

Unit 5

Issues of Epistemology

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 5, you will be able to carry out the following tasks.

- ❖ Gain familiarity with the issues of epistemology or theory of knowledge
- ❖ Link the different currents in philosophy, namely, rationalism, empiricism, idealism and phenomenology with understanding the social reality around us

5.1 Introduction

Epistemology[®] is a branch of philosophy that tries to understand the nature, source and limits of knowledge. You may ask, why are we talking about a branch of philosophy in a sociology course? While reading Unit 5, you would find that the philosophical issues discussed here form the foundations of explanations in theories about the social world. Units 6 and 7 clearly show the influence of philosophical ideas on the writings of sociologists. In order to better understand the contents of these units, it is a good idea to gain familiarity with the issues of epistemology.

Human beings have a tendency to want to explain and understand the world around them, leading to a variety of explanations. It is very common these days for a large section of humanity to look for explanations that are scientific. But at one time such explanations brought the wrath of the authorities, usually religious authority. As science made increasing strides revealing in turn the secrets of nature over which humankind tried to rule, the methodologies employed by the natural and physical sciences came to rule as to what should be the best methods of acquiring knowledge. Behind this quest for seeking knowledge were many issues that were grappled by not only scientists and knowledge seekers, but also people who ask philosophical questions.

As the Greek philosopher Aristotle rightly said, all philosophy originates from the basic sense of wonder human beings experience and that this

sense of wonder that leads to different explanations or theories. It is therefore not surprising that on the question of knowledge there are several contesting viewpoints. The question of what is true or adequate knowledge in a way translates into an issue of scientific methodology. In Unit 5 we will look at some broad issues concerning our understanding of the social reality around us, with reference to particular philosophers in the context of different schools of thought.

After introducing some major concerns of epistemology in Section 5.2, we will discuss the theories of rationalism, empiricism and idealism in Sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 respectively. These theories reflect the positivist outlook to understand the social phenomena. Not everyone agreed with the assumptions discussed in the three schools of thought namely rationalism, empiricism and idealism. Many scholars looked for meaning in observations they made. They focused on phenomenology which is a school of thought taking us in new directions to understand the social reality. The new developments have been discussed in Section 5.6.

5.2 Some Major Concerns of Epistemology

We are going to talk about some of the central concerns of epistemology, which deal with issues such as what is the source of knowledge, what is knowledge, how do we know which is truth and how is it different from justification. In other words, epistemology is mainly concerned with the nature, source, scope and limits of knowledge. The perspective adopted in different schools of thought is tied up with an overall metaphysical slant of that particular school.

You may ask what is metaphysics. Metaphysics refers to the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamental nature of all reality, whether visible or invisible. It seeks a description so basic, so essentially simple and inclusive that it applies to everything, whether divine or human or anything. It attempts to tell what anything must be like. So a metaphysician is trying to discover what underlies everything. Though in sociology metaphysical questions do not concern us, while discussing epistemology or issues related with knowledge, it is good to keep in mind that many philosophical ideas about knowledge have a metaphysical edge to them. For example, you will find that Kant's notion of 'the existence of one's consciousness proves the existence of objects outside one' has a metaphysical slant to it (see Section 5 on Idealism).

When we look at the history of epistemology, we can discern a clear trend, in spite of the confusion of many seemingly contradictory positions. The trend indicates that theories of knowledge stress its absolute, permanent character. For some philosophers the things we perceive are more than sense perceptions; they are an interactive outcome of the mind or soul.

Following the Renaissance (revival of art and literature in Europe, under

the influence of classical models in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), two main epistemological positions or theories of knowledge dominated philosophical inquiry into the theory of knowledge, namely, empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism views knowledge as the product of sensory perception. This theory holds that the origin of all knowledge is sense experience. The term also refers to the method of observation and experiment used in the natural sciences.

Often, rationalism is contrasted with empiricism. Rationalism is a theory which holds that the mind may apprehend some truths directly, without requiring the medium of the senses. Let us first discuss the theory of rationalism.

5.3 Rationalism

Greek philosophers, mainly Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundations of logical thinking. The principal tenet of rationalism or logical thinking is that truth can be best discovered through reason and rational thought. Rationalists assume that the world is deterministic, and that cause and effect hold for all events. They also assume that these can be understood through sufficient understanding and thought. *A priori* (from cause to effect) or rational insight is a source of much knowledge. Sense experience, on the other hand, is seen as being too confusing and tentative.

Logic and mathematics are classic rational disciplines, as is philosophy. Rational argument is particularly attractive as it implies a superior intellect, and we all use it regularly, although the truth of our assertions is often open to question.

Prominent rationalists include Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz (see Unit 1). We will be discussing the ideas of Descartes, who was the most prominent of them all.

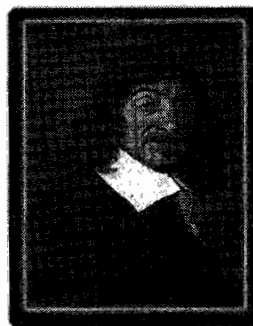
Descartes: I think, therefore I am

Descartes is regarded as the first "modern" thinker who has provided a philosophical framework for the natural sciences. Descartes attempts to arrive at a fundamental set of principles that one can know as true without any doubt. To achieve this, he employs a method called methodological skepticism. He doubts any idea that can be doubted. He gives the example of dreaming. In a dream, one's senses perceive things that seem real but do not actually exist. He argues that in a similar manner one cannot rely on the data of the senses as necessarily true. Or, he says, perhaps an "evil genius" exists who is a supremely powerful and cunning being and sets out to try to deceive Descartes from knowing the true nature of reality. Given these possibilities, Descartes asks, what can one know for certain?

Before coming to Descartes' answer to the question, let us know a little more about him (see Box 5.1).

Box 5.1 René Descartes (1596-1650)

Descartes (also see B1.4) was born in a village in France in the year 1596. He studied in a Jesuit school a wide range of subjects and excelled in mathematics. Descartes made a number of important contributions to mathematics and physics. Most enduring of his contributions was the foundation (with Galileo Galilei) of what is now known as analytic geometry. In 1649 Descartes moved to Stockholm at the request of Queen Christina of Sweden, who employed him as a philosophy tutor. Christina scheduled the lectures at 5 A.M. The early hours and harsh climate took their toll on Descartes' already weak health. He died shortly after in 1650. During his life, Descartes' fame rose to such an extent that many Catholics believed he would be a candidate for sainthood. As his body was transported from Sweden back to France, anxious relic collectors along the path removed pieces of his body. By the time his body reached France, it was considerably reduced in size. Descartes' philosophy developed in the context of Renaissance and early modern philosophy. Like the humanists, he rejected religious authority in the quest for scientific and philosophical knowledge.



René Descartes
(1596-1650)

Mathematicians consider Descartes of the utmost importance for his discovery of analytic geometry. Up to Descartes' time, geometry dealing with lines and shapes, and algebra with numbers, appeared as completely different subsets of mathematics. Descartes showed how to translate (almost) all problems in geometry into problems in algebra, by regarding them as questions asking for the length of a line segment, and using a coordinate system to describe the problem.

Descartes' theory provided the basis for the calculus of Newton and Leibniz, and in this manner for much of modern mathematics. This appears even more astounding when one keeps in mind that the work was just meant as an example to *Discours de la Méthode*.

Descartes methodology of pure reason and separation of mind and body was a problem which continued to haunt methodologies of the social sciences. In fact, Kant questioned this basic dualism in his book, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Though Kant attempted to remove the dualism he could not fully escape it. We will discuss this issue in Section 5 on Idealism. Here, we proceed with another aspect of Descartes' contributions. It deals with his quest for ways of obtaining scientific and philosophical knowledge.

To come back to the question 'What can one know for certain?', let us now look at what Descartes has to say. Initially, Descartes arrives at only a single principle; that is, if I am being deceived, then surely "I" must exist. Most famously, this is known as *Cogito, ergo sum*, ("I think, therefore I am"). In this manner, Descartes concludes that he can be certain that he exists. But in what form? You perceive your body through

the use of the senses; however, in Descartes logic, these have previously proven unreliable. So Descartes proposes that at this point, he would only say that he is a thinking thing. Thinking is his essence as it is the only thing about him that cannot be doubted.

To further demonstrate the limitations of the senses, Descartes proceeds with what is known as the Wax Argument. He considers a piece of wax and his senses inform him that it has certain characteristics, such as shape, texture, size, color, smell, and so forth. However, when he brings the wax towards a flame, these characteristics change completely. However, it seems that it is still the same thing; it is still a piece of wax, even though the data of the senses inform him that all of its characteristics are now different. Therefore, in order properly to grasp the nature of the wax, he cannot use the senses and he must use his mind. Descartes concludes, "Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind."

In this manner Descartes proceeds to construct a system of knowledge, discarding perception as unreliable and instead admitting only deduction as a method. Halfway through the *Method* (published in 1637, entitled in French as *Discours de la Méthode*) he also claims to prove the existence of a benevolent God, who, being benevolent, has provided him with a working mind and sensory system, and who cannot desire to deceive him, and thus, finally, he establishes the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the world based on deduction and perception. So it would appear that for Descartes the ultimate certainty emanates from God. This proposition of Descartes did not go too well with the empiricists in England. They were against the pure metaphysical facts. They brought into focus the body and experience as being the source of knowledge. Let us discuss about these ideas in detail in Section 5.4 on empiricism.

5.4 Empiricism

Empiricism surfaced as a reaction to rationalist arguments and 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 equality 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 basics 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 (who used Descartes' theory in his calculus) influenced the way the empiricists developed the arguments, which went beyond Descartes' rationalism. You may say that in a way, such empiricists as John Locke combined the forces of experience and reflection. David Hume's skepticism[®] and questioning on the other hand paved the way

for establishing the empiricist tradition in social inquiry. Hume concluded what began with Locke, in laying the foundations for many methodological questions that came up in the philosophy of the sciences. This is why we will discuss their ideas in detail in this section. Before proceeding to the details, let us have a few words to introduce empiricism.

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 *empeiria*, meaning 'experience', and its history goes back to Plato and the Sophists (which has the same root as 'sophisticated'). British empiricism refers to the eighteenth century philosophical movement in Great Britain, which maintained that all knowledge comes from experience. As mentioned before, in contrast to the empiricists, the rationalists maintained that knowledge comes from foundational concepts known intuitively through reason, such as innate ideas. Other concepts are then 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 what they have to say by examining some of the fundamental ideas of John Locke and David Hume as the foremost representatives of British empiricism.

John Locke: from sensation to reflection

Locke (for a biographical note on him see Box 5.2) 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 stated his central ideas.

Box 5.2 John Locke (1632-1704)

John Locke was one of the most respected British philosophers, Oxford academic and researcher of medicine. He served as a physician to Lord Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftsbury and supervised an operation to remove a cyst from Lord Ashley's liver. The operation was successful. He served as a government official in-charge of collecting information about trade and colonies. He was an economic writer, political activist, and a revolutionary, whose cause ultimately triumphed in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Much of Locke's work is characterized by opposition to authoritarianism. This opposition is both at the level of the individual person and at the level of institutions such as the 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.



John Locke
(1632-1704)

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 makes a further distinction. He argues that objects have qualities, which produce an idea in the mind.

Locke said there were primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are qualities which are produced by the senses such as smell, color, 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 such terms even though we remain ignorant of the real essences 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 the 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 certainty 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 (1685-1753), who wrote two books (*Treatises 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, George Berkeley placed mind first and asserted that things exist only when they are perceived by a mind.

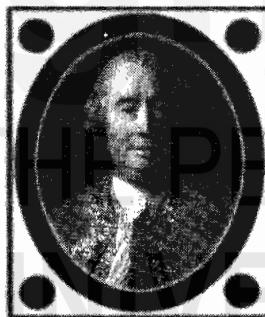
As pointed out earlier, John Locke had his supporters too. One of them was the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who applied Locke's ideas in a logical manner and argued that all thought is built up from simple and separate impressions. Let us examine his ideas a little further.

David Hume: belief as a habit

David Hume (for a note on his contributions see Box 5.3) 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 Hume, the proper goal of philosophy is simply to explain why we believe what we do.

Box 5.3 David Hume (1711-1776)

David Hume is generally regarded as the most important philosopher ever to write in English. Hume's major philosophical works, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), the *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), as well as the posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), remain widely and deeply influential, despite their being denounced by many of his contemporaries as works of skepticism and atheism. While Hume's influence is evident in the moral philosophy and economic writings of his close friend Adam Smith, he also awakened Immanuel Kant from his "dogmatic slumbers" and "caused the scales to fall" from Jeremy Bentham's eyes. Charles Darwin counted Hume as a central influence.



David Hume
(1711-1776)

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 impressions 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. (You can give such examples as this

animal looks like that animal; this book is on that table; moving this switch turns off the light, etc.) 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.

You may consider Hume's favorite example about our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. Clearly, this is a matter of fact; it rests on our conviction that each sunrise is an effect 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 continue tomorrow cannot be justified by reference to the past. So we have no rational basis for believing that the sun will rise tomorrow. Yet we do believe it.

Skepticism quite properly forbids us to speculate 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 with each other. Although many past cases of sunrise 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 the sun will rise again tomorrow. 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 the 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 the degree of conviction with which their objects are anticipated. Although this positive answer may seem disappointing, Hume maintained that custom or habit is the guide of life and the 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 supported 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 referents, even though we can have no real evidence for doing so.

Where does this leave us? 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 Berkley 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 (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.

As mentioned earlier, Hume has been described as awakening Kant from his dogmatic slumber; it is partly as a reaction to Hume that Kant attempted a theory of knowledge. He wanted to rise above the skepticism of Hume to look for certainties, yet he was not in favor of the pure rationalism of Descartes. Immanuel Kant took rationality of the human mind to a transcendental level and this attempt put him in the category of idealists.

In the next section we will carry forward our discussion of theories of

knowledge to cover the idealist approach to understanding the social reality around us. Before moving on to the next section, it is a good idea to complete Reflection and Action 5.1 exercise for absorbing what John Locke and David Hume have said about the ways of acquiring knowledge.

Reflection and Action 5.1

According to Locke our ideas about things come out of our experience of sensations and reflections. And Hume takes it further by concluding that a lot of what we think of as certainties are only habits.

What are you expected to do?

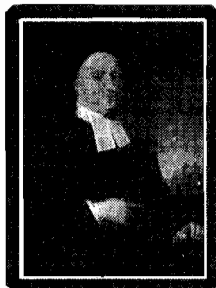
In the light of the above statements find out from at least five persons, including those who haven't been schooled in scientific explanations, as to how they will explain the movement of the sun and how they perceive that the earth is round. Write a short note of about five hundred words on their explanations and share it with the fellow students and the academic counselor at your Study Center.

5.5 Idealism

In philosophy, idealism refers to a system of thought in which the object of external perception is held to consist of ideas. Idealism holds that the mind plays a key role in the constitution of the world as it is experienced. In the history of thought you can discern different forms and applications of idealism. Its most radical form has been rejected because it is equivalent to solipsism. Solipsism[®] is the view that all reality is nothing but the activities of one's own mind and that in reality nothing exists but one's own self. Idealists generally recognise the existence of the external or natural world and do not claim that it can be reduced to the mere process of thinking. They believe that the mind is active and capable of producing and sustaining modes of being that would not have existed otherwise, such as law, religion, art and mathematics (See Box 5.4 for the ideas of George Berkeley.)

Box 5.4 Idealism and George Berkeley

The eighteenth century Irish philosopher George Berkeley is closely identified with the Idealist philosophy. He believed that all aspects of everything of which we are conscious are actually reducible to the ideas present in the mind. For example, the idea of a chair or a cow already exists in our minds; therefore, we recognise the chair or the cow when we find it. Thus the observer does not conjure the external objects (chair or cow) into existence. In fact, Berkeley held that the true ideas of the external objects are caused directly by God.



George Berkeley
(1685-1753)

or general ideas have objective existence and matter as an object of perception has real existence. In this sense, idealism is a theory that posits the primacy of spirit, mind, or language over matter. It includes claiming that thought has a crucial role in making the world the way it is. In other words, thought and the world are made for one another, or, they make one another.

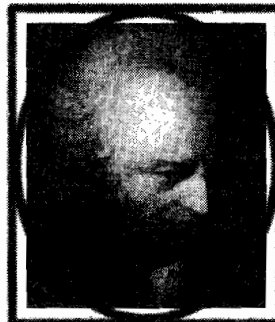
The eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant further refined idealism through his critical inquiry into the limits of possible knowledge. Kant held that the mind forces the world we perceive to take the shape of space-and-time. Hegel (1770-1831) thought that history must be rational in something significantly like the way science is. You can say that "idealism" denotes the belief that abstract or mental entities have some sort of reality "independent" of the world. Plato thought that all properties and objects we could think of must have some such independent existence. Confusingly, this kind of idealism was once termed "realism".

Immanuel Kant: *a priori* categories

As pointed out earlier, Kant's (for a biographical note on him see Box 5.5) aim was to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism. The rationalist had tried to show that we can understand the world by careful use of reason; this guarantees the undoubtability of our knowledge but left serious questions about its practical content. The empiricist, on the other hand, had argued that all of our knowledge must be firmly grounded in experience; practical content was thus secured, but it turned out that we could be certain of very little. Both approaches had failed, Kant argued, because both were premised on the same mistaken assumption. To correct this he wrote his book, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In this book Kant explained his ideas about the foundations of our knowledge of the physical world. He had great faith in moral freedom, in human beings' ability to choose what is right.

Box 5.5 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant was born in Konigsburg, Germany. He rarely ever left the small town that he lived in. He grew in the background of pious religious upbringing. Though he did not attend Church in his later years he kept his German Puritanical upbringing intact. Yet, he could not isolate himself from the skeptical current of that time. The men whom he later aimed to refute, and most of all Hume, influenced Kant. One biographer, Durant (1961: 261-262), says that Kant's life "passed like the most regular of regular verbs, rising, coffee-drinking, writing, lecturing, dining, walking". During these quiet years he wrote on many things, physical as well as metaphysical. He wrote about planets, earth, and volcanoes and on anthropology and even on pedagogy.



**Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)**

In his book, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is not attacking pure reason as much as he is highlighting its limitations. He in fact wants to exalt pure reason to transcendental level without the corrupting elements of the senses. He is not totally against the role that the senses play nor is he disavowing reason. What he does is to combine both empiricist and rationalist elements. How does he achieve this? He makes distinctions between where our knowledge originates and what kind of knowledge it is. Understanding these distinctions (see Box 5.6) is important in order to follow Kant's explanations.

Box 5.6 Analytic and Synthetic Propositions and A Priori and Posteriori Knowledge

In an analytical proposition, the predicate is contained in the subject. For example, the cricket balls are round.

In a synthetic proposition, the subject and predicate are independent of each other.

To explain further, Kant maintained that a priori knowledge comes purely from reasoning independent of experience. For example, $2+2=4$ is an example of a priori knowledge. A posteriori knowledge is based on sensory experience. For example, the statement, 'The bird is sitting on the tree.' is based on sensory experience.

Kant went on to explain exactly how the thought process worked. According to him we have some intuitive categories such as space and time, which are absolute and independent of and preceding sense impressions. On the question of Berkeley's problem of whether we will ever know the reality or the essence of objects, Kant has no problem with the existence of objects. As Osborne (1991: 103) expresses Kant's position, "The mere existence of my own consciousness proves the existence of objects outside of me". But Kant sets limits to knowledge and distinguishes between phenomena and noumena[®] (see Box 5.7).

Box 5.7 Phenomena and Noumena

According to Kant, it is vital always to distinguish between the distinct realms of phenomena and noumena. All of our synthetic *a priori* judgments apply only to the realm of phenomena. While phenomena are the appearances, which constitute our experience; noumena are the things themselves, which constitute reality, or what he calls *ding-and-sich* (the thing in itself). Since the *thing in itself* would by definition be entirely independent of our experience of it, we are utterly ignorant of the noumenal realm.

In Kant's view, the most fundamental laws of nature, like the truths of mathematics, are knowable precisely because they make no effort to describe the world as it really is but rather prescribe the structure of the world as we experience it. By applying the pure forms of sensible intuition and the pure concepts of the understanding, we achieve a systematic

view of the phenomenal realm but learn nothing of the noumenal realm. Mathematics and the sciences are certainly true of the phenomena; only metaphysics claims to instruct us about the noumena.

Let us at this point complete Reflection and Action 5.2 for fully grasping Kant's idea of noumena.

Reflection and Action 5.2

The noumena according to Kant are beyond our realm of knowledge. In the light of this statement answer the following questions.

Questions

- ❖ Do you think religion can be considered a noumena, as it is beyond the scope of explanation?
- ❖ Do you feel that the scientific explanations are inadequate to explain religious phenomena?
- ❖ Is there a contradiction between scientific explanation and matters of faith?
- ❖ How do you explain the position of a scientist, who believes in supernatural events like religious miracles?

So far we have discussed the ideas which are subsumed within the positivist outlook for understanding social reality. As you have already gathered in the units of Block 1 of the book, not everyone agreed with the assumptions discussed above. Many philosophers searched for meaning in observations they made. They focused on the processes by which we establish meanings in phenomena. For them important issue concerns the way we come to know about what is happening in the world outside ourselves. Phenomenology[®] is a school of thought, which has influenced profoundly the development of new approaches of making sense of social reality. Let us discuss in the next section the main ideas of the philosophy of this school.

5.6 Phenomenology: Bracketing Experience

The limited understanding of the phenomenal world that one was able to obtain using the approaches discussed in the various sections of this unit so far, gave impetus to the search for new approaches. Phenomenology provided inspiration to such seekers. Phenomenology treats consciousness as a given datum upon which we may build the foundations of claims to knowledge. Here is a presumption of an unmediated access to consciousness. The focus is on explaining the nature of practical consciousness. The intention is to reject a priori constructions and pay attention to the description of experience. This involves a description of the physical actions of the actors as well as their intentions and purposes, the way they make classification, attribute senses and meanings to their world. In many ways, these ideas of phenomenology found full expression in ethnomethodology[®]. Let us find out where these ideas came from.

In the late nineteenth century, a group of Austrian philosophers grew

dissatisfied with the excessive subjectivity fostered by the philosophy of the later German idealists. The Austrian philosophers were against excessive analysis of experiences. Instead of looking for causes and theories they concentrated on experiences as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences.

Franz Brentano (1838-1917) was the first scholar to develop the basic approach of phenomenology. Brentano claimed that the central concern of philosophy is to understand the nature and content of awareness in ways that illuminate the distinction between the mental and the non-mental.

In his book, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano (1874) proposed that every mental act be understood to have a doubly significant representational function. The function is to both designate itself reflectively and a phenomenal object intentionally. Indeed, this distinction between acts and their objects is the crucial distinction for Brentano, since "intentionality is the mark of the mental". One and the same phenomenal object can be intended by mental acts of different modalities, like believing, imagining, etc. Brentano held that although each intentional act is itself subjective, its intention is an objective thing or fact in the world.

A disciple of Brentano, Edmund Husserl carried forward Brentano's ideas and we will now discuss Husserl's contribution to the development of the new approach.

Edmund Husserl

Brentano heavily influenced the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl introduced the term phenomenology in his book, *A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913; trans. 1931) and held that the task of phenomenology was to study essences, such as the essence of emotions. Husserl stated that only the essences of conscious structures are the proper subject matter of phenomenology. As formulated by Husserl, phenomenology is the study of the structures of consciousness that enables consciousness to refer to objects outside it. Such a study requires reflection on the content of the mind to the exclusion of everything else. Husserl called this type of reflection the phenomenological reduction. Because the mind can be directed toward nonexistent as well as real objects, Husserl noted that phenomenological reflection does not presuppose that anything exists, but rather amounts to a "bracketing of existence", that is, setting aside the question of the real existence of the contemplated object.

What Husserl gathered when he contemplated the content of his mind were such acts as remembering, desiring, and perceiving and the abstract content of these acts, which Husserl called meanings. These meanings, he claimed, enabled an act to be directed toward an object under a

certain aspect; and such directedness, called intentionality, he held to be the essence of consciousness. Transcendental phenomenology, according to Husserl, was the study of the basic components of the meanings that make intentionality possible.

The question arises whether there were scholars who used phenomenological methods? We take one example of such a researcher. His name is Martin Heidegger.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)

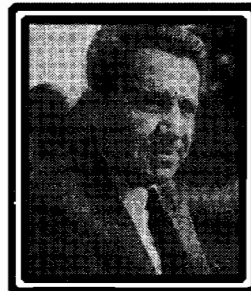
Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, employed the methods of phenomenology in pursuit of more comprehensive metaphysical goals. In Heidegger's full-fledged existentialism[®], the primary task of philosophy is to understand being itself, not merely our knowledge of it. Many feel that Heidegger's philosophy was more of a statement on the existence of modern alienated humankind rather than any philosophical propositions. He felt that traditional learning focuses on 'what is', whereas it may be far more illuminating to examine the boundaries of ordinary knowledge by trying to study 'what is not'.



Martin Heidegger
(1889-1976)

Heidegger (1963) held that it was only through the experience of nothingness that you are truly aware of something. For him traditional logic is no help, since it considers all negation as emanating from something positive. Heidegger proposed that we must abandon logic in order to explore the character of nothing as the background out of which everything emerges. Carefully contemplating nothing in itself, we begin to notice the importance and vitality of our own moods. Above all else, nothing is what produces in us a feeling of dread. This deep feeling of dread, Heidegger held, is the most fundamental human clue to the nature and reality of nothing. Heidegger was making a statement on ontology or existence rather than actually theorising on knowledge.

The phenomenological movement in philosophy had a great influence on sociology. Such sociologists as Alfred Schütz have adapted it to promote an understanding of the relationship between states of individual consciousness and social life. As an approach within sociology, phenomenology seeks to reveal how human awareness is implicated in the production of social action, social situations and social worlds. Alfred Schütz distilled from Husserl's rather dense writings a sociologically relevant approach. Schütz (1972) set about describing how subjective meanings give rise to an apparently objective social world, in which the activities of everyday life have a duration or temporality. It comprises



Alfred Schütz
(1899-1959)

a continuity that remains throughout the waking hours of the individual's life. According to Shutz, individuals organise intentionality of their activities in terms of their overall priorities,.

The short note on phenomenology in this unit is just to give you an idea of what has engaged the attention of knowledge seekers besides the issues of empiricism, rationalism and idealism.

5.7 Conclusion

In this unit we attempted to present some of the main ideas regarding the theories of knowledge. The influence of these philosophical ideas is wide ranging. You would have already found references to some of these ideas in the units of Block I of the book and you are likely to encounter them in subsequent units as well. The focus on the salient ideas associated with the quest to make sense of the world around us has hopefully given you an introduction to epistemological issues at the back of methodologies in social science research.

Further Reading

Nagel, Ernest 1961. *The Structure of Science*. Routledge: London (For problems of epistemology)



Unit 6

Philosophy of Social Science

Contents

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Foundations of Science
- 6.3 Science, Modernity and Sociology
- 6.4 Rethinking Science
- 6.5 Crisis in Foundation
- 6.6 Conclusion

Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading the Unit 6, you will be able to answer the following questions

- ❖ What were the diverse philosophical influences on sociology?
- ❖ What are the major currents of thinking in sociology like the positivist tradition and interpretative thinking?
- ❖ How were Enlightenment and the project of modernity idealised in sociology?
- ❖ How was modernity shattered by the post-modernist critique?

6.1 Introduction

Social science or, to put it more specifically, sociology is a formal body of knowledge that has grown, evolved, created a community of scholars, and established a distinctive tradition of learning. This is possible because it has a method, a set of principles or guidelines for observing the social reality, and constructing a systematic body of knowledge. In other words, it has a philosophy.

You can make out that here we are using the word philosophy not in the metaphysical or spiritual sense of the term. By philosophy we mean a way of seeing and observing, a way of thinking, arguing and arriving at truth. It is, therefore, important to understand the philosophy of social science. Only then can you comprehend how social scientists think, argue and construct the knowledge of society, and how it differs from the other branches of knowledge. A couple of examples would make it clear.

You may have read epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These are extraordinarily rich narratives that give you a glimpse of social history. But then, when modern historians write the history of the ancient period, their way of constructing history is qualitatively different from these epics. They may have used these epics as possible sources, but they are not storytellers, their goal is not to adore, glorify or condemn certain characters, or mythologise the past. They seek to remain 'neutral', rely on all possible facts, and write about the politico-economic life,

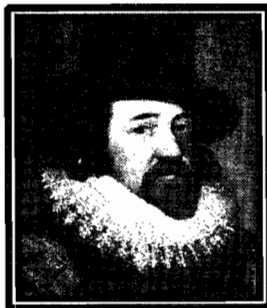
social formations, tools and technologies used in the given period. Modern history, it is therefore argued, is not fiction, or a narrative, or mythical account. Instead, it is a kind of science based on hard facts and empirical evidence.

Likewise, when M.N. Srinivas (1966) came forward with the notion of 'Sanskritisation', a process that indicates how the lower castes emulate the norms, values, practices of the forward castes, it was based on hard empirical evidence. It was, therefore, different from the textual account of the rigid and immobile caste system. In other words, the sociological reading of caste, which is based on a field view, is qualitatively different from the way it is being seen in the scriptures.

As a matter of fact, mythologies, folk tales, epics, travelogues and literature are innumerable sources from which we come to know about human society. But what give a distinctive identity to modern social science are its philosophy, its method of enquiry, and its ways of acquiring knowledge. No wonder you often say that history is not mythology, cultural anthropology is not travelogue, sociology is not journalism, and political science is not an election speech. This is not to suggest that mythology and travelogue, or journalism and election speeches, are domains of falsehood. The point we are trying to make is that the methodology of social science is qualitatively different. It is a formal, structured body of knowledge having its own technical idioms and vocabulary, and distinctive ways of collecting data and arriving at generalisations. Social scientists, it is argued, are "objective" and "value-neutral"; they rely on hard empirical facts, and the social science account is, therefore, not an ideological, subjective, valorisation or condemnation of social reality. It is often believed that understanding this methodology is like comprehending the very philosophy of modern science that gave an identity to social science. In this unit you would learn about this intellectual trajectory: how modern social sciences grew and evolved

6.2 Foundations of Science

We call it social science. But what is science? Science, you often tend to



Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

believe, is objective. Science is based on facts; science needs rational and dispassionate analysis, not an emotional or sentimental judgment. In order to make sense of the philosophic roots of modern science, we would briefly refer to two distinguished thinkers, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1564-1650), because it is generally agreed that their contributions in the seventeenth century provided the foundations of modern science.

out the book of nature as it is, how to observe it without any pre-selection and bias. For Bacon, there are many delusions that act as obstacles and divert us from truth. As a result, we confuse the reality with our own subjective idea of it. We must overcome all these delusions that Bacon regarded as the 'idols of mind'. There are four species of idols that Bacon (1970: 89-96) identified.

- ❖ ***Idols of the tribe:*** These idols are common to the human species as such, and emanate from the typical human weakness: our urge to see what we like to see in the world, our search for regularity, and our obsession with our own beliefs. Human minds, Bacon (1970: 92) argued, are like 'uneven mirrors' that distort the reality. Superstitions and prejudices continue to prevail because of these idols. In fact, the human being's 'feelings imbue and corrupt his understanding in innumerable and sometimes imperceptible ways'.
- ❖ ***Idols of the den:*** These idols, unlike the idols of the tribe, are unique to specific individuals. Each individual has his/her own dispositions and idols. Some, for instance, are inherently optimistic, some are pessimistic, and some strive for antiquity; some love change and innovation. All these individual peculiarities tend to affect one's ways of seeing, and hence distort the reality.
- ❖ ***Idols of the market:*** These idols are those that emanate out of human interaction, and cause severe linguistic confusion. Our language often proves to be inadequate to describe the reality as it is. No wonder, Bacon (1970: 94) said that 'the great and solemn disputes of learned men often terminate in controversies about words and names'.
- ❖ ***Idols of the theater:*** These are those idols 'that have crept into men's minds from the various dogmas of peculiar systems of philosophy' (Bacon 1970: 90).

For Bacon, these idols are essentially obstacles and must be overcome. Only then is it possible to see and observe the world without bias. In other words, nature exists out there, and it is only pure empiricism (not contaminated by our feelings and sentiments) that can grasp it. And this objective knowledge, he believed, would enable human beings to establish their superiority over nature. It is in this sense that knowledge is indeed power. And the relationship between the knower and the known is detached and impersonal; the vulnerability of the self of the knower is controlled, and the act of knowing becomes a dispassionate exercise.

If Francis Bacon provided the foundations of empiricism or what is known as the method of induction, Rene Descartes taught us the fundamental lessons of rationalism (or deductive reasoning). Descartes privileged the mental and intellectual, and argued that it was through clear ideas, or pure rationality, that human beings could arrive at truth and become free from all uncertainties and errors. For him, the sense could not be

reliable source of knowledge; the senses could deceive one. As a result, in an act of *meditation*, Descartes (1641: 439-440) began to doubt everything that he learned through the senses.

I will assume therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning who has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams, which he has devised to ensnare my judgment. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things.

Yet there was one thing Descartes felt certain about. Even if a demon deceived him, the fact that he was being deceived confirmed his existence as a thinking being. Descartes (1641: 440) wrote,

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no mind, and no body. Does it follow that I too did not exist? Not if I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, even if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition *I am, I exist*, is certainly true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

In other words, as Descartes argued, 'man is a thing that thinks'. This led him to privilege the indivisible mind that makes one think, and separate it from the non-thinking body. While one cannot separate oneself from one's mind, one can, however, exist without one's body! Descartes (1641: 467) said,

There is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible. For when I consider the mind or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself. I understand myself to be quite single and complete. Although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, I recognise that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is out off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind.

For Descartes, this mind/body dualism is absolutely important. The message he conveyed was clear. What provides solid foundations is a distinctively clear/ rational thought emanating from the *Indivisible, integrated, coherent mind*. And this rational thought is pure, abstract, disembodied, completely dissociated from the senses, from pain and pleasure, from feelings and emotions.

Needless to add, these two fundamentals, namely, objective empiricism and disembodied rationality, gave a momentum to modern science. But then, it was the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century (it was a logical culmination of European Renaissance, Reformation and Industrial Revolution (for details see Box 6.1 and Block 1 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A programme) that was really a turning point, a breakthrough that generated a new way of seeing, and celebrated the science of Bacon,

Descartes and Newton as the most cherished and legitimate body of knowledge.

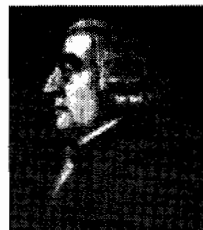
Box 6.1 The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment refers to an intellectual movement, primarily in France and Britain, that spans approximately one hundred years from the 1680s to 1789. Preceding and setting the stage for the Enlightenment were writers and scientists who investigated the natural world and systems of thought, writers such as Galileo Galilei, Issac Newton, Francis Bacon, and René Descartes. Enlightenment writers include Hobbes, Locke, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. The French writers were sometimes called the philosophers. The leading representatives were religious skeptics, political reformers, cultural critics, historians and social theorists (Zeitlin 1990:1).

In contrast to systems of thought where the sacred had dominated and where questioning was discouraged, Enlightenment thinkers viewed human reason as dominant. No subjects of study were to be forbidden, there were no unaskable questions, with all aspects of human life appropriate for examination and study. In doing this, Enlightenment thinkers combined the philosophic tradition of abstract rational thought of Descartes and other philosophers with the tradition of experimentation or empirical philosophy from Galilei, Newton, Bacon and others. The result was a new system of human inquiry that attacked the old order and privileges, put emphasis and faith on science, the scientific method and education, and acquired the practical function of asking critical questions about existing institutions and demanding that the unreasonable ones, those contrary to human nature, be changed. All social obstacles to human perfectibility were to be progressively eliminated. (Zeitlin1990: 2).

The writings of the Enlightenment profoundly affected politics and the development of sociology. The French Revolution (1789) and the American Revolution (1776) had many causes but many Enlightenment ideas and ways of thinking had a great effect on these political and social changes. The slogans of "liberty, equality, fraternity" and "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" state the political ideals of these revolutions and reflect the ideas of Enlightenment thought.

Possibly it is hard to speak of a singular/unifying Enlightenment agenda, because the philosophers, such as Voltaire (1694-1778), Montesquieu(1689-1755), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Adam Smith (1723-1790), did not necessarily speak the same language. Nevertheless, from these Enlightenment philosophers it is not altogether impossible to identify a series of the following salient features of the new thinking.



Adam Smith
(1723-1790)

- ❖ Instead of a God ordained society, Enlightenment spoke of the primacy of reason. It fought a great battle against Christianity,

particularly its implicit notion of originals in and imperfectability. Voltaire asserted that human beings were neither good nor evil as such; instead, the specificity of circumstances would matter a great deal in unfolding the potential of human beings (as mentioned in Mary 1996). In other words, it is possible for human beings to shape their destiny and create a better world. In that sense, the Enlightenment agenda was future-oriented and optimistic.

❖ Its optimism was sustained by its epistemology: its spirit of critical enquiry. 'Our age', wrote Immanuel Kant (1783), 'is in a special degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit'. Nothing was therefore taken for granted. This criticality gave a new momentum, enabled humankind to come out of the trap of closed/dogmatic thinking, and finally revealed a positive relationship between reason and freedom, science and truth.

❖ This criticality was not necessarily negative in nature. As a matter of fact, it destroyed as well as constructed. It did not oppose the ethical/spiritual core of Christianity. It opposed only the closed/dogmatic character of Christianity and provided the foundations of a new world based on a secular/liberal worldview. In other words, the roots of *modernity*: a project that celebrates scientificity, rationality and individuality could be found in the Enlightenment agenda itself. It was progressive. It believed in a linear/historical progress, which gave a new dynamism to the exploration of knowledge, innovation and experimentation.

❖ As far as the knowledge of human society was concerned, the philosophy of the Enlightenment gave a new direction, as outlined below.

- i) Society exists out there readily amenable to empirical observation.
- ii) This knowledge of society can be objective and universal, and hence cumulative and progressive.
- iii) This knowledge is different from and superior to ideological distortions and religious beliefs.
- iv) This knowledge is positively useful for the restructuring of human society.

Let us now discuss in more detail the interface between science, modernity and sociology.

6.3 Science, Modernity and Sociology

It would not be wrong to say that the modern social sciences emerged out of this epistemological optimism. It was, therefore, not surprising that right from its inception modern sociology, to take a specific example,

was guided by these two philosophic foundations: a) objective/universal science, and b) progressive and historically inevitable modernity. Sociology saw itself as a science: a scientific study of society. As an objective, value neutral and empirical science, it differentiated itself from religion, metaphysics and commonsense. As you have been learning about positivism and even classical sociology and the way both grew in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, you would discover the immense impact of Enlightenment philosophers on sociology and its methodology. Likewise, sociology emerged in order to make sense of the new age. Sociology, it is often said, was a product of Enlightenment modernity (Nisbet 1967). Not solely that. The leading sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Auguste Comte to Karl Marx, were the children of modernity. In their own specific ways, they celebrated the new age and wrote substantially about it. We would take some examples to make this point clear (see Box 6.2 for examples).

Box 6.2 Examples of Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx

Emile Durkheim

First, recall Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895, English translation published in 1938/ 1964). He believed in the scientific study of society, and wanted sociology to project itself as a science of social facts, not a political/partisan ideology. And one of his major writings, *The Division of Labour* (1893, English translation published in 1964), was an attempt to conceptualise the formation of modern industrial societies characterised by heightened differentiation, specialisation and a complex form of division of labor. He made a distinction between such a modern society with its 'organic solidarity' and a simple and/ or traditional society having 'mechanical solidarity'.

Karl Marx

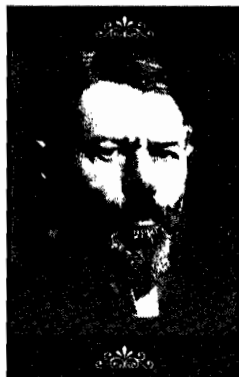
Second, think of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who believed in the Enlightenment affirmation of scientific reasoning. He seemed to be heavily influenced by Newton (1642-1727) and Darwin (1809-1882). And it is now well known that he sought to dedicate the second volume of *Capital* (1867) to Charles Darwin. Marx's 'scientificity' could be seen in his urge to discover the 'iron laws' of capitalist development, his inclination to plead for universal generalisations like 'the history of hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' and the distinction he made between historical materialism and ideology. Ideology, he argued almost like Francis Bacon, distorts and falsifies the reality, whereas the science of historical materialism enables us to see the reality as it is: how the mode of production seeks to govern the socio-cultural life and resultant conflicts and contradictions in society. Marx's affinity with modernity could be seen in his faith in historical progress, in science, in urbanity. No wonder, he didn't appreciate the 'Asiatic mode of production' or 'oriental despotism', and saw immense possibilities in the British rule in India because it enabled us to overcome our isolation and stagnation, and experience the light of modern civilisation!

It is not our contention to argue that these thinkers were blind champions of modernity. They were great scholars, and immensely sensitive. They could see the pathologies of modernity. You already know that Durkheim was concerned about anomie: the growing normlessness in modern

societies (see Block 3 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A programme). You also know that Marx was a great humanist who critiqued the fragmented character of capitalism, and its alienation[®]. And you are also aware that Max Weber, yet another great sociologist of the classical era, spoke of the pathos of disenchantment[®] inherent in the modern age. But you need to appreciate the essential point. Even when they saw problems with modernity, they did not want to regress to a non-modern age. Instead, they retained their faith in the foundations of modernity and science, and sought to accomplish the agenda of modernity by making it more humane and egalitarian.

As you can see, science with its central principles of objectivity, universalisation and causal explanation did have a tremendous impact on the formation of modern social science. This, however, does not mean that there was absolute agreement on the 'unity of method'. True, positivism, a dominant mode of sociological enquiry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, did not see much qualitative difference in the study of nature and socio-cultural domain. But then, there were many who differed, and pleaded for a separate mode of enquiry in social and cultural sciences. Its roots could be seen in Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), one of the leading Enlightenment philosophers. While meditating on nature, he spoke of the two distinct principles— a) the physical component being enslaved by the senses, and b) the moral component that strives for truth, justice and beauty (Seidman 1983). No wonder, one aspect of the Enlightenment social theory that spoke of human beings' conditioning gave birth to material/ structural analysis, and the other mode of enquiry that spoke of human beings' freedom gave importance to voluntarism, human agency, creativity and reflexivity.

Herein lies the point of departure. There are social scientists who would argue that unlike an object in the physico-chemical or biological world, the human being is a creative/reflexive creature, and human society is,



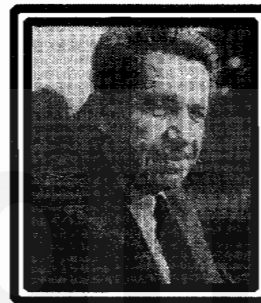
Max Weber
1864-1930

therefore, a domain of meanings, not just an 'external thing' constraining us. In other words, human society, it is argued, has to be seen as a product of creative accomplishment on the part of the social actors. The task of social science is to understand and interpret these meanings. Max Weber, as you will learn in Unit 7, emerged out of this philosophic tradition. For Weber (1949), sociology is an interpretative study of the subjective meaning complex of social actions. He regarded it as *verstehen*[®], a method of understanding the conscious/subjective meanings social actors attach

to the world. It was in this sense that Weber saw beyond mere economism, and interpreted early capitalism[®] as a domain of meanings that the proponents of Protestantism or Calvinism attached to the world (for details Block 4 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A programme).

Well, Weber did speak of the human agency. But this does not mean that his sociology was “subjective” in nature. Instead, he sought to unite the interpretative study of subjective meanings with an objective causal analysis. He was not against the basic tenets of science: objectivity, value neutrality and causal explanation. What he was objecting to was the positivist urge to equate society with nature, and undermine the domain of meanings. He was therefore talking about ‘[Ⓢ]ideal types’, which were more like models rather than exact scientific laws.

In the twentieth century the the tradition of interpretative sociology was further developed through phenomenological and ethno-methodological traditions (Giddens 1976). The central thrust of these traditions is that the world is largely a world experienced by human beings, and the task of social science is to describe, understand and make sense of this world: how people themselves define and construct it. Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), a major proponent of the phenomenological tradition, spoke of the inter-subjective world in which people interact, communicate and understand one another through the process of typification[Ⓢ]: a process that enables people to fix and define one another, and have a shared role-expectation. It is through this process of typification, that a meaningful and stable social order is possible. For Schutz (1972) the everyday world in which people interact is the *paramount reality*. It is taken far granted. And that makes society possible. But then, there are other realms, like the realm of dreams, or the realm of scientific theorising, in which people experience the world. All these finite provinces of meaning have their own notions of time and space, and shifts from one realm to the other involve ‘shock’. But then, for Schutz (1972), the paramount reality is most important, and all of us have to come back to it and experience the world as direct/ real actors. Sociology, for Schutz (1972), must describe and understand how people experience the world. This means that sociology must take people’s descriptions and definitions seriously.



Alfred Schutz
(1899-1959)

It is in this sense that sociological constructs are ‘second order constructs’. Likewise, Harold Garfinkel (1967) spoke of ethno-methodology, or ‘people’s methodology’. The task is to describe how people themselves define their world, not to `explain it in terms of some context-free, abstract, universal generalisation. In other words, in these traditions you are witnessing a shift from abstract explanation to meaningful understanding, from universality to specificity, from theory to description, from structural causes to people’s lived experiences.

Let us complete Reflection and Acion 6.1 to fully grasp the notion of construction of meaning.

Reflection and Action 6.1

Hygiene is an example of social construction. What might be considered hygienic pure and proper in one culture might be considered improper or unhygienic in another culture. What might be considered a tradition might be a crime according to some. For instance, female circumcision in parts of Africa is a custom for some cultures, but many oppose it as an act of violence. In India, when Sati, the burning of the widow, was performed, in Rajasthan, in 1986, it was upheld by a section of the community as valorisation of womanhood and tradition while it was considered a criminal act by the Indian State.

While there are typical and peculiar social constructions very relative to one's culture, so much so that understanding them might involve interpreting them in one's own cultural logic, there are also such aspects of society which are universally found among cultures and across cultures.

In the light of the above examples and statements, write down answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Questions

- ❖ Can one be value-neutral in situations such as female infanticide and sati?
- ❖ If meanings are relative to the cultures that construct them, then is it possible to compare two differently oriented cultures?
- ❖ Can you think of more examples of such relative constructions of meanings?

The two traditions of social science, positivist and interpretative, have a point of convergence, because both these traditions emerged out of Enlightenment modernity. In the positivist tradition you can see the Enlightenment affirmation of the legitimacy of scientific explanation. And in the interpretative tradition you can find the affirmation of the Enlightenment optimism centered on human beings' agency and their ability to create their own world.

But then, as you would learn, these very foundations are in a crisis, since all these modern principles, scientific objectivity, historical progress, coherent/rational self, and the agency/freedom of the actor, are doubted, particularly with the advent of post modernity. And it has caused a severe philosophic crisis, and sociology has to cope with it.

6.4 Rethinking Science

Before you learn more about the challenges that post-modernists have posed to the discipline, it is important to devote some attention to the philosophy of science (see Unit 1). Science, as you have already learnt, provided the foundations of modern social science. But then the very notion of science has undergone dramatic changes in our times, and the philosophers of science have made us rethink science. No wonder, this intense debate on the nature of science did have its impact on the philosophy of social science. It is, therefore, important that you learn something meaningful about this debate.

Let us begin with Karl Popper (1902-1994), a leading philosopher of science in the twentieth century, who changed our understanding of science and society. Popper grew up in Vienna, taught in New Zealand and England, encountered logical positivism and Marxism, and came forward with his distinctive idea of science (Popper 1972). He was heavily

influenced by the changes in physics that emerged out of Einstein's theory of relativity; it revealed that Newtonian physics, which was dominant for more than two hundred years, could be interrogated. This led him to plead for the relative character of science. Science is not something solid and stable, or eternally valid. Instead, science, for him, is a set of conjectures subject to falsification and refutation. No wonder, as Popper (1972: 37) asserted, the creation of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability or testability. A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event, he reminded us, is non-scientific. Contrary to popular belief, irrefutability is not a virtue of science. The challenge confronting the scientific community is not to search for confirmations/ verifications of the existing theory, but to search for falsification and refutation. It is not at all necessary to absolutise or sanctify any particular source of knowledge, be it Baconian empiricism or Cartesian rationality, and think that the knowledge gained through it is a domain of absolute certainty. This would lead to dogmatic thinking and generate a false belief that the world is full of verifications of the existing theory. Popper, however, critiqued this dogmatic thinking, and argued that science could progress only through an open culture promoting the spirit of refutability and falsifiability. See below a quotation from Popper (1972: 27).



Karl Popper
(1902-1994)

So my answer to the questions how do you know? What is the source or the basis of your assertion? What observations have led you to it? would be: I do not know: my assertion was merely a guess. Never mind the source, or the sources, from which it may spring, there are many possible sources and I may not be aware of half of them; and origins or pedigrees have in any case little bearing upon truth. But if you are interested in the problem which I tried to solve by my tentative assertion, you may help me by criticising it as severely as you can, and if you can design some experimental test which you think might refute my assertion, I shall gladly, and to the best of my power, help you to refute it.

It is only through this culture of "critical rationalism" that science progresses. Science is inherently critical and democratic, perpetually progressing through trial and error, conjectures and refutations. But pseudo-science[®] is dogmatic; it is too certain of its explanatory power, it sees only confirmations and verifications. With this understanding of science Popper critiqued logical positivism, determinism and Marxism. For instance, Marxism, Popper alleged, is not genuinely interested in falsifiability. Instead, it is dogmatic, desperately striving for confirmations and verifications. Popper (1972: 35) said:

A Marxist could not open a newspaper without finding on every page confirming evidence of his interpretation of history; not only in news, but also in its presentation, which revealed the class bias of the paper – and especially of course in what the paper did not say.

Moreover, Marxism as a doctrine of historicism[®], as Popper (1972: 337) argued, is inclined to large-scale historical prophecies. But then, 'the kind of prophecies which Marxism offers are in their logical character more akin to those of the Old Testament than to those of modern physics'. This sort of prophecy is possible only in a domain that is well isolated, stationary and recurrent, say the solar system. But unlike the solar system, human society cannot be separated from our deeds. Society, far from being repetitive, is perpetually changing, evolving and growing, 'The fact that we can predict eclipses does not, therefore, provide a valid reason for explicating that we can predict revolutions' (Popper 1970: 340).

In other words, Karl Popper gave a new meaning to science. He sought to free science from positivistic certainties. Science, for him, is relative; science is like myth-making. And what promotes science is not the arrogance emanating from cognitive certainty, but a spirit of humbleness that encourages the possibility of falsifiability and refutability.

Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) was yet another major philosopher of science



Thomas Kuhn
(1922-1996)

who taught us about normal science and its inherent conservatism, and extraordinary science leading to scientific revolutions. For Kuhn, *normal science* relies on the centrality of the paradigm that a particular scientific community takes for granted. To use Kuhn's, (1970: 10) own words, 'paradigms are some accepted examples of actual scientific practice, examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together, that provide models from which arise particular coherent traditions of scientific

research'. A paradigm, in other words, provides the background, and directs the trajectory of normal science. Its power lies in its ability to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. It was in this sense that Newton's *Principia and Optics*, Franklin's *Electricity* and Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* acted as paradigms at different junctures of scientific history. For Kuhn, normal science does not seek to refute, falsify or interrogate the prevalent paradigm. Instead, it seeks to actualise the potential of the paradigm itself, and resolve all residual ambiguities through further elaboration, experimentation and fact-gathering activities. Kuhn (1970: 23-24) said,

Normal science consists in the actualisation of that promise, an actualisation achieved by extending the knowledge of those facts that the paradigm displays as particularly revealing, by increasing the extent of the match between those facts and the paradigm's predictions, and by further articulation of the paradigm itself.

Kuhn characterised this entire process as a 'puzzle solving' activity. The reason is that the problems normal science investigates are more like puzzles that can be solved only through the rules provided by the paradigm

itself. Whatever does not fit into the paradigm is kept aside. Kuhn (1970: 37) elaborated:

A paradigm can insulate the community from those socially important problems that are not reducible to the puzzle form, because they cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools the paradigm supplies. One of the reasons why normal science seeks to progress so rapidly is that its practitioners concentrate on problems that only their own lack of ingenuity should keep them from solving.

No wonder, the centrality of the paradigm, the commitment to it, and its specificity give a concrete direction to science. It becomes a profession with its specific adherents and specialists, with its journals and publications. And, paradoxically, it is this conservatism that leads to the cumulative progress of normal science. But then, there are situations when the crisis/ anomaly begins to confront the scientific community. It may arise because of the persistent failure of normal science to make sense of the new phenomenon. This crisis situation leads to extraordinary science. It is extraordinary because, unlike normal science, it acknowledges the crisis, interrogates the established paradigm, and dares to become innovative. Kuhn (1970: 90-91) held,

Confronted with anomaly or with crisis, scientists take a different attitude toward existing paradigms, and the nature of their research changes accordingly. The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research.

And eventually, it is this extraordinary science that leads to a 'paradigm shift' resulting in scientific revolutions. It was the way Einstein, to take a specific example, made a revolution in physics. The revolutionary or new paradigm is incompatible with the earlier one. Indeed, Kuhn repeatedly emphasised on the 'incommensurability of paradigms'. There are substantial differences between successive paradigms. For instance, in one solutions are compounds, in the other mixtures. One is embedded in a flat, the other in a curved matrix of space. The result is that the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction.

It is not easy for the scientific community, as Kuhn reminded us, to accept the new paradigm, because massive conservatism/ dogmatism characterises the community of normal scientists. It is, however, important to realise that, despite this resistance, the new paradigm succeeds in attracting more and more adherents, and eventually establishes its hegemony. The new paradigm appeals because it is said to be 'neater', 'more suitable', or 'simpler' than the old.

What are the implications of this understanding of science for us? Normal science, because of the centrality of the paradigm, is extremely focused. It is also narrow and conservative because it does not wish to see beyond the paradigm. Things are, however, different in other creative fields

like music, graphic arts and literature, and even the social sciences, the field that, unlike natural science, cannot be said to have a hegemonic paradigm to follow. No wonder, in these fields learners are made aware of competing and often incommensurable approaches, and they must ultimately choose for themselves. An example would make this difference clear. Students of physics working on optics would feel so confident about the dominant paradigm that they would find no reason to entertain any other competing theory. That is precisely what the success of a paradigm is all about, its ability to defeat all competing approaches. But imagine students of sociology working on religion. For them, there is no hegemonic paradigm. Instead, they are likely to be aware of multiple, competing and even incommensurable approaches to religion, say, the Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist approaches. This makes social science more 'open ended' and fluid.

Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) was another leading thinker who critiqued



Paul Feyerabend
1924-1994

the hegemony of scientific method. No method, even the most successful one, for Feyerabend (1982), has the right to subdue and marginalise other methods. No wonder, he refused to give his consent to scientism[®], that is, the belief that science is the only valid form of knowledge. Instead, he revealed the politics of science, its relationship with power, and the way through propaganda and other strategies it murdered all alternative forms of knowledge. Scientism, he insisted, would go against the true spirit of a democratic society, because democracy should imply the plurality of knowledge systems, methods and traditions of enquiry. Each tradition, each fairy tale, each story, for Feyerabend (1982), has its validity. Nothing is dead or meaningless. It is important that we embrace an 'anarchist theory of knowledge' implying that everything is possible.

You may be wondering why we are discussing so much the philosophy of science. If you think deeply, you would realise that it is meaningful for social science. There are two lessons that you can learn.

- i) Positivism that seeks to legitimise the 'certainty' of science gets eroded. For Popper, science is like a conjecture subject to refutation; for Kuhn, science is conservative, and prevails because scientists too, like any other group of people, are being guided by peer group pressure and other socialising forces; and for Feyerabend, science has its own history of domination and violence. In other words, it speeds the process of de-legitimation of the positivistic foundation of social science.
- ii) With the demystification of science, sociology tends to become more sensitive to the plurality of methods and traditions. It acquires the courage to come out of the shadow of natural science.

In order to fully grasp the arguments presented above, let us complete Reflection and Action 6.2 and then proceed with the discussion on crisis in foundations of the social sciences.

Reflection and Action 6.2

Science as the only legitimate explanation is coming under increasing criticism. While it is acknowledged that science and technology have made immense progress and have made efforts to solve many of human problems such as hunger and disease and have tamed to some extent the wrath of the elements of nature, they have not been able to solve all of human problems, questions and search for meanings. This inability of science is one reason given for the increasing presence of religion in the everyday lives of people the world over. And if science is not the only legitimate explanatory avenue then what are the alternatives?

Some firm believers of Christianity contend that "evolution is a fantasy that scientists and other secularists cling to because it explains humankind through a process other than God's divine hand". They wish "the creation angle could be worked into the school curriculum somehow as another possible explanation. It could even be presented as a "theory"..." (source: <http://lashawnbarber.com>)

In the context of the above statements, write the answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Questions

- ❖ Do you think the rising religiosity among people has anything to do with the fact that science does not answer all our questions and needs?
- ❖ Should we be offering an alternative explanation to understand the deeper question of existence in our school curriculums, as some Christians have argued it?
- ❖ What according to you is a proper explanation which is worthy of being considered as a theory or as a part of a social science discipline?

*** SPECIAL NOTE FOR THE COUNSELLOR OF M A SOCIOLOGY FOR AN ACTIVITY DURING THE COUNSELLING SESSION:** Please, form a discussion group from the learners of M A Sociology at your Study Center and discuss the last question in the group. Organise a debate on this topic and prepare a programme for broadcasting by Gyanvani in collaboration with the IGNOU Regional Centre in your area.

6.5 Crisis in Foundation

It is, however, the advent of post-modernity that has caused a severe crisis to the philosophic foundation of the social sciences. As you already know, social science or sociology was a product of Enlightenment modernity. Its foundations lay in its adherence to scientific objectivity, its belief in reason and progress and its acceptance of the supremacy of western modernity. Post-modernity deconstructs all these foundations, and asserts that there is no universal truth, there is no culture that can claim itself to be superior to others, and the world is a site of differences. In other words, for post-modernists, there is no grand truth on science, progress and modernity. Instead, there are multiple voices, and the very notion of a rational/ coherent subject is questioned (Harvey 1989).

There are many reasons for the disillusionment with the project of modernity. The experience of war, violence and totalitarianism in the twentieth century, the growing assertion of the colonised people, and the resultant decline in the legitimacy of western power, the arousal of subaltern voices, the proliferation of new technologies of communication, and the rising consumer culture making a distinction between 'high' and 'low' meaningless— all these factors, as you would learn, led many sensitive thinkers in the West to rethink and interrogate the very foundations of modernity. The question is: what are its implications for sociology? In MSO 001, you would learn more about post-modernity. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to identify some implications as shown in Box 6.3.

Box 6.3 Implications of Post-modernism[®] for Sociology

Sociology, from Comte to Marx, was heavily influenced by science. Its objectivity, its universality and explanatory power. Hence sociology was seen as different from ideology/ narrative/ fiction/ metaphysics. Sociology as a science of society was thought to be more objective and true, a piece of reliable knowledge. But then, for post-modernists, science has lost its sole claim to truth; science itself is being seen as yet another narrative, a story, and an ideology. And, therefore, science cannot be seen as the master narrative. There is no master truth, no totalising theory. Instead, in this world of multivocality there are diverse stories and truths. It is a world without consensus, without coherence, without a meta-theory.

❖ Hence all these modern sociologies with their *totalising claims*, Comte's law of three stages, Durkheim's division of labor leading to organic solidarity, Weber's modernity as widespread rationalisation, and Marx's theory of class analysis, lose their significance. And sociology becomes, to use Zygmunt Bauman's (1987) words, "merely an act of translation of multiple traditions without any claim for legitimating the grand truth". And as science is being deprived of its validity claim sociologists in the post-modern setting become free to play with innumerable sources: narratives, life histories, fictions, popular cinema and music.

❖ Post-modernists questioned the sanctity of knowledge as an objective quest for truth. As Michel Foucault would argue, knowledge is never separated from power, and power from knowledge (discussed in Sheridan 1980). For example, psychiatry can be seen as an integral component of a disciplinary society. With its notion of 'normalcy' it seeks to modulate /control sexuality or madness. It is like formulating a concept like discourse[®] that embodies knowledge as well as power, and has a principle of exclusion and inclusion. Hence we have a discourse on madness or sexuality that allows psychiatrists, doctors and other 'normalising judges' to categorise people as 'mad' or 'sexually deviant'. In other words, everything is constructed, and there is no natural/ permanent truth. Furthermore, the idea of an emancipatory modern

society gets challenged, and we are told about a disciplinary society characterised by a widespread network of surveillance machinery.

Yes, post-modernists have caused a severe crisis. For them, there is no foundational truth (as put forward by Bacon and Descartes) that can prove to be objective, there is no universal/ totalising theory (like Marxism) that can overcome local contexts and heterogeneity, and there is no “superior” method (like science or positivism). Here is a situation, a typical post-modern condition, leading to relativism, incoherence and schizophrenia.

But then, there are social scientists who do not give their consent to post-modernism, even when they see problems with modernity and science. And this debate goes on. As you progress you will learn more about it and also participate in the debate.

6.6 Conclusion

In this unit we have tried to understand the philosophical bases of the social sciences and how different epistemological and metaphysical issues dealt within philosophy have had a bearing on various perspectives and methodologies of the social sciences. As you can see from the discussion in this unit, there has been no single paradigm or theory which has dominated the social sciences, including sociology. Though sociology was influenced by natural science and its methodologies, especially in its early stages, in an attempt to establish itself as a discipline, it has realised that the subject matter of sociology, involving as it is human beings, is not amenable to generalisations and laws of the Newtonian kind. With the discovery of increasingly different worldviews and particular cultures, it became difficult for sociologists to come up with universal explanations. Even if they did, the same came under heavy criticism. The increasing need to represent plurality has produced a new wave of critique leading to a post-modernist’s valorisation of many methods and in that almost everything is acceptable.

Further Reading

Phillip, Derek L. 1973. *Abandoning Method*. Jossey-Brass: New York (For a critique the epistemological foundations of common research procedures)

Coser, Lewis A. 1969. *Sociological Theory*. Macmillan: London (For a general collection of key passages from classic writings in sociological theory)



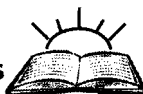
Unit 7

Positivism and its Critique

Contents

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Heroic Science and Origin of Positivism
- 7.3 Early Positivism
- 7.4 Consolidation of Positivism
- 7.5 Critiques of Positivism
- 7.6 Conclusion

Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 7 you will be able to learn and discuss the following themes.

- ❖ Positivism and its influence on sociology
- ❖ The contributions of Comte and Emile Durkhiem
- ❖ A critique of positivism
- ❖ Emergence of 'reflexive sociology'

7.1 Introduction

You have already become familiar in Unit 6 with an overview of the philosophy of social science. At this juncture, it would be a good idea for you to focus and concentrate on specific issues and modes of enquiry. In Unit 7 we are going to discuss positivism, a method of enquiry that sought to give immense cognitive prestige to the discipline, and wanted to convince its adherents that sociology too could be a science and follow the scientific methodological principles of empirical observation, deductive reasoning, and formulation of laws or universal generalisations (see Box 7.1 for salient features of positivism). As a matter of fact, this self-perception of sociology as a science sought to serve the following three purposes—:

- ❖ It separated sociology as an empirical science from humanities and philosophy.
- ❖ It gave a professional identity to the sociologist who ought to overcome the limiting identities emanating from caste, class and gender, and think in a more objective/rational/ universal fashion.
- ❖ The knowledge it would acquire would help us to reconstruct our society, and create a better world.

Section 7.2 traces the origin of positivism and Sections 7.3 and 7.4 discuss the early developments in positivism and its consolidation. Though positivism became a powerful sociological method, it had its critics. In Section 7.5 we show that positivism has now lost much of its appeal.

Box 7.1 Salient Features of Positivism

The salient features of positivism can be characterised as follows.

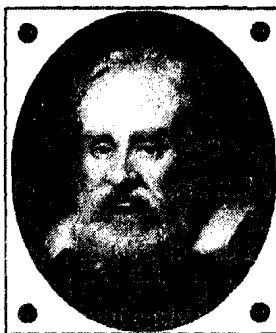
- ❖ It believes in the *unity of method*. Sociology is not different from the natural sciences as far as the method of enquiry is concerned.
- ❖ It celebrates objectivity and value neutrality. It, therefore, separates the knower from the known, subjectivity from objectivity, and fact from value.
- ❖ Sociology is not commonsense. It rests on explanatory principles, which give a universal character to the discipline.
- ❖ Sociology is a formal and organised body of knowledge, characterised by specialised skills and techno-scientific vocabulary.
- ❖ Sociology can strive for abstraction and generalisation. Human experiences can be explained through law-like generalisations.
- ❖ The scientific knowledge of society can be used for social engineering.

7.2 Heroic Science and Origin of Positivism

Herein lies an important question. Why did positivism grow at a certain juncture of history, and establish itself as the leading voice in the discipline? You already know how modern science was evolving, arousing immense optimism, and becoming hegemonic. The scientific thinking emanating from Bacon, Descartes and Newton, and scientific inventions and discoveries were altering the cultural/intellectual landscape of Europe. And eventually, the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century (see Box 7.2), as you have already learnt, was a turning point. It meant celebrating a new age of reason, objectivity and criticality. It was like coming out of the medieval order, religious influences, and asserting that scientific thinking would enable us to create a better world. It was difficult to escape the influence of the age. It was difficult not to be influenced by the spectacular success story of science. Science became knowledge itself: real, objective and foundational! And to survive in such a milieu was to accept science and its ascending power.

Box 7.2 Triumphs of Natural Sciences in the Eighteenth Century

The Enlightenment witnessed a period of spectacular triumphs in the natural sciences. Beginning with Issac Newton (1642-1727) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), natural science began a conquest of the natural world, which was a staggering success. This success did not go unnoticed in the social sciences. Rather, as many commentators have noted, the social sciences were born in the shadow of these triumphs. Furthermore, the methodological lessons that the natural sciences were teaching seemed to be very clear: if the methods of the natural science are strictly adhered to then the spectacular success of these sciences could be matched in the social sciences. The social sciences had only to await the arrival of their Newton (Hekman 1986: 5).



Galileo Galilei
(1564-1642)

Details in Box 7.2 possibly explain the origin of positivism. The assumption was that the identity of sociology as "true knowledge" could not be established without adopting the method of the natural sciences. There was yet another important factor. The new age characterised by the Industrial Revolution, expanding trade and commerce, and emergent bourgeoisie altered power relations in the West. It was the time that witnessed the assertion of the new elite: technologists, scientists and capitalists. They saw immense possibilities in science, and were strong



Isaac Newton
(1642-1727)

adherents of a positivistic/ scientific culture and mode of enquiry. Yes, there were dissenting voices, say, the voices emanating from romanticism[®] that critiqued the worship of science and reason, and pleaded for imagination, subjectivity and creativity (as pointed out by Gouldner 1970). But then, the language of science was irresistible. The politico-economic establishment was sustaining it. Science was going to stay, and positivism was its inevitable consequence.

The entire phenomenon can be understood better if you reflect on the self-perception of science. For instance, it is argued that science is a radical departure from common sense (Nagel 1961: 1-14). Well, common sense may not necessarily be false. But common sense, unlike science, is seldom accompanied by a search for systematic explanations – the explanations derived from solid factual evidence. For instance, before the advent of modern science people knew the function of the wheel. But it was only modern science that provided us with an explanatory principle like the frictional force to make sense of the operation of wheels. Likewise, the principles formulated by Newton could explain innumerable facts: the behavior of the tides, the paths of projectiles, and the moon's motion. It is also argued that, unlike the indeterminacy of common sense, the language of science is more specific, focused and pointed. It abhors all sorts of vagueness. Even though the poets may speak of infinite stars, it would be argued, astronomers are interested in calculating and measuring their exact number. Furthermore, science, unlike common sense, is a distant, detached and abstract exercise. Whereas common sense has an intimate relationship with our everyday world, science is essentially neutral. You may enjoy the color of the sunset: but then, the electromagnetic theory, which provides a systematic account of optical phenomena, retains its remoteness and abstraction. In fact, science deliberately neglects the immediate values of things. That is why; it is argued that science is primarily critical in spirit. Whereas common sense tends to take things for granted, science problematises even our most cherished beliefs. This does not mean that common sense is necessarily false and science is true. What distinguishes science is its

critical spirit, its insistence on empirical evidence. Here we quote the words of Nagel (1971: 13).

The difference between the cognitive claims of science and common sense, which stems from the fact that the former are the products of the scientific method, does not connote that the former are invariably true. It does follow that while common sense beliefs are usually accepted without a critical evaluation of the evidence available, the evidence for the conclusions of science conforms to standards such that a significant proportion of conclusions supported by similar structured evidence remains in good agreement with additional factual data when fresh data are obtained.

Many were articulating this supremacy of science as a more reliable, objective and critical knowledge. For instance in Box 7.3 we bring to you Merton's (1972) four institutional imperatives of science.

Box 7.3 Merton's Four Institutional Imperatives of Science

- ❖ Science is *universal*. The validity of a scientific statement does not depend on any particularistic criterion. It is against all sorts of ethnocentrism. It is valid for all.
- ❖ Science implies the *communism of knowledge*: Scientist, it is argued, want nothing more than esteem and recognition. Scientist's findings and discoveries, far from remaining a private property, become a collective heritage. It is this shared culture that enables science to evolve, grow and progress dramatically.
- ❖ Science demands *disinterestedness*: a process of rigorous scrutinisation and examination of one's findings without any bias.
- ❖ Science is *organised skepticism* that distinguishes it. Everything for science is an object of critical enquiry. There is nothing sacred or profane. Science investigates, examines and problematises everything. That is the success story of science.

In the self-perception of science as given in Box 7.3, you see a *positive* story: a positive affirmation of the virtues of science, its ability to construct objective, empirical, critical and universal knowledge, which is free from personal/ political bias and prejudice. In a way, it is a *heroic* notion of science. Positivism was also an affirmation of this positive/ heroic science. It was positive because it meant certainties of science. And it also meant a positive attitude towards life: using science for improving our lot.

7.3 Early Positivism

Positivism, as you can gather, emerged out of a situation in which there was tremendous optimism centered on the cognitive power of science. As mentioned in Unit 6, you also know that modern sociology evolved at a specific juncture of European history when the entire social landscape altered because of the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It was indeed a new age, and sociology as a formal/

academic discipline was trying to make sense of it. In fact, the roots of early positivism could be found in the first half of the nineteenth century in France. Imagine the state of post-revolutionary France. There was a significant change in the domain of knowledge. The separation of science and philosophy became inevitable; new scientific journals started appearing, and a close link between science and industry was established. It was felt that there was a single scientific method applicable to all fields of study. Possibly Saint Simon (1760-1825), one of the early sociologists, articulated this aspiration rather sharply. A scientist, he felt, is one who predicts, and it is this power of prediction that gives him the power. He, therefore, pleaded strongly for extending the scientific outlook from the physical sciences to the study of human beings. It was an urge to create some kind of a *social physics* so that sociology could accomplish its historical mission: completing the unfinished agenda of the Industrial Revolution.

Indeed, this close affinity with science gave birth to positivism. Auguste



Saint Simon
(1760-1825)

Comte (1798-1857), the founder of modern sociology, established positivism as the most cherished doctrine of sociology (see also Unit 1). Yet, like Saint Simon, Comte too was witnessing the revolutionary transformation. In a way, he saw the contradiction between the two social forces: theological/ military and scientific/ industrial. Like a visionary, he felt that this contradiction could be resolved only by the triumph of the scientific/ industrial society. Scientists, as he saw all around, were replacing theologians as

the moral guardians of the new social order, and industrialists were replacing the warriors. Not solely that. Comte too shared the Enlightenment assertion that it was possible for science to grasp the workings of the world. He believed that positivist or scientific knowledge was the inevitable outcome of the progressive growth of the individual mind as well as the historical development of human knowledge.

From 1871 to 1823 Comte and Saint Simon collaborated so closely that it was almost impossible to distinguish the contributions of the two. It was at this juncture that they spoke of social physics, and the need to discover natural and immutable laws of progress which are as necessary as the law of gravity. But then they separated, and eventually Comte emerged as an independent scholar. It was during 1830-1892 that he published six volumes of *Course of Positive Philosophy*. And finally, during 1851-1854, he published four volumes of *System of Positive Politics*.

What made Comte immortal in the discipline was his celebrated 'law of three stages' (see also Unit 1). First, he spoke of the *theological stage*: a stage in which the mind explains phenomena or mundane occurrences by ascribing them to the unfathomable gods. The fact is that without

some guide one cannot begin to make systematic observations. And sciences in their infancy could not escape the questions relating to the essences of phenomena and their ultimate origins to which theological answers are most appropriate. Second, he spoke of the *metaphysical stage* in which abstract forces, powers and essences, rather than spiritual forces, are considered responsible for worldly affairs. And finally, as Comte argued, there was a *positive* or scientific stage in which we abandon the search for ultimate origins, purposes, or abstract forces, and become more concrete and focused: we observe the relations between phenomena, and arrive at laws because *the aim of positive philosophy is to consider all phenomena as subject to invariable natural laws* (see the example in Box 7.4).

Box 7.4 An Example to Understand the Deeper Meaning of Comte's Law of Three Stages

Let us take a simple illustration to comprehend the deeper meaning of these three stages of knowledge. Imagine fire as a phenomenon. It is possible to explain it, as the Vedic hymns suggest, as a manifestation of a powerful deity called *Agni*. Now Comte would have argued that explaining fire as a manifestation of *Agni* is a theological explanation. But suppose one goes beyond these Vedic rituals, and enters a higher stage of contemplative/abstract thought, and sees fire as something symbolising human beings' quest for truth and purity: burning all egotistic passions and impulses. Yes, Comte would have argued that it is a metaphysical explanation. But then, if you argue that fire is just a physico-chemical phenomenon that can be explained in the form of a natural law, Comte would have argued that you have finally arrived the positive stage. In other words, positivist knowledge is empirical and universal; something that is concrete and demonstrable. Here is a piece of knowledge without a metaphysical/ theological significance. It demystifies the world. So when you see the rains, you need not explain it as *Indra's blessing*; nor do you see it as a manifestation of man's poetry to overcome the dryness of his being. Instead, the rains you see, in this positivist stage, can be explained in terms of the scientific principles of heat, cloud formation and water cycle!

Not all branches of knowledge, argued Comte, reach the positive stage simultaneously. The 'lower' sciences, like astronomy, mechanics, chemistry and biology, develop fast. These are lower sciences because these are less complex, less dependent on the other sciences, and their distance from human affairs is far greater. But sociology, being more complex, and more near to everyday life, reaches the positive stage quite late. Comte was, however, hopeful that even for sociology the time had finally arrived. It could now project itself as a positive science, analyse social phenomena, and discover the laws governing the relations among them. Sociology, for him, is the *queen of the sciences* because without the guidance of its laws, the discoveries of the lower sciences could not be utilised to their maximum advantage for humanity.

There are two kinds of sciences, namely, *analytic* and *synthetic*. Physics and chemistry can be said to be analytic because they establish laws among isolated phenomena. Biology is synthetic because it is impossible

to explain an organ apart from the living creature as a whole. Likewise, according to Comte, sociology is synthetic because everything, be it religion or state, has to be studied in the context of the entire society.

It is not difficult to draw the implications of positivism. There is no free will in mathematics and physics. Likewise, as Comte thought, there is no free will in sociology. Sociology, Comte believed, could determine what is, what will be, and what should be. In other words, social phenomena are subject to strict determinism.

Let us understand what it means. Even a child learning elementary mathematics would tell you that $2+2=4$. If you and I want it to be different, it cannot be altered. In other words, $2+2=4$ is an iron law, say, like the law of gravitation. It prevails irrespective of our subjective states of mind.

That is precisely the kind of knowledge positivism is striving for. Suppose as a Marxist you put forward a sociological law that socialism is inevitable because that is the way history progresses. You are arguing like a positivist, and equating Marxism with an invariable natural law like the law of gravitation that exists, no matter what kind of life projects you and I have, and what kind of thoughts we cherish.

Yes, Comte was a great proponent of science. He believed in the essential Enlightenment notion of progress and in the arrival of the new age of scientific objectivity. Yet, let us not forget that Comte was also a great moralist. He was deeply concerned about social order and its moral foundation. In fact, he sought to use positivist sociology to reconstruct his society. No wonder, positivist sociology, for him, would act like a religion, of course a secular religion for humankind. This led Nisbet (1967:58) to comment that 'positive sociology for Comte is simply medievalism minus Christianity'. Look at the state of the French society Comte was confronting. True, the revolution was a turning point. But then, it also led to new problems, which, as he felt, were quite disturbing. For instance, he could not give his consent to the prevalent 'anarchy' leading to exaggerated individualism. It was, for him, a disease of modern civilisation. Nor did he give his consent to those who pleaded for divorce rights. His anxiety was that it would lead to the breakdown of the centrality of the family; it would also weaken the community. This moral crisis, or the crisis of order, was something that must be resolved. And it was his conviction that the new positivist sociological knowledge could fulfill the void, and serve the therapeutic function of religion. No wonder, he was equally concerned about social static or restoration of order. In fact, if you think deeply, you would realise that Comte's positivism conveyed the interesting message that science, despite the progressive role it played, was also an integral component of the Establishment, 'an ideology of order'!

7.4 Consolidation of Positivism

Auguste Comte provided the intellectual foundation of positivist sociology. And possibly it was this French tradition that gave birth to one of the most distinguished classical sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim consolidated and elaborated positivist sociology. In a way, the *Rules of Sociological Method* that he published in 1895 gave a new momentum to the discipline. The subject matter of sociology, he repeatedly emphasised, is the domain of *social facts* that cannot be comprehended by any other discipline. It is, therefore, important to know how he defined social facts.

You can understand it better through an example from your everyday life. Imagine one fine morning you choose to walk barefoot. Nobody has compelled you to do so; it is your free choice, your own decision. But then, imagine one evening you decide to visit a temple, and offer your prayers. Before entering the temple you remove your shoes, wash your hands, and walk barefoot.

Do you see a qualitative difference in these two experiences? Yes, there is a significant difference. In the second case you are not really free. Well, you may argue that it is you who have chosen to walk barefoot inside the temple complex. But that is because you have internalised the prevalent practice so well that it looks almost natural and spontaneous. Imagine what would have happened had you tried to enter the temple without removing your shoes. You would have experienced severe constraint and resistance. From the temple authorities to the other devotee: all would object to your act and regard it as an insult to the sacred space. In other words, walking barefoot inside the temple is a fact that exists out there as a thing. It has an independent force that transcends your own will. If you disobey the practice, you would be forced, coerced, isolated or ridiculed. Such facts, according to Durkheim, are called social facts.

Everybody eats, drinks and sleeps. But not all such facts can be called social. Then, there would be no difference between biological/ physiological facts and social facts. In fact, there are some distinctive features of social facts. First, social facts exist outside you. Imagine a tree that you are seeing from your window. It has a reality of its own. Even if you close your eyes and refuse to see it, the tree exists as it is. Likewise, Durkheim (1964: 1) explained that

When I fulfill my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself, and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited through my education.

These facts are indeed different. The currency you use in your economic exchange, the language you speak in the process of communication, the

rituals you celebrate as a member of a religious community, all these are social facts. Their existence does not depend on your or my will. As Durkheim (1964: 2) put it, 'here are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness'.

Second, social facts are endowed with *coercive power*. True, in our everyday life we do not experience this constraint. The reason is that, because of habit, socialisation and internalisation, we tend to experience social facts as natural and spontaneous. But then, as Durkheim (1964: 2-3) reminded, 'if I do not submit to the conventions of my society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word'.

Third, social facts as things need to be distinguished from their individual manifestations. In fact, Durkheim held that social facts 'acquire a body, a tangible form, and constitute a reality in their own right, quite distinct from the individual facts which produce it'. For example, codified legal and moral rules, or articles of faith wherein religious groups condense their beliefs; none of these can be found entirely reproduced in the applications made of them by individuals. Yet, sociologically it is important to categorise their tangible, crystallised aspects as social facts, not their individual manifestations.

The meaning of 'social' in social facts is, therefore, clear. As Durkheim (1964: 3) stated, 'their source is not in the individual, their substratum can be no other than society, either the political society as a whole or someone of the partial groups it includes, such as religious denominations, political, literary, and occupational associations'.

To sum up, you can borrow Durkheim's (1964: 13) own words, and conclude:

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.

You can understand Durkheim's scientific sociology better if you look at the 'rules' he prescribed for studying social facts. One such rule which has often been talked about is that it is absolutely necessary to *observe social facts as things*. What does it mean? A thing is a thing because its facticity cannot be altered even if you and I want it. It is in this sense that external objects like a tree, a table and a chair exist as things. If you wish to observe a thing as it is, you should not confuse it with your own ideas and sentiments. A tree needs to be seen as a tree, even if you hate trees. In other words, almost like Francis Bacon, Durkheim would argue that our ideas and sentiments or 'idols' should not prevent us

from seeing a thing as it is (see Unit 6 for the discussion of Bacon's ideas). A sociologist must follow this fundamental lesson of scientific objectivity. Take, for instance, marriage as a social fact. As an individual, you may not like the institution of marriage. But when as a sociologist you plan to study marriage as a social fact, retain your objectivity, separate your own likes and dislikes from facts, and see it as a thing codified in marriage laws, religious traditions and social customs. In other words, it is like separating the knower from the known facts from values. It is similar to the way a physicist studies the behavior of atoms, or a geologist studies the formation of mountains. Durkheim (1964: 30) elaborated further.

Social facts...qualify as things. Law is embodied in codes; the currents of daily life are recorded in statistical figures and historical monuments; fashions are preserved in costumes; and taste in works of art. By their very nature they tend towards an independent existence outside the individual consciousness, which they dominate. In order to disclose their character as things, it is unnecessary to manipulate them ingeniously.

Likewise, Durkheim recalled Rene Descartes, and reminded us of the need for overcoming all presuppositions. For Durkheim (1964: 32) it is like overcoming 'inferior' faculties like emotions, sentiments and feelings. Only then is it possible for the sociologist 'to emancipate himself from the fallacious ideas that dominate the mind of the layman'. No wonder, Durkheim (1964: 35) pleaded strongly for a scientific vocabulary in the discipline. Sociologists must avoid the indeterminacy of common sense language, and be clear about the specificity of the concept they use.

The subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena so defined should be included within this group.

It is equally important to avoid all sorts of vagueness while studying/observing an object. The physicist substitutes for the vague impressions of temperature and electricity by the visual representations of the thermometer and the electrometer. Likewise, when a sociologist studies social facts, s/he should not be carried away by their individual manifestations. Instead, it is important to find their expression in tangible and crystallised forms; for example, in legal codes, moral regulations, popular proverbs, statistical figures and religious conventions. Take an example. Suppose you are studying caste as a social phenomenon. It is possible that Ambedkar and Gandhi might have experienced and responded to caste hierarchy in different ways. But if you are practicing Durkheimian positivist sociology, you need not to be carried away by these individual manifestations. Instead, your task is to see caste as a thing, a structure rooted in codified laws, religious sanctions and social customs.

An important characteristic of science is its explanatory power. As sociology is scientific, it must explain social facts. For Durkheim, sociological explanations are objective and independent and cannot be reduced into psychological terms. It was in this sense that Durkheim (1964: 102)

made an interesting point that 'a whole is not identical with the sum of its parts'. It acquires an independent character that is qualitatively different from those of its component parts. Society is, therefore, not identical with the sum of individuals. It is, of course, true that without individuals there is no society. But society transcends the individual. While explaining social facts, it is important to understand the supremacy of the collective over the individual. Durkheim (1964: 104) clarified that

The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated. If, then, we begin with the individual, we shall be able to understand nothing of what takes place in the group. In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as between biology and the physiochemical sciences. Consequently every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we could be sure that the explanation is false.

It was in this sense that Durkheim, as his other substantial works suggest, provided sociological explanations for social facts like suicide, division of labor and moral education. In fact, as Durkheim (1964: 110) categorically stated, 'the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness'. Likewise, the function of a social fact needs to be seen in its relation to some social end. Take, for instance, punishment as a social fact. For Durkheim, its cause is the intensity of the collective sentiments that the crime offends. Likewise, its function is to maintain these very sentiments at the same degree of intensity. No wonder, for him, when the teacher punishes the child its function is not to cause physical suffering to the concerned child but to restore the sanctity of moral order in the classroom. To explain a social phenomenon, as Durkheim argued, is to find its cause as well as its function. And both cause and function are essentially social, not to be reduced to the individual psyche.

The craft of scientific sociology that Durkheim constructed gave a new momentum to the discipline. Sociology, he asserted, must come out of the influence of philosophy, and establish itself as a science. The principle of causality, he believed, can be applied to social phenomena. And sociology, as a result, would be free from ideological analysis; it would be neither individualistic, nor socialistic. Instead, sociology would be an objective study of social facts. This objectivity might reduce the 'popularity' of the discipline. But then, as if speaking like a prophet, Durkheim (1964: 146) said,

We believe, on the contrary, that the time has come for sociology to spurn popular success, so to speak, and to assume the exacting character befitting every science. It will then gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity...Assuredly, the time when it will be able to play this role successfully is still far off. However, we must begin to work now, in order to put it in condition to fill this role some day.

Let us not forget that Durkheim, despite his strong plea for scientific sociology, was deeply concerned about the moral foundation of society,

its stability and order. Possibly modern/ industrial societies, and their implicit differentiation, specialisation and division of labor made him confront a new problem. Gone are the days of simple societies characterised by 'mechanical solidarity'. But then, can modern societies survive merely through egotistic individualism and selfish interests? No wonder, he evolved a strong critique of utilitarianism and its celebration of the atomised individual trying to maximise one's pleasure. Instead, Durkheim continued to retain his belief in the moral supremacy of the collective, and he saw that the increasing differentiation in a modern society, paradoxically, would lead to more and more mutual dependence and create 'organic solidarity'. It was this consistent search for the basis of moral order that led him to explore the domain of religion and of the sacred, and school and moral education. In a way, in both Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim you are witnessing an endeavour to reconcile positivist sociology with social order and stability.

Positivism, it seems, is both an assertion of science as well as a quest for order and stability. Does it mean that science is yet another form of ideology? (See Unit 1, where a similar question has been answered in the affirmative.)

Let us now complete the Reflection and Action 7.1 exercise to check our own understanding of Durkheim's idea of social facts.

Reflection and Action 7.1

For Durkheim social facts are external and coercive and social facts should be treated as things to be studied through concrete expression in legal codes religious expressions, proverbs, customs etc. Based on the above notion of social facts, write on a separate sheet of paper your answers to the following questions.

Questions

- ❖ What can be given as examples, based on your own experience, to substantiate Durkheim's statement that social facts are coercive?
- ❖ Do you think that human beings are constantly seeking to escape the binding aspects of society; if they do so, in what way do they achieve this? Give examples.
- ❖ After collecting a few proverbs relating to gender relations, find out in what way do they capture the status of women?

7.5 Critiques of Positivism

Yes, in the French sociological tradition you saw the evolution and consolidation of positivism. But then it reached the other parts of the world and became a powerful sociological method. Positivism had its appeal. It sought to give a 'scientific status' to the discipline. The search for precision, objectivity, causality and value neutrality made it acceptable. This positivist social science found its logical culmination in the cult of numbers, in the mathematisation of social phenomena, in the urge to reduce qualitative human experiences into quantified statistical figures. And it has also its remarkable achievements.

But then, you can guess that not everyone can feel comfortable with positivism. First, it is possible to say that what is applicable in the domain of nature is not necessarily applicable in the domain of human society. Because, unlike nature, society consists of self reflexive agents who think, argue, contest, and through their practices and actions transform the world. Hence society cannot be subject to abstract/ universal generalisations. Positivism, it is alleged, undermines the creativity, reflexivity and agency of social actors. As you have already learnt in Unit 6, interpretative sociology was a refreshing departure from the positivist tradition.

Second, it can also be argued that the so-called 'ethical neutrality' of positivism reduces it to a mere technique, separated from moral/ political issues. And, paradoxically, it is precisely the politics of positivism. The establishment to legitimise itself often uses its scientific nature. In other words, positivism can prove to be pro-establishment, status-quoist, non-critical and non-reflexive. In the twentieth century this critique of positivism came rather sharply from critical theorists, or the adherents of the Frankfurt School Marxism. What is asserted is that science has lost its emancipatory power. Instead, science itself has become an integral component of the establishment. In fact, the experience of war, large-scale violence, the growth of fascism, the spread of the "culture industry", and the emergence of the 'authoritarian personality', in other words, the darkness of the twentieth century led these thinkers to speak of the 'dialectic of enlightenment'. No wonder, from Adorno to Horkheimer to Marcuse, the central thrust of their argument was that positivist science was nothing but a form of instrumental rationality leading to domination and manipulation of human and natural resources. They critiqued this instrumental rationality, and pleaded for a more critical, reflexive, qualitative and emancipatory social science.

Third, as you have already learnt in Unit 6, post-modernists deconstruct the very foundation of science. No wonder, for post-modernists, positivism loses its cognitive power and legitimacy. And in a way the distinction between objective science and subjective narrative gets eroded, sociology becomes yet another narrative filled with biographies and life histories, and a non-positivist/ post-modern sociology does not look fundamentally different from cultural studies!

As you understand, positivism emerged at a time when sociology was trying to establish itself as a science. And positivism continues to have its appeal (as was also pointed out at the end of Unit 4). But then, with the passage of time, with new experiences leading to disillusionment with the so called 'neutrality' of science, and with new sensitivity to reflexivity and creativity, we see the growing critique of positivism. Positivism has indeed lost much of its appeal. You can understand this changing intellectual milieu if you concentrate on the following two specific critiques of positivism.

A) Reflexive sociology resisting methodological dualism

Reflexive sociology, as put forward by Alvin W. Gouldner (1920-1980), is a meaningful alternative to positivism. Gouldner (1970), an American sociologist, wrote with a high degree of moral sensitivity, and critiqued positivism. He warned us of the methodological dualism[®] implicit in positivism. This dualism separates the knower from the known, subject from object, fact from value. Not solely that. It views that if the sociologist engages politically, emotionally and aesthetically with the object of his/ her study, the 'scientific nature' of the discipline would suffer. This cold objectivity, as Gouldner (1970: 496) would argue, is essentially an expression of alienation, that is, the alienation of the sociologist from his/her own self. It is like looking at sociological knowledge as just a piece of amoral technique.

Methodological Dualism is based upon a fear; but this is a fear not so much of those being studied as of the sociologist's *own self*. Methodological Dualism is, at bottom, concerned to constitute a strategy for coping with the feared vulnerability of the scholar's self. It strives to free him from disgust, pity, anger, from egoism or moral outrage, from his passions and interest, on the supposition that it is a bloodless and disembodied mind that works best. It also seeks to insulate the scholar from the values and interests of his other roles and commitments, on the dubious assumption that these can be anything but blinders. It assumes that feeling is the blood enemy of intelligence, and that there can be an unfeeling, unsentimental knower.

Gouldner (1970: 493), however, pleads for methodological monism[®], and asserts that the separation between the knower and the known must be overcome, because you cannot know others without knowing yourself. That is why, self-reflexivity is absolutely important. To know others a sociologist cannot simply study them, but must also listen to and confront himself/ herself. Knowing is not an impersonal effort but 'a personalised effort by whole, embodied men'. Reflexive sociology invites methodological monism, and, therefore, alters the very meaning of knowledge. It does not remain merely a piece of information. Instead, it becomes an awareness! It generates self-awareness and new sensitivity. Reflexive sociology, you would appreciate, is heavily demanding. Unlike positivist sociology in which you can remain 'neutral' and 'apolitical', reflexive sociology demands your moral commitment and ethical engagement. You cannot separate your life from your work. Gouldner (1970: 495) wrote,

Reflexive Sociology, then, is not characterised by what it studies. It is distinguished neither by the persons and the problems studied nor even by the techniques and instruments used in studying them. It is characterised, rather, by a *relationship* it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it. Reflexive sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work.

Take an example. Suppose you wish to study the phenomenon called 'slum culture'. A way of doing it is, of course, a highly positivistic/ technical research. You hire research assistants, send them to the

particular slum with a questionnaire, and instruct them to distribute copies of it after random sampling. The data you gather get classified and quantified, and you make your conclusions. These are the conclusions derived from 'hard' facts. And never do you feel the need to engage yourself as a person with the slum. In other words, your dispassionate exercise is not different from the way a mathematician solves a puzzle, or a scientist works in a lab.

Now Gouldner's reflexive sociology would oppose this kind of research. Instead, it would make you reflect on your own self and your politics and morality. Possibly you are urban, upper class, English speaking and relatively privileged. What does it mean for you to understand the slum culture? Isn't it the fact that their suffering cannot be separated from your privilege? Can you understand them without questioning this asymmetrical power? These questions born out of self-reflexivity would possibly create a new sociology which, far from objectifying the world, tries to create a new one. Possibly new trends in sociological research emanating from feminist and Dalit movements resemble this sort of reflexive sociology. Because in these research trends one sees not just technical objectivity, but essentially a high degree of empathy, an urge to understand suffering, and a striving for an alternative praxis.

B) Agency and structure: process of structuration

Another significant critique of positivism has come from Anthony Giddens, a leading sociologist of our time. Giddens' (1976) book, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, is a turning point. It is a text in which he studied the intellectual trajectory of the discipline, and negotiated with interpretative traditions, and reflexed on a set of new rules. It does offer an alternative to positivistic/ scientific sociology. Giddens is categorical about the fact that nature and human society are two different realms of enquiry. Nature is not a human production, but society is being perpetually created, renewed and altered by human agents. That is why there are limits to natural science methodology in sociology. In sociology, argues Giddens (1976: 13), 'those who still wait for a Newton are not only waiting for a train that won't arrive, they're in the wrong station altogether'. This seems to be the reason why he began his intellectual conversation with phenomenological/ ethno methodological traditions, the way these 'interpretative' sociologies seek to understand meanings, that is, the meanings that conscious human actors attach to the world, and construct their knowledge of the everyday world they live in. Although, for Giddens, there are possibilities in these traditions, we need to see beyond. Because the meaning you and I attach to the world has to be situated in a social context, and asymmetrical resources and capabilities often characterise this context. Take an example. Imagine yourself as a student in the classroom. It is, of course, true that you are not a puppet-silently performing the prescribed 'role'. Instead, you are a creative agent attaching meanings, and creating an inter-subjective world called the classroom.

But, then, there is a problem. Your agency/ freedom is not unlimited. Because differential/ unequal resources might characterise the classroom: teacher versus student. Even a simple site like the classroom is, in fact, a site of conflict and contestation. Giddens (1976), therefore, argues that interpretative sociology alone is not sufficient; it is equally important to be aware of the complex relationship between the agency and structure. This critical/ creative engagement with methodological issues led him to put forward a set of rules which can be summarised as follows.

First, sociology is not concerned with a "pre-given" universe of objects. Instead, sociology deals with a world that is constituted or provided by the active doings of subjects. It is in this sense that 'the production and reproduction of society has to be treated as a skilled performance on the part of its members' (Giddens 1976: 160). Let us understand it. Suppose you are studying a phenomenon called caste. Even a rigid system like caste, you realise, is not pre-given. Instead, human agents are perpetually creating and transforming what we call a caste society. That is why, lower caste movements or Dalit movements or divergent reforms take place, and the social reality that sociologists study remains perpetually vibrant and alive. It is a skilled performance which is in perpetual flux.

Second, although society is a skilled performance, the creativity of the social actor, as you have just learnt, is not unlimited since all of us, irrespective of our creativity, are historically located social actors, working under certain conditions. It is in this context that we ought to be aware of the limits/ constraints provided by the social structure. But then, what is interesting about Giddens (1976: 161) is that he is talking about the duality of structure[®]. 'Structure must not be conceptualised as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling'. An example would make this point clear. Imagine that you are speaking a language. No matter how creative you are, you cannot speak whatever you wish. You have to follow the grammar: a set of rules. But then, it is not just an experience of constraint. Language also enables you to speak. Moreover, a living language is not static; through their linguistic expressions and practices people make changes in the structure of the language. This is what Giddens (1976: 161) regards as the process of structuration[®] and says that for him, 'to enquire into the structuration of social practices is to seek to explain how it comes about that structures are constituted through action and, reciprocally, how action is constituted structurally'. In a way, the process of structuration enables him to overcome the duality of structure and agency. Yes, you cannot imagine yourself without the 'rules' that the structure provides. But at the same time, you are not a puppet. You can innovate, experiment, and alter the structure.

Third, Giddens asserts that a sociologist cannot escape the language that lay actors use to make sense of their world. That is why, meaningful sociological research requires immersion[®] in the form of life which the sociologist seeks to study. Immersion does not, however, mean that the

sociologist has to become a 'full member' of the community. This only means the ability 'to participate in it as an ensemble of practices'.

And finally, sociological concepts, asserts Giddens, are based on double hermeneutic[®]. The reason is that social actors themselves have already interpreted society as being a skilled performance, and hence the sociologists further reinterpret it within their theoretical schemes, mediating ordinary and technical language. About hermeneutics you will read in Unit 8.

These debates and contestations, you need to realise, have enriched the discipline. And it is important that you become aware of these multiple voices within the discipline.

Let us at the end of our discussion, complete the Reflection and Action 7.2 exercise.

Reflection and Action 7.2

Structures are as much constraining as enabling, people constantly innovate and interpret the given structures.

Explain the above statement with an illustration from a contemporary situation and write a short note on the process of structuration. Discuss your note with fellow learners of M A Sociology at your Study Center.

*It is a request to the Academic Counselor to organise an essay competition on this topic and send the top ten essays to the Coordinator of MSO 002. The best essay will have a surprise appearance.

7.6 Conclusion

In Unit 7 we have discussed the antecedents of positivism in the context of tremendous strides made in the sciences and of the general milieu of Enlightenment. Auguste Comte is considered the founder of sociology for he tried to conceive of similar methodology for the social sciences and the study of society. Positivism, as we can see, had a tremendous impact on sociology and in some ways helped establish it as a discipline. The propositions and theories of Comte have, however, been refined especially in the case of Durkhiem. He, by far, has been responsible for defining the subject matter of sociology and in laying out the rules to study society. Subsequent thinkers have critiqued his visualisation of an overarching coercive society, but Durkhiem still lays out a road map for us to follow and be clear in distinguishing individual acts from societal acts. The subsequent methodologies and perspectives in sociology attempted to privilege the agency of the individual. We have discussed Giddens' work as an example of this approach. Another critique that came strongly against positivism came from Gouldner, who felt that positivism with its methodological coldness separates the knower from the known and therefore he pleads for a reflexive sociology. Many in the

social sciences, especially in social anthropology, have recommended reflexivity. The issues of who represents whom has come under severe debate not only in anthropology but also in the general debates in the social sciences. With the post-modernist critique of unilinear theories there is an increasing tendency to look for multi-vocality. The question that can be asked in this context is what relevance do theories, which support generalising tendencies, have in the globalising world?

Further Reading

Allan Kenneth 2005, *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory, Seeing the Social World*, Sage Publications (Pine Ford Press): New York.

(The book uses ideas of modernity and post-modernity to help student understand how the theoretical, historical perspectives apply to their own time period.)

Giddens, Anthony 1984. *The constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuralism*, Polity Press: Cambridge (Chapter 1 on Elements of the Theory of Structuration and Chapter 6 on Structuration Theory, Empirical Research and Social Critique)



Unit 8

Hermeneutics

Contents

- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Methodological Disputes in the Social Sciences
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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 8 you will be able to discuss the following themes of the hermeneutics perspective in the social sciences.

- ❖ Location of hermeneutics in methodological disputes in the social sciences
- ❖ History of hermeneutics
- ❖ Links between hermeneutics and sociology
- ❖ The position of investigator in interpretation of tradition
- ❖ Explanatory understanding in hermeneutics
- ❖ Critical or depth interpretation

8.1 Introduction

Unit 8 on Hermeneutics is the last Unit of Block 2 of Book 1. Block 2 deals with the philosophical foundations of social research. As mentioned in Unit 5, we are taking up a detailed discussion of Hermeneutics in Unit 8. Hermeneutics (the interpretation of tradition) is a part of the methodological quest to understand the social reality. As it has been applied as a method in sociology, we need to look at its location in the scene of methodological disputes in the social sciences and trace its history for learning of its significance in sociological inquiry.

You will find that not much work in sociology in India has the applied hermeneutics approach, but its application is quite popular in areas where tradition is perceived as significant in the lives of the people. Wherever there is a new interpretation of the tradition, application of hermeneutics becomes a necessity. Unit 8 is going to provide a new tool in your hands. Hope, you will make use of it in your researches.

After introducing in Section 8.2 methodological disputes in the social sciences the unit traces in Sections 8.3 and 8.4 the history of hermeneutics and shows its relationship with sociology. In the end it discusses philosophical ideas of hermeneutics.

8.2 Methodological Disputes in the Social Sciences

Two main traditions have dominated the philosophy of social science for quite some time now, the divide being between those for whom social science is the explanation of social phenomena through a search for causes, and those for whom social science is the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of social action. This dispute over the nature of social science has a long history during which it has manifested itself in many forms.

There was the dispute over methods (*Methodenstreit*) of the 1890s in Germany in economics and Carl Menger (1841-1921), the neo classical Austrian economist, insisted that the exact laws of theoretical economics were identical in form to those of the natural sciences such as mechanics. Gustav Schmoller (1838-1917), of the German younger economic history school, roundly opposed Carl Menger (see Bryant 1985). Schmoller was also a member of the Society for Social Policy (*Verein für Sozialpolitik*), which had been set up in 1872 at Eisenach as a reform movement. The Society (*Verein*) never took up concrete political programmes, instead it published several studies of specific concrete problems in the socio-economic sphere. For these studies, Schmoller advocated an inductive, empirical and historical approach in opposition to the deductive and abstract approach of Menger.

At this point, some neo-Kantian philosophers entered the debate and the dispute became generalised from a conflict over the methodology of economics to a conflict about the nature of social science (see Box 8.1).

Box 8.1 Conflict over Methodology of Social Science

Windelband (1848-1915), of the Heidelberg neo-Kantian school, in his Rector's address of 1894, distinguished the nomothetic natural sciences from the ideographic human sciences (see also Box 1.5 in Unit 1). This difference, according to him, was not due to nature or society being the object of study of these sciences, the difference was the result of these sciences having distinct cognitive interests and goals. The natural sciences have a technical goal and interest while the human sciences have a practical goal and cognitive interest.

Another important debate over the methodology of the social sciences in Germany was the debate on the value and purpose of scientific research (*Werturteilsstreit*), which began in 1903 and lasted for over a decade, and in which a famous participant was Max Weber. Weber cut through the debate in his own particular way, although he numbered himself among the descendants of the historical school (Schmoller, Windelband) For him the social world was composed of unique objects and singular configurations. He did not reject causal analysis as inappropriate to the social sciences. Believing in the 'value relevance' of all social action, Weber saw the method of 'interpretative understanding' as essential to

social science, but he also said that it had to be complemented by causal analysis. Not only did Weber's category of 'value relevance' not exclude causal analysis, it also did not exclude Weber's advocacy of a 'value-free' social science and this was the issue that he debated with Schmoller in the early 1900s (Weber 1949).

Finally, there was the post Second World War debate on positivism or positivist dispute (Positivismusstreit) in Germany, which began in 1961 with Popper's opening address to the German Sociological Association at Tübingen (see Bryant 1985 and also Adorno et. al. 1976)). Popper presented twenty-seven theses on the logic of the social sciences, and Adorno answered him. The debate was to be between a supposedly positivist methodology advocated by Popper and Adorno's anti-positivist stance, but Popper spiked the proceedings somewhat by claiming himself to be a critic of positivism. In spite of this, the dispute continued with Habermas coming in on the side of Adorno (1903-1969) and continuing the attack on Popper's methodology as positivist, and Hans Albert (1904-1973) defending this methodology. In this debate too, as in the earlier ones, one side insisted on the human/historical/cultural/social sciences having their own methodology, distinct from that of natural science. The name given to this distinct methodology of the human sciences was hermeneutics.

8.3 Tracing the History of Hermeneutics

In a way, the story of hermeneutics is much older than these methodological disputes. Should we begin this story of hermeneutics as a methodology for the social sciences with the figure of Hermes, who brought the messages of the Greek gods to mortals? As a messenger, did Hermes just repeat verbatim the words of the gods to the mortals, or did he first have to "interpret" what the gods said, to "understand" their words, before he could convey their 'meaning' to the mortals. (The Greek word, "hermeneus" means an interpreter.)

This concern with godly things remained when hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, resurfaced during the Reformation[®]. Hermeneutics really came into its own during the Reformation when, against the Catholic insistence on church authority and tradition in matters of understanding and interpreting the Holy Scriptures, Protestant reformers had to come up with alternative principles of the interpretation of the Bible. Did the church's insistence on its functionaries being the arbiters of the meaning of Christian religious texts imply that these religious texts were incomplete in themselves, and one had to go outside of them to a priest to discover their meaning? The recovery of the classical texts during the Renaissance had also led to a humanist hermeneutics, and the twelfth century interest in the Justinian[®] legal code generated its own hermeneutics of jurisprudence. The person responsible for bringing all these elements together, and known

as the father of modern hermeneutics, was Schleiermacher (1768-1834). While Schleiermacher (see Box 8.2 Schleiermacher on Hermeneutics) held his chair in Protestant theology at the University of Berlin between 1810 and 1834, he taught a course on hermeneutics.

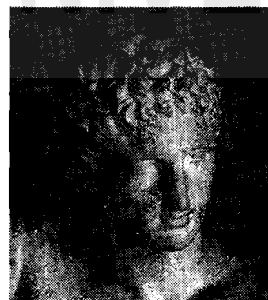
Box 8.2 Schleiermacher on Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher believed that human beings have a linguistic disposition and their linguistic competence enables them to understand the utterances of others. He considered hermeneutics an art and believed that every utterance, whether spoken or written, contemporary or historical, could be understood through an interpretation. Every utterance was an embodiment of the speaker's thought, and this thought could only be embodied in language. Understanding and interpretation, therefore, always had two aspects or components, namely, a grammatical or linguistic component and a psychological or divinatory component. According to Schleiermacher (1819: 74), "Just as every act of speaking is related to both the totality of the language and the totality of the speaker's thoughts, so understanding a speech always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities, and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker."



Schleiermacher
(1768-1834)

Schleiermacher (1819: 75) insisted that "these two hermeneutical tasks are completely equal, and it would be incorrect to label grammatical interpretation the 'lower' and psychological interpretation the 'higher' task". Grammatical interpretation corresponds to the linguistic aspect of understanding. This dimension is tied to the hermeneutical circle of part and whole, for it involves a consideration of the relation between an isolated expression or work and the pre-given totality of language or literature. Psychological interpretation, on the other hand, is a divinatory dimension that attempts to recover the individuality and originality of the speaker or the writer, to recreate the creative act.



Hermes, a
Greek God

The goal of understanding is to 'understand the text at first as well and then even better than its author'. Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader. Moreover with respect to the objective aspects, the author has no data other than we have (Schleiermacher 1819: 83).

8.4 Hermeneutics and Sociology

Having reached the stage of the rules of interpretation, to interpret well we have to linguistically contextualise the utterances of the writer, as well as historically contextualise the writer. We are still puzzled. What do the rules of the interpretation of texts have to do with sociology? Don't they belong instead to such disciplines as literary criticism? The answer to these questions is, in the words of Thompson (1981: 37), "In the wake of their work, the text to be interpreted was no longer a mere fragment of classical or Christian literature, but rather history itself as the document of the achievements and failures of humanity." Thompson's words echo the great German historians, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and Gustav Droysen (1808-1884). When history itself became the story or the text that was the object of study, it was only a small step from this vantage point to view social practices and social institutions as text analogues, the meaning of which had to be interpreted.

Defining sociology in this way would have, however, seemed meaningless to Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the founder of sociology, who published his *Course of Positive Philosophy* in six volumes between 1830 and 1842. For Comte (see Box 8.3 Comte's View of Sociology), all phenomena are subject to invariable natural laws; in so far as human phenomena are concerned, the fundamental laws are the laws concerning the human beings' intellectual history, the evolution of the way of thinking of human beings about themselves and the world around them.

Box 8.3 Comte's View of Sociology

Comte saw sociology as the culmination of an intellectual history, which began from Theology to Metaphysics to Sociology. This law of the three stages, like the law of gravity, had been at work since the beginning of the human being's life on earth; each branch of our knowledge has passed successively through three different theoretical conditions, namely, the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive. In the theological state, the mind supposes all phenomena to be produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings, and in the metaphysical state, the mind supposes abstract forces, veritable entities, inherent in all beings. In the positive state, the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws, that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance (see Gordon 1991). Various disciplines like physics and biology had passed through the theological and the metaphysical stages and had now become scientific. If sociology followed the route of these sciences, it would also achieve a scientific status.

It was against a position like Comte's that in 1883, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) published his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* in 1883; in which he argued that it was unfortunate that while the human sciences had successfully freed themselves from the domination of theology and metaphysics, they had succumbed to the domination of the natural

sciences. Dilthey opposed Comte by positing a methodological divide between the natural sciences (the *Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (the *Geisteswissenschaften*) which include the social sciences. Human beings are certainly part of nature, but unlike other natural objects like stones, air and trees, they are imbued with consciousness. They have an inside and when they do something, that something has a meaning for them, just as when an author writes something, he intends to convey some meaning through his writing. How can we know social action without the recovery of its meaning for its actors? When Dilthey asked this question, hermeneutics jumped from being a method of interpreting texts to being the method for the social sciences, and this jump fore-grounded the question of what is it that is assumed in conceptualising social action as a text. Then the task was to interpret the text and understand its meaning.

According to Dilthey, understanding is a category of human life. When human beings act, they act according to their reading of the situation in which they are. In order to understand their action, we have to first understand their understanding of the situation in which they acted. Dilthey argued that the formal methods of interpretation in the human and the social sciences are derived from these 'elementary forms of understanding' that are characteristic of everyday human life and social interaction. Dilthey (1883: 154) held, "Understanding arises, first of all, in the interests of practical life where people are dependent on dealing with each other. They must communicate with each other. The one must know what the other wants. So the first elementary forms of understanding arise."

For Dilthey, the object of understanding is always a 'life-expression'. Life expressions are of three classes, namely,

- ❖ The first of these classes are concepts, judgements and larger thought-structures.
- ❖ Actions form another class of life expressions.
- ❖ The third class is the 'lived experience'.

The understanding of any expression of life takes place in the medium of 'objective mind'. Taking over the Hegelian category of 'objective mind', Dilthey (1883: 155) writes, "For even the work of genius represents ideas, feelings and ideals commonly held in an age and environment. From this world of objective mind the self receives sustenance from earliest childhood. It is the medium in which the understanding of other persons and their life-expressions takes place."

Elementary forms of understanding give rise to higher forms of understanding. Even though understanding takes place in the medium of objective mind, "the subject matter of understanding is always something individual.... We are concerned with the individual not merely as an example of man in general but as a totality in himself" (Dilthey 1883: 158). Even

when one accepts Dilthey's insistence on the 'intrinsic value' of the individual, one is uneasy about how his adopted category of 'objective mind' fits with his emphasis on the individual. Dilthey's categories of objective mind and of the human being as a totality in himself or herself are analogous to Schleiermacher's distinction between the linguistic and psychological components of understanding. For both these thinkers, a central issue is that of how these two aspects of understanding fit together.

It is interesting to note that this dilemma of Dilthey's hermeneutics is matched by the structure-agency debate generated by structural-functionalism. Till the 1960s, the Parsonian model of structural-functionalism, which used a causal form of explanation, dominated sociology, particularly of the Anglo-American variety. The nineteen sixties saw a revolt against this model, in the form of ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics. Both ethnomethodology and hermeneutics insisted that instead of explaining social action by citing either structures or intentions as causes, the social scientist needed to understand the meaning of the action. For ethnomethodology, if the route to meaning lay through intentions, this still meant that intentions were not causes, instead they were the creators of meaning. For hermeneutics on the other hand, these meanings were derived not so much from intentions as from social and cultural practices (Alexander 1987).

8.5 Philosophical Hermeneutics

Getting back to our main story, while Dilthey's methodological concerns were further developed by Enrico Betti (1823-1892), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) took the discussion of hermeneutics to a different plane. Gadamer argued that if one were to take seriously the claim of understanding being a category of life, then one could not see hermeneutics narrowly as a methodological tool, but one had to instead speak of 'universal' hermeneutics, since all human experience has a hermeneutic dimension. In an unselfconscious manner, we are engaged in the hermeneutic task of understanding all the time, but we only become conscious of it when we have an experience of misunderstanding, when we feel that we have not read the situation correctly. Just as breathing is a constant part of us as long as we live, so is 'understanding' a part of our being in the world. In the introduction to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975) categorically stated that the hermeneutics he was developing was not a methodology of the human sciences. The philosophical questions of *Truth and Method* were: "what is understanding, and how is understanding possible?" Gadamer (see Box 8.4 Gadamer's Conception of Understanding) defined hermeneutics as the "basic being-in-motion of There-being which constitutes its finiteness and historicity and hence includes the whole of its experience of the world". ...The study of

hermeneutics is thus the study of Being, and, ultimately, the study of language, because "Being that can be understood is language" (as quoted in Hekman 1986: 94).

Box 8.4 Gadamer's Conception of Understanding

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer found fault with both the Enlightenment and the Romantic conception of understanding as being based on a false opposition between reason and tradition, or between judgment and prejudice. Understanding is not a matter of judgments alone; nor do prejudices always lead to misunderstanding. Similarly, if the canons of rationality enable one to understand only to make sense in the context of certain traditions, then the tradition is not a matter of simple inertia. It is instead "...constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, and cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen action as revolution and renewal." (Gadamer 1975).

In his thinking about hermeneutics, Gadamer, much more than Dilthey and Schleiermacher, also problematised the position of the investigator. For Gadamer, 'any interpretations of the past, whether by a historian, philosopher or linguist, are as much a creature of the interpreter's own time and place as the phenomenon under investigation was of its own period in history. The interpreters are always guided in their understanding of the past by their own particular set of prejudices. Acts of understanding or interpretation require the overcoming of the strangeness of the phenomenon to be understood and its transformation into an object of familiarity in which the horizon of the historical phenomenon and that of the interpreter become united.' This fusion of horizons between the object and subject of study is possible because the historical object and the hermeneutic operation of the interpreter are both part of the overriding historical and cultural tradition or continuum, which Gadamer calls effective history (for more on fusion of horizons and effective history, see Dostal 2002).

8.6 The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Our next thinker who has made a contribution to hermeneutics is Jorgen Habermas (1929-). Since Habermas came to hermeneutics from a Marxism mediated by the Frankfurt school, his methodological principles show the influence of both Marxist and Freudian theory. For Habermas, the history of the human sciences shows that human beings pursued knowledge in order to fulfill three interests, namely,

- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the empirical-analytic sciences is in technical control.
- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the cultural sciences is practical.

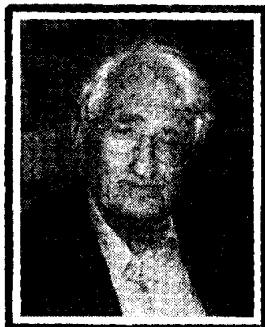
- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the critical sciences is in emancipation.

Positing a relation between the logical-methodological rules of a science and its knowledge constitutive interests, Habermas argues that the methodological structure of Freudian psychoanalysis is paradigmatic for a critical science of society. Habermas calls the method of psychoanalysis a form of 'depth hermeneutics'; which incorporates explanation and understanding into a science oriented towards methodological self-reflection. (We will learn a little later Ricoeur has labelled Habermas' method of psycho-analysis as 'hermeneutics of suspicion'). Successful psychoanalytic practice is defined in terms of the patient himself or herself being able to understand and overcome his or her neurosis. This idea can be generalised to the position that human beings, unlike objects in nature, have a consciousness and an understanding of what it is that they are doing. If the social scientist does not want to stay limited to this understanding, she or he is also not to ignore it by calling it false consciousness.

Habermas uses his category of depth hermeneutics to contest Gadamer's concept of philosophical or universal hermeneutics. Habermas allows that understanding the meaning of something that seems unfamiliar can come about when that unfamiliar action is placed in its historical and social context. But in the case of what he calls 'systematically distorted communication', he points to the problem of lack of understanding which remains even when the action is contextualised. We can use the example of a neurosis – say the compulsive washing of hands – to illustrate the point. If we seek to understand the meaning of someone constantly washing hands, over and above the placing of that someone in her or his social horizon, we need to also unearth the event which triggered that neuroses in the person. In order to understand this case, we have to first explain it (see Box 8.5).

Box 8.5 Habermas' Concept of Explanatory Understanding

Habermas (1985: 305) came up with the category of 'explanatory understanding' and said that "The What – the meaningful content of the systematically distorted expression – cannot be "understood" if the Why – the origin of the symptomatic scene in the conditions responsible for the systematic distortion itself - cannot be "explained" at the same time... explanatory understanding, as a depth-hermeneutical deciphering of specifically inaccessible expressions, presupposes not only, as simple hermeneutical understanding does, the trained application of naturally acquired communicative competence, but a theory of communicative competence as well. Such a theory concerns itself with the forms of the inter-subjectivity of language and the causes of their deformation."



Jorgen Habermas
(1929-)

Wanting to employ depth hermeneutics as a resource for the emancipatory interest of the critical sciences, Habermas asks us to be conscious of the problem of the understanding turning into reconciliation in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Unless we are conscious of the possibility of 'systematic distortions', the 'strangeness of the phenomenon' might be overcome not through explanatory understanding but through reconciliation.

8.7 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Finally, in his hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur carries this Habermasian turn back to explanation further. In his 'The Model of the Text', first of all, in order to prove the relevance of hermeneutics as a method to the social sciences, Ricoeur shows human action as having the same structure as a written text. Ricoeur (1971) first distinguishes between spoken and written discourse. In written discourse, unlike in an oral conversation, the link between the author and the meaning of what the author has written, as well as the link between the meaning of what is written and the specific interlocutor to whom it is addressed, is broken. Like written discourse, human action is also detachable from its author; it has consequences of its own, it always goes beyond its relevance to its initial situation, and it can be seen as addressed to an infinite number. These various similarities are sufficient to warrant the treatment of action as a text, and so to justify the distinctive status of a hermeneutical discourse on human action.



Paul Ricoeur
1913-2005

Like Habermas, Ricoeur also sees psychoanalysis as a type of hermeneutics. But this hermeneutics, Ricoeur points out, is not a hermeneutics of faith; it is, rather, a hermeneutics of suspicion. Whereas the hermeneutics of faith is animated by a willingness to listen and by a respect for the object as a revelation of the sacred, the hermeneutics of suspicion is animated by a skepticism towards the given and a rejection of respect for the object.

It is not only psychoanalysis that questions the authority of the meaning producing subject - so does structuralism: the objective meaning of a text is something other than the subjective intention of the author, and so the problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author. Not that hermeneutics, even in the hands of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, ever reduced meaning to intentionality, but what is new in Ricoeur is that he begins to speak of the transition 'from Understanding to Explanation' and 'from Explanation to Understanding'. Ricoeur (1971) argues that we should consider structural analysis to be a necessary stage between a

'naïve' interpretation and a 'critical' interpretation, between a 'surface' interpretation and a 'depth' interpretation. The final movement in the dialectic of interpretation thus culminates in an act of understanding that is mediated by the explanatory procedures of structuralist analysis.

8.8 Conclusion

An application of hermeneutics refers to making end use of a traditional text, like the judge interprets and applies the law to a case, or the preacher interprets and applies a religious tenet to a contemporary moral issue. In this sense, hermeneutics is visible all around us and we hope that you are going to find some use of hermeneutics in your researches. In the units that follow, you will read about contemporary perspectives used in sociological research. It will be interesting for you to discover the application of hermeneutics in some of the contemporary social research.

Further Reading

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