

CHAPTER V

PERCEPTION AS UNIT OF KNOWLEDGE

Perception has been regarded as the 'Unit of Knowledge'. In order to understand the expression 'Unit of Knowledge', we have to know what is meant by 'unit' here. The expression 'unit' refers to the unanalysable particular in terms of which everything of that particular is measured. We find that there are diverse opinions amongst Philosophers as to the meaning of 'unit of knowledge'. Here, the views of some Western Philosophers and Indian Philosophers have been dealt with in short in order to reach a conclusion.

Locke in his book "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" expounded the view that all knowledge comes from experience, rejecting the doctrine of innate ideas. According to him, mind is a 'tabula rasa', a blank sheet, passive and inactive in the beginning. Experience comes from two sources, viz., sensation and reflection. By

sensation we get the knowledge of external objects whereas by reflection we know the operation of our own minds. Whatever knowledge we obtain is due to either sensation or reflection. Simple ideas which are the ultimate constituents of our knowledge can come into being from either sensation or reflection. Human mind can form complex ideas by combining simple ideas which it receives from sensation or reflection. According to Locke, the 'simple ideas' are the 'unit of knowledge'.

But Kant holds the view that Locke has made a mistake in assuming that our knowledge is ultimately made up of simple ideas which are discrete and non-relational. Kant says that even the simplest form of awareness requires the activity of the mind. Thus, inactivity of mind or passivity of it as admitted by Locke is not acceptable to Kant. Kant maintains that 'simple ideas' of Locke are not the 'unit' of knowledge. Moreover, Locke's view has been criticized by Hobbes. He maintains that mind cannot construct things at the very start though it can grasp a complex whole. Kant, who tries to reconcile in his critical philosophy empiricism and rationalism, holds the view that neither empiricists nor rationalists are correct regarding the origin of knowledge. Knowledge is not due to reason alone. Knowledge is a product of sense-experience and reason. Kant rejects of Locke's view regarding the 'unit of knowledge'. He says that by experience we can have

discrete sense - manifold. This discrete and non-organised material is transformed into knowledge of object through the activity of synthesis of human understanding. Kant holds that knowledge is judgemental in nature : judgement is the irreducible 'unit of knowledge'. Knowledge proper, according to Kant, is composed of intuited sense-data duly combined by the understanding. To judge is to think and to think is to conceive of the common characteristics of the individual objects given to us in intuition. In other words in judging the understanding supplies the form of the concept under which the intuited sense-data are subsumed. Now we shall endeavour to give the meaning of judgement in short after Kant. In the Critique of Pure Reason Kant has said that the understanding may be defined as the faculty of judging.

Judgement is the assertion of characterisation of something by something else. Something which is characterised is the subject and something which characterises is the predicate. Kant takes the judgement in the sense in which Aristotle used it. In a judgement something is said of something else. Something of which something is said is called the subject, something which is said of the subject is called the predicate. At the conceptual level judgement asserts the inclusion of the predicate concept in the subject or denial of the inclusion of the predicate concept in the subject. There is judgement in every act of thought

and as such it is the starting point of every thinking.

By knowledge Kant means knowledge of object expressed in judgement. But this view of knowledge does not account for the growth of knowledge. Any judgement by itself does not constitute a system of knowledge; and without a system the different items of knowledge could not be reckoned as significant items of knowledge. Every judgement becomes significant only in the back drop of a system of knowledge. However, every system of knowledge admits of an organic growth. It is not something cut and dried and given at the very outset. Like the body of an organism the system of knowledge grows and different judgements and Constellation of judgements constitute parts and sub-systems within it; support one another and help the total system to grow and be more integrated. This integration implies entry of material from outside and harmonisation of loose and rough ends of these materials with one another and with already harmonised pieces of knowledge. This organic character of knowledge is not reflected in Kantian analysis of judgemental knowledge. The British idealist F.H. Bradley is well known in philosophy for his contribution to logic and theory of knowledge. According to him, the British Empiricists like Locke, Hume and Mill could not distinguish the questions of logic from the question of psychology. In his theory of knowledge he gives indication about the 'unit of knowledge'. He maintains that judgement is the unit of

knowledge. Knowledge is an awareness of an object. No knowledge is possible without judging. Hence, we can say that to be knowledge is to be a judgement. From this it follows that judgement is the 'unit of knowledge'.

But what is a judgement ? According to Bradley, "Judgement is the act which refers an ideal content (recognised as such) to a reality beyond the act"¹. If knowledge grows it must have a starting-point. This starting point exhibits the essential characteristics of being either true or false. No fact is true unless we think it. A mere sensation does not amount to knowledge till it is actively connected by the mind with other facts. A judgement is an assertion or truth - claim which may be either true or false. We may say that judgement is the starting point of knowledge. For all knowledge in the last analysis is composed of judgements. It is an act of consciousness.

From this conception of judgement we arrive at the following features of judgement. They are : (a) judgement is the act of thinking, (b) judgement is the thinking of an individual mind, (c) judgement is the thinking by means of ideas and it transcends the individual mind. From these features we can conclude that judgement is the act of objectifying and rendering communicable subjective experience.

Judgement is the act of reference. When we say, "rose is red", this means that we judge that the reality is such that 'rose' has 'redness'. From this we find, that judgement

is the act of reference of an ideal content. Now we should know the meaning of 'ideal content'. 'Ideal content' is a logical idea. Logical idea is contrasted with psychological idea. A psychological idea is an image or an occurrent in the individual mind. It is the subject of judgement. Logical idea arises from psychological idea. It is the predicate of the judgement and it is the essence of psychological idea. Moreover, logical idea does not depend on the individual mind.

According to Bradley, thought begins with judgement. No thought is possible without judgement. Hence, it can be said that judgement is essential for knowledge of any object and that is why Bradley regarded judgement as the unit of knowledge. Bradleyan theory of judgement has been criticized by Prof. Cookwilson, Stout and Hobhouse and others. The distinction between psychological and logical idea of Bradley, according to Stout, involves circularity. A logical idea is the part of the psychological idea, to know it as such is to make a judgement - but there cannot be judgement without logical idea. The admission of pre-judgemental level of knowledge or consciousness leads to the collapse of Bradleyean view that judgement is the unit of knowledge. It is Hobhouse who admits simple apprehension as the pre-judgemental stage of knowledge. Hobhouse points out why we should not admit judgement as the unit of knowledge.

According to Hobhouse, the unit of knowledge is pre-judgemental awareness. This pre-judgemental awareness, he calls, 'simple apprehension'. It is like 'sensation' and 'simple ideas' but not identical with any of them. "Whatever our immediate consciousness may be" says Hobhouse, "it is not merely an affection of the mind in this way or that, but an assertion of this or that, a cognitive act"². 'Sensation' we know, is mere affection but 'simple apprehension' of Hobhouse is not mere affection but an assertion. On the other hand, simple idea is a passive state of mind and reveals the object whereas simple apprehension of Hobhouse is active state of mind. This explains why sensation and simple ideas are not identical with the simple apprehension of Hobhouse.

Now the question arises : why does Hobhouse think that the unit of knowledge is pre-judgemental, and not judgemental ? Judgement, we know, involves Subject and Predicate and it relates them. The relation between the Subject and Predicate becomes possible if and only if we have prior knowledge of Subject and Predicate. Without the awareness of the subject and predicate, the question of relating them can never arise. Hence, judgemental knowledge from the very nature of the case presupposes pre-conscious level or pre-judgemental state of cognition. Hence, we cannot say that knowledge begins from judgement rather we should say that it begins with pre-judgement i.e., 'simple apprehension'. Hobhouse clearly holds the view that this 'simple

apprehension' is both logically and psychologically prior to judgemental knowledge. It is logically prior to judgement because without this as antecedent there cannot be judgemental knowledge. Further, it is psychologically prior in the sense that it can exist alone without the association or help of another cognition. Now, we can say that 'simple apprehension' which is both logically and psychologically prior to judgemental knowledge is the 'unit of knowledge'.

According to Russell, individual percepts are the basis of all of our knowledge. Our knowledge at its root is private and unshareable. The knowledge of the warm and intimate things which make up colour and texture of the experience of an individual is from the very nature of the case mainly unshareable. Hence, according to Russell, the given in personal experience is incommunicable and tends to be distorted during the process of articulation in language. The chief purpose of language is communication, and to serve this purpose it must be public. The data of experience are personal and private while the common world in which we believe ourselves and share is a matter of construction. We make corrections in interpreting sense-appearance in order to iron out the uncommon elements in such data. The aim is to achieve common knowledge. According to Russell, individual percept is the basic unit of knowledge and this percept, when it is first encountered,

is unalloyed and is without accretion of any interpretation. However, it acquires the load of interpretation as it is encountered over and over again by the experiencer in his experience. Therefore, Russell says : "you can learn by a verbal definition that a Pentagon is a plain figure with five sides, but a child does not learn in this way the meaning of everyday words such as "Rain", "Sun", "Dinner", or "Bed". These are taught by using the appropriate word emphatically while the child is noticing the object concerned, consequently the meaning that the child comes to attach to the word is product of his personal experience, and varies according to his circumstances and his sensorium. A child who frequently experiences a mild drizzle will attach a different idea to the word "rain" from that formed by a child who has experienced tropical torrents"³.

Now, we take up the problem of 'unit of knowledge' from the standpoint of Indian Philosophy. We know that there are some schools of Indian Philosophy which admit two stages of perception, viz., (i) indeterminate perception and (ii) determinate perception. At this stage, we are confronted with the question, which of them is the 'unit of knowledge' ? At the very outset of this chapter we have given the meaning of the unit of knowledge. And taking that meaning and characteristics of the 'unit of knowledge' into account we shall judge whether indeterminate perception or determinate perception is the 'unit of knowledge'.

Nyāya, Sāṅkhya and Mīmāṃsā Schools of Indian Philosophy admit indeterminate perception as prior to determinate perception and without indeterminate perception there cannot be determinate perception. Indeterminate perception is bare sensation having no particular characterisation (vikalpa). Though it is bare sensation, we cannot have perception proper without it. For instance, take the cognition of 'red cloth'. In this case it can be said that we have no knowledge, if we have no knowledge of 'red' and 'cloth'. Indeterminate perception is pre-judgemental cognition as it cannot be expressed in the Subject - Predicate form. In order to have a proper perception of a characterised thing we must have prior knowledge of the characteristic. It may be indistinct but that does not matter. We can therefore say that the indeterminate perception is the initial stage of knowledge or the 'unit of knowledge'. It is the starting point of knowledge. Without it we can have no knowledge at all. So we can say that indeterminate perception is the 'unit of knowledge'. If a comparative study is made, we shall find that there is partial similarity between the Hobhousean view of 'simple apprehension' and the view of Indian thinkers on indeterminate perception. Indeterminate perception is like the 'simple apprehension' of Hobhouse but there is a significant difference. Indeterminate perception is logically prior to determinate perception, but according to Hobhouse, 'simple apprehension' is both

logically and psychologically antecedent of perception. Further, it can be said that indeterminate perception, according to Nyāya, is known by inference and not by direct introspection. But, according to Hobhouse, 'simple apprehension' can be cognised only introspectively.

Indeterminate perception is called sensation and determinate perception is called perception. We have been given to understand and by the psychologists that there is a relation between sensation and perception. Neither of the two can stand alone. Sensation and perception are so closely connected that their separate existence is impossible. In this regard we like to quote Dr. Ward. He says, "The pure sensation we may regard as a Psychological myth"⁴; ... "By pure sensation is meant undifferentiated sensation. An uninterpreted sensation is pure sensation. But 'pure sensation' has no separate existence. Sensation and perception can be separated in thought only but they cannot be experienced separately.

Perception without sensation is not possible although sensation without perception in rare cases may be in existence. This is a real possibility because it is not unthinkable that a sensation i.e., uninterpreted perception may die out or be annihilated before mind grasps it properly for its interpretation. Though they differ from each other in certain respects yet they are interdependent with

some reservation. Stout says, "... we can never have absolutely pure sensation, sensation absolutely devoid of meaning, either original or acquired"⁵. Again, he says, "... the concept of absolutely pure sensation is an artificial abstraction. No actual sensation with which we can definitely deal is absolutely dissociated from past experiences"⁶. On the other hand, Woodworth says, "sensation is the first response aroused by stimulus ... perception is the second response"⁷.

We can say that sensation and perception are interdependent and sensation comes first and then comes perception. Speaking on the same vein we can say that indeterminate perception arises first and then comes determinate perception. This indeterminate perception which is the first stage and starting point of perceptual knowledge is the 'unit of knowledge'. It is perhaps not out of place to note here Russell's contribution to this discussion. When we are moving from private initial experience (indeterminate perception) to common perceptual knowledge (determinate perception), we are moving from personal to impersonal knowledge, i.e., we are moving from knowledge which is subjective and unshareable to knowledge which is common to different persons. Thus, determinate perception is at once more and less than indeterminate perception. It is more because this perceptual knowledge, being impersonal, is

conceptualized and therefore can be externalised and is shareable. It is less because it is incapable of conveying the freshness, accuracy and uniqueness of personal experiences.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The principles of logic - F.H.Bradley - Vol.I - Chapter I, p.10.
2. Theory of knowledge - Hobhouse, p.22.
3. Human knowledge and its scope and limit - Russell, p.18.
4. Psychological principles - Dr. Ward, p.143.
5. A Manual of psychology - G.F.Stout - 4th edition, p.124.
6. - Do - p.125.
7. Psychology - Woodworth, 6th edition, p.422.