

EPISTEMOLOGY AND HUMAN AFFAIRS

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Abstract

This paper examines the nexus between epistemology and human affairs. Epistemology as a philosophical inquiry is seen as a discipline detached from the practical affairs of life. This misconception is predicated on the abstract nature of its subject matter and the theoretical characterization of its approach. Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the normative nature of epistemology. It shows how epistemology develops criteria for assessing our knowledge claims and by extension our decision making processes. On the basis of this, the paper outlines the place of epistemology in human affairs.

Keywords: Epistemology, Knowledge, Philosophy and Human Affairs.

Introduction

In the public domain, epistemology is an abstract, abstruse and fuzzy philosophical inquiry that offers nothing but unnecessary hair splitting discourse detached from practical affairs of life. This explains why Ozumba (2013) notes that "epistemology is not a layman's job and as such must be couched to reflect the sophistication of the Ivory tower laced with jargons that are meaningful to the initiates"(p.33). This theoretically exclusive description of epistemology is a fallout of the popular but unfortunate conception of philosophy as a speculative discipline with no tincture of connection to practical life. In line with this reasoning, many definitions of philosophy depict it as a discipline that is not really concerned with the factual accuracy of statements about the world than with their meanings. It is therefore presented as an inquiry on the analysis and description of concepts with which we make meaning of the world around us. Hence, whenever the word 'philosophy' is mentioned, it conjures up the image of something abstruse and fuzzy devoid of any practical relevance to human affairs. This conception of philosophy is further strengthened by the fact that philosophy has become professionalized to the extent that philosophers appears to have been detached from practical concerns of life. However, a keen observation of philosophical discourse shows that the emergence and sustenance of philosophical inquiry is dependent on the contradictions of life. This argument is succinctly captured by Ibrahim (2019) when he writes that:

Philosophical ideas and problems are inspired, generated and sustained by the ever-evolving contradictions of human life. These contradictions in human existence provide the raw materials for philosophical discourse...If philosophy turns away from the practical concerns of human life, it is tantamount to detaching from its source of life.... detaching philosophical subject matters from practical concerns of everyday life is simply

philosophy's readiness for extinction (p.20).

From the above, it is clear that if philosophy is to remain relevant to humanity, it must as a matter of urgency begin to reconnect itself to its source of life, that is, the practical concerns of life. In fact, the failure of philosophy to address practical concerns of life is not only suicidal to philosophy, but also inimical to the sanity of human rationality. It is at this point that the place of epistemology in human affairs becomes discernible. This is because the concept of rationality is an epistemological problem. In a bid to ascertain the sanity of human rationality, it is imperative to interrogate the nature, structure and justification of human knowledge. This is the domain of epistemology. In view of this, it is highly important to begin to decode the “high-quality jargon” of epistemological discourse in order to make meaning to others outside the market place of philosophy. Hence, this paper sets out to explore the place of epistemology in human affairs. To achieve this objective, the paper analyses the terms epistemology and human affairs. It examines the stages of knowing in human life. It showcases how epistemological teachings help in developing criteria for assessing our knowledge claims. Finally, it outlines the importance of epistemology to human affairs.

What is Epistemology?

Etymologically, the word epistemology is a derivative of the fusion of two Greek words *episteme* which means knowledge or understanding and *logos* meaning “theory of or rational discourse”. Hence, epistemology means the theory of knowledge or rational discourse on knowledge. In this sense, epistemology is simply a meta-knowledge, that is, knowledge taking a critical look at itself in order to justify itself. For this reason, Ojong and Ibrahim (2013) see epistemology as the philosophical discipline that “investigates the process of human cognition and all the problems associated with its acquisition and justification” (p.39). By so doing, epistemology interrogates the nature, origin, scope, sources, validity and structure of human knowledge. This means that epistemology is the philosophical analysis of the foundations of our knowledge claims as it examines the means by which our knowledge is acquired, the extent of our knowledge, and the standards or criteria by which we can judge the reliability of knowledge claims. In its bid to ascertain the status of our cognitive inquiries, epistemology seeks to unravel questions such as “what is knowledge?” “What differentiate knowledge from mere opinion?” “How do we know that we know?” “What are the sources of our knowledge?” “How do we justify the trustfulness of our ideas?” “Can we know with absolute certainty?” “Are we capable of knowing outside the frame of our experience?”

A critical look at the above reveals the normative nature of epistemology. In view of the fact that human beings hold and express a wide range of opinions on variety of issues, and the possibility of thinking we know based on these opinions when in reality we do not know. It becomes imperative to have a sort of standards or criteria for determining the epistemic worth of our ideas or beliefs. Epistemology fulfills this role by providing the frameworks within which our claims to knowledge are assessed. This normative function of epistemology is fundamental in the sense that our actions in most cases are determined by the ideas we have or the beliefs we uphold. And, if our actions are to be justified, the beliefs and ideas that condition them must necessarily be justified. For this, reason,

epistemology as a normative discipline aims at providing standards or criteria for the assessment of our beliefs and ideas. This explains why Chaffee (2009) defines epistemology as “the area of study devoted to the questions of how to develop informed beliefs, construct knowledge and discover truth” (p.437). That, epistemology helps us in the acquisition of true-beliefs and the avoidance of false-beliefs. In practical terms, epistemology, with its cognitive interrogations, aims at what Crumley (2009) describes as "prudential goals" (p.16) That is, the capacity to make decisions in a timely fashion. Thus, through its pernicious and tenacious scrutiny of the foundations of knowledge, epistemology builds in us an epistemic map with which we survey the confusing terrain of our world in order to properly guide our actions.

What is Human Affairs?

The expression “human affairs” is made up of two principal words. Human, on the one hand refers to mortal anthropoid beings while affairs on the other hand means engagements, activities, relationships, or interactions. In this sense, human affairs refers to human or mortal interactions or relationships. It refers to the engagements or activities of humans in the pursuit of their survival. So, when we talk about human affairs we are simply referring to interactions as a fact of human existence. Human existence, according to Ozumba (2003) refers to man as an existential being faced daily with enormous challenges from his environment, his health, his spiritual well-being, relationship with others, economic survival, socio-political needs, educational, moral, cultural and other needs. In view of the fact that humanity is faced with diverse existential challenges, human affairs invariably becomes multi-faceted as it simply reflects the activities of man on a daily basis (p.33). As such, there are domestic affairs, family affairs, business affair, environmental affairs, financial affairs, economic affairs, political affairs, religious affairs, legal affairs, public affairs, international affairs, educational affairs and so on.

Epistemology and the Stages of Knowing in Human Life

In the proceeding part of this discourse, an attempt was made to clarify the normative status of epistemology. Epistemology was seen as an aspect of philosophical study devoted to the development of normative standards or criteria for what is to count as knowledge, truth and belief. This is said to be the objective of its examination of the nature, sources, structure and validity of knowledge. A critical look at the landscape of epistemological discourse reveals that the main task of epistemology centers on creating the awareness of the need to separate genuine knowledge from belief or mere opinion. This is a fundamental necessity in human existence as it helps us to figure out things in the confusing terrain of existence.

In everyday life, becoming aware of the true nature of knowledge and how it affects us emotionally and behaviourally is critical to achieving personal development and the satisfaction of everyday basic necessities. This is because our actions in daily life are usually conditioned within the purview of the stage of knowing we are at a given moment on a specific or area of experience. An individual may be at different stages of knowing simultaneously, depending on the subject or area of experience. For example, a person may be at an advanced stage in one area of life (academic work) but at a less sophisticated stage in another area (romantic relationship or conception of morality). In

general, however, people tend to operate predominantly within one stage in most areas of their lives. It is at this point that the engagement in epistemological discourse removes the veil of ignorance and propels us towards self-epistemic assessment. In this sense, epistemology develops in us the capacity for critical thinking and existential prudence. However, the road to becoming a critical thinker is a challenging epistemic journey that involves passing through different stages of knowing in order to achieve an effective understanding of the world. These stages, ranging from simple to complex, characterize people's thinking and the way they understand their world. A critical thinker is a person who has progressed through all the stages of knowing to achieve a sophisticated understanding of the nature of knowledge. Thus, in epistemology, we can deduce three basic stages of knowing in human life: naive, confused and critical. These are discussed here under Chaffee's condensed version of William Perry's developmental model of human thought. In his book *Thinking Critically*, Chaffee (2009) identifies the three stages of knowing as follows:

Stage 1: The Garden of Eden

Stage 2: Anything Goes

Stage 3: Thinking Critically (p.267).

In stage 1, that is, the Garden of Eden, our stage of knowing is within the framework of seeing the world in black and white, right and wrong, people in this stage of thinking develop their belief system based on what the “authorities” tell them. Just like in the biblical Garden of Eden, knowledge at this stage is absolute, unchanging, and in the sole possession of authorities. Due to their state of epistemic nativity, ordinary people can never determine the truth for themselves, they must rely on the experts. They are expected to learn and accept information from authorities. If someone disagree with what they have been told by the authorities, then, that person must be wrong. There is now possibility of compromise or negotiation. This is the case whenever a child insists that his/her teacher in school “aunty or uncle” is right in any subject-matter on which the parents may have a contrary opinion. In affirmation of the authority of the teacher, the child retorts “my aunty says....” In epistemology, the knowledge derived from this stage of epistemic naivety is referred to as authoritative knowledge. This is the type of knowledge acquired neither on the nature of the object of knowledge nor on the insight of the subject of knowledge but on the basis of someone else's authority. That is, it is an established knowledge which we accept without doubt simply because we feel there is no need to do so as they are validated by the claims of authorities in the field in question. (Ibrahim, 2021, p.45). However, in epistemological discourse, the danger of this stage of knowing is exposed as it is argued that authorities are not always right and we may be mistaken or misled when we take their views for granted. Furthermore, when authorities disagree, the novices become epistemologically disillusioned and realise that they cannot simply rely on authorities to tell them what to think and believe. They have to think through which authority to accept by explaining why they choose to believe one authority over another. As soon as this happens, the Garden of Eden stage of knowing elapses and the stage of extreme open mindedness enthroned. Just as Adam and Eve could not go back to blind, uncritical acceptance of authority once they had tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and

evil.

In stage 2, that is, the stage of anything goes, after the rejection of dogmatic and authoritarian framework of stage 1, the mind becomes open to any idea that comes its way. "The reasoning is that if authorities are not infallible and we can't trust their expertise, then, no one point of view is ultimately any better than any other" (Chaffee, 2009, p.169). As such, anything goes! In epistemology, this is known as the state of relativism: the view that truth is relative to any individual or situation, and there is no standard we can use to decide which beliefs make most sense. For instance, if a piece of land is shown to three different persons say Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa to assess what the land may be used for. The Igbo man may think of citing a ware house or shops, the Yoruba man may think of housing accommodation while the Hausa man may think of grassing for livestock. In stage 2 thinking, there is no way to evaluate this or any other investment preferences; they are simply "matters of taste" that may be influenced by culture, religion, education, society, historical contexts and so on. However, in the face of the open-minded attitude of anything goes in stage 2 thinking, the reality is that we are often not so tolerant. We do have at the base of our thinking some unwritten; perhaps unnoticed ground norms that guides our choices and preferences unconsciously. This is because some pattern of thinking do influence or determine our sense of judgement as we often condemn or praise beliefs and actions we come by. This shows that at some points we are still able to figure out that the anything goes attitude leads to absurdity as it runs contrary to our deeply felt conviction that some beliefs are better than other beliefs. This is a fallout of the epistemological teaching that beliefs are of two types: basic (informed beliefs) and non-basic (uninformed beliefs). In his article "The Epistemology of Everyday life" Ibrahim (2017) delineates the difference between basic and non-basic beliefs to be that basic beliefs are supported by compelling reasons and it would be absurd to reject them. For instance, the proposition "only women can give birth to babies" is a basic belief that its rejection stands questionable. On the contrary, non-basic beliefs are not supported by compelling reasons as their support is not so solid (p.127). For instance, the proposition "I believe that aliens have visited the earth" is a non-basic belief because its' support is weak and cannot be clearly established. The moment we are capable of engaging in this analysis, it is obvious that the coast is clear for an advancement into the next stage of knowing.

In stage 3, that is, the critical thinking stage, the two opposing perspectives of knowing in stage 1 and 2 find their synthesis. This is because critical thinking "consists of making informed, evaluative judgements about claims and arguments. It is characterised by being fair and open-minded; active and informed; sceptical and independent" (Butterworth & Thwaites, 2013, p.12). The defining features of this stage of knowing are: analysis, evaluation and further argument. When people arrive at this stage of knowing, they recognise that some viewpoints are better than others, not simply because authorities say so but because there are compelling reasons to support these viewpoints. At the same time, people in this stage are open-minded toward other viewpoints, especially those that disagree with theirs. They recognize that there are often a number of legitimate perspectives on complex issues, and they accept the validity of these perspectives to the extent that they are supported by persuasive reasons and evidence. This is simply the cultivation of the virtue of epistemic humility which strengthens one to recognise one's

biases, one's prejudices, the limitations of one's viewpoint, and the extent of one's ignorance. It is a rejection of epistemic arrogance which involves a lack of consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, with little or no insight into self-deception or into the limitations of one's point of view. Epistemologically arrogant people often fall prey to their own bias and prejudice, and frequently claim to know more than they actually know. These kind of people have no place in the critical stage of knowing as their attributes goes contrary to the dictates of critical thinking.

The Place of Epistemology in Human Affairs

Human existence is a complex and cloudy phenomenon that requires the ability to figure out how things are and how to navigate one's way through its excruciating challenges. The need to figure out things in order to survive places an epistemic burden on man. This gives credence to Aristotle's declaration that "all men by nature desire to know" (Bartlett, 1992, p.27). Knowledge, is therefore, a *sine qua non* to human survival. It is an existential imperative for man since it makes him feel at home in his habitat. As Rescher (2003) puts it, "...the need for knowing one's way about, is one of the most fundamental demands of human condition" (p.Xvii). In a nutshell, knowledge is a non-negotiable condition of existence. This perhaps explains why contrary to God's admonition, man (Adam & Eve) decided to eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And from that moment onward, every man carries about with him a touchstone to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil as well as right and wrong. This means that everyone, though may not be fully aware of it, has a theory of knowledge, that is, your own personal epistemology which enables you to develop beliefs and construct knowledge. However, it is not the case that people necessarily construct the most enlightened beliefs possible due to several factors such as prejudice, bias, uncritical acceptance of authority, peer pressure, religious affiliation, cultural influences and soon. It is therefore this obvious fact of human situation that necessitates the study of principles that guarantee the development of reasonable and coherent belief systems which ultimately transform into a theory of knowledge, that is, your own epistemology.

In human life, becoming aware of the nature of knowledge and belief, and how these thought systems affect us is critical to achieving personal empowerment in the pursuit of basic existential needs. This is because our actions in relation to others are usually conditioned by what we think is right based on certain beliefs or convictions. These beliefs determine our interpretation of the world and ultimately the way we think we ought to behave. Thus, our belief system becomes the mental map with which we guide our decision making in daily affairs. In our daily reasoning therefore, we do not determine if a conclusion is valid solely on the basis of the statements we are given. Instead, we restructure the statements presented to us according to our interpretative lens (belief system) and then decide if a conclusion follows thereof. This means that we function within a sort of personal "epistemic logic" in which we utilise our personal beliefs about the world to formulate conclusions about related issues which ultimately determine our choice of actions in various affairs. The consequences of this choice of actions may be either positive or negative depending on the quality of the belief system that conditioned them in the first place. Chaffee (2009) captures this point succinctly as follows:

In the same way that you use road maps to guide your destination, your belief system constitutes the “map” you use to inform your decisions. If your mental map of the world is reasonably accurate, then it will provide reliable guidance in helping you figure things out and make intelligent decisions. On the other hand, if your mental map is not accurate, then the results are likely to be unfortunate and even disastrous (p.437).

In epistemology, our effort to guide the development of reasonably accurate beliefs is conceived as part of a larger quest to achieve knowledge and truth for the meaningfulness of human life. This is why epistemology as a philosophical discipline is devoted to the analysis of knowledge by exploring knowledge through critical reflection. By extension, it is the area of study that interrogates how to develop informed beliefs, construct knowledge, and discover truth for human survival. In view of the fundamental role belief systems play in our life, epistemology critically examines our beliefs in order to differentiate between what we really know and what we think we know. This is the point where epistemology becomes a critical requirement in the intellectual development of man. In this sense, epistemologists' critique of the possibility, and justification of human knowledge prepares us to confront the challenges of existential affairs. This fundamental role of epistemology in human affairs is well captured by Blackburn (2012) when he highlights how public questions can give us urgent political and economic problems. According to him:

When people ask, for instance, whether economics or psychoanalysis is a science, what they are really interested in is whether economic predictions or psychoanalytic interpretations of personality are soundly based. Are they based on knowledge of how economies or psychologies work? Or are they speculation and based on mere cobwebs of theory? These are not idle questions: they determine who get the highly paid jobs and consultancies, and where human efforts get spent. But without at least the glimmering of an epistemology - a story about the structure of knowledge and its scope and limits - they cannot be tackled (p. 43)

The point being stressed in the above quotation is that public policies and expenditure are guided and determined by a critical scrutiny of the epistemic worth of respective disciplines. In this sense, epistemology provides the normative criteria for determining which discipline(s) deserves our attention and investment. In the same vein, courts may need to determine whether 'creationist science' is a science and that its theories therefore deserve airing in schools. This equally requires ascertaining whether there is anything like knowledge in the area of evolutionary history and orthodox biology. Epistemology therefore contributes to the proper formulation of the curriculum as well as the selection and structuring of various domains of knowledge to be transmitted in schools. In general

terms, epistemology matters to human affairs because it propels our understanding of the structure and limits of knowledge towards effective decision making. In specific terms, the importance of epistemology to human affairs includes the fact that it:

1. makes us conscious and take charge of our belief forming processes.
2. guides us against epistemic deception as it helps us in differentiating between what we know from what we think we know.
3. helps us to cultivate the virtue of epistemic humility which involves having the consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge as well as acknowledging the epistemic peculiarities of others.
4. eliminates epistemic arrogance by making us tolerant to other people's views in the face of compelling facts, evidence and justifiability.
5. encourages epistemic empathy as it creates an awareness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in place of others so as to genuinely understand them. This involves developing the ability to accurately reconstruct the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than one's own.
6. promotes intellectual perseverance which is the disposition to work one's way through intellectual complexities despite the frustration inherent in the task.
7. fosters intellectual autonomy which refers to internal motivation based on the ideal of thinking for oneself; having self-authorship of one's beliefs, values, and way of thinking; not being dependent on others for direction and control of one's thinking.
8. builds intellectual courage of having a consciousness of the need to face and fairly address ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints toward which one has strong reservations and to which one has not given a serious consideration. This helps to eliminate intellectual cowardice which is the fear of ideas that do not conform to one's own views.
9. helps us to fight against absolute skepticism as life becomes meaningless where there is nothing to believe.
10. saves us from dogmatism as we are equipped to constantly examine our beliefs.
11. makes inter-subjectivity possible as it prepares us to see things in other people's perspective.
12. deepens our level of understanding both as an individual and as a society.
13. empowers us to build well thought out decision making processes by providing us with logic of relations.
14. enhances our moral consciousness as it provides us with better normative frameworks for understanding our moral choices.
15. boost our chances of survival as knowledge is an existential imperative.

Conclusion

This paper began with a conceptual analysis of the terms: epistemology and human affairs. It then moved on to examine the nextus between epistemology and the stages of knowing in human life. This it achieved by exploring the insights of epistemological teachings on how we come to form beliefs and ideas at different intellectual stages of life. That is, diagnosing how we come to know in our daily life within the framework of the epistemological enterprise. It discusses the place of epistemology in human existence and highlights its importance to human affairs. Thus, the paper anchors that the link between epistemology and human affairs on the need to

analyse, identify, develop the criteria and methodologies for determining what we know, how we know, why we know, with the ultimate aim of improving human existential condition. It shows that knowledge is an imperative for human survival and that epistemology provides the criteria for assessing our knowledge claims towards ensuring effective decision making processes.

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