

Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)

Volume 3 (3) 367 – 372, September 2022 | ISSN: 2720-9946 (Online) ISSN: 2723-3626 (Print)

The article is published with Open Access at: <http://e-journal.unipma.ac.id/index.php/SHE>

ON THE OBJECT OF EPISTEMOLOGY AS AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Etorobong Godwin Akpan ✉; Department of Philosophy' University of Port Harcourt.

Abstract: The paper focuses on investigation of the object of epistemology as a research programme. It is warranted by the existence of programmes with incompatible objects in the history of philosophy that claim to be pursuing the same epistemic research objective. The purpose of the study is to identify and define a unifying object for epistemology in the midst of diverse alternatives. The method adopted for the study is content analysis. It was discovered that epistemology, which is a negation of skepticism, because it presupposes the possibility of knowledge, seeks as its object the discovery and characterization of the grounds upon which legitimate knowledge could be founded.

Keywords: Epistemology, Justification, Knowledge, Object, Philosophy, Skepticism, Subject Matter.

✉ etorobong.akpan@gmail.com

Citation: Akpan, E.G. (2022). On the object of epistemology as an academic research programme. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 3(3), 367 – 372. DOI: 10.25273/she.v3i3.13946.



Published by Universitas PGRI Madiun. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

INTRODUCTION

Every discipline is essentially characterized by the possession of a subject matter, an object, and a method. These basic components are the elements that define disciplinary boundaries and the mode of study in any science. The three elements can be divided into two categories: ontological components and projective components. The ontological components of a discipline refer to the totality of describable elements, excluding the human person, necessary for the existence of the discipline. These include the subject matter and the method of the discipline.

The subject matter of a discipline refers to the entity (physical or abstract) or class of entities designated to be studied as the primary domain of the discipline. In the case of epistemology, its subject matter could be said to be *Human Knowledge*. One very important feature of the concept of subject matter is that one entity or class of entities could constitute the subject matter of more than one discipline. Another element of the ontological component of a discipline is the method designated for the study of the subject matter. Central to the distinguishing features of disciplines is the uniqueness of their methods of investigation. The method applied to the subject matter determines the type of result to be expected from its preoccupations, which result is thereafter understood to either satisfy the object of science or not. The method often adopted for epistemology is that of philosophical analysis (whatever that means).

Another key component that defines the disciplinary boundaries of the sciences is their projective component. The concept of "projective component" is used here to refer to the totality of *aim and objectives* of any discipline as an academic research programme. The *object* of a discipline is found in this category. The object of a science or

discipline is the class or aspect of information or knowledge about the subject matter that the science seeks to discover. For instance, although epistemology, logic, cognitive sciences, sociology of knowledge, etc., have the same subject matter, their objects are entirely different.

It is in this very sense that the paper seeks to identify and clearly characterize the specific object of epistemology as a research programme. What exactly does epistemology seek to achieve in its study of human knowledge? This enquiry has become expedient in the face of discordant programmes in traditional philosophy that claim to be pursuing the objective of the same epistemological research. For instance, it is difficult to ascertain whether the stipulated ontology of Plato's utopia or the often preconceived notion of self-evident truth of continental rationalism or the predetermined anti-metaphysical project of empiricism and positivism or even the proposed naturalized foundation of knowledge by Quine should be accepted as the object of epistemology. This investigation is required not only because of the incompatibility of these programs but also because of their individual claims to constitute the absolute completeness of epistemology.

The study adopts a qualitative research design as its model. It uses the method of content analysis for its discussion because the only sources of data are drawn from the writings of academic philosophers.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY

Darwinism is a disappointment to the theocratic notion of man as an image of God, distinct from all other creatures and superior to them in all ways (Genesis 1: 26-29, New King James Bible); however, Darwinian man evolved into an apex being in the evolutionary process from lower life, so he is still superior in some

ways. Thus, as superior to all other animals, man is at the moment, within the evolutionary process, a *Homo sapiens*, a rational creature. Traditional anthropology accepts this position by dividing living creatures, in its study of life, into three categories: vegetative life, sensitive life, and rational life. "Vegetative creatures" refer to the members of the plant kingdom. Outside of plants and humans, the sensitive creatures are all other living beings. They represent what we call, in common parlance, animals or brutes. The only rational creatures are human beings. Prior to these anthropological analyses of life founded on Darwinian evolutionism, traditional philosophy had specifically mentioned that man is essentially a rational being, animals are sensitive and plants vegetative (Stumpf, 1982). But this remark was not supported by any systematic scientific justification, as in Darwinism.

In their essence, all men by nature desire to know (Aristotle, 1957). The desire to know is manifested in enquiries by children. These enquires are the starting point of philosophical practice.

Philosophy, practically and traditionally understood, is an enquiry. The concept is rooted in Greek usage; *philosophia*, meaning love of wisdom, is the root. *Philos* means love and *Sophia*, wisdom or knowledge. The Greek application of the concepts acquired a very wide connotation. For instance, the Greek statesman Pericles is quoted to have opined that the entire citizen body of Athens was engaged in philosophizing (Parkinson, 1996). A Greek politician, Solon once left Greece to travel and, as we should now say, broaden his mind; he is described as philosophizing (Parkinson, 1996). Quite apart from this broad usage, the Greek and professional philosophers' understanding of the concept is found in the Socratic Method; the dialectic (Parkinson, 1996).

Through the use of the dialectic, philosophy is fundamentally an enquiry

with the sole aim of attaining knowledge or science. Thus, philosophy is the mother of all science(s). Within the Socratic tradition, the purpose of the training of a philosopher was to enhance his or her ability for enquiry. Thus, Sylvanus Nnoruka's (Unpublished Lectures, 1996) description of the philosopher as one that questions the taken for granted in society. To be sure, Socrates exemplified the business of philosophy in general, past and present.

Consequently, Samuel Enoch Stumpf argues that "philosophy began with man's sense of wonder and curiosity expressed in the question, 'what are things really like.'" (Stumpf, 1982). The general implication of the foregoing analysis is that philosophizing is an essential quality of all humans, irrespective of language, colour, gender, and location. To be human, therefore, is to be rational. To be rational is to be capable of philosophizing.

Nonetheless, documented systematic philosophy puts the cradle of the arts in the seaport town of Ionia, known as Miletus, where Thales lived (Copleston, 1962). Nearly all historians of philosophy hold this historical theory. For instance, Samuel Stumpf (1982) argues that "the birthplace of philosophy was the seaport town of Miletus, located across the Aegean Sea from Athens, on the western shores of Ionia in Asia Minor, and for this reason, the first philosophers are called either Milesians or Ionians". Stumpf, however, is not referring to all philosophies. He has the western philosophical tradition in mind when he writes. After all, his book is entitled *Socrates to Satre: A History of Philosophy*. He is, thus, talking about the philosophy that pertains to these figures directly.

Within the context of western philosophical pursuit, which would occupy the remaining part of this work, philosophy began with a sense of wonder about the universe of diverse existences, with an unknown source of unity, an unfathomed flux. The first philosophers

of this tradition were concerned to locate the source of unity in diversity. Hence, they asked the question "*ex qua materia constituiti mundi*" (Of what material is the universe made?). Professional philosophers are familiar with the answers given by the pre-Socratic philosophers to these questions. The questions only became the starting point of a great variety of enquiries that were to form part of the corpus of philosophical concerns.

THE NATURAL ORIGIN OF SKEPTICISM

The response to philosophical enquiry, in the sense of proffering answers to questions asked by philosophers, leads to knowledge or science. Philosophy is, therefore, the possibility of science (knowledge); the evolution of human history has witnessed an increased growth in human science. But the frustration encountered in this development is the timely discovery of errors and falsehoods in scientific presentations. The consequences of discovering a falsehood, error, or relativism are severe, particularly in terms of the value placed on knowledge claims. Prominent among such consequences is skepticism, or epistemological despair or pessimism.

The widely disparate views of pre-Socratic cosmologists with respect to the nature of reality and its substratum resulted in a series of skeptical attitudes in the philosophical arts of the sophists. Gorgias is quoted to have argued that "nothing exists... if anything exists, it is incomprehensible... and even if it is comprehensible, it cannot be communicated" (Stumpf, 1982). A milder version of this pessimism was presented in ancient times by Protagoras, who opined that man is the measure of all things (Stumpf, 1982). The above despair entails a loss of confidence in the feeling of certainty, justification, and conviction implicated in every piece of knowledge. Such feelings are founded on the alleged truth of a given unit of knowledge claim.

Thus, in every knowledge claim, which is actually displayed in the form of an assertion, there is an unexpressed assumption of certitude concerning it. The assumption is the fact that the statement or the assertion is true. This alleged truth of claims or judgments gives rise to the feeling of certainty.

On the discovery of disparate views about a matter as well as false and erroneous claims, there is bound to be either doubt or further questions regarding the grounds for the feelings of certainty that a given judgment represents how things are, in their entirety.

It is, however, noteworthy that the confusion of certainty, justification, and conviction with grounds is psychologically ill-founded. Certainty, according to Bonjour, "is most naturally interpreted as pertaining to one's psychological state of conviction" (Bonjour, 1996). It is, in short, a feeling. In every genuine knowledge claim, the subject entertains this feeling found in the truth of statements (Cottingham, 1993). In times of controversies and debates, two opponents speak with a given feeling of justification for making their claims. It was on this basis that Pyrrhonism pitched its tent. The Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* was a suspension of judgment on the premise that the grounds on which a judgment was made were sufficient for its direct contradiction (Stough, 1993). Hence, human knowledge claims have no standard-justified grounds for their warrant.

EPISTEMOLOGY AS A NEGATION OF SKEPTICISM

Contrary to the orientation of skeptics, the conviction of the epistemologist is his or her confidence in the existence of atomized units of truth, according to which each proposition is possible. It is a negation of skepticism. Consequently, epistemology is the argument that knowledge claims are founded on reality.

Saddled with such responsibility, traditional epistemology is thus a theory of knowledge. As a theory of knowledge, it seeks to distinguish knowledge from opinion. Thus, in its etymological analysis, "episteme" is differentiated from "*doxa*" (opinion).

Etymologically, epistemology is rooted in two Greek words; "*episteme*", meaning knowledge, and "*logos*," meaning study or science. Thus, epistemology is the science, study, or theory of knowledge. It is known as the knowledge theory, the science of knowledge, the science of sciences, and the theory of theories. It seeks to understand "the scope, nature, extent, and limits of human knowledge. It also deals with the certainty and reliability of human knowledge." (Ozumba, 2001).

ON THE OBJECT OF EPISTEMMOLOGY AS AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH PROGRAMME

To achieve its objective, epistemology defines what knowledge of its own subject-matter is. The first traditional definition of this concept was given by Plato in his "Theaetetus". Socrates got Theaetetus to opine that knowledge is "true-belief with account" (Plato, 1996). This definition was modified in the 20th century by A. J. Ayer when he argued in his text, *Problem of Knowledge*, that "the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that something is the case are first, that what one is said to know be true. Secondly, that one be sure of it and thirdly, that one should have the right to be sure" (1956). Ayer's concept of the right to be sure is here understood as that conferred on the knower by the state of affairs. It is the prescription of grounds. According to Professor Joseph Omoregbe, "Roderick Chisholm... says that a person can be said to know something if he believes it, if it is true, and if he is justified in believing it in the sense that his believing it is reasonable or acceptable" (1998). Chisholm's concept of reasonable belief is explained

by Drehea's notion of "good evidence" (Omoregbe, 1998).

One fundamental issue with the epistemic analysis of knowledge is its emphasis on justification. From the Theaetatean and Socratic traditions to contemporary philosophical concerns, belief does not count as knowledge. It is the 'accounted-for-true-belief' that constitutes knowledge. The pivot of epistemic investigation is "the alleged assurance in knowledge claim, a practical instance of which is the alleged assurance of the existence of the external world" (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia 23. 552). Investigations in epistemology are aimed at what, in traditional parlance, is called justification. But better understood, it is the search for the grounds for the feelings of certainty, confidence, and justification in a unit knowledge claim. Thus, Willard Quine argues that "epistemology is concerned with the foundations of science" (Quine, 1969). "Conceived thus broadly, epistemology includes the study of the foundations of mathematics as one of its departments" (Quine, 1969). The provision or discovery of the foundations of science is the primary object of epistemology. In a traditional epistemic scheme, the search for the foundations of knowledge is understood as the justification or the provision of evidence or reason for a given belief. It was what the traditionalists called: "... theoretical rational (epistemological) justification..." (Omoregbe, 1998). For the traditionalists, it was the justification of knowledge claims. This view of epistemology gave rise to Edmund Gettier's challenge of the "justified-true-belief" concept of knowledge on the grounds of the adequacy of justification, or what contemporary philosophers called conclusive evidence (Ozumba, 2001).

Willard Quine has argued for a more practical view of the object of epistemology as that which involves the provision of non-stipulated but

investigated and discovered foundations of knowledge. He refers to it as *naturalism* and avers that it does not prevent rational reconstruction. It rather provides a more scientifically founded basis for what he calls "the new and more liberal kind of rational reconstruction" (which is a fictitious history) in which we imagine our ancestors introducing those concepts "by succession" (Quine, 1969) and then filling them up with relative references, with which we form and legitimate the corpus of our knowledge claims. This idea of the provision of foundation is what this paper accepts as the standard object of epistemology.

CONCLUSION

It is the submission of this paper that the object of epistemology, in general, is the attempt to establish the truth of a knowledge claim by the discovery of evidence, which in turn constitutes grounds for the certainty of the claim. In times past, the object of epistemology was that of normative justification. This justification involves a deductive demonstration or presentation of ontological evidence aimed normatively at validation or invalidation of knowledge claims. But from a behavioural constructivist view point, which is consistent with Quine's naturalism, the object of epistemology could be understood as justification by the presupposition of knowing, as shown by Quine above.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. (1957). *A selection on Aristotle*. New York: Charles Scriber's sons.
- Ayer, A. J. (1956). *Problem of knowledge*. London: Macmillan.
- Bonjour, L. (1996). "Foundationalism". *Reason at work: Introductory reading in philosophy*. Ed. Steven Cahen New York: Harcourt Brace and company.
- Copleston, F. (1962). *A history of philosophy*. New York: Image Books.
- Cottingham, J. (1993). *A Descartes dictionary*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher.
- Henry Robert., ed. (1993). *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia Volume 23*. 15th ed. Chicago Encyclopaedia Britannica Incorporated.
- Omoregbe, J. (1998). *Epistemology: A systematic and historical study*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers.
- Ozumba, G. (2001). *A concise introduction to epistemology*. Calabar: Ebenezer printing press.
- Parkinson, G. H. R. (1996). "What is philosophy" *An encyclopedia of philosophy*. Ed. G. H. R. Parkinson. London: Routledge.
- Plato. (1996). "Theatetus". *Reason at work: Introductory readings in philosophy*. Steven Cahen. New York Harcourt Brace and Company.
- Quine, W.V. O. (1969). *Ontological relativity and other essays*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stough, C. (1993). "Pyrrhonism". *A companion to epistemology*. Eds. Jonathan Dancy and Earnest Sosa. Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell.
- Stumpf, S. E. (1982). *Socrates to Sartre: A history of philosophy*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Tyndale, W., ed. (1980). *New King James Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.