



The Role of Categories in the Acquisition of knowledge: an Epistemological Analysis

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Abstract

The word Epistemology comes from Greek episteme, meaning knowledge and logos, meaning theory or logical discourse. Thus, the term epistemology may be understood as the branch of philosophy concerned with the origin, nature, extent, validity, justification and limitation of knowledge. Epistemology has always been concerned with issues such as – what is knowledge proper? What is the correct definition of knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? How knowledge is acquired? Is there any possibility of genuine knowledge? In the light of these issues, an attempt is made in the present paper to analyze the role of categories in the acquisition of knowledge. I shall also analyze the origin, nature and development of categories right from Ancient Greece, and their role in the acquisition of knowledge. The main thrust of my paper is to analyze how categories and knowledge are inter-related and how the change in categories leads to the corresponding change in the very nature of knowledge. I shall begin by giving a brief overview of the term epistemology and its subject matter.

Keywords: Categories, Epistemology, Knowledge, Meaning, Validity.

The subject matter of epistemology involves four fundamental components – subject of knowledge, object of knowledge, sources of knowledge, and means of knowledge.¹ By the subject of knowledge we may mean any subject or agency actively involved in the process of knowing while the object of knowledge may be understood as something presented before the knowing subject. Both the subject and object of knowledge are diametrically opposed to each other and their role in the pursuit of knowledge is putatively understood as irreversible. That means the very nature of knowing subject is to know the other in whatever form it might come in contact with it. And the knowing subject always remains a knower and can never become an object of knowledge; considering the knower as an object of knowledge involves inconsistency and self contradiction. The third component in the structure of knowledge is considered as the sources of knowledge which is conceived differently across different traditions of philosophy. In the Western Philosophy, with slight variations across its different schools of thought, considers at most three sources of knowledge – perception, inference and testimony. While in the Indian philosophy, there are some schools of thought that accept up to six sources of knowledge – perception, inference, testimony, comparison,



postulation and non-existence.

However, the first two sources of knowledge irrespective of any philosophical tradition, find utmost place in the pursuit of knowledge. The perception as the source of knowledge is considered as the bed rock of any knowledge; and if any other source of knowledge is accepted then that too, finds its place in perception. This component of knowledge implies the involvement of sense experience, reason, understanding, language and so on and so forth. If it considers, keeping aside every other thing aside, sense experience as the sole source of knowledge; such an approach is termed as empiricism. While if it considers that the reason has the dominant and primary role in the acquisition of knowledge and the sense experience plays nothing more than secondary role then such an approach has been understood as rationalism. The fourth and the last component of knowledge involve the role of certain concepts and categories that aid in the pursuit of knowledge. And in the present paper, I am going to discuss in detail about this last component of knowledge which becomes subject matter of my analysis.

Before I could proceed further to analyze the above mentioned fundamental components of epistemology, it is necessary to throw some light on the origin, growth and nature of pre-Socratic philosophy in general and epistemology in particular. Pre-Socratic writings were chiefly concerned with ontology and cosmology since the dominant thrust of this period was chiefly concerned with the understanding of nature.³ During this time, epistemology was still at its rudimentary stage. This is evident from the fact that Thales talks about water but not H₂O and in India Vaisheshika philosophy talks about atoms but not their divisibility. In the like manner, even in Pythagoras, knowledge was there but there were no instances of logic that could examine reality through proper and systematic analysis of arguments.

The epistemological concern seems to arise first in the writings of Plato since there was, along with many problems, the problem of understanding human nature. In order to have proper understanding of human nature, Plato developed certain cardinal virtues. The apparent logic behind developing virtues was that human beings inherent certain virtues and these virtues in turn determine the true nature of human beings. These cardinal virtues reflect not only the character of human being but also the very nature of the self as a whole. That means to say that these virtues by virtue of their inherence in an individual determine the very character trait of him. Also, Plato thinks that cardinal virtues are means to realize certain ends like the attainment of peace, order, harmony, goodness, justice and so on and so forth.

Plato, in his *republic*, considers that the subject of knowledge is something that exists and the object of belief is some intermediate entity, often taken as what is becoming or the sensible physical objects of the world and their qualities.⁴ What truly exists for Plato are unchanging forms and it is these forms which he indicates as the true



objects of knowledge. Plato mentions in (Phaedo 76 d) “Ideas are absolute, for they are eternal varieties and form, they are standard of knowledge.”⁵ Moreover, knowledge is infallible, while belief is fallible. Plato advises us to reflect on the ideas without the distractions of hearing, seeing or bodily pleasures, in search of reality with unaided intellect and unadulterated thought. Again, he mentions in the (Phaedo 65c, 66a.): “If ideas are eternal in the sense that they are timeless, then they are not perishable or mutable. They are immutable. Again, if sensible things as mutable are corporeal, then ideas may be called incorporeal”⁶

If we look into the history of mankind, we find that the quest for knowledge has always been there in almost every sphere of human life. In theology, particularly in the biblical episode of Adam and Eve, we do find mention about the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From this episode we come to know that how knowledge implies dual meaning (i.e., knowledge as alienation as well as emancipation). Knowledge as an alienation implies that there is no end to knowledge and because of which it leads to suffering and pain. Knowledge as an emancipation implies freedom which means that we want to know that that liberates us. Eve eats the forbidden fruits of the tree of knowledge in order to be like that of god and thereby knowing good and evil. Such a quest of knowledge was even at the sake of alienation because she was punished for eating fruits of the forbidden tree.

Apart from the brief overview of epistemology, the first systematic reference of categories we find in Aristotle. According to him, all objects of the world are classified under ten categories. Substance is defined as “that which neither can be predicated of anything nor be said to be anything”⁸. Hence, this particular man, that particular stone are substances. Later in the text, Aristotle calls these particulars primary substances to distinguish them from secondary substances which are universals and can be predicated. His ten categories of reality are as:⁷

- Substance (e.g., Cow, Pigeon)
- Quantity (e.g., two liter, five meter)
- Quality (e.g., red, green)
- Relation (e.g., thrice, twice)
- Place (e.g., in Africa, in the countryside)
- Time (e.g., younger, elder)
- Position (e.g., hanging, in sitting)
- State (e.g., has socks on, has arm on)
- Action (e.g., watching, running)
- Affection (e.g., being painful, being pleasurable).

If one analyses the cause of the origin and development of these categories one can conclude that the period from



Socrates to Plato and Aristotle was one of the great transitions. Society and its different organs (i.e., economic, political, cultural and religious systems) were coming into existence. Take for instance economic system; need may arise for categories that could provide knowledge about – what is to be produced and how much is to be produced? How a just society is to be established? What are the necessary criteria of maintaining law and order in a society? In order to fulfill these needs, certain categories have been developed that help in understanding reality.

So far as the growth and development of knowledge is concerned, it is conceived that it is an ever growing phenomena – that it develops from incomplete to more complete, imperfect to perfect, bottom to top, parts to whole etc., But at the same time, it does not mean that there is such a thing as something like complete knowledge. It is simply an ideal. If it is complete, then, it is like an ideal gas in the laws of thermodynamics or nirvana and grace in theology. Apart from theology, there is no knowledge which is absolutely complete. However, the question that arises is – how can we say that knowledge is not to be understood as something like an inert and static thing but is to be understood as a growing and developing phenomena? The answer to this question lies in considering the very role and existence of categories in the acquisition of knowledge. And there are two ways by means of which we can say that knowledge is ever growing and developing phenomena. The first is the quantitative way that seeks to analyze that how much concepts and categories have been developed by a particular system. The second way views knowledge as ever growing and evolving phenomena. This is the very characteristic feature of the Indian philosophy in which new concepts are propounded only after assimilating the earlier position since no philosopher is independent in Indian philosophy. But, in the western philosophical tradition, before proceeding further, earlier position is repudiated.

It is evident from the history of epistemology that there has been a continuous transition or shift of concepts and categories from one philosophical tradition to another (i.e., from ancient Greek to German and modern Europe). And, if concepts and categories are undergoing growth and development then there is a corresponding development in patterns of knowledge. This is owing to the fact that every sort of knowledge is based on some basic concepts and categories. Take for instance, Descartes' concept of substance leads to dualism; pantheism and pluralism to that of Spinoza and Leibniz while neutral monism to that of Hume.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in his *Critique of Pure Reason*⁹ (1781), developed a very systematic account of judgments and categories while criticizing Aristotle's structure of categories. His table of judgments is as:

- Quantity of judgments:
 - Universal
 - Particular



- Singular
- Quality:
 - Affirmative
 - Negative
 - Infinite
- Relation:
 - Categorical
 - Hypothetical
 - Disjunctive
- Modality:
 - Problematic
 - Assertoric
 - Apodictic

Kant having criticized Aristotle, argues that the latter did not develop a proper system or mechanism for the evolution of categories. He just picked up the concepts and sought to develop them. Kant in the second part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*¹⁰ particularly in the transcendental analytics discusses the possibility, validity and limits of knowledge. He argues that the underlying mechanism through which certain concepts and categories develop is not properly answered by Aristotle. According to Kant, thinking does not become possible without concepts and categories. And thinking about concepts is termed as judgment. The structure of the sequence proceeds as: to judge is to think and to think is to have concepts. Kant deduced concepts on the basis of judgments but Aristotle did not. The table of twelve categories of Kant are as follows:¹¹

- Quantity:
 - Unity
 - Plurality
 - Totality
- Quality:
 - Reality
 - Negation
 - Limitation



- Of Relation:
 - Of inherence and subsistence
 - Of Causality and dependence
 - Of Community
- Modality:
 - Possibility-impossibility
 - Existence-non-existence
 - Necessity-Contingency

Thus, Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) begins his analysis from Aristotelian logic in outlining four respects in which one can classify any judgment according to its quantity, quality, relation and modality. In each of these judgments, there are three alternative classifications (i.e., in respect of quantity, a judgment may be universal, particular, and singular; in respect of its relation; a judgment may be categorical, hypothetical or disjunctive and so on). Corresponding to each form of judgements, Kant deduces a particular concept:¹²

Kinds of judgments

Table of categories

I. Quantity

1. Universal: All S is P
2. Particular: Some S is P
3. Singular: This S is P

1. Unity
2. Plurality
3. Totality

II. Quality

1. Affirmative: S is P
2. Negative: S is not P
3. Infinite S is not non-P

1. Reality
2. Negation
3. Limitation

III. Relation

1. Categorical: S is P
2. Hypothetical: If S, then P
3. Disjunctive: S is either P or Q

1. Substance-Accident
2. Cause-Effect
3. Reciprocity or Action reaction



IV. Modality

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Problematic: S may be P | 1. Possibility-Impossibility |
| 2. Assertory: S is P | 2. Existence-Non-Existence |
| 3. Necessary: S must be P | 3. Necessity-Contingency |

Kant, unlike Aristotle claims that there are three kinds of propositions under the category of quantity: universal, particular and singular. But Aristotle, on the other hand, did not consider singular as a category. The examples of universal, particular and singular propositions are – the concept capitalism is a universal proposition, capitalism in many countries is a particular proposition and capitalism is in America is an instance of singular proposition, respectively. Besides this, Aristotle used only quantity, quality and relation but the modality as a category has also been used by Kant.

Now, the obstacle is how do we form concepts? The answer to this question lies in the fact that we form concepts by quantifying concepts in terms of propositions (i.e., universal, particular and singular). Take for instance, according to Newton, everything is space and every event is time. Not only this even the universal proposition can become particular and vice versa. Truth is one, is an instance of the universal proposition while truths are many is an instance of particular proposition. Quantity is understood only in terms of universal, particular and singular propositions but even this position could be challenged since there are certain things which cannot be quantified like meditation, spirituality etc. Similarly, Kant analyses his rest of categories one by one. He says that objects are given to us by sensation and positioned in space and time. He also says that “percepts without concepts are blind and concepts without percepts are empty.”¹ First Of all, he maintains, that the job of any philosophical system is to prepare concepts and then apply to percepts – the outside world.

Such a view of Kant has been challenged by Hegel (1770-1831) in two ways – first by arguing that “Kant’s theory of sensation is undialectical. Secondly, he criticizes Kant’s view that we have to know our means of knowledge – the categories – before we have any knowledge, as if one may learn to swim without venturing into the water.”¹⁴ The transcendental deduction of categories of Kant paved direct way to Hegel. Unlike Aristotle and Kant, according to Hegel, there are innumerable categories, since the reality is dynamic in nature. Besides this, for Kant, logic and dialectics are two separate domains but Hegel mixes the two and claims that both go hand in hand. Also, if we further make a comparative account of Kant and Hegel, on the concept of space and time, we find that their views are diametrically opposed.

Kant sought to maintain and justify the Newtonian physics, since he conceives the mechanical notion of the world.



He maintains a realist position. However, Hegel in his *Science of Logic* (1812-1816), repudiates the mechanical conception of the world and argues that universe is dynamic in nature. According to him, there is nothing like thing in the world and everything is event. Hegel composed his *Science of Logic* in three volumes – Logic of Being (1812), Logic of essence (1813) and Logic of notion (1816).

In the *Logic of Being* (1812)¹⁵ he develops the triad system of categories (i.e., Being, non-Being and becoming). He describes Being and non-Being are opposed and yet are identical. Also, Being and non-Being are contradictory terms and so are the instances of extreme forms of opposition, yet they are identical. Unlike Newton, Hegel accepts that the two contradictory things can be true at the same time. The notions of unity and struggle of opposites which claims are the two contradictory notions can exist at a time. Not only this, but he also maintains the view that identity is identical within differences. That means the notion of identity is possible provided there are sufficient differences.

In the *Logic of Essence* (1813)¹⁶ Hegel talks about pairs of categories like cause and effect, universal and particular, substance and attribute, necessity and change and so on and so forth. However, all pairs are mutually complementary and not in isolation. All categories are organically/dialectically interrelated. Hegel maintains that contradiction is a deriving or moving force behind any change. It is because of contradictions we have purity of thoughts. We cannot remove the contradictions but we can overcome them.

However, in the *Logic of Notion* (1816),¹⁷ he mainly talks about the knowledge and freedom are the two broad concepts. Knowledge implies the knowledge of causation while the concept of freedom means the absence of constraints. To know is to get free from constraints. As he mentions that the notion of becoming in the *Logic of Being* means that everything is in the process of becoming and nothing is static and perfect; in the same manner freedom and knowledge are belonged to self consciousness which is also known as *geist* and there is no end to it. *Geist* operates between concepts and reality. If concepts are adequate then they conform to reality.

Karl Marx (1818-1883), completely turns upside down Hegel and develops his own system of categories. According to him, it is the matter that constitutes the ultimate reality rather than the idea or consciousness. This is how the former comes under the materialistic camp while the latter comes under the idealistic one. Marx's contribution is considered as unique to the world in the sense that he not only talks about different interpretations of the world, but also attempts to provide the ways and means through which the world could be brought under desirable change. He has categorized the human history into four phases according to the four historical modes of production – Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and the Capitalist mode of production. He maintains that the concept of private property was not present in the primitive stage and the production and distribution of natural resources were in the hands of common



people where everything was commonly shared. However, in due course of time, because of certain factors like surplus wealth, the concept of private property started emerging. Private property as a category proved to be the root of all evils. This is owing to the fact that it gave rise to class system in a society. Marx argues that human history has always been the history of two classes (i.e., exploiter and exploited). Small minority class owns the means of production and distribution and exploits the majority class.

The extreme form of exploitation leads to alienation of the majority class. Marx has talked about four basic components of alienation in his *Economics and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844.¹⁸ Firstly, the workers in the capitalist society are alienated from their own productive activity. Secondly, the workers are not only alienated from productive activities but also from the product of those activities – the product of their collective labor. Third, the workers in capitalism are alienated from their fellow workers and finally, and most importantly, the workers in capitalist society are alienated from their own human potential. The over exploitation of one class by the another class lead to alienation among the members of the majority class. The extreme form of this alienation owing to inherent contradictions in the relations of productions lead to class struggle when the people of the majority class unite together finally brings change in the modes of production.¹⁹ To further substantiate this point, Marx, in his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) mentions in a very lucid way that “the history of all the hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.”²⁰ According to him, the solution to such problem lies in the abolition of private property. He conceived that the workers of the world would unite together and enter into revolt against capitalist regime thereby to overthrow capitalism. He dreams of a sort of classless and stateless society.

CONCLUSION

Thus, unlike Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel; the Marxian categories not only give knowledge but also provide emancipation to humanity. The Aristotelian categories are considered as the mere modes of predication, and represent a logical classification of predicates. While Kantian categories are the moulds of understanding under which things have to pass before becoming knowable. The Hegelian categories are the dynamic stages in the development of thought which is identified with reality. Whereas, the Marxian categories are the categories which not only give knowledge but also give emancipation. This is how one can say that the whole sequence of ideas in the history of the western philosophy developed – Kant by refuting the categories of Aristotle gave his new idea of reality; Hegel by refuting Kantian notion of categories presented a philosophy which is a philosophy of absolute idealism, a dynamic and concrete Identity-in-difference; Marx on the other hand, by repudiating the Hegelian notion of categories, provided a new idea of philosophy that result in emancipation of the humanity as a whole. It is clear from the above analysis that right from Aristotle to Marx, there has been a tremendous change in the conception of knowledge and reality due to the corresponding change in the categories of reality.



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