

Theory of Knowledge as propounded by great Western Philosophers compared with Ramanujacharya's based on Vedas

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The term **METAPHYSICS** was introduced to define what are “THINGS” and “WHAT IS MATTER”. It included information about space and time as related to physical materials. This concept was mainly promoted by ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. Later on, in the 19th and 20th centuries, modern philosophers promoted the concept of **EPISTEMOLOGY**, to define the Theory of Knowledge. This concept was first highlighted by the Scottish **King James VI** in the 16th Century, based on the Greek character called *Epistemon*, meaning Scientist. There were many social beliefs and religious statements of Christian preachers that were not acceptable to the modern thinkers. This led to the evolution of Epistemology. This term was first used by the philosopher **Frederick Ferrier**. There was a major movement in Germany promoting Theory of Knowledge among philosophers, under the head **WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE**, promoted by **Johann Fichte** and **Bernard Bolzano**.

Let us understand the Theory of Knowledge dealing with how it arises in man with some examples. We all know that $1 + 1 = 2$; $5 + 5 = 10$; $93 + 7 = 100$ and so on. **But how did we arrive at it?** Another very interesting and puzzling question – **Is it really true?** Is it not correct to state that someone developed this mathematical system and we all have accepted it. It totally synchronises with our **system of quantification and evaluation**. Hence we are happy and continue with it. **Are these statements true? If so, how true?** Epistemology questions the very process

of knowledge and its recognition. **WHAT – WHEN – WHO – WHERE – HOW** are all different aspects of knowledge that cannot be classified as true at all times and to everyone thinking about it. Epistemology also questions the process of acquiring this knowledge – **THE HOW OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION**. There is a very important interface between **KNOWLEDGE AND THE KNOWER**.

The quality of one's knowledge or knowledge itself depends upon the knower and the process through which we acquired it. Western Knowledge Philosophers focus a lot on this, highlighting that the so-called ocean of knowledge with humanity is just a huge collection of thoughts much of which may not be true. (Refer **Theory of Māyā** at the end of this article). Epistemology addresses the **NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE** and its **JUSTIFICATION**. It was mainly promoted to understand and explore the **RATIONALITY OF BELIEFS** in society considered as knowledge by those who drive beliefs. Skeptics would say that most of the beliefs are untrue and not justifiable as truths. The branch of Epistemology known as **SKEPTICISM** was developed by Western philosophers to address the issues that questioned **faith based knowledge, whether to call it as knowledge at all or no?** Epistemology goes to the root of all knowledge, their **SOURCES, SCOPE and JUSTIFIABILITY OF BELIEFS**. It addresses the **CRITERIA** for justification of anything as knowledge – **IDENTITY Vs. REALITY**. **Michael Polanyi** explored issues related to beliefs based on tradition

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exploring whether they are provable. Many centuries ago, **the Greek philosopher Plato** highlighted that religious beliefs project themselves to be absolute truths and that promoters of scientific thinking should question them. **Knowledge vs. Belief** is a major philosophical debate among Western philosophers. The great Greek philosopher, **Socrates**, argues that **powerful people in society force the people to accept that all beliefs promoted by the powerful are absolute truths**. He states that only beliefs that are **justified through verification** can be considered as knowledge. Only true beliefs **with accountability** for verification and proof can be considered as knowledge.

CONNOISSEUR of French philosophers **WISSEN & KENNEN** of German philosophers highlighted the superiority of **Recognition** over just knowing, and promoted the **Theory of Recognition**. **Michael Polanyi** highlighted the need to move from “**Knowledge That**” to “**Knowledge How**”, in order to self-evaluate traditional, mainly religious, beliefs that project themselves as absolute truths. **Edmund Gettier**, the famous American philosopher raised fundamental questions on knowledge – **Is justified true belief knowledge?** It may be justified and true, but still it is still a belief. Often justification comes through events, and that too through good luck. Did your thinking about the possibility of an event arising just through coincidence? For example, your friend promises to come and meet you at a particular place and time. Some colleague tells you that he won't come. You still go and wait. He did not come. Your colleague tells you – “Hey! Did I not tell you he will not come? Why did you not believe me?” Question: Did he have true knowledge or did just believe that the person will not come and it happened to be true? **MANY OF THE BELIEFS TO WHICH WE ARE TOTALLY ATTACHED COME TO BE TRUE THROUGH GOOD LUCK! - says Gettier. SKEPTICISM** questions validity of all beliefs, though they have been accepted by society as knowledge through event and occurrence based surmises, so-called true events. **Gettier's Euler Diagram** shown

below highlights the gaps between Beliefs, Truths and Knowledge.

We have to address the **PROCESS** through which beliefs are formed –

- Creation of a **PERCEPTION** and its receipt by the knower.
- **Process** of receiving the perception
- **Remembering** and retaining it.
- **Reasoning** – its usage to address what is received in the brain.
- **Introspection** – as to various aspects of the information received, and its validity.

The question is, after all this, can we say it constitutes TRUE KNOWLEDGE? Examination of any knowledge as to its truth from all angles is one of the main issues discussed in the Western Theory of Knowledge. It is known as **RELIABILISM**. It is argued that true knowledge should be backed up by **INFALLIBILISM & INDEFEASIBILITY**. At any time I check the information and at any place where I check it, whoever checks it – it should be correct. It should be infallible. One can address the issue through any number of questions and arguments. Whatever the argument, however we look at the issue, it should be true and not defeasible. Then it is true knowledge. It is important to note that all concepts (say mother, father, child, vehicle, food etc.) are all backed up by the **need for each one of them and all beliefs are also based on the need for them**. But they may not be backed up by truth. **Nyaya Theory of Knowledge** promoted by the Buddhists states that “**Not all claims as knowledge can be sustained.**” True belief acquired through a wrong route, through **pseudo-evidence** may just be an event – NOT KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH. Just an accidental relationship between truth and belief. **RELIABILISM** addresses this process of deriving knowledge and evaluating beliefs. Knowledge specialists evaluate that **the ratio of true to false beliefs is very high**.

There is another aspect of knowledge examined by epistemologists – **Externalists vs. Internalists**.

The famous philosopher **René Descartes** holds that **all knowledge in human beings arise through internal processes using own senses**. As our senses are not infallible, our knowledge is also not infallible. In knowledge, no man is perfect. No one possesses perfect ability to know all things. True knowledge is derived through clarity and distinctiveness. He proposed that human beings are individuals as they can think – “*Cognito ergo sum*” (“*I can think, therefore I am.*”). He also proposed that **knowledge should be reaffirmed in man through methodological doubts**.

Another issue that is addressed in the Western Theory of Knowledge is the **VALUE PROBLEM**. **Socrates** questions – “**Is belief more valuable or is knowledge more valuable?**” Under the Value Problems in Epistemology, there is a section on **Ethical Values**, also called **VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY**. For example, we buy things from the market. We go to a given supplier again and again as we perceive in his or her supplies monetary or ethical value provided by the party. This value is derived through the **IMAGE** of the supplier in our minds. In modern commercial business, companies push their images in the minds of the customer through advertisements. Question is – **Is the image of a company the true value of the company or its product that we are after?** **VERITISM**: It is a branch of Epistemology that questions the **value of any knowledge**. It says that man has been in search of absolute truth since ages. The search has been unfruitful. Man can only theorize on absolute truth, but never reach it. Veritism claims that the claims made by Organized Religions about their concepts about God and other theories are absolutely wrong as they are not verifiable. What is perceived by man’s six senses only are real. It also highlights that **all human beings** have a **SENSE OF RIGHT & WRONG**, and value **MORALITY** (except those who are psychologically affected).

Knowledge acquired through one’s senses is **EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE**. According to Veritism, only knowledge derived through experience is true knowledge. The **process of acquiring knowledge** is dealt with in Epistemology under

A-PRIORI & A-POSTERIORI KNOWLEDGE. **A-PRIORI KNOWLEDGE** is acquired without use of any of the senses, without any experience. It is knowledge received **through reasoning, but without validation**. We don’t experience mathematics and arithmetical calculations. We are taught maths and believe or made to believe that it is true. Knowledge propagated by great sages is all a-priori knowledge. Also we derive knowledge through our own **PERCEPTIONS** and **INTUITION**. The great scientists and mathematicians derived their knowledge and propounded astounding theories through sudden awakening and revelations in their minds. Great examples are **Newton, Einstein, the great mathematician Ramanujan** and others. How did they discover what they did? – Through the process of acquiring a-priori knowledge.

A-POSTERIORI KNOWLEDGE is all knowledge acquired through experience. Veritism accepts only this kind of knowledge as true knowledge. A child knows its school mates or teacher through experience. However, can we state that it knows its mother only through experience? Or a child cries for food whenever hungry. It knows that it gets food when it cries. Is it a-priori knowledge or a-posteriori knowledge? Does it not cry for food from the day it is born? What experience did it have then? We must accept that much of the knowledge deposited in one’s brain is a-posteriori knowledge. **Only a small portion of our brain deposited knowledge is a-priori knowledge**. One does get intuitive knowledge from time to time – through sudden awakening of his mind. But it is rare and only a small part of one’s field of knowledge.

BERTRAND RUSSELL (1872 – 1970) – He highlighted that all knowledge has to have a relationship. He called it “**KNOWLEDGE RELATIONS**” or “**KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ACQUAINTANCE**”. One receives knowledge only when he gets acquainted with the items associated with it. He also introduced the **Theory of ATOMISM**. The theory holds that the world consists of ultimate logical “facts” (or “atoms”) that cannot be broken down

any further. Having originally propounded this stance in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein rejected it later on in his publication “*Philosophical Investigations*”.

The name Atomism was coined in 1918 by Russell in response to what he called “Logical Holism” – that is, the belief that the world operates in such a way that no part or component of a body can be known without the whole body being known first. This belief is commonly called MONISM, and in particular, Russell (and G. E. Moore) were reacting to the absolute idealism dominant then in Britain and exemplified in works of other philosophers.

Bertrand Russell also highlighted the difference between **Knowledge by DESCRIPTION & Knowledge by ACQUAINTANCE**. He explained what is mind, how it can lead man from true knowledge to unreal so-called knowledge; how mental thinking could take man far away from true knowledge in the **CONCEPT OF MIND**. He highlighted that **THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE cannot substitute for PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE** driven by **SKILLS** derived through experience. He dwelt with the issues related to **INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES & PEOPLE’S KNOWLEDGE PROPERTIES**.

IMMANUEL KANT (1724 – 1804)-Another great Western Knowledge Philosopher was the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant, considered as a genius of modern philosophy. He dealt with issues of Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ethics and Aesthetics. In his book “*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*” (**Critique of Pure Reason**) he addresses the relationship between reason and human experience. He highlighted what is **TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM & EMPIRICAL REALISM**. Idealism cannot transcend human experience. One cannot have an idealism far removed from experience. He also highlighted issues related to **ANALYTIC KNOWLEDGE PROPOSITIONS & SYNTHETIC KNOWLEDGE PROPOSITIONS**. For example, “My father has three children.” – is an analytic proposition based on direct experience and what is seen, whereas “All children of my father

have black hair.” – is a synthetic proposition based on surmise and supposition. Kant states that

- All scientific and mathematical statements are synthetic propositions.
- All synthetic propositions are a-priori knowledge.
- All scientific analysis and mathematical analysis are synthetic in nature.
- **Knowledge Constructivism**: The entire Knowledge Field is a compilation of man-made constructions. E.g. – Liquids, Atoms, Molecules.
- **SCIENTISTS CONSTRUCT THE TRUTH!!**
- **It is impossible to have a world that is mind independent.**
- He discusses knowledge issues with reference to **REGRESSIVE ANALYSIS**.

REGRESSIVE ANALYSIS – is a branch of Theory of Knowledge that reviews each event or aspect of knowledge analyzing the cause behind it, continuing to analyse the cause behind each cause. It is the same as **Root Cause Analysis (Why-Why Analysis)** used in technical problem solving. He states that a good quality Regressive analysis is **LINEAR**. On the other hand, there are a few aspects of knowledge wherein regressive analysis goes round and round in a cyclical manner, the analysis ending up in the same event which we started analyzing to identify its cause. This is called **CIRCULAR** analysis, which does not lead to true knowledge being established. Problems in regressive analysis arise due to **EMPIRISM (EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS)** based on suppositions and not backed up 100% with facts. Empirical Analysis relies mainly on Common Sense, Positivism and Realism, not backed up by truth. All these are related to **SENSE DATA**. **JOHN POLLOCK** observes that “**Justification just meanders in and out through our network of beliefs stopping nowhere (in circular regressive analysis).**”

DAVID HUME (1711 – 1776) from Edinburgh promoted the concepts of **Philosophical Empirism, Skepticism, Nihilism and Naturalism**. He emphasized that **one’s knowledge is linked to the ideas in**

one's mind. If one has no idea on a subject he cannot have any knowledge about it. He designated this as **EMPIRISM. IDEATION THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE** – All knowledge is backed up by ideas. If one does not have any idea about something, his knowledge on it is nil. **SKEPTICISM** – People should start questioning knowledge, throw up ideas against it and explore its reality. “Knowledge should have room for Skepticism.” All knowledge cannot be 100% correct. **NIHILISM** – There should be room for rejection of what is accepted by most people as truth and unsailable information. Nihilism proposes that **most of the MORAL JUDGMENTS ARE WRONG.** They are all based on false groundless prepositions. It holds that there is nothing that is intrinsically moral under all conditions and for all people. There is nothing that is good under all circumstances and nothing that is bad under all conditions. These views are strongly opposed by all religions and believers in social integration. It is suggested that the question of validity of Nihilism should be examined from pure philosophical angle and not from the angle of social upliftment. He holds that **all science is related to human nature and his moral philosophy. Human nature is the most important CAPITAL ASSET of Knowledge.**

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS (1225 -1274) An Italian Dominican and Catholic Priest, he studied the work of Aristotle and explored the field of human knowledge. Some of the important ideas promoted by him in the field of knowledge are * **SENSES:** They are the basis of all knowledge in an individual. **All knowledge begins with senses. * Senses grasp objects and create an understanding** about them in one's mind. * **IMAGE CREATION:** Knowledge is retained through **creation of an image of the object** in one's brain. * **ABSTRACTION:** One's mind thinks about the object and explores its characteristics. It robs the object of certain characteristics the mind does not accept. Then it deposits the modified image of the object in one's brain. Thus, the image of any object in one's brain may not be the true object. (Example: Images of persons we love and persons

we hate.) * **INTELLECTUAL LIABILITY:** Thus the improper understanding of an object by a person becomes one's liability with only those properties that are considered valuable by one's mind. * **TRUTH:** One wanting to reach truth and understand its true value, has to address the **PROCESS OF ABSTRACTION.** A good procedure would guarantee the truth about the object in one's mind.

VEDIC THOUGHTS ON THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE –

EXPLANATIONS BY SHRI. RAMANUJACHARYA

According to the Vedas, while understanding how and why of Knowledge that arises in men, one need not be concerned about its truth. We are only **studying the nature and level of knowledge in a person**, without going into the areas of its quality and versatility.

STEPS OF KNOWLEDGE CREATION: Following steps are highlighted in creation of Knowledge in any person:

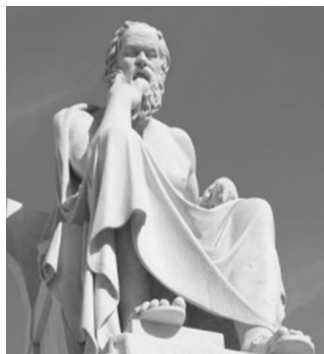
- **PURUSHA (PRURUSHĀRTHA) (Conceptualization)** – All knowledge is first infused in an individual through conceptualization. A child creates the concept of its mother, father, friends etc. before recognizing them. The concept is backed by providing a meaning to it (*Purushārtha*).
- **PRATYAKSHA – DARSHANA (Imaging)** – Then an image of the object is created in the mind of the persons as also a small child who is learning to recognise mother, father etc. *VASTU*(Material Object) or *PARAVASTU*(Non-Material like heat, pressure etc.)
- **VISHLESHA (Differentiation)** Knowing difference between objects.
- **PRAMĀṆA – SANMĀTRĀ (Measurement)** – The perceiver then creates and remembers the measurement in terms of its size, shape, height, weight, colour etc. in order to recognise it whenever it presents itself before the individual.

- **ANUMĀNA – CHINMĀTRĀ (Mental Measurement)** – The true measure of the object is different from what the mind of the individual can create or understand. Hence the true measurement of the object is stored in the mind of the knower as per his or her own mental capability. This is called *Chinmātra* in Vedic knowledge.
- **UPAMĀNA (Comparison through Differentiation)** – The knower then recognises the object by comparing it with other objects, by differentiating it from others. A child learns to recognise mother from other ladies, understand the difference between a cat and a dog, etc.
- **SĀKSHITWA – SĀKSHI-JNYĀNATWAM – CHAITANYA - SANNIKARSHA (CONSCIOUSNESS) (Recognising Proof of Difference between things through Mental Awakening or Conscious Differentiation)** – The Recognition of an object gets reinforced and embedded in the mind through proofs and through consciousness of the individual.
- **ṢABDA (Identification through Sound and Naming)** – Then the individual allocates names for the object and recognises it through sound. When somebody asks a two or three-year-old child, “Where is your mother?”, it smiles and points towards its mother standing nearby.
- **VEDĀRTHASANGRAHA (COLLECTION OF INFORMATION and retention in memory through attachment of meaning for the characteristics of the objects - IDENTIFICATION & DIFFERENTIATION)** – Entire set of objects of knowledge in the individual gets embedded in one’s mind through collection of the images of the object and retaining it in the brain. In the process of storage in the brain, there is a proper storage system created within the brain.
- **NYĀYATATTWAM – YATHĀRTHAKHYĀTI (JUDGMENT)** – This is followed by Judgment about the characteristics of the object, its goodness and bad qualities, emotional attachment etc.
- **MĀYĀ (IMAGINATION – GAP BETWEEN REALITY AND PERCEPTION)** – This is one of the most serious problems faced by all knowers and those who imagine that they know things well. **Adi Shankarāchārya** states that entire human thinking is plagued by *Māyā* (imagination removed from reality)

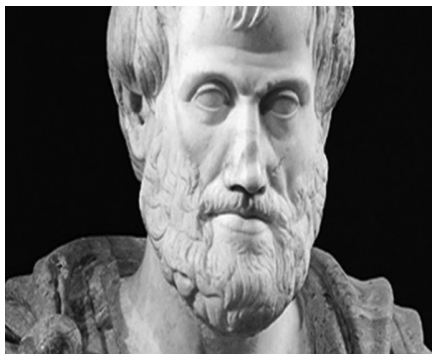
Finally one has to move from Knowledge to the vast field “Beyond Knowledge” – from Veda to Vedanta.



Many great Western philosophers starting from Socrates a few centuries BC (Before Christ) have propounded explanations about the Theory of Knowledge in man.



Socrates



Aristotle



Plato