

# TESTIMONY: A METHOD OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

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## **Abstract**

*This paper initially focuses on the issue that ‘which one is the beginning of our knowing process i.e. should we know ourselves first or should we know about others first?’ Secondly, why should we want to know and if we do not know what will be the consequences. Knowledge as a vital part of human life, it should be individual or communitarian in nature is the main concern of this paper.*

*The comprehension through the sensory organs of human being is not meant for itself only, and it is meant for the benefit of others as well. Nowadays, what is known as scientific knowledge, which is individualist in nature, is considered as the ultimate source to know the external world through the empirical method. However, in this paper, I suggest that only empirical method will not work alone without moral and spiritual knowledge. Therefore, reason and belief are the other components of knowledge, which cannot sustain without trust and testimony.*

**Keywords:** *Scientific Knowledge, Trust, Testimony, Cognitive ability, Communitarian Knowledge.*

## **Introduction**

In this modern society, social knowledge is an inevitable part of our life. The cognitive ability of human being to understand others mental state as well as the capacity to perform creative works in the society is God’s gift given to human being. Through this cognitive ability, one can establish or prove one’s own capability to develop the interpersonal relation in the society. The interpersonal relation is developed when there will be development of mutual understanding among the individual beings, which is dependent upon the depth and knowledge of one’s cognitive process. Traditional epistemology has long preserved the Cartesian image of inquiry as an activity of isolated thinkers, each pursuing truth in a spirit of individualism and pure self-reliance. This image ignores the inter-personal and institutional contexts in which most knowledge endeavors are actually undertaken. Human beings thank their cognitive abilities and in particular to their meta-representational capacity to represent the mental states of others which are unique in their ability to engage in creative and elaborate distortion and deception, and also unique in their ability to question in a reasoned manner the honesty of communicators. Epistemology of every philosophical system discusses about how we know and what do we know. However, the general question is seldom asked – why should we know, though it is essential cognitive activity of the human being to know. What is the functional element of the knowing process- individual or collective species? Which one is the beginning of our knowing process- we know ourselves first and then the query about others arises or is it the other way around? How the process of knowing is possible, etc, etc.?

Before discussing the above-mentioned questions we have to first attend to the question – why we want to know? Has it taken the place of the survival of the species? If we do not know

anything then what happens to us? The probable answer would be common for all that if we do not know anything then one is isolated from the society. He is not only unable to share his emotions but he cannot even feel anything regarding the social knowledge of society.

It is not exactly individualistic in nature. A lot depends on the community of knower. Knowledge, in any case is a vital element in human life. We generally expect that the beliefs produced by an evolved cognitive system are true. Cognitive systems are basically producers of knowledge. Their function is not to produce knowledge *per se*, let alone scientific knowledge. They produce knowledge relevant to the organism's welfare. They do so relying on the kind of environment in which they have evolved. When placed in a different type of environment, whether by historical accident or by experimental design, stimulated by phenomena the representation of which is irrelevant to the organism's welfare, cognitive systems may well become quite unreliable. For instance, perceptual illusions, which are very rare in a natural and familiar environment, may be common in artificially devised settings. Natural individual cognition is therefore likely to produce true beliefs of a very limited variety, which get further imported. Beliefs and belief-producing systems worth a philosopher's evaluation come with communication, language and culture. Communication might be seen as a wonderful extension of individual 'cognition, a kind of cognition by proxy'. A communication organism is not limited to information derived from its own perceptions and inferences. It can benefit from the perceptions and inferences of others also. However, knowing through communication, language and culture is an essential part of the human species.

Knowledge is a social<sup>1</sup> (communicate) product and property. Every individual should share with others for the betterment of both the individual and the community. If every member of the community has to learn every piece of knowledge, it is a waste of time and it provides less opportunity for acquiring new knowledge. For the sake of communitarian knowledge or social knowledge, there is the requirement of testimony, which consequently demands trust.

For the survival of a community, three different kinds of knowledge needed, namely, (i) knowledge about the surrounding, (ii) knowledge of the life, (iii) knowledge of the life beyond death. The first one leads to scientific knowledge, the second leads to ethics and values, and last leads to the spiritual knowledge. The role of the testimony is necessary in every sphere of knowledge.

Truth is the ultimate goal of Scientific, Religious and Ethical knowledge. Human beings acquire knowledge in different spheres by applying different methods, which are complementary to one another. For example, what is true for science is not false for religion or ethics. In science, we acquire knowledge through experience, observation and experiment. It is because science deals with the external, observable world, therefore, the methods are predominantly empirical. However, in ethics and religion, we acquire knowledge by inner experience and reasoning. Therefore, the methods applied in ethics and religions are not empirical at all nevertheless, in all the spheres of human knowledge we accept testimony as a method of knowledge. The manner in which we accept the scientist's theory as testimony, in the same way, we should also accept religious and ethics theories by testimony.<sup>2</sup> There is a similarity between the methods of testimony accepted in science, and those accepted in religion and ethics. The experimental and objective methods of science may appear to be different from those of non-scientific disciplines. However, that is not the case. The esoteric traditional systems is seemingly scientific methods of 'try it and see for yourself'.<sup>3</sup> Religion and ethics are not dogmatic and irrational for those matters. Just as there is creativity in science, so also there is creativity in religion and ethics.

## What is Testimony?

Testimony is the method of knowledge based on another person's written or spoken word. When the other person gives certain reason for accepting something as true, then we generally accept his/her words. Majority of human beings depend on verbal testimony of others. In this way, we accept the authority of the scientists and accept scientific theories. Similarly, in morality and religion we accept the authority of great saints and moral leaders. In matters of spiritual knowledge, we accept the authority of the texts like the Upanishads.

We have the testimony of great prophets of religion like Buddha, Christ and Mohammad who proclaim of certain truths, which we accept without doubt, just as we do not doubt the truths discussed by the greatest scientist. However, knowledge of the great prophets and saints is considered as dogmatic knowledge, whereas scientific knowledge is considered as more systematic, methodical and scientific.

Even in Science, perception is not the only source of knowledge. Apart from perception, there are methods of induction and deduction applied in science. Besides, testimony also plays an important role, as scientific theories depend upon other's scientific theories for their truth and validity. In religion, authority of a prophet matters much more because here the words of the prophet are the testimony of the truth proclaimed. Religious testimony validates the religious ideas regarding God, Soul, Immortality, after-life and rebirth. These ideas are not valid methods to the authority of the scriptures; therefore, the Indian philosophical systems accept verbal testimony for all forms of transcendental knowledge. The Vedanta accepts *Sabda* as a *pramana* for knowledge regarding *Brahman*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the domain of values and moral discipline, we have to accept the authority of moral persons like Gandhi, Christ and Mohammad. We accept the moral commands as a matter of moral obligation without ceasing to be rational in our moral life.

Though there is some difference in methodology of science, religion and ethics, sometimes they produce the same result. For me, their value of truth, whether it is science, religion or ethics is the same. Currently, the manner in which they describe the methods followed, it seems that their approaches are different; which is not the real case. The question comes to our mind is that by applying different methods or by changing the methods can we change the result? In other words, as we discussed, the different sources of knowledge such as perception, inference, comparison and testimony, if applied to know a particular kind of enquiry, do they produce same results with varying values? Definitely, the answer here will be 'no', because value of truth is always constant which cannot vary from time to time and by varying methods. In spite of this, in our day-to-day life, we notice that are not able to recognize the truth through our own sense perceptions. For example, regarding the rotation of the earth, though most of us are aware about it from the scientific discovery of Galileo, we continue using the same traditional way of bearing in mind about the sun as rising from the east and setting in the west, rather than the earth.

## Reason and Belief in Testimony

The question arises, as to whether reason and belief can form heart of testimony. We believe in the verbal testimony not blindly but by reasoning. However, in science and religion, belief and reason play a dominant role.<sup>5</sup> Reason and belief together constitute the ground for everything in testimonial knowledge. The scientific truths are believed by people on the basis of reasons provided by the scientists however, in religion both reason and belief are present. Religious statements made by an authority, must satisfy the rational mind for acceptance. Sometimes

people believe or accept some religious truths without knowing the reason behind them. However, these religious beliefs help them indirectly to live a better and peaceful life, without knowing any reason behind it. For example, belief in rebirth is not based on any scientific reason, yet it helps up in leading an ethical and religious life. For the word ‘uttarayan’ we assume it as the day from which the sun moves towards ‘uttar’ means north direction. For another example, we know about the mathematical value that if we will deduct some from all, the quantity of the rest will be less. But this verse (*Om poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poornamudachyate Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavashishsyate*)<sup>6</sup> says something which is completely violating the mathematical calculus, but still it is most popular chanting in our day to day life.

\*Verse Lyrics in English

*Om poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poornamudachyate Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavashishsyate*

### Trust as the Foundation of Human Life

For social living, there is an essentiality of testimony and thereby of trust, be it in science, ethics or religion. I would like to say that both science and religion are based on belief and reason, though of two different kinds. Trustworthiness always leads the human beings to maintain a relation between reason and belief.<sup>7</sup> Without trust, there is no value of reason or belief for human being. However, the words of a trustworthy person or authority play an important role in knowing something, so trust plays an important role in the field of epistemology, especially in the knowledge acquiring process. More or less, in our daily life, we depend or accept what the authority / authorities (scientific or religious) say/s. The authority granted to a communicator affects the effectiveness of his/her communication. From the communitarian point of view, trust is the foundation of human life and society.

### Notes and References

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- [1] Paul Faulkner, “The Social Character of Testimonial Knowledge” *the Journal of Philosophy*, Vol., XCVII, 2000.
- [2] Amit Goswami, & Maggie Goswami, *Science and Spirituality*, PHISPC Publication, New Delhi, 2000.
- [3] Especially in all the Indian system does not accept the blind belief or dogmatic method. Right from Buddha to Sankar, all are defining the process of knowing is very difficult. Buddha himself is the example of that process who did penetration for several years to get knowledge. In Sankar also he defines that what the pre-requisite to know Brahman is. In my opinion this methods are not simple of dogmatic. Like science it is depend upon ones celebrity and individuals endeavour.
- [4] D.M. Dutta, “Testimony as a method of knowledge”, *Mind*, Vol. 36, 1927.
- [5] Richard Holton, “Deciding to trust, coming to Belief”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol., 72, 1994.
- [6] *Om poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poornamudachyate Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavashishsyate* quoted from *Ishavasya Upanishad*, Verse Lyrics in English.
- [7] John.Hardwig “Epistemic Dependence”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol., LXXXII, 1985.