

Programme: Master in Sociology
Postgraduate Department of Sociology,
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Semester II

Course: CC-5 (Research Methods in Sociology)
Unit-I (Part A) Schools of Epistemology - 1

Introduction

Epistemology is the study of investigation of knowledge itself. In other words, it is a branch of philosophy that tries to understand the nature, source and limits of knowledge. But it is not about what we know rather how we know what we know? It talks about how people come to have knowledge about the external world. It makes us aware about the power of the human mind and the limits of human mind. It challenges the way we think and helps us to find truth which frees us from falsehood. In simple terms epistemology refers to what constitute the valid knowledge and means of acquiring knowledge.

Therefore, the relationship between the epistemological foundation of research and the methods employed in conducting research is critical in order for research to be truly meaningful. Thus, the connection between epistemology and method clearly explained, indeed the entire notion of philosophical facets of knowledge. The different faculties of knowing the social world are – empiricism, positivism, realism, idealism, interpretivism, and postmodernism. In this section we will discuss about empiricism.

Empiricism

Empiricism came as a reaction to rationalist thought. It views knowledge as a sensory perception. This theory holds that origin of all knowledge is sense experience. There are events that led to surface this faculty of epistemology. These were the events that were transforming the British society influenced the way it took roots in the way Anglo-Saxons perceived social reality. The first of these events was the English civil war in which monarchy and feudalism were challenged. The second was the increasing demand for individual rights and equally among all human beings. The third was unprecedented growth of commerce and science that was fuelled by inventions and discoveries such as Boyle's experiments to understand the basic of gases, Leeuwenhoek's use of the microscope to discover the world of bacteria, and William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood. The laws of motion established by Newton influenced the way the empiricist developed the arguments, which went beyond Descartes' rationalism. For instance, theorist like John Locke, who combined force of experience with reflection. David Hume's scepticism and questioning on the other hand paved the way for establishing the empiricist tradition in social inquiry. Human concluded what began with Locke, in laying the foundations for many methodological questions that came up in the philosophy of the sciences.

The central principle of empiricism is that truth comes only from direct experience. Words can only be understood if they are connected by their recipient to actual experiences. The word 'empirical' comes from the Greek word *emperia*, meaning 'experience', and its history goes back to Plato and the Sophists. British empiricism refers to the eighteenth century philosophical movement in Great Britain, which maintained that all knowledge comes from experience. In contrasts to empiricists, the rationalists maintained that knowledge comes from foundational concepts known intuitively through reason, such as innate ideas. Other concepts are deductively drawn from these.

British empiricists staunchly rejected the theory of innate ideas and argued that knowledge is based on both sense experience and internal mental experiences, such as emotions and self-reflection. Let us see the views of few British empiricists such as John Locke and David Hume.

John Locke: from sensation to reflection

Locke, one of the most respected British Philosophers was an Oxford academician and researcher of medicine. He served as a governmental official in-charge of collecting information about trade and colonies. He was an economic writer, political activist, and a revolutionary. Much of Locke's work is characterised by opposition to authoritarianism, both at the level of the individual person and at the level of institutions such as government and the church. He believed that there were no divine rights for monarchs to rule, and that human beings are free and in this condition all human beings are equal.

Locke was concerned with materials out of which our knowledge is made. He wanted to examine the character and limitations of human knowledge. In his book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke states his central ideas. For Locke, the mind of a child is like a blank sheet of paper and all ideas come from actual experience. The mind has no innate ideas, but it has innate faculties; it perceives, remembers, and combines the ideas that come to it. The mind desires, deliberates, and wills; and these mental activities are themselves the source of a new class of ideas. Experience is therefore twofold. On the one hand, there are ideas of sensations of seeing, hearing, touching, etc., and on the other there are ideas of reflection, which are thinking, believing, etc. The first ideas are simple where the mind is passive and the second ones of reflection are more complex and active. Such ideas reflect our awareness of our own mental experiences (introspection).

As for the relation between the idea and the object one experiences, Locke distinguishes. He argues that objects have qualities, which produce an idea in the mind. These are primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are qualities which are produced by the senses such as smell, colour, taste and sound. The secondary qualities are those which refer to bulk, hardness, volume, etc.

According to Locke, the mechanical operations of nature remain hidden to us. Careful observation and experimentation may support a reliable set of generalisations about the appearances of the kinds of things we commonly encounter, but we cannot even conceive of their true natures. What we know essentially, according to Locke, is the nominal essence of an idea or thing. Thus, common names for substances are general terms by means of which we classify as we observe them to be. We can agree upon the meaning of the things themselves. Locke held that the extent of our knowledge is quite limited; the most we can hope for is probable knowledge.

He extends this argument to the general nature of knowledge and comes up with a deceptively simple notion of knowledge as perception of agreement or disagreement of ideas. The result of all this is that our knowledge is limited. As per Locke's definition, we can achieve genuine knowledge only when we have clear ideas and can trace the connection between them enough to perceive their agreement or disagreement. That doesn't happen very often, especially where substances are at issue. Locke's efforts have therefore led to the sobering conclusion that certainly is rarely within our reach; and therefore we must often be content with probable knowledge or mere opinion. Locke ultimately recommends that we adopt significantly reduced epistemological expectations.

Hume takes another step and reduces one's expectations of certainty of knowledge by being skeptic to begin with.

John Locke influenced the way his contemporaries viewed the process of human understanding. Many of them disagreed with his ideas. His main critique came from George Berkeley, who wrote

two books (*Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710) and (*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, 1734), in his reply to the views of John Locke. Quite contrary to Locke's theories that the fundamental essence of the world was matter, and mind was only a passive instrument, Berkeley placed mind first and asserted that things exist only when they are perceived by a mind.

John Locke also had supporters, one of whom was David Hume. Hume applied Locke's ideas in a logical manner and argued that all thought is built up from simple and separate impressions.

David Hume: belief as a habit

David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, contributed his works in English. His major philosophical works, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, *the Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), as well as posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), remain widely and deeply influential, despite their being denounced by many of his contemporaries as works of scepticism and atheism.

Hume argued that as human beings do in fact live and function in the physical world, we should try to observe how they do so. According to him, the proper goal of philosophy is simply to explain why we believe what we do.

Hume's analysis of human belief begins with a careful distinction among our mental contents of impressions, which are the direct, vivid, and forceful products of immediate experience. Ideas are mere copies of these original impressions. For example, the color of the tree at which I am now looking is an impression, while my memory of the color of my mother's hair is merely an idea. Since each idea must be derived from an antecedent impression, Hume supposed, it always makes sense to inquire into the origins of the idea by asking from which impression it is derived.

The apparent connection of one idea to another is invariably the result of an association that we manufacture ourselves. We use our mental operations to link ideas to each other in one of three ways: resemblance, contiguity, or cause and effect. Experience provides us with both the ideas themselves and our awareness of their associations. All human beliefs result from repeated applications of these simple associations.

Such beliefs can reach beyond the content of present sense-impressions and memory, by appealing to presumed connections of cause and effect. But since each idea is distinct and separable from every other, there is no self-evident relation. These connections can only be derived from our experience of similar cases. Hume argues that causal reasoning can never be justified rationally. In order to learn, we must suppose that our past experiences bear some relevance to present and future cases. Although we do indeed believe that the future will be like the past, the truth of that belief is not self-evident. In fact, it is always possible for nature to change, so inferences from past to future are never rationally certain. Thus, in Hume's view, all beliefs as a matter of fact are fundamentally non-rational. For example, we believe that there will always be day and night. Clearly, this is a matter of fact; it rests on our conviction that day and nights are caused by the rotation of the earth. But our belief in that causal relation is based on past observations, and our confidence that it will always be like this cannot be justified by reference to the past. So we have no rational basis for believing that there will always be day and night. Yet we do believe it.

Skepticism quite properly forbids us to separate beyond the content of our present experience and memory, yet we find it entirely natural to believe much more than that. Hume held that these unjustifiable beliefs can be explained by reference to custom or habit. That is how we learn from experience. When I observe the constant conjunction of events in my experience, I grow

accustomed to associating them from each other. Although many past cases of days and nights do not guarantee the future of nature, my experience of them does get me used to the idea and produces in me an expectation that there will be day and night. I cannot prove that it will, but I feel that it must.

Remember that the association of ideas is a powerful natural process in which separate ideas come to be joined together in mind. Of course they can be associated with each other by rational means, as they are in the relations of ideas that constitute mathematical knowledge. But even where this is possible, Hume argued, reason is a slow and inefficient guide, while the habits acquired by much repetition can produce a powerful conviction that is independent of reason.

Our beliefs in matters of fact arise from sentiment rather than from reason. For Hume, imagination and belief differ only in degree of conviction with which their objects are anticipated. Although this positive habit is the guide of life and foundation of all natural sciences.

The primitive human belief, Hume noted, is that we actually see (and hear, etc.) the physical objects themselves. But modern philosophy and science have persuaded us that this is not literally true. According to the representationalist philosophy, we have no direct experience of the presumed cause! If we know objects only by means of ideas, then we cannot use those ideas to establish a causal connection between the things and the objects they are supposed to represent.

In fact, Hume supposed that our belief in the reality of an external world is entirely non-rational. It cannot be supposed either as a relation of ideas or even as a matter of fact. Although it is utterly unjustifiable, however, belief in the external world is natural and unavoidable. We are in the habit of supposing that our ideas have external references, even though we can have no real evidence for doing so.

Hume believed himself to be carrying out the empiricist program with rigorous consistency. Locke honestly proposed the possibility of deriving knowledge from experience, but did not carry it far enough and Berkeley noticed further implications. Next, Hume has shown that empiricism inevitably leads to an utter and total skepticism.

According to Hume, knowledge of pure mathematics is secure because it rests only on the relations of ideas, without presuming anything about the world. Experimental observations, which were conducted without any assumption of the existence of material objects, permit us to use our experience in forming useful habits. Any other epistemological effort, especially if it involves the pretense of achieving useful abstract knowledge, is meaningless and unreliable.

The most reasonable position, Hume held, is a 'mitigated' skepticism that humbly accepts the limitations of human knowledge while pursuing the legitimate aims of mathematics and the sciences. In our non-philosophical moments, of course, we will be thrown back upon the natural beliefs of everyday life, no matter how lacking in rational.

Hume thought that a human being is a bundle of different perceptions and in that sense has no fixed identity. He criticised the idea that everything has a cause. In fact, he doubted everything that we assume on the basis of our common sense and also on the basis of scientific knowledge. Philosophers have found it hard to answer his penetrating doubts. Hume influenced philosophical debates about principles of knowledge.