

## Chapter II

### Conceptual Background

#### 2.1 The notion of knowledge.

The main concern of philosophy is the quest for truth, knowledge and wisdom. It is obvious and evident that the central aim as reflected from man's intellectual history is the determination of his place in the universe, or in other words, the attempt to know and understand himself and his surroundings. In short, the intellectual activity understood in terms of "philosophy" gives an evidence that man has been searching for truth and knowledge about himself and his world or worlds.

The fact that man wants to know himself and his place implies that man lives in ignorance. In the attempt to give answers to the fundamental question of what and where man is, different schools or different intellectual organizations have given different and sometimes contradictory answers. Often, these answers are regarded merely as 'beliefs' in the sense that their truth-claims have not been proved or justified, or, on the other hand those beliefs are incapable to be falsified. Anthony Quinton wrote in his article "Knowledge and Belief" as follows :

If philosophy is conceived as an ontological undertaking, as an endeavor to describe the ultimate nature of reality or to say what there really is, it requires a preliminary investigation of

the scope and validity of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

According to the most widely accepted definition, "knowledge is (generally defined or regarded as) justified true belief. That it is a kind of belief is supported by the fact that both knowledge and belief can have the same objects."<sup>2</sup> That is truth is the criterion which will determine the status as "knowledge" of beliefs. For example, my belief that the gods in the epic Ramayana exist will be considered as knowledge if the truth-claim of the existence of the gods is justified or proved to be true.

Obviously, the concept of knowledge in this sense relates to the notion of truth. However, the notion of truth is the most fundamental and problematic concept in philosophy. Presently, according to Popper there are two epistemological doctrines concerning the notion of truth : pessimistic epistemology and optimistic epistemology. The optimistic view holds that truth is manifest, that we have the power to see it, to distinguish it from falsehood, and to know that it is truth. The pessimistic view is linked with a doctrine of human depravity, with disbelief in the power of human reason.<sup>3</sup> The analogy of Plato's cave-man may be regarded as a prime

<sup>1</sup>Anthony Quinton, "Knowledge and Belief" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 4 [London: Macmillan, 1967], p. 345.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, [London: Routledge, 1976]

4 d. ed., pp. 5-6.

example. Apparently, these two contrary doctrines considered in connection with the above definition of knowledge have altogether an impact on the notion of knowledge. At any rate, this leads to an awareness of the ignorance of man.

As a conceptual background is needed for a better understanding, especially for those who are not accustomed to philosophical discussion, this thesis will adopt Popper's view of knowledge. Popper distinguished two different senses of knowledge or of thought :

1. knowledge or thought in the subjective sense, consisting of a state of mind or of consciousness or a disposition to behave or to act, and
2. knowledge or thought in an objective sense, consisting of problems, theories, and arguments as such. Knowledge in this objective sense is totally independent of anybody's claim to know; it is also independent of anybody's belief, or disposition to assent; or to assert, or to act.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis will adopt what Popper denominates "the third world" as an application to what may be called 'knowledge'. The third world is, as Popper explicates it, "the world of objective contents of thought, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of arts".<sup>5</sup> This world may be the products of (or, if it is the case, which comes into being through) the second world (the mind, the consciousness or thinking process); but, factually, it

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<sup>4</sup>Karl Popper, Objective Knowledge, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], pp. 108-109.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

has its own independent existence. In other words, the third world is the library or the store of knowledge or beliefs or thoughts which man generation after generation has a share in the contribution process; a legacy which has survived and passed through to the present generation. And this thesis is set out to defend that literature is one of the all important supplies. That literature is a source of knowledge which helps man to know himself and his place.

### 2.2 The novel trend in the scientific attitude.

This thesis comes into being upon the recognition of the clash between the ancient wisdom and the modern belief. In the old time, the major sources of knowledge - or of that which guides man's life - appear to centre around the Bibles or the scriptures, whereas in the modern time science has claimed to be the sole edifice which provides what is conceived as "the rational truths". In other words, the authority of what may be termed as 'knowledge' seems to turn away from the mystic priests and fall into the hands of scientists. Obviously, literature, particularly the ancient classic works of literary art, has a close relation with religion. The rise of science is appreciated on the basis that science is successful in giving predictions and that scientific explanation is held to be rational, whereas the religious is often regarded to be irrational. However, those who have strong faith in religion perceive that their belief is rational. The notion of rationality, thus, is considered to be the touchstone of the validity of beliefs.

In the whole sphere of human knowledge in the third-world sense, besides the religious and scientific cults, however, there is another kind of belief. This third kind is the occult or superstition which, along with the lines of religious practice, has survived from the dead civilizations. Although it is banished by both religion and science, the spores of the belief can find their ways to spread through the whole world, prevalent even among scientists and the so-called religious men. The face or the nature of the beliefs appear as stranger to those of religion and science as comets are strangers to the solar system. In spite of the existing hostility, the contradictory species of lore or beliefs (religious and scientific on one side and that of the occult on the other side) appear to mingle and dwell in the same societies and, sometimes, in the same person. Generally, scientists repudiate the occult on the ground that the occult belief is irrational. The priests, on the other hand, despise the belief, which is alien to the religious teaching, because it has undesirable effects upon the human minds. It blackens the minds or devalues or lowers the nobility of human spirits. In short, the occult practice dehumanizes the human beings.

The mention of the occult here is relevant and significant in that a better understanding of the belief is recognized to lead to a better understanding of the concept of the term 'knowledge', and of what is going on in the sphere of intellectual enterprise or in the history of ideas. Whatsoever the term 'knowledge' means, it embraces the sense like 'that which gives true description and true explanation

of the world'. Now it has been realized that the phenomena of the occult belief must relate to something real in human experience, that social anthropology should be concerned with finding out what is the basic reality underlying witchcraft ideas.<sup>6</sup> That is - the study of the occult is also realized to lead us to a better understanding of reality. What is remarkable and significant is that the mysterious nature of the occult belief not only reminds us of our ignorance but also leads us to reconsider our concept of the term "rationality".

Actually, there has been a recognition that if science is meant to reach the proper description of reality, science must not limit itself in a narrow area. Dr. Albert Shadowitz gave, in the preface of his book entitled The Dark Side of Knowledge, a remarkable statement which concerns the notion of rationality and reveals to us about the present state of the scientific knowledge and its trend.

Dr. Shadowitz wrote as follows :

Though we suspect that popular lore, as a whole, does not contain a large fraction of truth, we also suspect that any widespread, long-lived belief about the world must somehow reflect nature. Belief, like any other human faculty, evolves continuously under the impact of our confrontation with nature. A long-surviving popular lore, then, probably contains some truth. For a scientist, the fascination of the dark side of knowledge is this : the truth it may contain must lie beyond, perhaps well beyond, the frontier of scientific knowledge. Science has not yet been able to recognize this truth and transform it into knowledge. But this

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<sup>6</sup>Max Marwick, Witchcraft and Sorcery, edited, [Middlesex: Penguin Education, 1970], pp. 38-39.

small content of truth in the lore can point the way for science to evolve into completely new directions.<sup>7</sup>

The book is a scientific study of the occult. In Dr. Shadowitz's words, the study seeks an understanding of the seemingly irrational through rational means".

A few reflections can be seen in the paragraph quoted above. The most important thing is the change in the scientific attitude. Some scientists have laid their eyes on what they had previously overlooked. They have begun to recognize that the irrational beliefs may contain some truth which is unknown to science, that the fact that those beliefs seem irrational does not mean that they contain no truth. Scientists are learning to put themselves in a tolerance stage of attitude, a stage at which, historically, the growth of science is rendered possible.<sup>8</sup> The notion of rationality sometimes acts as a veil of maya which prevents them from seeing the lights of truths of the other beliefs. As a matter of fact, philosophers have begun to reconsider the concept of rationality. Henry Harris, for example, argued about in what way rationality in science should be understood.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Albert Shadowitz and Peter Walsh, The Dark Side of Knowledge, [London: Addison - Wesley, 1976], p. viii.

<sup>8</sup>R.A. Lyttleton, "The Nature of Knowledge", in The Encyclopaedia of Ignorance, edited by Ronald Duncan and Miranda Weston-Smith, [New York: Wallaby, 1977], pp. 10-17.

<sup>9</sup>Henry Harris, "Rationality in Science" in Scientific Explanation, edited by A.F. Heath, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1981], pp. 36-51.

Dr. Mark Tamthai even proposed that we give up the application of the term, since he found that at the present stage of human conceptual scheme we have no criterion nor instance to ground the meaning of the term 'rationality' on.<sup>10</sup>

The whole thing may be considered as an evolution of the scientific attitude. There remains a long way for science itself to evolve before it reaches the imagined or projected apex, for example, the stage where it can issue a complete explanation of the whole phenomena in the solar system. As a matter of fact, today science has to accept that it knows very little about the sun<sup>11</sup> and its visiting comets. To conclude in a metaphorical statement, scientists are realizing that there is a possibility that after a proper investigation, no matter how much time is consumed, the pervasively existing 'weeds' might be discovered or turn out to be 'herb-plants'. That is - in short, literature may contain some medicine, some truth, which will cure the ignorance of the people who understand it.

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<sup>10</sup>Mark Tamthai, "Belief and Rationality" in Thammasart University Journal, Vol.13 (March 1984), pp. 136-144.

<sup>11</sup>Frank Ross, New Worlds in Science, [New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1960], pp. 55-91.



### 2.3 Positivism and Status of Science.

"There are no complete studies on positivism".<sup>12</sup> And this inclusion is not designed to be a kind of compendium of the school of philosophy, but as a section of the background on which the logical positivism, another distinctive movement in philosophy, will be better understood. Positivism and Logical Positivism are two separate different schools of philosophy which uphold the same views that "science [mathematics included] is the only valid knowledge and [that] facts [are] the only possible objects of knowledge".<sup>13</sup> That is - the central tenet of the positivist thought is "the primacy of science and the rejection of [traditional\*] metaphysics"<sup>14</sup> and the transcendental philosophy.

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<sup>12</sup>Nicola Abbagnano, "Positivism" in The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol.7, [London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967], p. 419.

\* The modifier is added here under the recognition of (or with respect to) G. Bergmann's book entitled The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism. John Passmore in his book A Hundred Year of Philosophy says of Bergmann as 'a leading positivist'. This suggests that distinction between the 'traditional' metaphysics and 'novel' metaphysics be made.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>14</sup>Robert N. Beck, Handbook in Social Philosophy, [London: Collier Macmillan, 1979], p. 30.

Therefore, according to the strict doctrine of positivism the claims made by the religion, the art, and part of the philosophy regions to status of knowledge are considered invalid. Some positivists regard their works as philosophy of science.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is the knowledge of knowledge; "the task of philosophy is to find the general principles common to all the sciences and to use these principles as guides to human conduct and the basis of social organization".<sup>16</sup> With no need to appeal to any doctrine of transcendental speculation, the positivists see that the social sciences owes its foundation to the knowledge provided by the natural sciences. Superstition is by no means knowledge. Religious and artistic behavior or human action are explained anew in the so-called 'scientific' terms. Usually, positivists employed the traditional terms, but they "emptied them of all traditional meaning".<sup>17</sup> Religious ontology is simply denied as fantasy or psychological projection. Thus, the present day prevailing mood which is flourishing 'the spirit of science' may be described concisely with the adjective 'positivistic'.

Positivism was notably founded, or indeed began to flourish in the eighteenth century. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was considered to

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<sup>15</sup>John Passmore, "Logical Positivism", in The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 5, (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 414.

<sup>17</sup>Robert N. Beck, Ibid., p. 31.

be the anticipator,<sup>18</sup> but Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was respected as the founder. The term "positivism" was used first by Henri, comte de Saint-Simon "to designate scientific method and its extension to philosophy". And Comte was the first thinker who adopted the term for a philosophical position. Actually, from a point of view that positivism rejects religious ontology or transcendental philosophy, this doctrine may be considered as "a recurring position in the history of thought, represented by a stream of philosophers from the Sophists of ancient Greece to the contemporary analytic positivists".<sup>19</sup> In the positivist concept, the root of the meaning of man does not reside in what is traditionally called the theological realm but lies solely in the natural world called the planet earth. Comte wrote his important work Positive Philosophy after an attempt at a failed suicide.\* In

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-45.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

\* A note on Comte's personal life is included here since it is seen to have some characteristic matter falling in the purview of 'artistic or poetic ideology'. Will Durant in his book The Story of Philosophy (New York: Touchstone, 1961, p. 265) wrote of Comte as follows: "But, like most of us who set out to reform the world, Comte found it difficult enough to manage his own home; in 1827, after two years of marital infelicity, he suffered a mental break-down, and attempted suicide in the Seine." And again on the next page he put: "There was a certain dogmatic intellectualism about this positivism which perhaps reflected the disillusioned and isolated philosopher. When in 1845, Mme. Clotilde de Vaux (whose husband was spending his

the later stage of his thought, when he grew older and after having experienced a series of alternative domestic life, he became to recognize the need for religion but still insisted that its root must rest on the natural whole world. Contrary to Plato or Augustine or Aquinas, Comte envisaged that man falls from no where else but springs up from the natural planet earth.

However, Comte is diverse from the Sophists or the Indian Materialists, e.g. the Cārvāka. Apparently, he places the stress of the importance of man solely on the intrinsic quality, or in another word, the qualities originating and realized within the whole man himself and his society. For Comte, human progress is due to the fact that man himself is of the progressive nature. Man in Comte's word is the Great Being; the earth the Great Fetish, and space the Great Way. And that it is man himself who recognizes his possibilities and realizes them in and along the course of his evolution. Obviously, Positivism has a close affinity with Marxism which was given birth at

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life in jail) took charge of Comte's heart, his affection for her warmed and colored his thought, and led to a reaction in which he placed feeling above intelligence as a reforming force, and concluded that the world could be redeemed only by a new religion, whose function it should be to nourish and strengthen the feeble altruism of human nature by exalting Humanity as the object of a ceremonial worship." Surprising as it might seem, John Stuart Mill, Comte's admirer, was also recorded to have been incubating such a death before a reading of Wordsworth rescued him. Wittgenstein too, whose influence over the logical positivists was notable, confessed that the idea came to him very often.

the same period.\* That is - to apply the concept 'good' for an illustration of the case, if man is good, it is because goodness resides originally within man himself, rather than being bestowed from and by the external agency. Considered thus, positivism is sometimes conceived as a trend of humanism. It rises up, on the basis of knowledge provided by the sciences, to address the nobility of man in the dignity or in the name of man himself, not in the name of the Absolute, or the Supreme Being, or say, God. However, some scholars view this notion as a new phase of Catholicism.<sup>20</sup>

Apparently, scepticism leads man to doubt God and His existence; science then has brought man to a conclusion that the natural world is the sole, absolute home of man. In a sense, science then is meant to support the nobility of man. And philosophy is meant to guide man to

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\* Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a contemporary of Comte (1789-1857). Robert N. Beck put a footnote in his book Handbook in Social Philosophy to distinguish the differences between the contemporary philosophies as follows: "Positivists generally have been influenced by the procedures of physics, pragmatists by biology, utilitarians seek to give morals and legislation a scientific status, and Marxists offer a scientific law of history."

<sup>20</sup>Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy, [New York: Touchstone, 1961], p. 266.

settle in his own solely-real home. To Comte, "the apex of the hierarchy of sciences is sociology, or social physics".<sup>21</sup> The positivist conception of man and his world implies the assertion that man is the guide of his own progress in the name of evolution. Conclusively, for the social positivists that Comte and Mill are leading figures, only the natural sciences provide man with valid knowledge from which theories of social order or progress can be derived. The distinguished name of Comte and his positivism is parallel with his thesis of the three stages of human development. These are :

the theological, or fictitious, stage in which man represents natural phenomena as products of the direct action of supernatural agents; the metaphysical stage in which the supernatural agents are replaced by abstract forces believed to be capable of generating the observable phenomena; and finally; the positive stage, in which man, refusing to seek the ultimate causes of phenomena, turns exclusively toward discovering the laws of phenomena by observation and reasoning.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, to Comte, from the seventeenth century onwards man has passed into the positive stage which is that of science. Bertrand Russell remarked that "almost everything that distinguishes the modern world from earlier centuries is attributable to science, which achieved its most spectacular triumphs in the seventeenth century".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Paul Edwards, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 415.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 415.

<sup>23</sup>Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy, [London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980], p. 512.

Notably, four great scientists had simultaneously contributed to the triumph of science, before Comte's positivism arose. They were Copernicus (1473-1543), Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo (1564-1642) and Newton (1642-1727). Actually, Copernicus belonged to the other century, but his astronomy was not recognized in his time. Later in the next century in which positivism was notably given birth, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his The Origin of Species. While scientists were working to discover the new truths or theories, philosophers of the century, Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz and Locke set out to "analyse and articulated the methods and assumptions on which science rests".<sup>24</sup> Scientific Historians pin-points the seventeenth century as a stage of the scientific revolution which is also the turning point of the change of human world view.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, positivism was/is an impact of the scientific revolution.

There are three fundamental kinds of positivism. The first is social positivism which Comte and Mill stand as the leading figures. Mill, however, rejected Comte's absolutism and this led to his theory of Utilitarianism. The second kind is evolutionary positivism. Herbert Spencer is the most influential figure. Spencer argued that the universe evolves continuously and unilinearly "from a primitive nebula to the more refined products of human civilization".<sup>26</sup> That is it goes by itself as

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<sup>24</sup>Robert N. Beck, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolution, 2d ed. [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975], pp.92-135.

<sup>26</sup>Paul Edwards, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 417.

evolution is its nature; whatsoever it is spiritualistical or materialistical. At any rate, he accepted that there must be an ultimate cause. And that "the sole task of authentic religion is to remind men of the mystery of the ultimate cause. The task of science, on the other hand, is to extend indefinitely the knowledge of phenomena".<sup>27</sup> The third type is critical positivism which has a close connection with logical positivism or neopositivism. Sometimes, this type is known as empiriocriticism. Howsoever diverse they may appear, they share the same faith in science, that the only conclusions issued by science are valid or deserve the concept 'truth' or 'knowledge'.

#### 2.4 Knowledge, Truth and Man's Crisis.

As a matter of fact, at the present time, the faith in science - meaning the natural sciences - has risen up to the point that, among the general men, science seems to claim the prevailing (or even absolute or ultimate) source of knowledge. Science appears to be the most authoritative or the first and last resort when the present men happen to face the need for truth or when they come to the point where they have to determine their problem or the truth of their belief. There is a glowing belief that the "scientific investigation" is the sole route to truth or reality; that what science says or 'concludes presently' must be true both 'at the present' and 'in the future'. We have acquired 'a habit' to think that what science says today it will say the same tomorrow, since science is conceived of as

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 417.



the sole institution which issues valid knowledge of the laws of nature.

The present time is the time of crisis in the sphere of human knowledge or belief. Because at the present stage of scientific knowledge, what science says is not the same or even contrary to that which is preached by the antiquity or the arts and religion. Since the seventeenth century, man has been faced with the question 'what is the case of his being?' For his belief in some degree affects his way of life. It is like being at war, to plunge into the next action, the commander must decide carefully so that he will not lose the fight. Now, if the 'data' or 'the informations' he acquires from 'his spies' are wrong or 'not true', he might 'lose the fight'. Man after the scientific revolution is in an intellectual crisis because he has fallen into the stage where he is induced to question his beliefs; the stage at which he is unascertained of what is the truth about his life and his world.

Dostoevsky (1821-1881) a Russian who is one of the world great writers, one of Comte's contemporary intellectuals had recognized the impact of the revolution, or the effect of the change of the world view. In his work The Possessed he made it spoken through the engineer Kirilov : "The laws of nature made Christ live in the midst of falsehood and die for a falsehood".<sup>28</sup> And in The Brothers Karamazov, he depicted Ivan as "one of those

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<sup>28</sup>Quoted from Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, [New York: Vintage Books, 1965], p. 79.

who don't want millions, but an answer to their questions".<sup>29</sup> Carl Sagan in his recent famous book The Dragons of Eden as well recognizes man's living ignorance; as a scientist he still has faith in science. He ends his last chapter by quoting Jacob Bronowski : "We are a scientific civilization, ..... that means a civilization in which knowledge and its integrity are crucial. Science is only a Latin word for knowledge .... Knowledge is our destiny".<sup>30</sup> That is - what one 'knows' or 'believes' is true will destine him. This assertion applying the word 'destiny' somehow reveals the attitude that man must be ready to pay the price for his ignorance. And also it implies that 'knowledge' is salvation, and man is destined or 'condemned to know', perhaps, the 'absolute truth', And that one day science will bring him the truth, which is inferred to or derived at 'empirically' or 'scientificly'.

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<sup>29</sup>Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Constance Garrett, tr., (New York: Signet Classics, 1957), p. 83.

<sup>30</sup>Carl Sagan, The Dragons of Eden, (London: Coronet Books, 1978), p. 238.