

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.

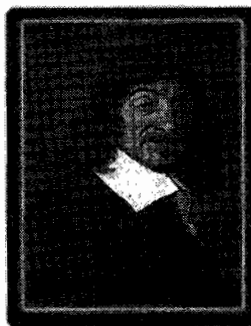
Descartes: I think, therefore I am

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?

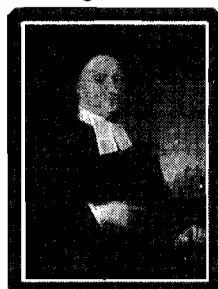
In the light of the above statements find out from at least five persons, including those who haven't been schooled in scientific explanations, as to how they will explain the movement of the sun and how they perceive that the earth is round. Write a short note of about five hundred words on their explanations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

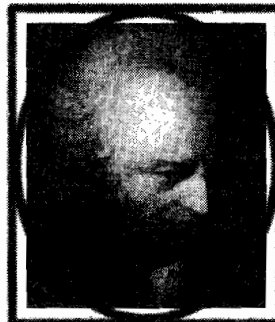
The eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant further refined idealism through his critical inquiry into the limits of possible knowledge. Kant held that the mind forces the world we perceive to take the shape of space-and-time. Hegel (1770-1831) thought that history must be rational in something 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.

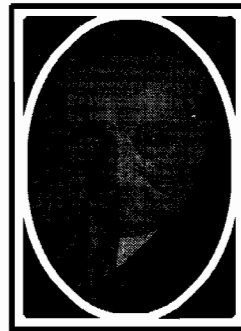
What Husserl gathered when he contemplated the content of his mind were such acts as remembering, desiring, and perceiving and the abstract content of these acts, which Husserl called meanings. These meanings, he claimed, enabled an act to be directed toward an object under a

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)

