

Introductory Text: Theory of Knowledge

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Two philosophers were playing golf and bumped into two psychologists on the golf field. They decided to have a bit of fun with the psychologists and asked teasingly: "How do you ever manage to finish a game, you must be constantly psychoanalysing each other". In response the psychologists answered: "Well, at least we do not keep arguing about whether the ball exists or not!"

What can I know and how do I know it?

Epistemology is the study of the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. The term "epistemology" is based on the Greek words '*episteme*' (knowledge) and '*logos*' (account/explanation). The focus here is on analysing the means of production of knowledge and how it is linked to related notions such as truth, objectivity and science. It also deals with scepticism about different knowledge claims. In other words, epistemology primarily addresses the following questions: "What is knowledge?", "What are its sources?" "How is knowledge acquired?" and "What do people know?"

There are various kinds of knowledge, for example, one knows *how* to ride a bicycle and one knows *that* a bicycle has two wheels. Thus one distinguishes 'knowing how' from 'knowing that'. This distinction is between theoretical reason and practical reason, with traditional epistemology being interested primarily in knowledge of the theoretical kind.

Different schools of thought propound different sources of knowledge acquisition. In contrast to the empiricists, who emphasise the role of experience in knowledge acquisition, the rationalists claim that knowledge is innate, namely, it is not dependent on experience. According to the empiricists, observation is a prime source of knowledge acquisition (*to be is to be perceived*), whereas the rationalist consider knowledge to be innately present in the human mind. Thus, a distinction is made between two kinds of knowledge: *a priori* and *a posteriori*. *A priori* knowledge is knowledge that rests on reasoning independent of experience and observation (that is, it is non-empirical) and *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is known by experience (that is, it is empirical).

What is Science?

Because science is widely believed to be the most precise available means of acquiring knowledge, and because scientific theories claim to give us consistent and verifiable knowledge about the nature and functioning of the world, the philosophy of science plays an important role in epistemology.

The most fundamental question for the philosophy of science is 'what is science?'. Employing evidence from experimentation, logical deduction, and rational thought, science aims to examine and provide facts about the nature of reality. Rational application of scientific methods guarantees consistent results, so not to leave any room for rational agents to disagree. Thus, scientific knowledge claims to facilitate the process of consensus decision making by which people of varying moral and ethical views come to agree on 'what is real and true'.

Scientific Method

Scientific method is a set of techniques for investigating phenomena and obtaining new knowledge, as well as corroborating or rectifying previous knowledge. It is based on gathering observable, empirical, measurable evidence, subject to the principles of reasoning.

Scientific researchers put forward specific hypotheses as explanations and devise experiments to test these predictions for accuracy. The procedure is repeated in order to make increasingly accurate predictions. One of the cornerstones of scientific inquiry is the objectivity and neutrality of scientist, so that there is no partiality in the interpretation of the results. Another basic expectation is that the procedure and results must be verifiable by others by attempted reproduction of them.

One of the most important claims of science is that scientific knowledge does not rest simply on authority of the scientist. Unlike, for example religious discourses, which draw on the authority of the respective religious leaders or scriptures, the knowledge produced by scientific inquiry must be demonstrable and verifiable. Scientific results must be consistently valid for observations past, present, and future of given phenomena. Random phenomena, for example, are neither predictable, nor repeatable. Equally important is falsifiability or the elimination of alternatives through repeated experiments by multiple researchers who must be able to replicate results in order to corroborate them. Thus, despite consensus about a particular hypothesis or theory, the guiding principle of scientific method is that all hypotheses and theories are principally subject to disproof.

Critique of scientific method

A critical question in science is, to what degree the current body of scientific knowledge can be taken as an indicator of what is actually 'true' about the physical world in which we live? The unequivocal acceptance of such knowledge as being absolutely true, infallible and unquestionable has been called scientism.

One of the most important critics of scientific method is Thomas Samuel Kuhn, who examined the history of science in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and concluded that the actual method used by scientists differed dramatically from the then-espoused method. Kuhn denied that it is ever possible to isolate the theory being tested from the influence of the theory in which the observations are grounded. He argued that observations always rely on a specific paradigm, and that it is not possible to evaluate competing paradigms independently. By "paradigm" he meant, essentially, a logically consistent "portrait" of the world, one that

involves no logical contradictions. For Kuhn, the choice of paradigm was sustained by, but not ultimately determined by, logical processes. The individual's choice between paradigms involves setting two or more "portraits" against the world and deciding which likeness is most promising. In the case of a general acceptance of one paradigm or another, Kuhn believed that it represented the consensus of the community of scientists. Acceptance or rejection of some paradigm is, he argued, more a social than a logical process.

Paul Feyerabend similarly examined the history of science, and was led to deny that science is genuinely a methodological process. In his book *Against Method* he argues that scientific progress is *not* the result of applying any particular method. According to him, successful science is invariably in violation of any specific methodology or norm of science. He argues that no description of scientific method could possibly be broad enough to encompass all the approaches and methods used by scientists. Feyerabend objected to prescriptive scientific method on the grounds that any such method would stifle and cramp scientific progress. Thus his claim, "the only principle that does not inhibit progress is: *anything goes*." Criticisms such as his led to a radical approach to the sociology of science.

Another interesting perspective, offered by Karl Popper, is falsifiability. This principle states that in order to be useful (or even scientific at all), a scientific statement ('fact', theory, 'law', principle, etc) must be *falsifiable*, that is, able to be tested and proven wrong. Much of the discussion in the philosophy of science concerns the relationship between theory and evidence. We usually assume that if a theory predicts some result for a particular experiment and that result is then observed, then the observation is positive evidence for the truth of the theory and the theory is confirmed by it. However, the problem of induction is that no amount of evidence for a particular universal generalisation (say that all crows are black) is inconsistent with the piece of evidence refuting it (say the next observed crow is white). Popper famously tried to avoid this problem by proposing that theories are never confirmed by evidence only falsified; in so far as a theory has not yet been falsified, despite our best efforts, then we have reason to carry on using it but we should never think that it has been inductively supported. These observations are part of Popper's case for defending the idea that what makes a theory scientific is its falsifiability, or refutability.

Correspondence Theory of Truth

Philosophy (translated as love of wisdom) is above all concerned with the question of truth. The history of philosophy is resonant with the conviction that the pursuit of Truth is the utmost desideratum and its eventual discovery is tacitly assumed. Characteristically knowledge has been construed as the relationship between a knowing subject and the 'given' object. The typical 'lover of Truth' objectively examines the independent real world of things 'out there' and attempts to accurately represent them in order to unearth and capture their 'authentic' essence. S/he attempts to conquer the distance between words and things. This sovereign subject seeks to establish irrefutable foundations of knowledge by eliminating all doubt and error. Thus knowledge progresses as 'fact' replaces mere speculation or opinion (Greek: *doxa*). At this point the representations correspond exactly and in every detail to the object 'as it is'. Further, these claims are verifiable unequivocally by anybody who uses decisive, objective,

rational methods. This leaves no room for ambiguity or variation and ensures access to absolute knowledge. The traditional theories of Truth view it as transcendent and non-contingent, unsullied by the fallibility of human factors. Inherent in this correspondence model of knowledge acquisition is the presumption of an Archimedean point from which one has unmediated access to the absolute, universal, unitary Truth. This single, optimal perspective, irrespective of context or individual variability, guarantees knowledge as reward for disinterested pursuit of Truth. It claims to transcend finite, myopic, subjective valuations and experiences by using scientific methods that enable one to distinguish true from false for an accurate, 'correct' comprehension of the world.

The French Philosopher René Descartes, for example, expresses confidence in the power of the human mind to perceive Truths clearly and distinctly, purged of all error and doubt. Autonomous, rational subjects are able to 'see' the Truth by "natural light" of the mind. His notion of Truth seeks to establish fixed, irrevocable, certain foundations for knowledge that transcend the constraints and relativities of temporal human understanding and elevates the 'knower' to a sphere of privileged insight. In this process s/he vitiates multiplicity of perspectives in favour of a singular all encompassing Truth that anathematizes ambiguity, uncertainty and contradictions. Thus Truth is conceived as measurable, ascertainable, verifiable and language (words) are vouchsafed the special task of 'mirroring' reality transparently. Further, the 'external' world is perceived as a constellation of political, economic, social structures that are constant, immutable, isolated 'givens' independent of the inquirer. Thus 'facts' are posited to be 'out there', ready and available for investigation. The objective knower produces impartial and value-free knowledge and remains neutral about its ramifications. He is reduced to a passive voyeur, aloofly documenting information about the world. It is further claimed that people working independently of one another, employing objective, scientific, rational methods would automatically arrive at similar conclusions. For Descartes, when two people disagree, neither has access to the Truth. If one of them knew the Truth he would convince the other of the superiority of his argument. Thus consensus becomes the acid test for Truth determination.

The goal of traditional epistemology is to provide irrefutable, certain foundations of knowledge in order to precisely and accurately represent the whole of reality. The project here is the search for a body of knowledge that is trans-culturally and pan-temporally valid. Discrepancies in reports about this "objective" world known in common are attributed to errors in perception, interpretation, lack of methodological rigour and incompetence of the observer. An eventual upshot of this traditional obsession with the centrality of Truth are the rigorous efforts to seek out causes of error, imprecision and inaccuracies, to overcome illusions and false appearances and employ every means (violent when necessary) to establish the sovereignty of Truth. This also involves maintenance of rigid distinctions between those who are capable of knowing the Truth by virtue of possessing some 'special' abilities and those unfit to get to it on their own. True discourses claim to provide certain, absolute, universal knowledge that is accessible only to those, who fulfil the necessary qualifications and master conclusive techniques and methods. The impartial expert achieves contact with the non-human Truth by being logical, methodical, objective and rational. S/he is the purveyor of Truth to those 'others' who are dependent on the 'grand interpreters' to deliver it to them.

Further, traditional epistemologies promise that knowledge accumulates progressively, so that all ambiguities and difference would be eventually reduced to a unified, coherent system of knowledge. This guarantees that all that has eluded man will in due course of time be accessible to him and provides a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of thought and the certainty that man can eliminate every doubt and error to establish absolute perfect knowledge. For example, science claims to be a linear accumulation of Truths and evolution of reason, by virtue of providing a unified, coherent body of knowledge unsullied by contradictions and ambiguity. If one ever dares to challenge its claim to sovereignty, one is immediately silenced with the assertion, "It has been scientifically proven". This conjures up the image of a rational, objective scientist working in his laboratory, an investigator of the hidden Truths, who works in a totally neutral environment 'uncontaminated' by historical, temporal or personal concerns to achieve dramatic breakthroughs. Objectivity is pronounced as a touchstone for epistemic validity. To be objective entails being impartial, rational and logical, so that one is able to see the 'whole' picture. The neutral spectator stands 'outside' of and above the given situation with no stake in it. S/he claims to totalize all particular, fragmented perspectives into a coherent whole with no loose ends or loopholes. Thus the scientific discourse seeks "epistemic sovereignty" by virtue of being the "God's eye view". Truth strikes like a bolt of lightning to only those privileged few and this voice of Truth is a detached, disembodied voice of one who has reached the highest stage of development. Methods of arriving at these Truths are confrontational and awards 'victory' to the arguments that succeed in 'knocking out' the rest, as the rationale is that only Truth survives. Furthermore, only a select few are eligible to enter the 'arena' and thereby the outcome is already pre-determined. The language of attack and defence is customarily 'deployed' in examining and expressing claims. The reward for the most agile and forceful arguer is that his discourse ascends to the position of true discourse, till it is 'knocked out' by a 'better' argument.

The Word and the World: Language, reality and the problem of representation



This is not a pipe, René Magritte (1926)

The relation between language, reality and representation is equally important for philosophy. The traditional subject/object binary opposition posits Truth as discovery of pre-given relations between subject and object in the objective world that is expressed through accurate and precise language. Within the classical dualist discourse, language functions as a tool employed by a sovereign subject to mirror reality. This 'mirror function of language' reduces language to a vehicle to accurately and exhaustively represent the world 'out there'. Furthermore, language is conceived as a means of expression, a vehicle for the exchange of thoughts that facilitates communication of 'inner' ideas.

The linguistic turn within the contemporary philosophical discourse problematizes the traditional relationship between language and reality. It rejects the instrumentalist, referential, correspondence function of language vis-à-vis reality. It is argued that words are neither 'mere' representation of things we encounter in the world, nor are they arbitrary tags attached to objects as an afterthought. We situate ourselves in the world in language and this is the limit of our world. Objects and events of the world are not pre-classified and we find ourselves surrounded by an intimidating multitude of chaotic images that we organize and categorize into meaningful patterns through language. Names are our way of determining what will count as 'reality'. We are constantly engaged in the process of mapping our world. Like a grand jigsaw puzzle, we are desperately trying to fit all the fragmented pieces into a coherent picture. But language is not a mono-dimensional, neutral one-to-one correspondence of words and the material world. Rather we are all caught up in a complex web of linguistic relations by which we comprehend the world around us.

This challenges the customary understanding of knowledge as simply a stable referential relation between subject and object. Likewise, the traditional concept of a pre-discursive cogitating 'I' as ground for knowledge is similarly challenged. The subject is not a fixed substance with an enduring stable identity, but a socio-temporal construct within an open field of discursive possibilities. Similarly the object is not suspended in limbo waiting to be 'discovered', that is, it does not exist 'in itself'. Nor is discourse the grand unfolding of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject about the objects 'out there'. Rather knowledge is a space, where the subject occupies a particular position in relation to a certain object, which forms the basis for that particular discourse. Thus knowledge-production is a complex web of formulations, so that within the same discursive practice different subjects could occupy multiple positions and it is possible to speak of 'different' objects, to have clashing points of view and make different choices.



Las Meninas, Diego Velázquez (1656)

Language, which is characteristically understood as the vehicle through which meaning is produced and expressed, can also become the medium through which meaning is lost. When the plurality of possibilities is reduced to 'the Truth', when language is forced into the role of purveyor of a univocal representation of reality, it can obscure what one is trying to elucidate. This insufficiency, this never having the 'right' words implies not only the elusiveness of what is to be signified, but also the absence of absolute foundations that formerly ensured the one-to-one correspondence of words and things and thereby the order of the world. To speak is to bring this void at the heart of language into play and thereby, confront the instability of all representation, which language can neither compensate nor overcome.

The challenge to the 'mirror function of language' complicates our everyday understanding of how representation functions. Thus, for example, the sign 'pipe' has nothing to do with the object in question. The French philosopher Michel Foucault challenges received notions of representation by exploring the artwork by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte. Particularly on the basis of Magritte's notable work, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1926), Foucault critiques the established system of seeing that links reality with visual representation. Magritte's painting of a pipe, combined with the painted words "This is not a pipe", questions the nature of visual representation itself. Both Foucault and Magritte engage in a critique of language: the former epistemological, the latter visual.

Similarly, in his analysis of the famous painting *Las Meninas* by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez, Foucault illuminates what is at stake in all orders and principles of ordering: a fundamental disorder or absence. He confronts the instability at the heart of representation and language.

Knowledge/Power

In contrast to traditional theories of knowledge, feminist and postcolonial epistemologies critique the Eurocentric and Androcentric bias in knowledge production and consumption. The critique of absolute knowledge is for abandoning the traditional reverence of Truth. The traditional depiction of a sovereign cogitating subject set off against a world of objects that s/he seeks to represent and thereby manipulate and control is considered to be politically suspect. It is argued that we have no direct way, independent of our practices and motivations to get to the impersonal Truth of the matter. It is not simply a question of decoding a basic pre-existing fixed text that different people happen to decipher in different degrees of accuracy. Rather every culture has its own unique system of meanings, repertoire of Truths and criteria for knowledge and values. These belief systems and epistemic practices are neither true nor false in an absolute way, but are characteristic of particular groups depending on factors such as race, class, caste, gender, sexuality, age, able-bodism etc. Thus discourses have to be understood as per the context of their occurrence, as truth-claims and the rules governing the criteria of Truth change from epoch to epoch, whereby what is considered true in one era is dismissed as myth or falsehood in another. This implies that there is a plurality of discourses, which are not defined once and for all. These are not only in the immediate and present context, but allude to past ones and also engender future ones. Cultural and historical factors shape the scope of one's thought and action. This means that not all are led necessarily to the same view of the world. Truths, values, concepts are not independent of the processes they regulate or evaluate, but are simultaneously products of those processes.

This implies that epistemic practices do not emerge ex-nihilo, that is, they are not a disengaged view from nowhere but are situated in various socio-historical contexts like the family, workplace, religious, educational, political, commercial institutions and are social products of specific cultural and historical forces. Assertions and claims of what is and is not arise at junctions of discourses and practices in diverse contexts, whereby there are no overarching set of universal evaluative standards by which all the discourses can be ranked. This undercuts the project of finding universal foundations of knowledge, the reality behind the appearances as absolute bedrock of Truth that guarantees the subject an unmediated access to reality. Given that there are no underlying foundations, no absolute certainties, no universal criteria, results in an infinite plurality of perspectives from which to interpret a complex reality.

Critical epistemologies contend that there is no 'external' privileged position of certainty, no ahistorical universal understanding. There is no ideal, neutral discourse that grasps the whole of reality through a transparent language, in which there are no areas of ambiguity or variation. 'Truth' is seen as a social practice and not a yardstick against which discourses may be measured. Further, knowledge is not 'internal' to a subject, so that some are born with certain special abilities to access it. Rather the subject itself is constructed by what s/he is studying and consequently à la Nietzsche there is "no knower behind the knowledge". Thus knowledge is neither an inventory of what has been verified to be true at some point in time nor an accumulation of information possessed by the knowing subject. The subject and object alike are discursively and socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and this engenders "truth games", that is, not the discovery of Truth, but rules according to which certain assertions ascend to the status of Truth. These "truth games" determine what counts as Truth at any particular time, whereby truth is not based on eternal universal principles, but

particular time, whereby truth is not based on eternal universal principles, but contingent ways of ordering the world. This highlights how knowledge is inextricably linked to multiple forms of power. These practices are non-subjective, anonymous, socially sanctioned body of rules that govern one's manner of thinking, perceiving, judging, valuing and acting. They are the background of what one says, does and believes.

To the question, "What is Truth and who says it?" traditional epistemology claims that individuals who are rational, autonomous and unbiased, use decisive methods to get to the Truth and ipso facto concur. Instead of pursuing this line of questioning, critical theorists demonstrates how the concept of Truth has functioned in our societies, whereby the "regimes of Truth" are historically constructed rather than being eternally necessary forces. Thus an assertion is regarded as true or false, is taken seriously or prematurely dismissed depending on the prevalent "regime of Truth" at a given point of time. This also determines who is to be taken seriously and who is declared as a 'non-player' in the truth games. Furthermore, the traditional distinction between truth and our motivations for revering it as 'Truth' is also problematized. This implies that Truth does not automatically appeal to a person irrespective of the socio-cultural context s/he is situated in. What we consider to be true or false, the very distinction itself, is a socio-historical product of contingent factors. This challenges the claim that there are timeless universal truths that are accessible only to a group of people from a particular discipline, who employ special hermeneutical techniques and through a neutral discourse accurately reveal these Truths. The promise of deep elusive Truths hidden from 'ordinary' people, but nonetheless decipherable by the authoritative specialist adept at the art of interpretation, is a mythical construction of power to perpetuate itself. For example, critical theorists question the effects of power associated with the scientific hierarchization of knowledges, whereby science is accepted as the parameter against which all other forms of knowledge are measured. Science is merely one sort of discourse amongst the others, but scientific discourses have succeeded in monopolising the rules that determine what should count as Truth and thereby appropriate the privilege of true discourse. The scientific discourse masquerades as an impartial search for Truth and thus comes to be linked with the obligation of searching for and revealing it.

Knowledge is established when a particular claim is sustained over a period of time without being falsified and thus becomes epistemically meaningful. Thereby a certain type of power accompanies any knowledge claim, as the one speaking is backed up either by raw threat of force, moral authority or by virtue of being 'rational and scientific'. What matters is not only what is said, but who says it to whom, for what purpose and from what institutional site. For example, "India is overpopulated" is a mundane everyday remark. But, if uttered by the spokesperson of the World Bank or the IMF on the basis of 'scientific' demographic projections, it ascends to the status of 'Truth'. This authorized, institutionalized justification of certain assertions to be 'Truths' have serious social ramifications. For example, in this case, population policies financed by international organizations based on these 'scientific facts' provided by 'experts' have important economic, legal, social, moral, political implications on the lives of common people. Thus certain methods of validation, that is, of verification and refutation determine what is to count as Truth. By fulfilling these criteria established by the current rules of a specific truth game, ordinary assertions earn the distinction of being 'true'.

Speakers who want to be taken seriously must talk about these objects collectively agreed upon by the community (medical, scientific, religious, business) using appropriate categories and concepts.

Thus certain individuals (for example, white, Christian, heterosexual, bourgeois men) are vested a privileged role to decide the body of rules that constitute the conditions of emergence of knowledge. The type of knowledge of object depends on the context in which it emerges, the motivation of enquiry and the purposes it will serve. The force and cogency of the assertion depends on the authority of the individual who utters them with the backup of the sites from which they are made. The hierarchization of discourses are according to whether they are, for example 'native' or 'alien', 'western' or 'eastern', 'metropolitan' or 'rural', whether they are uttered in the dominant language or regional language. Truth is thereby a well-ordered system of systematically established procedures for regulation, operation, circulation, distribution, production of discourses.

The site where knowledge is produced is also the site of power and vice versa. Concepts like 'knowledge in itself', 'a pure willless knowing subject', 'Truth v/s power' camouflage the power/knowledge relations. True discourses disguise the power they produce by erecting the oppositions between knowledge and power. But knowledge is not extrinsically linked to power, rather knowledge is a form of power. Thus there is no question of unearthing a Truth cleansed of effects of power. 'Knowledge' and 'Truth' are just designations bestowed on discourses that are successful at determining the rules of the "truth games" according to which true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the Truth. All knowledge is thereby political, not because it can be manipulated by a particular speaking subject to his/her advantage; rather all knowledge has its conditions of possibility in power relations. Thus knowledge is not so much true or false, but successful or unsuccessful in relation to other knowledges, insofar as it succeeds in assuming propriety over Truth. In any society, discourse is power because the rules regulating discourse determine the hierarchization of knowledge as rational/irrational, truth/error, sane/insane, valid/invalid, science/non-science.

Knowledge/Truth and Violence

The universal concept of Truth disregards the differences amongst people belonging to, for example different races, classes, castes, sexualities, ethnicity, religion etc. To expect that one and all obey and pledge by the same one Truth leads to totalitarian thought control. Such a society seeks to iron out differences, is sustained by violence and maintains its 'unity' by crushing dissension and denial of multiplicity. An epistemic commitment to homogeneity, certainty, holism, exclusivity goes hand in glove with a political commitment to totalitarianism. In exalting certain belief systems, values, discourses, people, we court the danger of marginalizing others. The perspectives of certain dominant groups parade as universal perspectives and induce effects of power by demanding conformity in the name of 'Truth'. They govern the lives and choices of others by directing, modifying, shaping, imposing, restricting their actions. The belief that all people, at all times, in all cultures must necessarily agree is forced consensus, whereby certain dissenting voices are belittled and played down and others are amplified. Discourses or belief systems that the currently dominant party constructs or

articulates constitute the prevailing Truth, which in turn becomes a justification for the dominant group's hegemony.

Our pursuit of 'Truth' generates power relations through violent closure of possibilities for new configurations of reality. Imperialistic discourses draw all phenomenon around a single all pervasive center, principle, worldview, perspective which tolerates no 'deviation' and thereby sanctions the commission of violence against dissenting voices. It is crucial to question the power of true discourses by pointing to the violence done in the name of 'Truth', on the strength of the power appropriated by specific vocabularies.

Seven Blind Men and the Elephant (Objectivity versus Subjectivity)

The parable of the seven men and the elephant can be interpreted in several ways. According to one of them, the seven men are in a dark room with the elephant. Each of them grasps one part of the elephant's body on the basis of which they draw utterly dissimilar inferences about the elephant as a whole. This results in a heated polemic amongst them. The conflict is resolved when a 'wise' expert illuminates the room and enlightens these fallible men about 'the Truth' of the elephant.

In another version the seven men are blindfold and once again claim their particular viewpoint to be the absolute Truth. But there exists the possibility for these men to escape ignorance by taking off their blindfold themselves, whereby they can 'see' the elephant. Thus they can reach a consensus about the elephant.

In a third version the seven men are blind and thus condemned to be 'prisoners' of their particular perspectives without the possibility of reaching absolute, eternal, universal knowledge about the elephant. In this case neither a 'wise' expert can help them 'see' the 'Truth' nor is there scope for consensus. Given the possibility of plurality of perspectives, dissension becomes an ineliminable part of the scheme of things.

This raises the question of the working of the concept of Truth in everyday practices. The typical solution to this problem is to search for a unitary transparent Truth by eliminating all error and ambiguity so as to clear up any misunderstandings. The commonsensical conception of knowledge construes it as the relationship between an objective inquirer and the given object. This "God's eye view" is over and beyond imperfect subject positions and posits an 'ideal' observer who rises above his/her finite, parochial perspective and is not limited by his/her particular socio-historical context. Here the process of subjectivity formation is crucial as certain individuals are constructed as "knowers of Truth". On strength of being the 'insightful elite' they aim to 'correct' or 'straighten' those who are ignorant of the 'whole picture'. The supposition of a unitary, independent world shared by all, despite differing versions about it, attributes discrepancies to the shortsightedness of those who are unable to 'see' properly.

To insist on a uniform monolithic perspective, by arguing that because there is only one single universe that we all inhabit we must necessarily concur about the status of things in it, ignores that although the objects that we bump into maybe 'same' but the knowledge conditions are

not the same for all, but are differentiated by, for example gender, class, caste, race, colour, age and religion etc. Thus the way we perceive or 'know' the world necessarily varies. For example a physicist, a photographer, a farmer and a mythologist would perceive the selfsame 'sun' from diverse point of views. Further, no one perspective is more accurate or adequate than the others, independent of the interests and purposes of the inquirers. Truth that transcends all specific human understandings and purged of mere subjective valuations and experiences is a chimera. All knowledge is necessarily perspectival and contextual depending on our needs and motivations.

The penchant for a monolithic, absolute definition of Truth does violence to differing perspectives by vitiating them, whereby "differences become deficiencies". The valorization of a particular discourse as being the exclusive vehicle of Truth marginalizes other incompatible accounts of the world. The standard definition of Truth can be easily employed for legitimizing a sexist, racist and homophobic social order, as the 'grand interpreters' of Truth, by virtue of possessing requisite degree of rationality, objectivity, impartiality to distinguish between true and false, are accorded privileged positions in the Truth-hierarchy and consequently the 'Other' is denigrated. Conceptual exclusion engenders physical segregation. Thus a homogeneous epistemology leads to the classification of certain individuals into categories of impure, irrational, deviants, abnormal, delinquents, perverts etc. and justifies social exclusion in ghettos, prisons and 'camps'. Concepts framed from a privileged point of view create a reality that excludes and makes invisible other experiences. The search for certainty and for a single 'correct' path to Truth produces while at the same time seeks to eliminate and homogenize the incommensurable. Thus Truth wins its certitude through rites of exclusion, whereby belief systems of the dominant groups calcify into 'eternal Truths', which in turn form the basis for the group's hegemony. To rupture this conceptual circularity, the myth of an absolute, eternal, universal Truth has to be questioned.

Thus one could conclude that there is no one Truth, no one authority, no one objective method that leads to pure, neutral knowledge. The belief that the experiences of only a few special groups needs to be taken into account entails the reduction of a diversity of perspectives to a single, self authorized voice of Truth. This sort of knowledge and the methods of producing it are a fundamental part of exclusionary politics that excludes all that it cannot assimilate. This promotes a 'politics of Silence', whereby marginalized groups even when they manage to speak are not heard at all or they choose to be silent for the fear of being ridiculed, ostracized, ignored or even annihilated on account of being 'different'. Their silences further strengthen someone else's speech.

To go back to the parable of the seven blind men and the elephant, if one of the men establishes his version to be the only Truth, he will dismiss other perspectives as 'false' and ascend to a privileged position of control and exploitation of others. But the recognition of plurality of perspectives will lead to possible experiments with truth and non-violence.