness. In particular, the data were not thought to be physical stimulations, retinal irradiations, pressure waves at the ear drums and so on. This was because, as we previously noted, the epistemologists was to start by being neutral on the question of the existence of physical entities: that was something which had to be proved, not presupposed. Also, it is because such physical events could not by themselves count as evidence for any beliefs the subject might have. Having your retinal stimulated might cause you to believe that there was a hamburger in front of you, but could not be your justification for thinking the hamburger was there, since, ex hypothesi; you would be unaware that your retinal had been stimulated. Furthermore, the stimulation of your retinal could not have any sort of content, such as a propositional content which could stand in confirmation relations to anything else.

The naturalized epistemologist precisely reverses this emphasis. Quine makes clear that when he speaks of data or input, he does not mean conscious states of any kind, but rather the physical interactions that take place between our physical sense organs and the physical environment. The significance of this difference will be clear in the light of the third difference which we now turn.

***Naturalized Epistemology focuses on what causes our beliefs rather than on what justifies them***

Traditional epistemology was concerned not primarily (or even at all) with asking why, as a matter of fact, we do believe the various things that we do, but rather with whether we were entitled or justified in believing them or in what would count as good evidence or justification for believing them, in other words, about the norms governing belief formation. In essence, it was concerned with what we ought to believe, not with what we do believe. Thus, in considering the question of our belief in the reliability of inductive inferences, the relevant question was not 'what causes us to think that induction is reliable? But rather 'what, if anything, would justify the belief that induction is reliable? In connection with beliefs about the external world, the question was not 'what causes us to believe in the existence of a mind-independent world of three spatial and one temporal dimensions, containing persisting objects' but rather 'what justifies this belief?'

The difference between these two types of questions, one about the cause of our beliefs and the other about their justification, can be disguised by asking such questions as 'why do we believe that P? Presumably, most people who wonder whether their belief is rational, either decide that it is or else abandon the belief. So if we assume that our belief that P is rational, the causes and the justification of the belief will coincide: it is the fact that we have good reasons for the belief that causes us to hold the belief. But the fact that the two questions can in some cases have a single answer B should not blind us to the fact that there are indeed two questions here, one about cause and the other about justification and that traditional epistemology was concerned with the second and not with the first. By contrast, naturalized epistemology seems to be concerned with the first and not with the second. Two things are responsible for this.

One, Quine construes the data on the basis of which people form their world picture not as states with a propositional content, such as beliefs not even as conscious states like awareness of sense impressions but rather as physical events (irradiations, of the retinal and so on). And it is quite clear that physical events like these could not themselves be the justification for anything. Secondly and perhaps as a consequence of the first point, Quine hardly ever refers to the relation between our data and the theories we form on the basis of the data in justificatory terms. It is true that he refers to the data as 'evidence', but he is strikingly unconcerned with the question of what makes data evidence, or good evidence, for one thing rather than another. Rather, his central concern is always with how we are to explain what causes a person to end up with the theories she does, given the data she starts with.

From what we have considered about the distinctive features of Quine's naturalized epistemology, we will realise that the new epistemologist will not be interested in the distinction which was of central importance to the old epistemologist, the distinction between justified and unjustified beliefs. For unjustified beliefs will be explicable in just the same way that justified beliefs are explicable: the new epistemologist will be looking for some cognitive mechanisms in the subject which take the data as input and yield the beliefs as output.

## ITQ

**Question**

Which of the following is not a feature of Quine's naturalized epistemology?

- a) The assumption that there is an externalized world.
- b) The argument that physical stimulations are the data of naturalized epistemology.
- c) The argument that what justifies our belief is important.
- d) It focuses on what causes our beliefs.

**Feedback**

- Feed at the four options supplied in this QUESTION, you will discover that options A, B, and D are features of naturalized epistemology. Naturalized epistemology assumes the existence of an external world; holds that physical stimulations are necessary for naturalized epistemology; and focuses on what causes our beliefs rather than what justifies them. Hence, the right option is C because that is the focus of traditional epistemology which naturalized epistemology criticizes.

**Discussion  
Activity**

Critique the position of Richard Feldman on naturalized epistemology, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-naturalized/>

**Post your response on Study Session 10 forum page on course website.**

## Study Session Summary

**Summary**

In this Study Session, we examined how knowledge is derived from the external world. It offers a psychological account of knowledge acquisition. We explored David Hume conception of naturalized epistemology. We learnt that naturalized epistemology has some features which makes it different from traditional epistemology. We also showed why traditional epistemology differs from Quine's type of epistemology.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

**SAQ10.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 10.1, 10.2, 10.3, and 10.4)**  
Discuss the idea of naturalized epistemology?

**SAQ 10.2 (tests Learning Outcome 10.5)**  
Critically examine Hume's position on naturalized epistemology.

**SAQ 10.3 (tests Learning Outcome 10.6)**  
Highlight three features of Quine's naturalized epistemology.



## Study Session 11

# Social Epistemology

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we shall look at another approach to epistemology known as Social Epistemology. This approach does not employ psychology as Quine's approach did. Rather, it offers a social dimension to knowledge. We will also observe classically-oriented social epistemology and provide historical account of the truth-oriented social epistemology.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 11.1 *define and use* correctly the term "social epistemology".
- 11.2 *discuss* classically-oriented social epistemology
- 11.2 *give* a historical account of truth-oriented social epistemology
- 11.4 *distinguish* between Richard Rorty's social epistemology and Lyotard's postmodernist epistemology.

## 11.1 What is Social Epistemology?

Since each individual belongs to a certain social environment, in order to actualize their aim, there is the need for them to interact with themselves and other social phenomena within their group or social environment. Social epistemology tend to invoke group belief and group knowledge, hence social epistemology can be defined as the study of social dimensions of knowledge or information.

**Social Epistemology** The study of social dimensions of knowledge and information.

The term '**social epistemology**' has aroused divergent views from different thinkers. For some thinkers, social epistemology should retain the same general mission as classical epistemology; revamped in the recognition that classical epistemology was too individualistic. Other thinkers argue that social epistemology should be a more radical departure from classical epistemology, a successor discipline that could replace epistemology as traditionally conceived. The former, that is the first assumption is regarded as the classically-oriented social epistemology, while the latter, the second assumption is regarded as applied social epistemology.

## 11.2 Classically-Oriented Social Epistemology

This type of social epistemology can be realized in at least two ways. One way would emphasize the traditional epistemic goal of acquiring true beliefs. It would study social practices in terms of their impact on the



truth-values of agents' beliefs. A second version would focus on the epistemic goal of having justified or rational beliefs when a cognitive agent is justified or warranted in accepting the statements and opinions of others.

Classical epistemology has been concerned with both the pursuit of truth and with rationality of epistemic justification. Here, a person might rightly conduct his/her reason in the search for truth but not succeed in getting the truth. However, as long as he/she forms a belief by a proper use of reason or by proper use of other faculties like perception and memory, then his/her belief is rationally warranted or justified. Furthermore, according to the traditional account of knowledge, in classical epistemology, for a person to know a proposition, he/she must believe it, it must be true and his/her belief in it must be justified or rationally warranted. The foregoing remarks apply to classical epistemology in its individualist version. But when we try to socialize classical epistemology, that is, social classical epistemology we arrive at a social angle to the pursuit of true belief and the pursuit of justified belief. Some projects in social epistemology have adopted precisely these themes.

### 11.3 Historical Account of Truth-Oriented Social Epistemology

The first formulation of truth-oriented social epistemology is found in the writings of Alvin Goldman who proposes to divide epistemology into two branches: individual epistemology and social epistemology. For Goldman, both branches would seek to identify and assess processes, methods or practices in terms of their contributions (positive or negative) to the production of true belief (Goldman, 1987: 109-144). Goldman further stresses that 'individual epistemology would identify and evaluate psychological processes that occur within the epistemic subject, while social epistemology would identify and evaluate social processes by which epistemic subjects interact with other agents who exact causal influence on their beliefs (Goldman, 1987: 111). Thus, the communicational acts of other agents and the institutional structures that guide or frame such communicational acts would be prime examples of social-epistemic practices that would be studied within social epistemology.

In his subsequent book, *Knowledge in a social world*, (1999), Goldman argued that 'both in everyday life and in specialized arenas such as science, law and education, a certain value is placed on having true beliefs rather than false beliefs (Goldman, 1999: 13). This type of value he called 'veritistic value'. The veritistic approach to social epistemology aims to be evaluative or normative rather than purely descriptive or explanatory. It seeks to evaluate actual and prospective practices in terms of their impacts on true versus false beliefs. Goldman argued further that apart from evaluative and normative roles, it can also play a regulative role. He finally opined that a practice can sometimes be judged veristically unsatisfactory when later and better evidence shows that many judgments issued under its aegis were false.

Phillip Kitcher also developed the social epistemology of science from a truth-oriented perspective. One of his main concerns has been the division of cognitive labour. He contends that 'the progress of science will be optimized, when there is an optimal distribution of effort within the scientific community ([www.stanford.or.social.epistemology](http://www.stanford.or.social.epistemology)). In other words, it may be better for scientific community to attack a given problem by encouraging some members to pursue one strategy and others to pursue another, rather than all pursuing the single most promising strategy. When this is done, then the progress of science will be optimized in terms of getting true answers to significant scientific questions. In his book, 'the advancement of science (1993), Kitcher constructs the notion of a consensus practice, 'a social practice built up from individual practices consisting of an individual's beliefs, the informants he regards as credible, the methodology of scientific reasoning he accepts and so forth'(www.stanford.or.social.epistemology). He then constructs a family of notions of scientific progress and characterizes progress in terms of improvements of consensus practices in getting significant truth and achieving explanatory success.

Feminist epistemology embraces the idea of social epistemology, that is, classically-oriented social epistemology. However, many of them strongly criticize traditional epistemology because of its emphasis on abstract individual, and view it as a poor model for feminist epistemology. Elizabeth Anderson for instance views feminist epistemology as a branch of social epistemology. She explains the aim of social epistemology by identifying as a branch of epistemology that aims at promoting our reliable that is, truth conducive, processes of belief formation and checking or cancelling out our unreliable belief forming processes (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/postmodernism>).

Miranda Fricker, is another feminist epistemologist who also adopts an approach to social epistemology with classical roots. For her, 'human beings have a fundamental need to acquire true beliefs and hence a derived need to seek out good informants, people who will tell us the truth as to whether P' (Internet Stanford encyclopaedia of Philosophy). She explained further that norms of credibility arise in society to pick out the class of good informants, people alleged to be competent about the truth as well as sincere. Thus, the common feature among classically-oriented social epistemologists centres on the truth aim.

## 11.4 Applied Social Epistemology

Many thinkers in the social studies of knowledge reject or ignore such classical concern of epistemology as **truth, justification and rationality**. However, it is evidently clear that various communities and culture speak the language of truth, justification or rationality, but these thinkers do not find such concepts legitimate or useful for their own projects. They seek to describe and understand a selected community's norms of rationality, like anthropologist describing the norms of an alien culture. But they reject the notion that there are any universal or objective norms of rationality and criteria of truth that they themselves could appropriately invoke.

Barry Barnes and David Bloor put it this way, 'there are no context-free or super cultural norms of rationality (see *Internet Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*). In other words, they are opposed to the fact that certain practices are more rational or more truth-conducive than others. Thus, they officially decline to make any judgments about the epistemic properties of various belief-forming practices. They contend that such judgments would have no culture-free basis or foundation. These thinkers are regarded as social epistemologists because they are specifically interested in social influences on knowledge. Richard Rorty (1979) for example explained that if the old aspirations must be abandoned, why not use the old label for the new type of project' (Rorty, 1979: 138).

## ITQ

### Question

- Can you state the two forms of social epistemology?

### Feedback

- The two forms of social epistemology are:
  - 1) classically-oriented social epistemology and
  - 2) the applied epistemology.

### 11.4.1 Richard Rorty as a Social Epistemologist

In his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty (1979) explained that 'our practice or any practice in our culture does not need any grounding or any justificatory foundation. Rather, claims in other areas of culture are settled conventionally within the practice' (Rorty, 1979: 138). Rorty is often charged with relativism apparently because of his insistence that epistemic notions like knowledge and truth make sense only relative to a society, culture or worldview. It is however pertinent for us to examine Rorty's version of social epistemology in order to determine whether he is actually guilty of the charge.

Rorty developed a sustained argument to the effect that the foundational projects of modern epistemology have been unable to successfully establish their claims that knowledge must and can be grounded in absolute truths and that necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge can be ascertained. He turns his back on the ill-conceived project of seeking absolute epistemic foundations advocating what he calls 'epistemological behaviourism'. According to him, one justifies a belief or statement by advancing other beliefs or statements that do not require justification in that context so as to satisfy the standards implicit in our social practice of justification.

For Rorty, justification is a matter of social practice and peer approach. Whether one can be truly said to know is not a matter of some relation between you and the thing you claim to know but a matter of whether what you claim to know conforms to a certain social practice. He offers a coherence theory according to which there is coherence of a given belief or knowledge claim with the beliefs and practice of the epistemic community to which one belongs. This can be called 'social coherentism' which is different from the internal coherence of an individual belief system.

Furthermore, appropriate justification, according to Rorty, will always be piecemeal and local since justification is relative to our social practices. His epistemological behaviourism is an account of justification and not a theory of truth. He denies that there is any interesting theory of truth, that is, any general account of what makes belief and sentences true. No class of truth has foundational status with respect to the rest of truths. While we usually call beliefs true when they are better justified than their competitors, 'true does not mean 'justified' or 'warranted'; it is indefinable and ineliminable' (Rorty, 1991:13).

Truth or what for Rorty substitutes for it are an inter-subjective agreement among the members of a community. That inter-subjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly accepted reality. The end of inquiry, for Rorty, is not the discovery or even the approximation of objective truth but the formulation of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community. The objectivist tradition centres round the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something which transcends it, namely, that which it has in common with every other actual and possible human community. But once the notion of objective truth is abandoned, Rorty argues, one must choose between a self-defeating relativism and ethnocentrism. For Rorty, one 'should grasp the ethnocentric horn of the dilemma and privilege our own group' (Rorty, 1991: 29). As for any new beliefs that we are to consider, they must at least roughly cohere with those already held by the community. Rorty expresses this point thus: 'we want to be able to justify ourselves to our earlier selves. This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way we live now (Rorty, R. 1989:5).

How is Rorty led to these conclusions about truth and reality? He has two arguments for this. The first can be found in his Contingency, Irony and Solidarity where he explains that:

*To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences, there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there (Rorty, 1989: 5).*

Somehow paradoxically, he further explains that:

*The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of a human being—cannot (Rorty, 1989: 5)*

The argument may be put this way: 'true' is a modifier that describes only sentences. So where there are no sentences there is no truth. But even if we grant that only sentences can be true, it does not follow that a sentence alone is sufficient for truth. 'Happy' can only describe a sentient being, but the mere existence of the sentient being does not entail that he is happy. The supposition that only sentences can be true does not remove the need for some other non-linguistic condition, which makes the

sentence true. Nor is it even clear that the existence of a sentence is necessary for truth.

In fact, Michael David Rohr (1998) interprete Rorty as denying any interesting theory of truth: that is, any general account of what makes beliefs and sentence true. There is no general account of why beliefs are true anymore than there is a general account of why things are good. No class of truths has foundational status with respect to the rest of truth. Since there is no foundation for truth or knowledge, then according to Rorty, there is nothing outside our social practices to ground them. Hence his rejection of objectivity as a goal of inquiry in favour of solidarity within a community of inquirers; less provocatively, he argues that objectivity be understood as inter-subjectivity. The desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much inter-subjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can.

In contrasts to Rorty, those who ground solidarity in objectivity—the realists—construe truth as correspondence to reality. They also argue that there are procedures of justification of beliefs which are natural and not merely local. Rorty rejects this reduction of solidarity to objectivity. For him, there is always a gap between our sense experience and the reality that is purported to exist. He argues that Descartes was unable to bridge that gap by means of reason any more than Hume could bridge it by experience (Rorty, R, 1991: 189).

Rorty's attitude towards truth in which the consensus of a community is taken as central rather than a relation to a non-human reality forms the basis of his rejection of Plato's realism. Rorty rightly takes the Platonic doctrine as central to Western Philosophy; it is the core of realism, a view that has dominated the Western philosophical tradition to this day. According to this view, to be truly rational, procedures of justification must lead to the truth, must lead to correspondence to reality, and lastly, procedures of justification must lead to the intrinsic nature of things.

Rorty rejects Platonic realism because he finds the notion of 'correspondence' involved to be hopelessly metaphysical and without content. He writes:

*The trouble with Platonic notions is not that they are wrong but there is nothing significant to be said about them. Specifically, there is no way to 'naturalize' them or otherwise connect them to the rest of inquiry or culture, or life (Rorty, 1979: 311)*

Rorty also rejects the notion of knowledge as accurate representation because it lends itself naturally to the idea that certain sorts of representations, certain expressions, certain processes are basic, privileged and foundational (Rorty, R., 1979:318-319). This criticism is backed up with holistic arguments of the form 'we will not be able to isolate basic elements except on the basis of a priori knowledge of the whole fabric within which these elements occur' (Rorty, R., 1979: 319). Thus, we will not be able to substitute the notion of 'accurate representation' (element by element) for that of successful accomplishment of a practice. This argument suggests that we cannot

understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works. Also, we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts.

Elsewhere, Rorty urges that no attempt should be made to salvage something from the Platonic notion of knowledge as accuracy of picturing because no true statement pictures the world and that picturing is 'only a picture'. As a result, he characterizes the Platonic notions of 'truth as correspondence' and 'accuracy of representation' as absurd.

The point of Rorty's criticism of Platonic notions is to highlight the plausibility of the socialization of our epistemic practices. For him, the dominating notion of epistemology is that to be rational, to be fully human, to do what we ought, we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that such common ground exists. He added that to suggest that there is no such common ground seems to endanger rationality.

Furthermore, Rorty aims to forestall the idea of an ultimate philosophical foundation for our knowledge. He maintains that philosophy must give up its traditional claim to be the final court of appeal in disputes about truth. The only alternative, which one can say his behaviourism espouses, is to accept as true, what the community of knower's agree on. Hence the study of the nature of human knowledge should be treated as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact. To this end, we should see keeping a conversation going as sufficient as a sufficient aim of philosophy (Rorty, 1979: 317).

One can summarize Rorty's position as that which judges items of belief by reference to different societal values. Hence, there is no absolute scale of values applicable to all societies. The underlying premise of his work is that every culture generates its own value system and as a result, an individual belief must cohere with these value systems. In a review of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Robert Hollinger describes Rorty as a philosopher who views any attempt to discover objective standards of truth, knowledge, justice and beauty and the idea of an a historical, neutral set of categories and standards that can and should ground culture or any of its components, or provide a framework for all discourse, all inquiry, and all problems as building to which stories are constantly added, so that 'if the foundations are not secure the whole building will come crashing to the ground.

In conclusion therefore, Rorty insists that there is no 'skyhook' which takes us out of our own minds or other human minds. He agrees with Hilary Putman that there is no 'God's eye viewpoint' that reveals reality in itself (Rohr, 1998:353-354). Each person interprets reality in accordance with his/her own subjective condition. But Rorty does not argue for an individualistic free-for-all notion of truth. He emphasizes the social influence upon the individual and his beliefs.



### 11.4.2 Jean Francois Lyotard's Postmodernist approach to Social Epistemology

Central to Lyotard's general position is the rejection of grand narratives that are claimed to have characterised the modern age. He describes the postmodern 'turn' as one of increasing incredulity towards metanarratives. In this regard, Lyotard rejects universalism and promotes localized action, which rest on difference and particularity. He explains that:

*Rather than seek to weave the individuality of events into some comprehensive scheme of human liberation, let us wage a war on totality, let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable, let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name (Lyotard, 1993: 82).*

Postmodernism becomes a celebration of a range of different theoretical perspectives: 'postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of authorities; it refines our sensibilities to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable (Massumi, B. and Bennington, G. 1984: xxv). Lyotard sees the postmodern attitude as one of incredulity towards all statements which claim that things have to be done in one particular way and that way only.

For Lyotard, attempts at providing overarching and comprehensive stories simply conceal the heterogeneity of discourses. For example, scientific discourse, according to Lyotard, explicitly excludes narrative discourse and many supposedly objective claims in science tend to be framed by some kind of narratives, involving distinctively value-laden notions of social progress and human emancipation. Marx for example, provided a grand narrative of science, which placed him within the framework of those seeking the emancipation of humankind as a whole (Cuff, et. al. 1998:294).

Lyotard's postmodernism removes all foundational categories by re-examining them as the causative products of some other factors. For him, no a priori Archimedean point of reference, on which to ground human reason is available. There is no direct experience of reality without interpretation; and all interpretations are in some sense corrupted by the cultural and personal prejudices or prejudgements of the interpreter (Gracie, 1997:15-16).

The implication of Lyotard's postmodernist approach for our understanding of social epistemology can be deduced from the above epistemological conclusion. He came to this conclusion by attacking the main features of traditional epistemology particularly the features of objectivity and universality. This we shall examine in lecture twelve.

As a result of the rejection of all grand discourses and universal criteria of judgement, Lyotard articulates a postmodernist conception of local pragmatic 'language games'. For Lyotard, the creation of knowledge is just a language game and social life is organized around these language games. Language games serve to legitimate or justify people's behaviour in society. They are games in which the participants try to assert certain things to be true or right. Each statement or utterance is a 'move' that

may aid the participant in trying to win the game, that is, to get his or her version of what is true or right accepted (Lyotard, J.F 1984: 10).

The metaphor of language game was further extended in order to illuminate the condition of postmodern knowledge. Borrowing a lengthy metaphor from Wittgenstein, the pioneer of the theory of language games, Lyotard explains that:

*Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares of old and new houses and of houses with additions from different periods and this surrounded by a number of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses (Anscombe, 1974: 8)*

The houses and 'streets' being referred to in the metaphor suggests heterogeneity. The point of the metaphor, then, is that the reality of knowledge today is a huge array of piecemeal moves within pragmatic discourse and none of the discourses appeal to exactly the same criterion of validity. Consequently, each of us can result to quite different knowledge claims depending upon the situation in which we find ourselves. Such knowledge claims are equally valid; hence there is no need to appeal to overarching notions of validity which govern all mini-discourses.

## ITQ

### Question

- What is postmodernism?

### Feedback

- It is an aggregate of philosophical positions which allow for tolerance on the ground that there is nothing like a universal truth or objectivity which traditional epistemology holds.

Lyotard's reference to language games is meant to show that, in the postmodern era, diversity is the order of the day as people lose faith in the search for one great truth that unites and justifies all knowledge. Knowledge in this era fragments into a multiplicity of different language games that are specific to particular areas of social life. Also, he argues that all knowledge is based upon the use of language. Just as we have different games and the specificity of the rules governing each game, so also we have heterogeneous discourses such that one can say that knowledge is always knowledge from different viewpoints.

Many philosophers view the positions of Rorty and Lyotard as similar to the position called 'epistemic relativism' in philosophy. This position is often described as dangerous and troubling because it offers no objective standard through which one can assess what counts as 'truth'. Another charge against this position is that it is nihilistic because it simply gives up on the project of distinguishing good reasoning from bad reasoning and embraces a sort of epistemic anarchy.

In spite of these criticisms, their works remain persuasive to those who would subscribe to the idea that knowledge is a socio-cultural construct. A brief example will explain this. If two people begin with significantly different judgments rejecting or accepting particular inferences, then it



seems entirely possible that they may end up reasoning in very different ways, each of which is justified for the person who reasons in that way. Therefore if relativism is right, then there may be a pair of people whose systems of reasoning are very different from one another, though each system is valid for the person using it. This also applies to different communities. This exactly forms the basis of the relativism we are considering in this sub-section. Hence we can conclude that the positions of Richard Rorty and that of Jean Francois Lyotard seem to allow for both heterogeneity and diversity in the manifestations of our epistemic claims.



### Discussion Activity

- 1) Pick an encyclopaedia of philosophy and read up on Social Epistemology.
- 2) Attempt a critique of the position of the encyclopaedia.

**Post your response on Study Session 11 forum page on course website.**

## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the social dimension of knowledge. This theory argued that contrary to traditional epistemology, knowledge goes beyond having beliefs and attempting to justify one's knowledge claims. It highlights our social dimensions of knowledge.

## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 11.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3)

What is social epistemology?

#### SAQ 11.2 (tests Learning Outcome 11.4)

Differentiate between Rorty's social epistemology and Lyotard's postmodernist epistemology.

## Study Session 12

# Feminist Epistemology

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine feminist epistemology as an aspect of epistemology that draws on the approach of social epistemology. We will discuss the meaning, basis, issues, aims of feminist epistemology and stages in the development of feminist epistemology.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

12.1 *explain* the basis of feminist epistemology.

12.2 *discuss* issues in feminist epistemology.

12.3 *appraise* the essential arguments in feminist epistemological discourse.

12.4 *highlight* the aims of feminist epistemology.

12.5 *outline* the stages in the development of feminist epistemology

## 12.1 The Basis Feminist Epistemology

### Feminism

**Epistemology** The branch of social epistemology that studies the various influences of norms and conceptions of gender and gendered interests and experiences on the production of knowledge.

**Feminist epistemology** has often been understood as a branch of social epistemology that studies the various influences of norms and conceptions of gender and gendered interests and experiences on the production of knowledge (Anderson, 1995:57-58).

Put in another way, feminist epistemology is about the ways gender influences what we take to be knowledge. Consider for example theoretical and scientific knowledge, the kind of knowledge privileged in the academy. Western societies give the impression that this kind of knowledge is masculine. Theoretical knowledge is often tailored to the needs of mostly male managers, bureaucrats and officials exercising power in their role given capacities. Feminist epistemologists suggest that various kinds of practical know-how and personal knowledge (knowledge that bears the mark of the knower's biography and identity) such as the kinds of un-theoretical knowledge that mothers have of their children are undervalued when they are labelled feminine. Given the androcentric need to represent the 'masculine' as independent of the 'feminine', this labelling has led to a failure to use untheoretical knowledge effectively in theoretical reasoning (Rose, 1983). Traditional epistemologists find these claims of feminist epistemologists highly disturbing if not plainly absurd. Feminist epistemologists such as Sandra Harding (1986:30) and Jane Flax (1989) have rejected empiricism or even traditional epistemology as a whole for its seeming inability to comprehend these claims.

Whatever the issue is, feminist epistemology can be better explained through a careful understanding of social epistemology. Many feminist epistemologists have been inclined to embrace this type of epistemology because as Sandra Harding puts it, 'knowledge claims are always socially situated' (1986:65). Situated knowledge considers how people may understand the same object in different ways that reflect the distinct relations in which they stand to it. It is described as knowledge that reflects the particular perspectives of the subject.

Current developments in feminist epistemology stem from the recognition that knowledge is socially constructed and, therefore, must be seen in the context of the social relations in which its production occurs. Recognition of the socially constructed nature of human society and relationships is reflected in and forms the basis of feminist epistemology. A central question in feminist epistemology has to do with the problem of the objectivity of knowledge. Objectivity as a feature of foundationalism requires that knowledge be abstract and certain. This according to feminist epistemologists has led to an incomplete account of knowledge. For them, knowledge is incomplete without considering the multiple experiences of diverse groups in society and how their experiences are interrelated.

Various issues have inspired feminist interests in theories of knowledge. For instance, stereotyped perceptions of women's nature and actions based upon them. This according to Carol Gould (1983) 'counts amongst the most intransigent of constructs that shape women's experiences and make it difficult for women to move beyond domination' (Gould, 1983: 14).

## 12.2 Issues in Feminist Epistemology

Stereotyped perceptions of women's nature are of course continuous with stereotyping of any sort. Gender stereotyping can be defined as the constant portrayal of women and men according to the gender division of labour by stressing that such stereotyping is 'normal' and natural. Put in another way, gender stereotypes are structured set of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and of men. They are beliefs held by individuals, (personal gender stereotypes) and are also shared patterns of thinking within a particular society (cultural gender stereotypes) (Ashmore, and DelBoca, 1991:159). It could come in form of personality traits for example, women are emotional and men are not, or in form of abilities, for example men are good at mathematics while women are not. It can also be in form of role behaviour for example, women are more likely than men to care for children. Again, it may be in form of occupations, for example, most nurses are female while most doctors are male.

Gender stereotypes are 'bipolar' in the sense that women and men are perceived to have opposing personal qualities. Some researchers however feel that the core meaning of stereotypic beliefs about the sexes is best captured by the distinctions 'hard-soft', 'active-passive'. Manifestations of such perceptions are perhaps best known as they come across in anthropological psychological and sociological studies. A close look at

those studies show that their implications are as much ontological in their structuring effects upon women's possibilities of being, and epistemological in their constraints upon responsible knowing. Indeed, such studies often work as self-fulfilling prophecies, leading people to be much as stereotype-governed as research takes them to be.

Again, with special references to stereotypes of women, feminists in several disciplines have documented the ways in which actions and attitudes shaped by such stereotypes structure the ways in which women are perceived and known, and come to know them. Much of this documentation is philosophically pertinent because it shows precisely with reference to other peoples experiences of themselves as participants in the world, that is, how one comes to know oneself through perceived doctrines has profound effects on one's possibilities of being (Code, 1988: 192). In a complex process of reciprocal structuring and restructuring, what a person comes to belief that he/she is affects what that person can know and to a large extent, structures what he/she is.

You should note that the point is not that if stereotypes are removed then experiences will present itself 'pure and tainted' but rather that experience is always mediated by the location of the experiencing subjects in terms of time, place culture and environment and it is always shaped by unconscious considerations and motivations.

The discussions thus far are drawn from patriarchal structures where stereotypes are imposed upon women from the vantage point of male experience. Patriarchy inputs political, moral and social meanings to sexual differentiation. It is the male domination of ownership and control at all levels in society, which maintains and operates the system of gender discrimination. This system of control is justified in terms of patriarchal ideology, which is the system of social values and norms, often embedded in law, tradition and religious beliefs which support the perpetuation of gender discrimination, claiming that the man is the head of the household with sexual rights over women.

On the level of epistemological discourse, many feminists have condemned patriarchy for creating and reflecting an exclusively masculine view of the world and for rendering women's experiences and their perspectives invisible. According to one of them, 'patriarchal thought is characterized by the imposition of divisions and oppositions on the disparate flow of experience: reason versus emotions, mind versus body, subject versus object' (Bordo, 1992:144). As a result, one side of each pair is favoured over the other, establishing a hierarchy of classifications in which that which is associated with the male is given priority over that which represents the female. Their conclusion therefore is that patriarchy establishes male dominance in its basic account of the world, its standards of knowledge and judgment as well as in its concrete institutions and practices.

To this end, feminist have produced competing theories about the general forms of inequality and the broader structures, belief systems and institutions which produces and organize particular experiences in order to analyse, understand and hopefully challenge women's exclusion. Prominent among these theories is the one labelled 'Feminist Epistemology', which is concerned with how gender influences our ways

of knowing. Feminists have argued that ‘mainstream epistemologies systematically exclude the possibility that women can be ‘knowers or agents of knowledge, the voice of science is masculine, history is written from only the point of view of men of the dominant class and race; and the subject of traditional epistemology is always assumed to be a man (Pereira, 2001).

Various practitioners of feminist Epistemology argue that dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women by: excluding them from inquiry, denying them epistemic authority; denigrating their ‘feminine cognitive styles and models of knowledge, producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, deviant or significant only in ways that serve male interest, producing theories of social phenomena that render women’s activities and interests or gendered power relations invisible and producing knowledge (science and technology) that is not useful for people in subordinate positions or that reinforce gender and other social hierarchies.

Feminist epistemologists are mainly concerned with scientific knowledge as a way of challenging the absolutism and objectivity of foundationalism. They trace the failure of foundationalism to flawed conceptions of gender, knowers’ objectivity and scientific methodology. They however offered various arguments which they present as essential arguments in feminist epistemology.

### ITQ

#### Question

- What is the major thing that feminist epistemology was reacting to?

#### Feedback

- It was reacting to the patriarchal structures of traditional epistemology which does not give room to seeing women’s experience as a factor for their participation in the social world.

## 12.3 The Essential Arguments in Feminist Epistemology

The major arguments in feminist discourse are:

- a. Feminist epistemology rejects the notion that there is an Archimedean point from which knowledge is acquired. It argues that the existence of such an Archimedean point that abstracts the knower from the known will only lead to an incomplete account of knowledge. Instead we should focus on the specificities of our local experience. Also, feminist epistemologists argue that epistemological assumptions within scientific discourse reconstruct a stereotypic view of women and men. This has resulted in various forms of dualisms with the other pole serving as the dominated one.
- b. Feminists’ epistemology also questioned the objectivity of science with its attendant neutrality. They argue that science is not the neutral, dispassionate, value-free pursuit of truth. Science, like all knowledge, is culturally constructed, produced under particular social and historical conditions. The dissatisfaction of feminist

epistemologists is with modern science (scientific knowledge). Hence, the notion that the project of modern science crystallizes or informs ‘masculinist’ models of thinking has been a prominent theme in some recent writings. What we encounter in Cartesian rationalism, says Karl Stern ‘is the pure masculinisation of thought’ (Stern, 1965:104). The scientific model of knowing says Sandra Harding, represents a ‘super-masculinisation of rational knowledge’ (Harding, 1981:17). The specific consciousness we call scientific, Western and modern claims James Hillman ‘is the long sharpened tool of the masculine mind that has discarded parts of its own substance calling it ‘eve’, female and inferior’ (Hillman, 1972: 250). Understanding the development of Cartesian objectivity and modern science in general will give us some textual support to these insights on feminist epistemology and as a result clarify their importance.

- c. There are various forms of the feminist critique of science and its objectivity. One aspect of this critique is the picture of scientific objectivity as expressing an essentially male approach to knowledge and the world. Thus, Ruth Bleier explains that:

*Science is the male intellect: the active knowing subject: its relationship to nature the passive object of knowledge – is one of manipulation, control and domination: it is the relationship of man to woman, of culture to nature (Bleier, (1984: 196).*

Bleier’s reason for the above conclusion is that many people have been led to believe that the discourse on women and their nature, a discourse like all others from which women have been absent and excluded, has been an objective investigation because it was conducted by science. But science itself, the tool for investigating such natural objects as woman has always been defined as the expression of the male mind; dispassionate, objective, impersonal, transcendent. The female mind untamed, emotional, subjective and personal—is incompatible with science. The presumption here therefore is that science, by its very nature is inherently masculine. As Haraway puts it, the entire range of the tools of science is penetrated by the principle of domination. Catherine Mackinnon also speaks of objectivity as ‘the ostensibly non-involved stance, as the male epistemological stance which does not comprehend its own perspective’ (Mackinnon, 1982: 538).

Another aspect of the critique of objectivity that is relevant to this study is the suggestion that part of the problem about objectivity and thus about how women have been traditionally perceived and described may well have to do with the dualistic categories into which we have tried to place our knowledge. The claim here is that science rests on and is defined by the assumption of a polarity between man and woman that structure our view of and investigations into what constitutes men’s and women’s nature. More generally, these polarities underlie all our views about what constitutes knowledge and indeed structure our investigations of the nature of human thought, behaviour and organization. The consistency with which our culture accepts these dualisms as constituting not only science but art, philosophy, literature and indeed our customs and



institutions is standardly taken to reflect the fact that these dualisms really exist in the world and specifically in the nature of men and women—a kind of realism with respect to the male/female polarity (Hanen, 1988: 30).

Feminists argue that to treat these polarities as representing contradictory and mutually exclusive spheres is to propound false dichotomies, not because these ways of classifying fails to order our perceptions but because they order them in ways that leave out or under-represent or undervalue women's experience. Interestingly, this critique is by no means limited to science and its feature of objectivity. For Catherine Mackinnon (1982:541), this not only extends to epistemology but also the traditional bifurcation between reason and emotion with knowledge made dependent upon reason alone, the implication is an incomplete account of knowledge.

Feminist epistemologists take issue with certain epistemic notions like objectivity, universality and rationality claiming that they are all male notions. Feminist epistemologies, like other anti-foundationalist tendencies in contemporary epistemology, have grown out of critical interrogations of the universalistic presumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Sceptical about the very possibility of developing a theory of knowledge in general whose claims to universal validity are premised on its abstraction from the specificities of human experience, feminist epistemologists have insisted on the constitutive role that epistemic locality plays in the making and evaluating of knowledge claims. It is with the foundationalist project of seeking an absolute grounding for knowledge and its resultant consequence (that of abstract individualism) that many feminists take issue.

Another central argument which is closely linked to the above is that feminist epistemologists are of the opinion that central epistemological regulatory notions like objectivity, good method, and rationality and the abstract individual are conceptualized to favour men. As a result, they, like the anti-foundationalists concentrate less on formal universal conditions for making and justifying knowledge and emphasize the specificities of knowledge construction. Apart from conceptualizing these notions to favour men, traditional epistemology fails to take into cognizance real life situations. It tries to define knowledge without taking into cognizance knowledge for whom, it also tries to define justification without considering specific circumstances.

Many feminist epistemologists are sceptical of the model of knowledge that foundationalism has bequeathed to modern science. According to them, the type of knowledge that Descartes has bequeathed to modern science and of which he is often explicitly described as the father, is based on clarity, dispassion and detachment as against involvement, perceptivity and connectedness.

Finally, feminist epistemologists also take issue with the problem of Androcentrism in science. Androcentrism occurs when theories take men's lives or masculinity to set the norm for humans or animals generally with female difference either ignored or represented as deviant. It also occurs when male activities or predicaments are represented as the primary causes or sites of important changes without regard to the roles

of females in initiating or facilitating changes (Harding, 1990: 96). One can also describe a situation where phenomena are viewed from the perspective of men's lives without regard to how women see them differently as androcentric. Similarly, a knowledge practice can be said to be androcentric if it reflects an orientation geared to specifically or typically male interests or male lives. Androcentrism can appear in knowledge practice in at least two ways: in the content of theories or research programmes and in the interests that lead inquirers to frame their research in certain terms or around certain problems. Feminist have advanced feminist epistemology most fully and persuasively by exposing androcentrism in the content of social-scientific and biological theories.

You should note at this point that men and women do have some gender-specific experiences and personal knowledge due to their different socialization. Such experiences and forms of knowledge can be fruitfully brought to bear upon theoretical inquiry. It is therefore not surprising that women researchers have exposed and criticized androcentrism in theories much more than men have. Women researchers, like feminist epistemologists base their argument on the social construction of science, a particularly important subject because of the deep and central ways that scientific knowledge shapes western ways of knowing. According to this argument, it is impossible for science or scientists to be otherwise, since science is a social activity and a cultural product created by persons who live in the world of science, as well as in the societies that bred them. Similarly, Sandra Harding (1986:9) explains that scientific processes are not transparent: they necessarily permit cultural and social values and interests to contribute to the descriptions and explanations of nature's order. Thus, gender values and interests too could have shaped practices and claims.

## 12.4 Aims of Feminist Epistemology

As a form of social epistemology feminist epistemology, aims at incorporating the experiences of women within the epistemological framework. It offers ways of better understanding and evaluating female experiences. It is motivated by the recognition that everyone who knows something is a person occupying a position in one or more social groups. This in turn makes the social location of the knowing subject relevant for epistemic evaluation of the subject's beliefs.

The project of feminist epistemology also aims at explaining the achievements of feminist criticism of science which is devoted to revealing sexism and androcentrism in theoretical inquiry. An adequate feminist epistemology must explain what it is for a scientific inquiry or practice to be sexist and androcentric; how these features are expressed in theoretical inquiry and in the application of theoretical knowledge and what bearing these features have on evaluating research.

Finally, feminist epistemology aims to defend feminist scientific practices which incorporate a commitment to the liberation of women and the social and political equality of all persons. All adequate feminist epistemology must explain how research projects with such moral and



political commitments can produce knowledge that meets such epistemic standards as empirical adequacy and fruitfulness.

## 12.5 Stages in the Development of Feminist Epistemology

Three models or positions are often considered as stages in the development of feminist epistemology. These are feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism.

### 12.5.1 Feminist Empiricism

Feminist empiricists maintain that sexism and androcentrism are identifiable biases of individual knowers that can be eliminated by stricter application of existing methodological norms of scientific and philosophical inquiry (Hawkesworth, 1989). According to standard arguments about sociological research, rigorous observation and the use of the scientific method eliminate observer bias, but feminists argue that the observer is not a neutral party. Because knowledge is socially produced, the particular experiences and attitudes that observers bring to their work influence what they study, how they study it and what they conclude about it. Untangling the relationship between the knower and the known is essential according to feminist scientists. In other words, unless research begins with the ordinary facts of life, then the knowledge that sociologists construct will be both alienating and apart from the experiences of human actors.

Feminist empiricism argues that it is possible to remove sexist and other biases from the processes of research, particularly when problems of study are initially being identified and defined, in the belief that, once these have been eliminated, value-neutral work will be produced (Harding, 1986:10). Harding regards this as an attempt to reform bad science, simply by adding women into existing frameworks rather than questioning the prejudiced assumptions that are constructive of science per se. By so doing, new perspectives on women's lives and specifically those that challenge sexist's assumptions will result in more accurate explanations of women's experiences.

### 12.5.2 Feminist standpoint

Standpoint theories in general claim that in any historical period, the prevailing worldview is a clear reflection of the interests and values of the dominant group (Agra, and Adan, 2004). Women, as a group, traditionally excluded from power circuits occupy a special social position that gives them a privileged epistemological standpoint, a less distorted worldview than the one imposed by middle-class white males. This theory argues that women's specific location in patriarchal societies is actually a resource in the construction of new knowledge (Harding, 1991: 21). This does not result from the biological fact of being a woman but from the unique experience of women as an oppressed group confronting a patriarchal society.

In an attempt to buttress the above point, Helen Lauer (2002:179) explains that an individual is advantaged in the evolution of certain claims about economic or social structure if he or she has been socially stigmatized,

subordinated, economically deprived or confronted in many ways and is subsequently or simultaneously empowered to reflect upon the implications of such experiences and alternatives. Here, the argument is that understanding woman's lives from a committed feminist exploration of their experiences of oppression produces more complete and less distorted knowledge than that produced by men. Women lead lives that have significantly different shapes and patterns to those of men and their subjugated positions provide the possibility of more complete and less perverse understanding. In this way, we can say that the feminist standpoint theory is based on two main ideas. First, all knowledge is located, since it is a practical and social construction. Second, one special location (that of women) is more reliable, as it provides privileged standpoint to unveil some types of truth.

Generally, standpoint theories claim to represent the world from a particular socially situated perspective that can lay claims to epistemic privilege or authority. Feminist standpoint theory in particular identifies one particular social situation as epistemologically privileged.

When you look at the goals of feminist standpoint theory, it suggests that it is a type of critical theory. Critical theories aim to empower the oppressed to improve their situations. To serve their critical aim, critical theories must represent the social world in relation to the interests of the oppressed, that is, those who are the subject of study, supply an account of that world which is accessible to the subjects of study, which enables them to understand their problems and supply an account of the world which is usable by the subjects of study in order to improve their conditions. Critical theory can therefore be described as theory of, by, and for the subjects of study (Anderson, 2004).

### **12.5.3 Feminist Postmodernism**

The general postmodernist theme embodies a sceptical sensibility that questions attempts to transcend our situations by appeal to such ideas as universality, objectivity, rationality, essence, unity, totality, foundations and ultimate truth and reality. It stresses the locality, partiality, contingency, instability, uncertainty, ambiguity, and essential contestability of any particular account of the world, the self, and the good (Anderson, E, 2004). Politically, the postmodernists' emphasis on revealing the situatedness and contestability of any particular claim or system of thought is supposed to serve both critical and liberatory functions.

Within feminism, postmodernist ideas have been deployed against theories that justify sexist practices, notably, ideologies that claim that observed differences between men and women are natural and necessary, or that women have an essence that explains and justifies their subordination. The oft-cited claim that gender is socially or discursively constructed— that it is an effect of social practices and systems of meaning that can be disrupted—finds one of its homes in postmodernism (Butler, 1990:1).

Taking the perspectivism intimated by standpoint epistemologies to its logical conclusions, feminist postmodernism rejects the very possibility of a truth about reality. It rejects claims of epistemic privilege

emphasizing instead the contingency and instability of the social identity of knowers and consequently of their representations. Feminist postmodernists use the 'situatedness' of each finite observer in a particular socio-political, historical context to challenge the possibility of claims that any perspective on the world could escape partiality. As an alternative to the futile quest for an authoritative truth to ground feminist theory, feminist postmodernists advocate a profound scepticism regarding universal (or universalizing) claims about the existence, nature and powers of reason. (Flax, J. 1986: 194). Rather than succumb to the authoritarian impulses of will to truth, they urge instead the development of a commitment to plurality and the play of difference (Flax, 1987: 621-643 and Anderson, 1997: 370-376).

Thus, feminist postmodernism envisions our epistemic situation as characterized by a permanent plurality of perspectives, none of which can claim objectivity—that is transcendence of situatedness to a 'view from nowhere'. It rejects the project of feminist standpoint theory which has to do with identifying a single epistemically privileged perspective. It sees such project as flawed and an unjustified assertion of power in the name of an unattainable objectivity.

Taking a look at the three epistemological positions discussed above, there are indications that no single contender can address all the concerns that have fuelled the feminist turn to epistemology. The elements of feminists' standpoint epistemologies that sustain feminist claims concerning women's privileged perspective on the world are at odds with the insight generated by the long struggle of women of colour within the feminist movement, that there is no uniform 'women's reality' to be known, no coherent perspective to be privileged. Yet the feminist postmodernists plea for tolerance of multiple perspectives is altogether at odds with feminist empiricists desire to develop a successor science that can refute once and for all, the distortions of androcentrism.

In spite of the conflicting claims of these three epistemological positions, an important point to be stressed is that each of the positions is an attempt to address the central concern of feminist epistemology. These concerns range from the need to reject an absolute grounding for knowledge with its emphasis on objectivity which extends to the realm of science, to the need to stress situated knowledge which addresses the question of who the knowing subject is. In this regard, feminist epistemology is motivated by the need to find appropriate ways of knowing women's experiences and the structures that shape them in order to be able to develop theoretical accounts of knowledge which are linked with these experiences.

Again, the three feminist epistemological positions are attempts to ground accounts of the social world which are less partial and distorted than the prevailing ones. In this sense, they are attempting to produce a science that better reflects the world around us than the incomplete and distorting accounts provided by traditional social science. This science will not substitute one gender loyalty for another but instead, incorporate all gender loyalties.

**ITQ****Question**

- Which of the following is not a stage in the development of feminist epistemology?
  - a) Feminist empiricism.
  - b) Feminist standpoint.
  - c) Feminist science.
  - d) Feminist postmodernism

**Feedback**

- The answer is C because it is the only one that is not a stage in the development of feminist epistemology.

**Discussion  
Activity**

What do you consider as the truth about Feminism?

[Post your response on Study Session Twelve forum page on course website.](#)

## Study Session Summary

**Summary**

In this Study Session, we examined feminist epistemology as an aspect of social epistemology. We observed that feminist epistemology not only grew out but questions traditional assumptions about knowledge as they challenge familiar beliefs about women, men and the social life. Feminist epistemology is therefore necessitated by the need to see women's experiences as an important part of their ways of participating in the social world. As a result of the issues arising from traditional epistemology which led feminist epistemologists to describe this type of epistemology as inadequate, feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism were highlighted as stages in the development of feminist epistemology.

## Assessment

**Assessment**

**SAQ 12.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 12.1, 12.2, 12.3, 12.4, and 12.5)**  
Critically discuss the idea of feminist epistemology.

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## Feedbacks on Self Assessment Questions (SAQS)

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### SAQ1.1

In answering this question, we expect you to first attempt a definition of the major terms which are mentioned in the question. Hence, a definition of epistemology, knowledge, beliefs, and justification is required.

Traditionally, there are four branches in philosophy and epistemology is one of those branches. Epistemology is generally regarded as the theory of knowledge. It is an attempt to know or understand knowledge in its universal sense. The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology defines it as '*... the theory of the origin, nature and limits of knowledge*'. From our analysis so far, we would see that knowledge plays a pivotal role in the definition of epistemology. What then is knowledge?

We can refer to knowledge as the cognitive aspect of consciousness. In other words, when you claim you know, it means you have perceived or understood or comprehended that thing. Philosophically speaking, knowledge has been defined by Plato, in *Thaetetus*, as that which has three conditions namely truth, belief, and justification. In other words, for any thing to constitute knowledge, such a state of affairs must be true, it was be a belief that is held, and the believer must be justified in believing it. What this points to us more is that there is a difference between knowledge and mere belief or opinion. Knowledge is on a higher plane and for any belief to transcend to knowledge; it must be true and must have justification for it.

From this standpoint, we can see that there is a connection between the idea of epistemology, knowledge, belief, and justification. The enterprise of epistemology is built on knowledge. Thus, we cannot talk about epistemology without talking of knowledge. In the same vein, the structure of knowledge is such that justification and beliefs are central to the basis of its uphold. In fact, the place of justification which has been regarded as the foundation in the structure of knowledge cannot be underestimated.

### SAQ1.2

In answering this question, you must understand that the kind of knowledge determines the source of such knowledge. From what you have learnt in this study session, we have a posteriori knowledge and a priori knowledge. The a posteriori knowledge is knowledge gained from experience alone while a priori is knowledge that is gained from reason alone. What this points to us is that there are two schools as regards the source of knowledge. The first school holds that knowledge is derived from experience while the other school holds that knowledge is derived from reason. The first school is referred to as Empiricism while the second school is referred to as Rationalism.

Empiricism is the school of thought that asserts that our comprehension of the external world is only done through experience. In other words, we only come to know what we know through our senses (your sense of taste, smell, feeling, seeing, and hearing). In this school of thought, the three British Empiricists are notable and they are John

Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. These trio assert that all knowledge comes from experience. You should note that you are expected to discuss what the ideas of each of these philosophers is as regards empiricism.

Rationalism on its part is the claim that all our knowledge derive from reason and not experience. They opine that our knowledge derives from a mental process, be it inductive or deductive. They further disagree with the positions of the Empiricists that we are born a 'tabula rasa' (a blank mind). They hold that we are born with certain innate ideas and that we come to realize them through deduction. Hence, we attain or get knowledge by a logico-mathematical procedure which falls within the realm of reason. Proponents of this school are Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. They are referred as the continental rationalists. You are expected to discuss the ideas of each of these philosophers.

### SAQ2.1

From what you have studied so far in this study session, you can refer to skepticism as an attitude or position or disposition in philosophy which casts a doubt on the possibility of attaining knowledge. The focus of the argument of the skeptics is that we cannot claim to know anything for sure. Hence, they deny the possibility of knowledge.

The notion of scepticism is not new in philosophical enterprise as it can be traced from the ancient philosophy. Heraclitus, ancient philosopher held that all things are in a state of change and so change is the only permanent thing. By this, he asserts that you cannot step into a river twice. The implication of this is that knowledge is impossible. This is because knowledge is permanent. Whatever is knowledge will always be knowledge and this would be impossible if everything is in a state of change. This position was supported by his disciple Cratylus. Georgias is another Greek philosopher who gave, although extreme, a position on this. According to him, nothing exists and even if anything exists it cannot be known; if however it can be known, such cannot be communicated. Hence, we cannot claim that anything exists. Protagoras' relativists position that man is the measure of all things also points that knowledge is impossible since each person is the determinant of what exists or is real and this violates one characteristic of knowledge – its universality.

The skeptists have given different arguments to support their stance and the three in focus here are the brain-in-the-vat argument, the argument from error, and the argument from experience. You are expected to discuss each of these in detail.

It is also of importance to differentiate between philosophical skepticism and methodological skepticism. Philosophical skepticism is the position that we cannot know anything about anything and an example of this is David Hume. On the other hand, methodological skepticism involves casting doubt or employing the methodic doubt. It involves casting doubt on what one already knows with a view to arrive at a better conclusion. A good example of this is Rene Descartes in his quest to attain the indubitable foundation of knowledge.

### SAQ 3.1

Thaetetus is one of Plato's dialogues and just like his other dialogues, he uses Socrates as the midwife of ideas. In this dialogue, Socrates engages Thaetetus in a discussion to know what knowledge is. Thaetetus in this discussion comes up with four definitions of knowledge.

The first is knowledge as arts and sciences. Thaetetus defined knowledge by listing the fields of Arts and the sciences. Socrates rejects this definition on two grounds. On the



first ground, Socrates held that the definition does not bring out what is common to all these fields that will thus bring the idea of knowledge out. The second ground is that in defining, you are not expected to give instances of a concept. For instance, if I ask you to define a man, we do not expect you to start mentioning names of men but rather to give the universal features of all species of being called men.

The second definition of knowledge by Thaetetus is defining knowledge as perception. This definition will translate to mean that anything called knowledge is perception. Hence, you know a thing when you perceive it. Socrates criticized the definition for reducing knowledge to perception. The fact that we know only through perception but we know that perception is not always knowledge. He particularly noted that such a definition involves a relativism similar to the Prothagorean assertion that man is the measure of all things. Hence, this definition will mean that knowledge is relative and not universal since perception itself is relative and not necessarily universal.

The third definition is the definition of knowledge as true judgment. In other words, for anything to be called knowledge, it must be a true judgment. Socrates criticized this on the ground that that it is possible for something to be a true judgment and yet lack reasons for arriving at it..he held that anything that will qualify as knowledge must have well-explained reason(s) to back it up. This is what leads us to the fourth definition.

The fourth is the definition of knowledge as true judgment plus logos or account. What this means is that for anything to qualify as knowledge, such must be a true judgment and which the believer is justified to believe so. This is what has come to be defined as the traditional account of knowledge as Justified true belief (JTB).

#### SAQ 4.1

From what you have studied in this study session, you can adequately define perception as the process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting, and organizing sensory data. This sense data come as a result of our interaction with the world and they involve the use of our sensory organs. Perception takes place at different levels.

The first level is detection – the level at which you can sense whether you are being stimulated or moved by some form of energy. The second level is recognition – the level at which one can identify and detect the patterns of stimulation. The third level is discrimination – the level at which you can differentiate between the different patterns of stimulation.

Perception involves the working on of the sense data to produce objects, events, people, and other aspects of the world. But the question we should ask here is what is the process of perception? The process of perception involves the respective sense organs transforming physical signal into nervous impulses and these impulses then travel to the brain.

There are physical and psychological factors that affect or influence perception. Very good examples of the physical factors are the nervous system and the brain. The nervous system includes the interplay of our sense organs and each sensory organ has its own detector with which it detects signals from the world. The detectors or receptors (because they receive information from the outside) have their different ways of transforming energy to nervous impulses. The same thing goes with the brain which has different parts, each performing a separate function, and thereby influencing perception.

Psychological factors influencing perception include emotion, motivation, and learning. The things we have learnt may prejudice our perception. For instance, if you



have indoctrinated to see anything Nigerian as good, your perception of anything Nigerian will be affected by this. In similar vein, our emotional state or the motivation that we get may also affect our perception.

You must also note that there are principles that guide our process of perception. One of such principles is the principle of closure which is the general psychological tendency to view things as complete and unified. Another is the principle of constancy which holds that we tend to view things as constant in size, shape, colour as well as other qualities regardless of the variance in the stimulation. Another principle in focus is the principle of perceptual context which holds that our perception of an object depends in part on the context.

We can now go ahead to look at the theories of perception.

The first we are looking at is Realism. This is the philosophical position that holds that objects of perception exist independently of our perception of them. Philosophers have made a distinction between direct realism and indirect realism. Direct realism is the position that that which we perceive are the things themselves while indirect realism holds that that which we perceive are just a reflection or copy of the real things.

The second theory in focus is anti-realism. There are also two variants of this theory. The first variant is idealism which holds that nothing is real but ideas. In other words, we can only be aware of mental objects. What this means in essence is that if I say a table exists, it exists because I perceive it in my mind. A proponent of this is Bishop George Berkeley who says that everything exists because it exists or is perceived by the mind of God.

The second variant is phenomenalism. This is the position that what we know of the external world is just what our senses tell us. In other words, we cannot perceive the things in themselves but appearances as presented to us by our sense organs. Two major proponent of phenomenalism are A.J Ayer and J.S. Mill.

### **SAQ 5.1**

As you have learnt in this study session, defining or stating the traditional account of knowledge requires you to remember the abbreviation, JTB. This simply means justified true belief. In other words, a knowledge claim will only qualify as knowledge if these three conditions are met. First, there must be a belief. Secondly, this belief must be true, and thirdly, there must be an explanation for that which is believed. Take for instance, Y knows P, if and only if:

- i. Y has a belief P.
- ii. P is true.
- iii. Y is justified in believing that P is true.

You can cite an example to support your analysis.

### **SAQ5.2**

We expect you to first give us a background information on what the Gettier problem is and what gave birth to it and then discuss the attempts at rehabilitating the Gettier problem.

Edmund L. Gettier in his phenomenal short essay titled, 'Is justified true belief knowledge?' challenged the traditional account of knowledge. His essay sowed that the three conditions as stated in the traditional definition of knowledge are not sufficient conditions of knowledge. He showed that it is possible for a claim to have justified true belief and yet not have knowledge. We expect you to cite an example in

this regard. For instance, supposing two men, Smith and Jones, are job applicants. Assuming Smith was informed by the employer himself that Jones is the one that will get the job and prior to the information by the employer, Smith had counted the money on Jones and had seen two crisp naira notes and based on these things, he went ahead to make this claim:

The man who will get the job has two crisp naira notes in his pocket.

Supposing this claim is true but that the man who eventually got the job between the two men is Smith who accidentally has two crisp naira notes in his pocket. Can we then go ahead to say that Smith's claim is knowledge despite it being justified true belief?

Four categories of attempts have been identified in the attempt to rehabilitate the Gettier problem. We expect you to list each of these categories of attempts and explain them.

The first we would mention is the claim that the definition of knowledge must be such that the believer's ground for believing the claim must not include any false belief.

The second category of attempts is that a knowledge claim will still be knowledge provided that there is no other truth that can defeat the justified belief. This is what is called the indefeasibility argument.

The third category is the position that knowledge is justified true belief that is arrived at using a reliable method. This is referred to as the reliability argument.

The fourth condition is the causal connection.

### SAQ 6.1

You have been taught here that there are three theories of truth and they are the Correspondence theory of truth, the Coherence theory of truth, and the Pragmatic theory of truth. We expect you to discuss each of these theories of truth and point out their weaknesses as well. You will do well by citing examples to illustrate your explanation of each of these theories. Let us quickly shortly remind you of what each of these theories is all about.

The Correspondence theory of truth holds that truth is the relation between fact and belief. According to this theory, a belief will only be true if it is what actually obtains in reality. This theory does not accommodate other forms of beliefs that deal with non-empirical fact. Also, the theory is simplistic as it only repeats the common sense idea of truth.

The Coherence theory of truth holds that truth is the relation between the belief and the system of beliefs that it belongs to. A belief is only true if it coheres with other beliefs that fall within the same system of beliefs with it. Thus, this theory holds that all beliefs belong to a system and each belief in the system must cohere with other beliefs within that same system. The problem with this theory is that it makes truth relative to the system of beliefs and not objective as one would expect of truth.

The Pragmatic theory of truth holds that a proposition is true if it is practicable and realizable. In other words, when a claim does not have practical implication, then it is not true. The implication of this is that we are left to wonder what the difference will be between accepting a claim and accepting it as true. This is because the Pragmatic theorists are making us to believe that whatever is true must be useful, desirable, etc. and this is beyond our common conception of truth.

### SAQ 7.1

We expect you to tell us what foundationalism and the infinite regress problem are and then go ahead to tell us how foundationalism has been able to solve this problem of infinite regression.

Foundationalism is the position that knowledge is attainable and acquirable as against the position of the skeptists. However, this will be possible provided this knowledge is based on a solid foundation which is self-justifying and self-sufficient.

The infinite regress problem arises from our quest to make justifications for our knowledge claims. The justification for a claim would go on and on till infinity. Take for instance, if I claim that 'Nigeria is blessed', I must be able to justify it. The justification that I gave for this claim would also have a justification, and this will go ad infinitum. It is in response to this that foundationalism holds that we have basic beliefs which do not require any further justification because they are self-evident and self-justified. Hence, instead of looking for further justification, we stop at these basic beliefs where we need not go further.

However it has been discovered that foundationalism has not adequately resolved the infinite regress problem and this explains why other theories such as coherentist theory of justification as well as contextualist theory of justification have sprung up.

### SAQ 7.2

In responding to this question, we expect that you would tell us the position of each of these variants of foundationalism and their similarity as well as differences.

The notion of classical foundationalism is traceable to Rene Descartes who holds that our basic belief rests on our psychological states which are self-evident to us and thus are infallible and indubitable. Roderick Chisholm's fallibilist foundationalism also accepts that there are basic beliefs which are based on our psychological states. However, fallibilist foundationalism holds that human nature is prone to error and so is our psychological states.

Another difference between them is that fallibilist foundationalism holds that knowledge is not universal and unchanging as classical foundationalism puts it. Rather, it changes from time to time.

### SAQ 7.3

You must understand that foundationalism can both be understood both as a theory of justification as well as as a theory of knowledge.

Foundationalism, as a theory of knowledge, holds that our knowledge claims must be based on certain basic beliefs which we come to know either through our senses (empiricism) or through reason (rationalism). Do these terms look familiar to you? Go back to your Study Session 1 and read up the sources of knowledge as you were taught in that session.

As a theory of justification, foundationalism holds that beliefs can either be basic or non-basic beliefs. The basic beliefs are self-evident and self-justified while the non-basic beliefs are justified by virtue of their inferential linkage to the basic beliefs. The justification of the belief is dependent on factors internal to the believer (internalism) or external to him (externalism).

**SAQ 8.1**

Do you still remember the Coherence theory of Truth (Check Study Session 6)? What does that point out to you? We expect that you will understand that coherentism covers it as a theory of truth as well as a theory of justification. You have done Coherentism as a theory of truth and so your concentration should be on it as a theory of justification. You would remember that we told you that coherentism connotes a system where all the elements or beliefs in it are logical connected and consistent with each other. You must note that the notion of logical consistency and explanatory relations is central to the notion of coherentism. In other words, A and B can only be said to cohere if they are both logically consistency to each other and there is an explanatory relations between them. Take for instance, it is impossible to say ‘I smashed an egg on a stone and it broke but I smashed an egg on a rock and it did not break’. You would see that there is no logical consistency between the beliefs – smashing an egg on the stone and it breaking as well as smashing an egg on a rock and it does not break.

Coherentism is a traditional rival to foundationalism. It rejects the pyramid-like nature of foundationalism as it holds that the basic beliefs themselves must rest on something. In responding to the infinite regress problem, Coherentism holds that that the infinite regress problem was wrong to assume that the justification for a proposition will have to come in the form of a proposition as well. For it, justification is a holistic process and so P is justified because it coheres with other beliefs with which it shares membership of the system with.

Given this, you can then go ahead to tell us what the Coherence theory of justification is all about. As a theory of justification, Coherentism rejects the idea of beliefs as being hierarchically arranged in such the basic beliefs are at the base and give support to the non-basic beliefs. For them, beliefs are justified by virtue of their coherence to the system of beliefs to which they belong. What this means is that a belief will always belong to a system and one would expect that there should be a logical consistency as well as clear-cut relations between that belief and other beliefs in the system. Proponents of this theory include Wilfrid Sellars, Keith Lehrer, etc.

This theory has however been criticized for various reasons which are highlighted below. You must note that you are not expected to start numbering your points as that is not what we expect you to do in philosophy. Rather, you should develop each point into a paragraph. The criticism against this theory can be discussed on various grounds. The first is the input and isolation argument. The second is the argument as regards alternative coherent system. Another argument is the one in relation to truth connection. The problem of feasibility is another ground for rejecting coherentism. There is also the argument from preface paradoxes as well as the problem arising from counter-examples.

**SAQ 9.1**

We expect you to tell us what contextualism is before going into the contributions of the individuals involved.

Contextualism in epistemology is philosophical position that holds that the justification of a belief will be dependent on the context within which it is used. Thus, attributing knowledge, in the opinion of the contextualists, vary from the context of one user to the other. The positions of contextualists differ on the central focus of contextualism.

According to David Annis, man is a social animal and this fact must be put into consideration in the issue of justification of beliefs. So for us to determine whether someone is justified in believing something, we have to consider the issue-context prevalent among the community to which the believer belongs knowing full well that each community has its own norms and social practices. In other words, for us to determine if X is justified in believing P, we must take into consideration the prevalent standards of justification of the community to which X belongs to. For instance, if I pose a question to an ordinary employee about the company which he works with, I would not have much problem with his response compared to if such faint information were to be given by the MD of the company.

Annis however noted that these standards of judgment cannot be criticized or rejected and this does not make it subjective either. The people can reject a standard of judgment if they believe that that their authority has lacked substance or basis.

For Keith DeRose, the truth value of a knowledge claim (be it an assertion or denial) vary in certain ways dependent on the context in which they are used. This variance is a function of the epistemic standards which the believer meets or fails to meet. Thus, the proposition, S knows that P may be true in one instance where the epistemic standard is low and false in another instance where the epistemic standard is high. For instance, the proposition 'I know that philosophy is about confusing people' can be said to be true if such proposition is made by Y who has a faint idea of philosophy but would be false if Y is a graduate of Philosophy. What this means is that what is of utmost importance is that the believer must be in a good enough epistemic position to that which is believed. The question then is how to determine the notion of 'good enough epistemic position', DeRose proposed the rule of sensitivity. By this rule, she is proposing a conditional theory that supposing Y knows X. If Y would believe X if X were to be wrong, then it is insensitive but if Y would not believe X if X were to be wrong, then it is sensitive.

In spite of the contributions of the duo, contextualism has its criticisms. One of such is the position that it is inconsistent. This is because contextualism holds that a knowledge claim may be true in one context and false in another thereby violating the three laws of thought - law of excluded middle which says that something cannot be true and false at the same time. Another objection is that based on warranted assertability.

### **SAQ 10.1**

This question expects you to give us a brief discussion on what naturalized epistemology is, its distinctive features, its development and what separates it from traditional epistemology.

Your definition of naturalized epistemology must take into consideration that naturalized epistemology is the scientific study of how we come to know what we know. In other words, it concerns itself with studying of the historical development, transmission and acquisition of human knowledge. Quine asks that we drop epistemology in the dustbin. In his view, epistemology only survives as "a chapter in psychology". Thus, with naturalized epistemology, Quine asks that we abandon any notions of priority of epistemological theories in comparison with actual physical sense stimulation.

Naturalized epistemology arose against the backdrop of the criticism of traditional epistemology as aiming at arriving at certainty which Quine refers to as a lost cause. Traditional epistemology seems to be concerned with questions as regards how reasoning out to go and neglecting the processes that take place when reasoning

actually begins or takes place. In reaction to this stance of traditional epistemology, Quine holds that it should be the concern of epistemology to know and understand the real processes of perception and knowledge in humans, rather than be focusing on the ideal as traditional epistemology does. Naturalized epistemology differs from traditional epistemology in many ways.

One of such is that the idea of a supernatural entity like God does not come in in naturalized epistemology. Another difference is that, unlike traditional epistemology, naturalized epistemology does not rely on a priori reflection alone in its exercise. Thirdly, unlike traditional epistemology, naturalized epistemology believes that no analysis surpasses the realm of scientific explanation and/or analysis.

### SAQ10.2

David Hume? We hope that name sounds familiar? You will remember we mention this philosopher as one of the British empiricists. David Hume rejected the Cartesian argument of creating an edifice for knowledge that makes it hierarchical. He also rejected the notion of equating knowledge with certainty as well as the idea of saying that we acquire knowledge a priori without experience. We expect you to bear what you had learnt in Study session 1 of this course. This nevertheless, we expect you to point out the things that make Hume a proponent of naturalized epistemology.

One of the things that make Hume a naturalist is his belief in the natural sciences which lays emphasis on empirical confirmation for verifying the validity of claims. Aside this, Hume holds that knowledge are a product of purely causal mechanism which is similar to the position held by the naturalists. Another thing that makes Hume a naturalist is his position as regards skepticism. For him, skepticism may not be curable as held by the sceptists.

### SAQ10.3

From what you have learnt so far in this study session, you will discover that these features bring out the focus of naturalized epistemology. The first feature is the assumption that there is an external world and so does not bother itself on proving the existence of this world as it is the case with traditional epistemology. Another feature is the focus on what causes our belief as against what justifies them. For Quine, our concern should be what causes our beliefs rather than distinguishing between justified beliefs and unjustified beliefs. A third feature is that Quine argues that physical stimulations are the data of naturalized epistemology. For Quine, the data which the subject receives are not mental states as seen in the Cartesian epistemology but they refer to the interaction between the physical environment and the sense organs.

### SAQ11.1

From what you have learnt so far in this study session, you will have discovered that the central difference between traditional epistemology and social epistemology is that social epistemology takes the social dimension of knowledge into focus. In other words, it is not concerned about the justification of the belief of the individual agent. Hence, we expect that your definition of social epistemology must cover its interest in group belief or group knowledge on the basis that it would be inadequate to study the individual agent's knowledge without making recourse to others whom he shares the society with.

There are different views as regards what should be the interest and focus of social epistemology. Some have argued for the retention of the mission of classical epistemology but taking into consideration of the social dimensions of this. This school is called the classical-oriented social epistemology. This project could be



achieved in two ways. A first way is to study the impact of social practices on the truth or otherwise of the agent's belief. A second way is to study the effect of social practices on the justification of an agent's belief. That is, when would he be justified if he takes into consideration of the opinion or judgment of others.

The second school holds a radical position that the focus of social epistemology should be totally detached from the interests of traditional epistemology. They contend that there is anything called a universal norm of rationality and criteria for truth. They argue for the place of context in rationality. In other words, since we think in our languages, our norms of rationality will be confined to the context of our culture and language. Thus, we cannot talk of inter-cultural standards where objectivity comes in.

### SAQ11.2

In answering this question, we expect you to tell us what the ideas of Rorty and Lyotard are.

Although we can glean a difference in the positions of both Richard Rorty and that of Lyotard, there is no disputing the fact that the focus of the philosophy of the duo is similar. Both of them launch an attack on the project of universalism and objectivity which is the focus of traditional epistemology.

Richard Rorty rejects the notion of the universality of truth and objectivity. According to him, it is a mere fantasy to start talking about objectivity or the universality of truth given that whatever anyone believes is considered within the confine of his community. What you call truth is a function of conformation with social practices. In other words, truth is not a function of the relations between the agent and the matter or statement of fact as the classical epistemologists will have us believe. Thus, justification is in relation to the norms of the society in which the agent finds himself. As against the correspondence theory of truth which is what the realists subscribe to, Rorty advocates a consensus theory of truth. By consensus, Rorty is saying that truth and reality do not exist independently of the mind of the agent but rather it is the consensus of the society. In other words, truth and reality are what the society has accepted as truth or reality. What Rorty is saying in essence is that we cannot transcend the society in our quest for truth. What we can talk about is not objectivity but rather inter-subjectivity. The premise of this position by Rorty is that every culture generates its own value-system which may not be the same with others and in view of that, an individual belief must be in adherence to this values. The implication of all of Rorty advocacy is the rejection of a foundational position for knowledge. In other words, the idea of knowledge and certainty and truth becomes relative and no universal foundation that all must conform to is set.

For Lyotard, there is a need for the rejection of grand narratives which tend to provide an overarching framework within which all are to fall. This provision of an overarching framework kills the heterogeneity of discourses. It kills the individuality of the discourses and subsumes the individuality under the universal framework. In the light of this, Lyotard rejects universalism and its place accepts which local action which operates within the framework of differences and particularity. In other words, the individual identity of each discourse is sustained. Lyotard rejects all forms of objectivity and universality. He suggests the notion of language game as a substitute. He asserts that knowledge production is just a language game and each society is woven round this as well. In view of this, each society makes claim to knowledge in view of its prevalent and prevailing conditions and such is still valid. This is in contrast to an objective truth of the traditional epistemologists.

**SAQ 12.1**

We expect you to note that feminist epistemology is a strand of social epistemology that studies the influences that gender has on our acquisition or production of knowledge. It looks at how our gender relation affects our production of knowledge. You will remember that in the last study session, we talk about how the society affects what we produce as knowledge. The gender relations in the society plays a role in affecting our knowledge acquisition or production. More often than not, theoretical knowledge is labeled masculine and feminist knowledge is seen as dependent. This is what our gender values has imbued us with. It is this that feminist epistemologists are out to attack.

In all societies of the world, there is a prevalent level of male chauvinism. By male chauvinism, we mean the domination of the male folks at the expense of the women. This male chauvinism has led, no doubt, to gender stereotyping in the societies of the world. With this gender stereotyping, the orientation of the people are affected as regards the social placement of both genders. The masculine gender is associated with leadership while the female gender is associated with followership. This is further entrenched given that the society is controlled by the masculine gender who thus determines what the knowledge of the society is. Feminist epistemologists argue that prevailing epistemic practices in traditional philosophy disadvantage women and disparage them as being epistemically inferior to the masculine gender. Thus, feminist epistemology uses the scientific knowledge to challenge the objectivity and universality as espoused by traditional epistemology.

Feminist epistemology aims at incorporating the feminist experiences within the epistemological framework. It also intends to explain the achievements in the feminist criticism of science as well as defend feminist scientific practices as a medium of clamouring for gender equality.

Feminist epistemology has developed along three stages which are the feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint, and feminist post-modernism. Different arguments have been put forward in the project of the feminist epistemologists.

One of the arguments of the feminists epistemologists is that the notion of foundationalism that there is a point where we draw our knowledge from can only succeed in abstracting the knower from the object of knowledge. Another argument they gave is that they criticized the notion of science as well as neutrality which it tends to promote. They argue that objectivity is male-centred and not meant to protect women. Similarly, feminist epistemologists argue that traditional epistemology central terms such as rationality, objectivity, good method, universality, etc. are conceptualized to favour men. In the light of this, they go for less universal terms. They also tackle the male chauvinism in science. This is because theories in science only took into cognizance the preference and experience of men to set the scientific norms and standards without making recourse to the women.



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