

JOURNAL OF FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Vol. XXVIII.I January 2020

Peer-Reviewed

ISSN 2395-5635

**DOUBT AND KNOWLEDGE IN
WESTERN AND INDIAN
PHILOSOPHY**

Editors

Arvind Vikram Singh

Anubhav Varshney



UGC CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

2020

The Notion of ‘Appropriative Epistemology’ and Epistemic Justice

**Anubhav Varshney, Bheeshm Narayan Singh and
Megh Goswami**

The aim of this write-up is to support anti-definist view in epistemology by importing Kierkegaardian notion of ‘appropriation’ and building a case for what we term as ‘Appropriative Epistemology’. Further the paper suggests the necessity to subscribe to the idea of ‘appropriative epistemology’ in order to ensure epistemic justice. We have also harped upon the views of J. C. Wilson and H. A. Prichard on uniqueness of knowledge situation, to support our proposal of appropriational dynamics in knowledge situation. It may be mentioned, at the very outset, that the thesis of J. C. Wilson and Prichard has been used in a different sense here, as shall be clear from the lines that follow and that the aim here is not to support their thesis but rather to complement the idea of epistemic justice by bringing in insights from Kierkegaard and Wilson-Prichard.

Keywords: Anti-definism, Sui-generis, appropriation, Appropriative Epistemology, epistemic justice

1. Anti-Definism, Sui-Generis View of Knowledge and Appropriative Epistemology

1.1 Anti-Definism and Scepticism

Anti-definist strategy in epistemology stands for tools and arguments, furnished to challenge attempts made to construct a synchronized theory of knowledge. Ever since Agrippa such challenges to normative epistemology have a long history. It is often an ignored fact that anti-definism has very less to do with skepticism; such confusion between anti-definism and skepticism could be well seen in the traditional criticism of texts like Vaidalya and the hair splitting anti-epistemology of Jairāsi and Śrīharṣa. On this league, we humbly submit that the difference between anti-definism and skepticism must be underscored in the tribe of epistemologists.

1.2 Sui-generis Thesis

In contemporary epistemology several thinkers offer engaging counter-examples to challenge the traditional definitions of knowledge, wherein they dismantle one or more traditional conditions of knowledge. Parallel to the fashionable Gettier's problem and responses to it, thinkers like J. C. Wilson and H. A. Prichard have furnished potent but largely ignored alternative perspectives for analyses of knowledge. Wilson and Prichard offer the sui-generis view of knowledge, where every case of knowledge is seen as a unique mental state which is irreducible in terms of another set of categories. Thus knowledge is a unique category

which mustn't be explicated in terms of other categories. As such every definition of knowledge shall have some loopholes. Wilson asserts that since the experience of knowing is the presupposition of all inquiries, knowing itself cannot be made a subject of inquiry.¹ For Prichard, "knowledge is sui generis and therefore a 'theory' of it is impossible" and any attempt to define it in terms of other entities, shall be a definition of those 'other entities' and not knowledge.²

The import of the thesis by Wilson and Prichard, which is useful for us, then has to do with 'uniqueness' and as such indefinable character of knowledge situation. They have treated knowledge situation as unique and indefinable for different reason than us, but we absorb for our purpose the 'uniqueness' component of their thesis. Their views are sure to get strengthened if they are coupled with the views, on truth and associated notions, absorbed from existentialist literature; all the same their views shall also, in turn add to the strength of the continental view.

1.3 Idea of Appropriative Epistemology

In most of the definitions of knowledge, 'truth' is regarded as an essential condition of knowledge, so much so that false knowledge is regarded as a misnomer in western epistemology. The ingredient of 'truth' is what requires an understanding and it is this which we seek to introspect. In JTB thesis the 'truth' is obviously objective and static truth. Such objective and static view of truth is precisely what most existentialists are uncomfortable with. In

Kierkegaardian view of 'truth', it is an "objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness"³ as opposed to an outward and fixed fact. Thus truth is truth so far it is my lived and internalized experience; and more importantly, it is something which is a matter of appropriation, or that which is in the process of becoming⁴. In other words, truth should have passed the touchstone of inwardness through an appropriation process; thus it is in simple words, an inward appropriation. A corollary of such a position is that any cognitive category, including knowledge, has to pass on the criterion of lived experience and inwardness. Thus we propose to term a theory of knowledge drawn in accordance to Kierkegaard's brand of existentialism, as 'Appropriative Epistemology'; needless to acknowledge or disclaim, that it would be a perspective and not a theory of knowledge.

We are aware that the term epistemic appropriation has been used in different sense by certain other scholars such as Emmalon Davis, who advance the notion of 'Epistemic Appropriation' to underscore an unjust and harmful epistemic practice⁵. However we have conjoined the terms, 'appropriation' and 'epistemology' to connote a perspective/theory of knowledge wherein every epistemic category draws its force and authenticity from inwardness; therefore our conjunction of the two terms is about devising a therapy to redress epistemic injustice.

The above idea of appropriation and appropriative epistemology could be used as both a destabilizing factor and a savior. It could be used as a destabilizing factor for

obvious reasons against traditional epistemology. However it could be utilized as a savior for subterranean knowledge and theories of knowledge, such as feminist epistemology, depth epistemology⁶ and indigenous knowledge systems etc.

2. Epistemic Justice and Appropriative Epistemology

2.1 Epistemic Injustice

The idea of epistemic injustice refers to an unfair treatment meted to a view of knowledge or to a proposition that might become a case of knowledge. Miranda Fricker⁷ who introduces the notion of epistemic injustice has basically talked about two types of epistemic injustice- testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. The fundamental concern of Fricker has been a “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower”⁸. For us, an epistemic injustice basically constitutes any unjust dismissal of an epistemic claim; thus an *ex situ* evaluation of an epistemic claim is also an epistemic injustice. We propose that the most fundamental epistemic injustice pertains to existential injustice, which ensues from overlooking the fact that all knowledge is a case of lived experience. In certain theories of knowledge which we believe as subterranean such as the notion of depth epistemology, it is an inward realization that serves as the ultimate epistemic criterion. Progenitor of the term, Prof. S.L. Pandey categorizes Prof. R.D. Ranade, Prof. P.S. Burrell, Prof. R.N. Kaul and Prof. A. C. Mukherji as depth epistemologists⁹, the ultimate criterion of knowledge in first three of these four thinkers is an inward realization. The very idea of depth epistemology might get

ridiculed by those who believe in 'veridical knowledge' as the fundamental concern of epistemology. This ridiculing over, of a knowledge claim is precisely a case of epistemic injustice. However this cannot be categorized as a case of testimonial or hermeneutic injustice. It is this kind of injustice which is quintessential to all cases of epistemic injustice. We term such epistemic injustice as existential or appropriative injustice.

2.2 Appropriative Epistemology as a solution to Epistemic Injustice

To reiterate, situations of epistemic injustice could be addressed by accepting every knowledge situation as a sui-generis case and attending to its appropriative dynamics. Thus in the scheme of what we suggest as appropriative epistemology, knowledge claim has to be adjudged on a 'case to case' basis. Some suggestions to modify the traditional analysis of knowledge, so as to make room for epistemic justice via appropriative epistemology, are in the order. Doing so, we have to see the JTB thesis in an altogether different light.

To start with 'belief', in an appropriative scheme the distinction between 'belief-in' and 'belief-that' has to be demolished or better the distinction has to be softened. The distinction has remained fundamental in JTB thesis and the 'belief' of the belief view is invariably always a matter of belief-that. H. H. Price elaborates the distinction well in his now classic article¹⁰. The argument furnished behind this has been that belief-in is an inward affair or a kind of

psychological belief and not an epistemic belief. However if now, appropriation or a lived experience are to serve as criterion of knowledge affairs then belief-in cannot be excluded from cases of knowledge; nor can there be a watertight demarcation between 'belief-in' and 'belief-that'.

In a similar manner 'truth' will no longer be just an external objective and static affair. It has to be internal and therefore dynamic. This altered view of truth shall exalt certain cases of cognition as fit for an epistemic evaluation. 'Justification', will have to be assessed, yet again on a 'case to case' basis. In the model of appropriative epistemology, inner authentication or a situational or case sensitive authentication, is the source-head of all justification.

Therefore, to summarize the notion of appropriative epistemology, every case of knowledge has to be assessed from its appropriational or subject-sensitive or case-sensitive dynamics. We are aware that one might object, that this shall make epistemic evaluation impossible as there will always be some incommensurable elements left; however we propose that such incommensurable elements may be overcome through an *in situ* and dialectical dialogue or again an appropriation process. This view point has a theoretical coexistence/family resemblance with the thesis of Wilson and Prichard. We submit that in order to ensure a just assessment of all epistemic claims a 'case to case' evaluation or appropriative epistemic analysis is a necessary condition. A dismissal of certain epistemic claims in the light of one formal analysis, which itself

results from subscribing to defnivist strategy of some sort, is the first step towards epistemic injustice. In other words the first prerequisite of epistemic justice is subscription to appropriative epistemology. In the end we humbly propose that a juxtaposition of existentialist ideas and the anti defnivist viewpoints in formal epistemology shall go a long way in resolution or dissolution of some perennial epistemic problems, epistemic injustice being one of the most prominent of such problems.

References:

- ¹ See his views in Wilson, J. C. (1926): *Statement and Inference with other Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Clarendon
- ² Prichard, H. A. (1909): *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 245
- ³ Kierkegaard, Soren (2009): *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*(CUP), ed. Alastair Hannay. Cambridge: CUP, p. 171
- ⁴ CUP, p. 66
- ⁵ Davis, Emmalon (2018): *On Epistemic Appropriation*, Ethics 128, no. 4 (July 2018), pp. 702-727
- ⁶ The notion of Depth Epistemology is developed by Prof. Sangam Lal Pandey to designate a specific type of criteriology that has to do with criterion of ultimate knowledge. For an instance, Pandey cites *Aparokṣānubhūti* as *aśeṣa pramāṇa*.
- ⁷ Fricker, Miranda (2007): *Epistemic Injustice Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: OUP; henceforth EI

⁸ EI, Introduction, p. 1

⁹ Pandey, S. L. (1987): *Problems of Depth Epistemology*. Allahabad: Ram Nath Kaul Library of Philosophy

¹⁰ Price, H. (1965): *Belief 'In' and Belief 'That'*. *Religious Studies*, 1(1), pp. 5-27

Anubhav Varshney

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy,

University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

Email-anubhavshunya@gmail.com

Bheeshm Narayan Singh

Research Fellow, Department of Philosophy,

University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

shekhawat.bheeshm@gmail.com

Megh Goswami

Research Fellow, Department of Psychology,

University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

megba96@gmail.com