

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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KNOWLEDGE : WHOSE IS IT, WHAT IS IT, AND WHY HAS IT TO BE 'TRUE' ?

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So much has been thought and written about the subject, yet even the simplest questions do not seem to have been asked by the profoundest of thinkers who have thought about it. To think of 'Knowledge' is immediately to think of the 'senses', and yet it is not man alone who possesses the senses. 'Living beings' all around us possess them too, and if to possess 'senses' is 'to know', then certainly they also would have to be granted 'knowledge' in that sense of the term. And, senses are not just five; they may be more or less. That many animals do not possess all the senses which man has is well known, but that they may possess 'senses' which we do not have, is not so well recognised. Migratory birds are said to fly thousands of miles every year from wintery homes that have freezing temperatures to warmer places, and in case they do this they must have some type of 'sensory knowledge' which man does not have. The range even of the normal senses enormously varies amongst animals; they 'see' what we do not see, they 'hear' what we do not hear and their sense of smell far outstrips anything that man can boast of.

As for what has been called 'inner sense', almost all 'living beings' feel pleasure and pain and seek the one and avoid the other. They display 'intelligence' in this regard as they would not have survived without it and, as experiments on 'learning' demonstrate, modify their behaviour in the light of their experience.

Who shall, then, deny them 'knowledge', at least of the kind that is based on 'sense-experience' and is determined by 'success in seeking 'pleasure' and avoiding 'pain' ? But the term 'living being' is not confined to 'animals' alone and, if so, the challenge that this poses to the idea of

'knowing' has to be posed and faced even if it cannot be decisively answered.

The extension, however, creates problems for the very idea of 'knowing' as what we call 'senses' not only grow less and less, as the Jains noted, but it becomes increasingly doubtful if there is any such thing as a 'sense' at all in such border-line cases as amoral or virus or other micro organisms. Even the semblance of a 'sense' disappears in the case of plants, and if they are regarded as 'living' in some sense of the term, and if 'living' is necessarily associated with some sort of 'knowledge', then one would have to accept, however reluctantly, that there can be such a thing as 'non-sensuous' knowledge, that is, knowledge which is not based on the senses, or derived from them in any way whatsoever.

The problem can perhaps be solved by enlarging the notion of 'sense' and redefining it in such a way as to render its paradigmatic exemplification in the human race purely accidental and treat it more in functional rather than structural terms. This would be in line with the 'behavioural', 'objectively observable' approach of science but, then, it would raise the problem of distinguishing between this behaviour and the one found in that which is 'non-living', even if the term 'behaviour' may seem ill-suited in the case of the latter:

This may appear a *reductio ad absurdum* of the approach we have adopted as to talk of 'knowledge' in the case of non-living matter is a manifest absurdity but, unfortunately, the recent achievements in 'Robotion, Artificial Intelligence and Information technology seem to be proving that the 'absurdity' is no absurdity and if some thinkers still feel it to be so, it is only because of old habits of thought which one finds difficult to give up. Yet, if one accepts the 'absurdity' in its most literal sense in which alone it is truly absurd, one faces the dilemma raised by the question : how far is consciousness a necessary pre-condition for knowledge.

The relation of consciousness to knowledge seems self-evident, and all thinking about it till very recent times rests on it as, without it, it will make no sense. No one believes that if something consists of matter and matter alone, it can be said to have consciousness, as the two are supposed to be radically apart by the very definitions we have given to them. There are, of course, those who subscribe to some sort of 'pan-psychism', but even they will display in their behaviour and attitude *all* the difference that

the denial of such a position usually entails. And, as for those who believe it to be an 'emergent' property of matter under certain conditions even they would have to admit that those conditions are not fulfilled in 'machines' which are said to behaviourally display what is usually called 'knowledge'. In fact, the 'conditions' under which 'consciousness' is said to emerge, as far as we know, have not yet been specified.

On the other hand, even if one admits that 'matter' and 'consciousness' do not go together, can one accept that consciousness qua consciousness 'knows' anything without its relation to the body and the senses and the mind and the intellect, and everything else at the human level? As for other 'living beings', there has to be a 'body' there, a 'living body' which is *not* matter in the usual sense as it 'dies' and when 'dead', ceases to be that very soon.

The term 'consciousness', strangely, has no referent; nothing that we can point to. All that we have is 'external', 'indirect', 'behavioural', 'verbal', 'communicative' evidence and this is what is sought to be replicated by those who deny it altogether. The direct, 'introspective' evidence on which every one relies and which seems incontestable, does not seem to give much 'Knowledge' as questions of 'truth' and 'falsity' generally do not arise in respect of it, and perhaps cannot arise in most cases. What 'knowledge' can the so-called 'inner sense' give us and even if it does, it has to be accepted as 'self validated' by the fact that the inner sense is supposed to function only with respect to that which is purely 'inner' and hence not 'knowable' to anyone other than the one to whom it belongs. The concept or the idea of there being such a sense may itself be denied on varied grounds, the most important of which center around language which is supposed to be 'public' and hence incapable of being restricted to anything that is strictly 'private' in character. The argument, ascribed to Wittgenstein, rests on such obvious mistakes that it is surprising how it could be taken seriously by anybody. One is not born speaking a language and if it is so, that is, if one has to learn a language, then one will have to accept a pre-linguistic situation and the argument from language will not prove anything. But even if one takes the language-centric predicament as seriously as some would like us to take, even then we will have to accept that most languages do make a distinction between 'private' and 'public', and if language has to be accepted as a guide to what is 'correct' or

'incorrect', the distinctions it makes will have to be taken as pointing to something that is considered as 'real' within the linguistic community that makes them.

The radical distinction between first person and the second and third persons is central to all languages, just as is the distinction between second and third person. Strangely, the 'you' to whom 'I' talk, talks of himself or herself as 'I' and addresses me as 'you'. It is this that makes me realise that it is as much an 'I' as I think myself to be. The 'Thou' of Bubu is certainly an 'I', but not *identical* with me, or the 'I' that is 'Me' as Ramchandra Gandhi seems to have suggested in his "I am Thou". The well known advaitic move to assert absolute identity by denying all difference as *upādhi* is of little avail as all those who say or utter the word 'I' have to have *upādhis* to say or utter it.

But the word 'I' announces a radical distinction between all that can be objectified and that which eludes and transcends objectification. It is a function of self-consciousness and concretises it to oneself and others and yet it is content-less, an empty phrase that casts, through its reflexivity, an ever-lengthening shadow creating the illusion that something is there to be 'known' when there is nothing to know. Philosophy at least in one of its forms arose from this illusion and "know Thyself" was the slogan it coined for itself which the Greeks and the Westerners in their philosophical tradition did not get stuck in as much as the Indians who also said, "*ātmanam viddhi*".

Consciousness, even when self-conscious, hardly 'knows' anything, except perhaps that something 'is', or that 'nothing' is not. This may sound perplexing, but a little reflection on the phenomenon of dream or sleep, so dear to the *advaitin*, would reveal the problem. What do we 'know' in dreams and can we be really said to 'know' anything? It is not that there is 'nothing' there; we do 'recognise', 'name' and even get mentally and physically affected, but that also happens when we 'imagine' or read a novel or 'see' a play, but do we 'know' anything in these situations?

The case of 'sleeping' is even worse. So also is that of becoming unconscious, being put under anesthesia, falling in a coma, or even dozing or becoming absent-minded, or just forgetting, not 'knowing' where one is in one's own house, or a hundred other such things which happen to everyone. The *advaitins* have made too much of someone's saying that he slept well and that the 'waking experience' sublates 'dream experience'.

But one may not sleep well and the 'dreaming' may be sublated by sleep or, conversely, 'sleep' by 'dreaming' as happens every night. But where is 'knowledge' in all this? Consciousness, it seems, has little to do with knowledge and, in any case, does not seem much interested in it as whatever it is aware of, if it is aware of, it considers as 'real'. And, if everything is 'real' for it, how can the question of knowledge ever arise?

But, even 'awareness' which seems at least *prima facie* a necessary precondition for knowledge, does not seem to be a necessary condition for consciousness if its 'desire' for sleep and 'intending' to do so, is taken seriously. Nothing can be worse for consciousness than sleeplessness, and 'to sleep' is not to be aware, not even to dream as what one wants is 'dreamless' sleep or 'deep' sleep as the *advaitin* likes to call it. One, of course, wants to wake up from that sleep, though even this may not happen when one wants 'really to die', that is, to wake up no more. But, then, what we understand as consciousness would be an adventitious quality, and knowledge its accidental property that arises only under certain conditions when they happen to obtain.

The problem of consciousness is insoluble as it has both a subjective and an objective aspect and varies in intensity and quality, besides appearing both as a dispositional and an actual property. At another level, it affects and is affected by almost everything, including itself. Its close association with body, mind and intellect at the human level and its interrelationship with those in causal terms as both effect and cause in some sort of circular causality as commonly evidenced in bio-feedback phenomena renders any meaningful discussion of it practically impossible. But the real problem in respect of it is its relation to 'life', which continues in dreaming and sleeping, but seems to snap or lapse or cease when death occurs, that is, life ceases to be. Till life exists, the possibility of consciousness exists and if 'to live' is to 'know' in another sense, and to be 'self-conscious' is to 'know' in another sense, and to be 'self-conscious' is to 'know' in still another sense, then we have to distinguish and de-segregate these senses that are confusedly intermixed in our cognitive discourse about knowledge. Not only this, we have to realise that one is a precondition for the other and that the successive levels are not only levels of knowledge, but also of consciousness and reality in a sense which, if becomes aware of them in self-consciousness, would affect both consciousness and reality in significant

way.

Neither consciousness nor reality, nor knowledge remain the same as they continuously create and recreate one another. Self-consciousness when it emerges, as it man, plays havoc with it all as human history attests in plenty. As for 'meditative consciousness', it is not only not yet accepted without reservations, but its relation to others is scarcely understood at all as it is tangential to them and even negates them in an important sense by trying to abolish them altogether.

But if consciousness is such a tricky, chameleon-like, diverse, many-leveled and many-layered 'thing', how can it even be thought of as some sort of a property belonging to something. We do talk of 'we' and 'I', but that is only a manner of speaking and not much should be made of it. After all, one does use such expressions as "I have consciousness" without anyone thinking that consciousness is a property which one may have or not have and yet 'be' what one is, for if one were to do so, one would find it difficult to distinguish between that which is inconcient and oneself. The idea that one could still make the distinction in terms of the possibility of one's being conscious would not only render the possibility 'inessential' to one's being, but also render it difficult to deny that possibility to anything else.

The question of 'ownership', whether of properties or of anything else, applies not only to consciousness but to 'knowledge' as well. In fact, in the case of knowledge it appears even more problematic as knowledge is just not the sort of thing that can be 'owned'. Whatever it be, it cannot be 'private', confined to one alone or 'unshareable' by others because of its nature. If anything, it is just the opposite, not only because it presupposes, pre-existing knowledge without which it could not have come into being, but because in order to be considered as 'knowledge' even by oneself it will have to be placed before others for their judgement and, in any case, should be so presentable in principle.

One is, of course, held responsible, and holds oneself responsible, for what one claims to 'know', but responsibility does not always mean 'ownership' and in the case of knowledge, it is meant to be accepted and used by others as if it was their own. One uses knowledge that was discovered by others all the time and never feels that one does not have the moral right to do so. The association of some names with some kinds of knowledge is mostly accidental as priority disputes between persons

and civilisations attest and even when it is not so the so-called 'discovery' is meant to be a public property, that is, the property of whole mankind.

Knowledge, thus does not belong to anybody, even though one says, 'I know' and philosophers make a distinction between 'knower', 'known' and 'knowledge' or, as they say in Sanskrit, *jñātā*, *jñeya* and *jñāna*. Those who made the distinction forgot that knowledge was a collective, cumulative affair of mankind, and if it had to be regarded as 'belonging' to anybody, it had to belong to mankind as such and not to this or that 'I'. But mankind includes not only those who lived in the past, but those who will live in the future also. But once this is seen, 'knowledge' will assume a strange character and lose the mystique associated with it, and acquire the character of an ongoing human enterprise, a collective *puruṣārtha* of mankind.

But if it is so, it throws a light on the other *puruṣārthas*, the number of which is indefinitely large and not just four as is usually enumerated in the Indian tradition, for if it were so 'knowledge' could not be a *puruṣārtha* as it has not been mentioned amongst them. A *puruṣārtha*, however, is a matter of 'seeking', perennial seeking, as perennial as time itself, and hence not something that can be possessed, or meant to be possessed.

But man does not seek just one thing; nor does he know what the seeks. Had he known this, he would not have been almost always dissatisfied, or even disappointed with the success that his 'seeking' temporarily results in. But, what is the relation between his different seekings, and are they necessarily in harmony with one another? This crucial question has hardly been raised, let alone attended to. As for the role of the seeking for 'knowledge', the fact that it has not been given independent status as a *puruṣārtha*, or a 'seeking' may be taken as a sufficient evidence for its being seen as only subsidiary or instrumental for the realisation of something else which alone is supposed to have intrinsic value for man.

Yet, 'truth' has always been held to be one of the highest values, if not the only one, and 'truth' is supposed to be a characteristic of knowledge, and if so, how could 'knowledge' not be an ultimate value, a *parama puruṣārtha* for man. But, are knowledge and truth so indissolubly related that one cannot be conceived without the other. First, even on the usual understanding of these terms, nondeclarative statements are not supposed to be true or false though, as they are 'understood', they must be said to convey some knowledge. On the other hand, declarative statements when

they happen to be 'truly' universal, that is, consisting of an indefinitely extensible conjunction of singular statements, cannot be 'true' by definition as even if one of the conjunct is false, the whole conjunct shall be false. This is the well-known problem of Induction presented in a logical garb, but then one sees the logical necessity behind it. The converse problem with a particular statement or what these days is called an 'existentially quantified statement' is that it cannot be proved false, again by definition, as it is an indefinitely extensible disjunction of singular statements. One may, of course, save the situation by requiring declarative statements to be either true or false, but not necessarily both. Yet, whatever the option, the fact remains that it is *only* a singular statement which is true or false, and no one considers a singular statement as an example of knowledge.

But statements need not have a 'subject' term at all and hence the question of their being 'singular' or 'non-singular', that is, particular or universal, need not arise. Imperative or injunctive statements are an example of this and moral and legal contexts, which happen to be the most important for understanding the human situation, are determined and defined by them. 'Truth', in the usual sense, is inapplicable to them and if they are considered as 'subjects' for study and discussion and regarded as 'knowledge' in some sense of the term, that knowledge cannot be considered as 'true' or 'false'.

The problem with the predicates 'true and false' is that one just does not know what they exactly mean, and whether they can even be meaningfully applied to all domains and discourses without exception. A little change in the nature or type of 'object' to be 'known' radically affects not only what is to be meant by 'truth' in respect of it, but also of the method to be used to ascertain it. The dispute about 'knowledge' in the social sciences or the humanities is well known, as also the question whether 'knowledge' in these fields is strictly to be accorded the status of 'knowledge' as the process of establishing a 'knowledge claim' is generally not clear, or even agreed upon. There are, as everybody knows, 'schools' or *sampradāyas*, each with its own 'orthodoxy' and methodology, self-enclosed in its own certitude, oblivious to the criticisms offered by others. Psychology is the clearest example of this and the rival journals published by them, an evidence of this. The so-called 'schism in Physics' and the Intuitionist revolt in Mathematics may be cited by some as an evidence

that even these hard-core knowledgefields are not immune from the problem. But if this is accepted then the problem will be seen to lie deeper still, and not just be confined to certain kinds of knowledge only.

The problem relates to the notion of 'knowledge' itself. Does it form a 'unified whole' covering everything that is known, or consists of disparate 'atomic sentences' each 'mirroring' a 'fact' or displaying or showing it, as Wittgenstein is supposed to have at one time held. There can be 'in-between' positions, loosely organised 'unities' relating to certain fields only, along with the hope that some day it will all be tied up so neatly as not to be disturbed ever again. But this will be a utopian absurdity as it can only be achieved by a 'suicide' of the knowledge-enterprise itself even while humanity is living' and has not become extinct.

Knowledge, it is forgotten has an 'openended' character and subject to continuous revision, modification, extension, emendation and, what is more, itself 'requiring' to be known or understood, an 'understanding' that is always subject to dispute and alternative interpretation.

Knowledge thus cannot be true in the sense in which 'truth' is usually understood, nor can it be 'owned' by anyone as the 'claim' to know is bound to be spurious, if not a deliberate deception, an immoral act of a different order as it deceives regarding the source of truth itself. But all this is bound to be, unless we become clear about what 'knowledge' is, and whether it is the sort of 'thing' about which philosophers, whether in the east or in the west, have disputed and discussed up till now. The discussion has to take a new turn as the discussion up till now rests on the assumption that reality is there, finished and completed, to be known, and that human action has nothing to do with it. But as action is real and the ideas of the good and the beautiful tell us it is so, the idea of knowledge has also to be different, and shall be different unless man wants to deny his own reality which perhaps he is 'free' to do. But, then, the idea of 'knowledge' would have to accommodate in it this idea of 'freedom' also. And, if he does, what shall happen to the truth which he thought he was seeking through knowledge. Perhaps, he was seeking something else and only deluding himself by thinking that he was seeking 'truth'.