

# EPISTEMOLOGICAL RE-EXAMINATION OF THE SOURCES OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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## Abstract

*This work examines some of the sources of human knowledge to ascertain their validity and justification. The search for the justification of human claim to knowing a particular thing brought to bear the need for the re-examination of the sources through which this claims emanate from. This is aimed at ascertaining the justification of the source to know if such knowledge is reliable. This search over the years resulted in bringing forth various opinions and sources as through which humans can gain knowledge. Some of these opinions and sources tend to stand in conflict with others there by making it confusing for one to actually know which is to be trusted. It is on the bedrock of this confusion that the objective of this research is to examine the sources of knowledge. To achieve this objective, this work defines knowledge, discusses some of the types, and sources of knowledge as well as attempt an evaluation of the sources of knowledge discussed. This research is relevant because it aims at putting forward the various discussed sources of knowledge and the examination of these sources to ascertain their validity. The method employ in writing this paper are philosophical methods of examination, criticism and evaluation.*

**Keywords:** Epistemology, Sources, Rationalism and Empiricism

## Introduction

The human person over the years is bedeviled with the desire to know. This desire is an inherent disposition in man that stirs up the incessant curiosity to always desire to unravel things: search about the primordial stuff of the universe, the essence of being, his existence and other existents in the world. This burning-incessant curiosity is what is responsible for man engaging in various forms of study. These studies are geared towards also knowing: what is man's place in the world? What is the explanation of the world man finds himself? How can man even gain knowledge about his place in the world? What is this knowledge? Why should man even seek to know? From what can man gain knowledge from? How many kinds of knowledge is there to be known? Are there rules governing the process of knowing?

The above questions are all epistemological questions that aim at man gaining knowledge about one thing or the other. However, as earlier said, the core focus of this paper, is "how does man get to know and what validate his claims that he knows? In other words, what are the sources responsible for man's claims of possessing a particular knowledge about a particular thing? It is the objective of this paper therefore to examine the some of the sources of knowledge that has been put forward is justify their validity and

acceptability. In doing this, this paper presents some of the weaknesses and strengths associated with those mentioned sources. Also, to put forward a better understanding of the purpose of this paper, this paper defines knowledge, it discusses some of its types, and also looks into how they relate to the sources of knowledge.

### **Concept of Knowledge**

It is the case over the years that knowledge remains an intriguing phenomenon and to provide an adequately acceptable definition keeps troubling man even till data. This is to say that, there is no univocally acceptable definition of knowledge. On the other hand, this does not mean there is no definition of knowledge; of course, there are thousands of definitions given so far. Despite these definitions given about knowledge, it is important to mention here that a proper definition of knowledge ought to begin with explaining the word “know”. This is because, the word 'knowledge' is “... the noun form of the very to know” Ibrahim, 2012: 110. Hence, in this paper, we shall begin the definition of knowledge from defining what 'know' is.

Idang opined that “to know means to have an idea of something as the result of experience, information or learning's and knowledge in its simplest form has to do with understanding and familiarity gained by experience or information” Idang, 2008:16, this simply means that having knowledge about a thing comes from first having an idea of such a thing either through learning about or experiencing it which is a process that has to do with the verb 'know'.

On the other had, Chambers Encyclopedic Dictionary emphasizing more on what 'to know' means averred that:

To know: therefore, can mean any of the following; to be aware of something; to be certain about it; to learn and remember something's, to have understanding or grasp of the: object of knowledge; to be familiar with something; to be able to recognize or identify something; ability to distinguish between things; to have enough experience and training, to be intimate with something” Ibrahim, 2012 :110.

From the above views given about 'to know', it becomes clear that since there are various opinions about what 'to know' is, it will be difficult to coin or have a univocal view of what knowledge is. This is because different people will define knowledge based on their conception and understanding of the word 'to know'.

The above explication was aimed at giving a background to why there is no univocal definition of knowledge and to what one may consider to be definition. The controversy and disparity in opinion concerning what knowledge is or should be considered as did not start today. This controversy has been right from the ancient period through the medieval, modern and down to the contemporary period. A historical view of what knowledge is will help explain this position better.

In the ancient period as seen in the Thaeatetus, “knowledge was defined as perception. The things we perceive constitute what we know” This was the view of the man called Thaeatetus as seen in the dialogue Thaeatetus. However, Socrates objected to

this position by asking 'can't one be mistaken in his/her process of perception and world one still therefore not be justified in claiming to have knowledge since knowledge is perception? What Socrates was trying to say was; if perception means knowledge, then, a misperception will double as knowledge and non-knowledge at the same time and this will be contradictory" (Ibrahim, 2012, p. 111). Thus, Socrates argued that knowledge should be something more certain than mere perception. This led to the task of defining knowledge by Plato who was a student of Socrates.

For Plato, knowledge should be something that is true, and is believed to be true and there is a rational justification for such belief. This rational justification is the rational explanation given to support belief. This led Plato towards comparing what is regarded as knowledge and what is regarded as mere belief or opinion. With the take-off point that Plato had, he ended up positing that knowledge is that opinion or belief that is true and there is a rational explanation given for its. Thus, Plato's definition of knowledge come to be regarded as "justified true belief" Idang, 2008:61.

In the medieval period which was the period dominated by the church, dogmatism and belief without much recourse to reason, knowledge was seen as that revealed alone by God. One is just to believe and have faith without questioning laid down rules, knowledge claim or postulations. This was the era that authoritative and revealed knowledge flourished.

In the modern period, with the revolution posed by Martin Luther, Descartes came up with a seniors level of revolution and refutation of the position of knowledge claims held by the church. According to Ibrahim "Descartes, a rationalist of the modern period, insisted on a kind of agnostic foundation on which to hinge his entire theory of knowledge. Though his systematic or methodic doubt he arrived at the logito... Descartes identified the criteria of distinctness and clarity as the marks of true knowledge. Thus, true knowledge for Descartes must come from self-reflection, geared by intuition that springs from pure light of the human mind and deduction.

Contemporary thoughts about knowledge tend to show that there are some elements of disagreements found between the ancient view and some of the contemporary period. For instance, Edmund L. Gettier in an article published 1963 titled "Is justified true belief knowledge?" put forward, position that tends to rival the claim that knowledge is justified true belief held in the ancient period. He argued that, though justification, truth and belief are necessary conditions for knowledge claim, they are not sufficient conditions. He showed through two thought experiments how weak the 'justified true belief' account of knowledge is without a fourth condition to support it. Though he did not give the fourth condition, he set the pace for the search of the fourth condition in his new and more powerful way.

Despite the search for the fourth condition, Omoregbe asserted that "knowledge presuppose consciousness. All thinking, all acquisition of knowledge, and even skepticism itself presuppose consciousness" Omoregbe, 1998:1. Thus, it can be said that knowledge for Omoregbe deals with one's consciousness of a particular thing or event. Omoregbe further buttressed his point by evening that:

Consciousness is basic to epistemology and is the veritable starting point for any discussion about knowledge. For, it is because man has consciousness

(reflective consciousness) that he can think, that he can acquire knowledge, can justify his knowledge or can even doubt.

From the above therefore, it appears for Omoregbe, knowledge about a particular is synonymous with consciousness or being conscious of that particular thing. From the foregoing, this research submits that knowledge is the familiarity, consciousness, claim and awareness one has about a particular as a result of experience, reasoning or fearing that can be rationally justified.

### **Some Types of Knowledge**

The following are some of the types of knowledge there are:

#### **1. Empirical Knowledge**

This is the type of knowledge that is derived through the sense organs like: the sense of seeing, learning, touching or feeling and tasting. Omoregbe posited that “empirical knowledge is the knowledge acquired through sense. Perception, that is, through any of the five senses. Empirical knowledge is always knowledge of an individual object, a particular object, not knowledge of a class or category of object” Omoregbe, 1998:24. Those philosophers who subscribe to this form of knowledge are called 'empiricists' and “this position in epistemology is known as empiricism' Idang, 2008:6. In a nutshell, empirical knowledge is that knowledge derived from observation, experience or experiment which is strongly aided by the human senses like; the eye, ear, hand, leg or other part of the body, nose, tongue etc.

#### **2. Rational Knowledge**

This is the opposite of empirical knowledge. Rational knowledge is the knowledge that is based on reason. Asira, Ogar and Ibrahim postulated that rational knowledge is “any knowledge that is based on rational grounds like on reasoning, logic, mathematical procedures and other extra-sensory means that are not based on capricity, chance, lunch, or based on sheer imagination” (Asira, Ogar and Ibrahim, 2012, p. 41). In epistemology, this kind of knowledge falls under the school of thought called 'rationalism'.

#### **3. Authoritative Knowledge**

This is the knowledge derived from an authority or a secondary source. Idang submits that:

The knowledge we acquire when we depend on a secondary source for information is said to be authoritative knowledge. For instance, we come to know about Socrates by the testimony of his friends, pupils, and contemporaries like Plato and Aristotle... authoritative knowledge is closely related to revealed knowledge, which is also certified by an indisputable authority (Idang, 2008, p. 63-64).

From the opinion of Idang, despite his claim that authoritative knowledge is closely related to revealed knowledge, this paper observes that it is also closely related and similar to testimonial knowledge.

#### **4. Intuitive Knowledge**

This type of knowledge is the type that is derived through a moment of insight and awareness. Idang averred that “the position on intuitions thus seems to be a supra-rational approach to truth based on a spontaneous apperception of reality” (Idang, 2008, p. 65). It should be borne in mind at this point that intuition is not the result of conscious reasoning or of immediate sense perception, but a moment of flash.

In Omoregbe's view:

Intuitive knowledge is knowledge gained by intuition; it is knowledge that is acquired directly by an immediate contact of the mind with the object without going through the process of reasoning. Such knowledge is acquired by direct insight without making use of reasoning or concepts. It comes as a flash into the mind (Omoregbe, 1998, p. 29).

#### **5. Conceptual Knowledge**

Conceptual knowledge is defined as the knowledge that is based on universal concepts “acquired through the process of abstraction; hence it is also known as abstract knowledge or intellectual knowledge” according to Omoregbe (Omoregbe, 1998, p. 34). The process of abstraction is the process whereby abstract ideas are abstracted from particular concrete objects.

For Hamlyn “Understanding conceptual knowledge is linked up with the fact of language” (Hamlyn, 1970, p. 272). This is because, concepts are words and words are units of meaning or building blocks in mean information within a given language. This “using a concept means understanding the grammar of the language in which the concept is used. Wrong use of concept will obfuscate meaning and hinder communication and ultimately hinder knowledge” (Asira, Ogar and Ibrahim, 2012, p. 145).

### **Some Theories of the Sources of Knowledge**

There are many theories of knowledge; but two of these theories are very outstanding. They are rationalism and Empiricism. This paper shall focus on the examination of these two theories with at least one other one:

#### **1. Rationalism:**

This is an epistemological doctrine that holds that knowledge comes through reasoning. Esikot postulated that “rationalism is the school of thought that holds that knowledge of the real world is acquired independently of experience” (Esikot, 2019, p. 33). In other words, this position stands against the senses as a source of knowledge. Thus, rationalism is opposed to any form of knowledge that comes from the sense or experience. Those philosophers who support this view are called 'rationalists'. For Esikot:

They contend that there are some truths that accessible to the human mind and these constitute the only reliable foundation to our knowledge claims. Such truths are evident in geometry and logic (Esikot, 2019,

p. 33).

From the above therefore, rationalism is that theory of knowledge that is against sense - perception. Another name for this theory is 'a priori' theory of knowledge.

## **2. Empiricism**

Empiricism is that epistemological doctrine that holds that knowledge is derived through the senses and experience. For Esikot:

The central thesis of empiricism is that perception is at some point or other indubitable; hence some forms of knowledge, if not all knowledge, come ultimately from experience (Esikot, 2019, p. 32).

Hamlyn held similar opinion when he averred that:

Thus empiricism in its strongest version comes down to the thesis that the indubitable propositions that must form the basis of the defense of knowledge against the skeptic are to be found in experience (Hamlyn, 1970, p. 37).

From the above two definitions, generally expressed, empiricism is the philosophical doctrine that holds that human knowledge (of the world) is acquired totally from the senses and experience. Thus, observation is said play a vital role as long as this position is concerned. Those philosophers who subscribes to this position are called empiricists.

## **3. Intuitionism**

According to Mbat (Mbat, 2003, p. 38), “intuitionism is a philosophical doctrine that knowledge by intuition is the primary and only source of knowledge”. In other word, this position argues that the only true source of knowledge is institution. This kind of knowledge does not depend either on the senses, perception or on reasoning.

## **Some Sources of Knowledge**

According to Esikot, “sources of knowledge refer to the ways or medium though which we come to acquire or possess knowledge” (Esikot, 2019, p. 31). There are a lot of sources through which human can know a thing. The following are some of those sources:

### **1. The Senses (Empiricism)**

One of the sources of human knowledge is the senses like the eye, nose, mouth, lands etc. the philosophical position that supports the senses as a reliable source of human knowledge is called empiricism. Mbat postulated that empiricism as an epistemological theory holds that “all our knowledge derived from, or are founded in our sense perceptual experiences, which include touch, smell, hearing, taste and sight” (Mbat, 2003, p. 36). This position in nutshell holds that, the senses is the only means through which humans can gain knowledge about reality. Some philosophers who support this position are: John Locke, Bishop Berkeley, and David Hume. In the opinion of Esikot:

Modern empiricists are of the view that all propositions that can be known are related in some way to experience apart from the propositions of logic

and mathematics, which depend for the truth on the meanings of the terms involved; but that we are not really provided with new information by means of them (Esikot, 2019, p. 32).

## **2. Reason (Rationalism)**

Reason is acclaimed as one of the sources of knowledge, perhaps, to some philosophers, it is the only true source of knowledge. Reason or reasoning as a source of knowledge is opposed to sense-perceptual experience. Reason as a source of knowledge falls under the epistemological school of thought called rationalism. Mbat posited that “rationalism is a major rival school of epistemology to empiricism. Rationalism is the claim that true knowledge is derived from reason” (Mbat, 2003, p. 37). In other words, rationalism challenge physical sense-perceptual experience as deceptive. Rationalism holds that possible-certain truth about anything one wishes to know; including the ultimate nature of reality, the laws of nature, essence of God and moral laws can be known through reason.

## **4. Authority**

Another source of knowledge that is worthy of note here is authority. Esikot averred that “by knowledge from authority we mean such kinds of knowledge that we acquire from person other than ourselves” (Esikot, 2019, p. 33). It should be understood that an authority is an expert in a particular field or discipline whose pronouncement or opinion is often considered as trustworthy and valid. Mbat posited that:

A good lot of the things we claim to know are neither things that we personally experience nor they are things that we infer from our reason. Besides knowing certain facts through experience and reason, authoritarians claim that we can also know facts about the world by learning them from some authority (Mbat, 2003, p. 39).

## **Evaluation**

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the lack of a univocal definition of knowledge may not be unrelated with the fact that there are various sources of knowledge and types of knowledge as well. This is so because, in as much as there are a lot of positions given on how humans can gain knowledge, one should expect that there will be accompanying varieties of definitions of knowledge. Be that as it may, this paper mainly focuses on the sources of knowledge.

There are other sources of knowledge that has been postulated, but this paper submits three for examination because of the following reasons:

1. Not to go off the scope and limit of this work.
2. The other sources of knowledge; when critically analyse, studied and examined are seen to (in one way or the other) fall under these aforementioned three sources.

The above discussed sources are not without flaws even as they are tenable to a large extend. As one of the objectives of this paper, an examination of these sources will be

carried out at this juncture to ascertain their weaknesses and strengths. Let's begin with empiricism (the senses).

Empiricism stands very tall as long as knowledge acquisition is concerned. This is because, whatever one claims to know, such must have passed through the process of observation, either directly by the one who claims to have the knowledge or by some other person who serves as an authoritative figure (authority) from which such claim emanated from. Thus, one cannot totally get rid of the senses in the process of knowledge acquisition. However, as Esikot argued:

The acceptance of empiricism either in the traditional or modern rendition rules out certain claims to knowledge. For instance, knowledge of the soul, God... one problem with empiricism is that it is restricted and limits that which is knowable to perception, and perception is not reliable (Esikot, 2019, p. 32).

In other words, Esikot is arguing that since the senses is associated with perception, and perception may be deceptive because of the weakness of the senses, empiricism may also be misleading since it depends on the senses. Mbat held and raised similar contemplations about the validity and justification of the claim of knowledge from the senses when he averred that:

While it may not be right for us to deny the facts that experience provides us in formation about the physical world, and serves as source for our formation of ideas... empiricism has some serious problems. For example, Descartes... questioned: if we have for one time been deceived by our senses, what guarantee do we have that they may not always deceived us? (Mbat, 2003, p. 36).

On the other hand, rationalism and authority as sources of knowledge are not with flaws. For instance, rationalism discard the senses in the process of knowledge acquisition forgetting that one cannot reason or think about nothing. One must have seen something, touched it, smelt it, felt it or heard about such a thing before contemplating or rationalizing an such a thing. As such, the senses cannot be totally thrown away for they are the medium through which such is possible. Thus, rationalism may not function effectively well without the senses.

On authority, it is believed that the authority must have derived his/her facts or foundation of knowledge from either the senses or reason. As such, authority as a source of knowledge is still linked back to the senses or reason. Despite this, when the reliability of knowledge from authority disagrees with another authority on the same claim, there is need to be cautions by withholding judgment on the matter. Furthermore, sometimes it is seen that a careful examination of the claims of an authority unravels some weaknesses of such claims, thus, one must be careful when accepting knowledge claim based on authority.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper submits that as controversial as the definition of knowledge is, there is still a definition of knowledge based on the school of thought one subscribes to. This school of thought is also influenced by the one believed to hold as his or her source of knowledge. Be that as it may, there are two foundational sources of knowledge which humans subscribe to; they are empiricism and rationalism. The former emphasizes the senses; the latter emphasizes reason. A careful examination of these two sources shows that man cannot do without them. At some point man makes use of reason and at another time he makes use of the senses; whether consciously or unconsciously.

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