CHAPTER VIII

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the preceding chapters, I have examined how far and in what respects the analytic philosophers have succeeded in characterizing 'knowledge' better than the traditionalists who offered nothing more than certain abstract definitions. In doing so, I have considered Ryle's distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that', Austin's analogy between 'knowing' and 'promising', and, finally, the justification problem of knowledge. Ryle distinguishes between two types of knowing and intends to show that knowing is mainly a 'capacity verb' which consists in the ability to perform some act. But he ignores the propositional content of knowledge and, therefore, cannot be said to have given an adequate analysis of the concept of knowledge. Austin's analogy between knowing and promising is equally inadequate as it lights up only one aspect of knowing when considered in the first person use. In any case, he himself later rejects his proposed analogy and admits only a performatory force of 'know' statements. A more significant step towards defining the concept of knowledge is the justified-true-belief analysis. But Gettier has shown that even when a belief is true and justified, it may still fail to attain the status of knowledge, if the justification is based on false grounds or
premises. Subsequent philosophers have tried to resolve this difficulty by adding a fourth condition of knowledge. But we have seen that both the causal and the defeasibility approaches fail to remove this defect, for there may always be an unknown factor preventing us from attaining knowledge. Neither the foundationalists nor the non-foundationalists give an adequate explanation of the concept of 'epistemic justification'. While the foundationalists cannot show how basic beliefs justify non-basic beliefs, the coherence theory (representing non-foundationalism), in neither of its forms, gives a satisfactory account of complete justification.

I want to reconsider some important points that have been emerged from the previous discussion. The following points are enumerated below.

1) 'Knowledge' as an abstract concept.
2) 'To know' as a capacity verb.
3) 'I know' as a performative utterance.
4) The causal link between the belief state and the factual state.
5) The notion of indefeasible justification.
6) 'Foundation' of empirical knowledge.
7) The notion of 'Coherence'.
8) The concept of 'infallibility'.

First, the analytic philosophers try to explain the concept of knowledge by means of the linguistic analysis method which is claimed to be an improvement upon the traditionalists' abstract conception of knowledge. They reject the traditionalists' view that knowledge consists in being in a special state of mind. According to them, the concept of knowledge is to be explicated in terms of linguistic analysis.

But the account of knowledge given by the analytic philosophers is nothing more than an abstract conception of knowledge. They provide some necessary and sufficient conditions for 'X knows that P'. But 'X' stands for any human being and 'P' stands for any proposition or state of affairs. Therefore, the definition of knowledge proposed by them is applicable to any human being's knowledge of any proposition or fact. By an 'abstract concept', we mean a concept which is devoid of any reference to individuals, times and places. This being the meaning of an 'abstract concept', the analytic philosophers have given nothing but some abstract conception of knowledge. So the linguistic analysis method fails to provide a better method of analysing knowledge.

Secondly, in contrast to the propositional analysis of knowledge, Ryle describes the word 'know' as a 'capacity
verb'. 'Knowing how', according to him, consists in the ability to perform an act. Our intelligent capacities like playing, learning, behaving, understanding, misunderstanding are all parts of 'knowing how'. But Ryle's view that 'know' is a 'capacity verb' is to be rejected for two reasons. First, it puts excessive emphasis on 'knowing how' or the ability to perform some act intelligently. But I cannot communicate my knowledge to others if I do not express it in terms of a proposition. In order to give a complete account of knowledge, we must light up its propositional aspect. Otherwise, the analysis of knowledge in terms of some necessary and sufficient conditions is not possible. Secondly, the view that 'knowing how' is a capacity to perform some intelligent act is not sound in its own sphere. From the fact that a person understands or appreciates something, it does not follow that he has the ability to perform it. One may appreciate the cooking of a special dish, but he may not be able to cook it himself and vice versa. There are various aspects of knowing and no aspect should be ignored by putting emphasis on the other.

Thirdly, Austin compares the verb 'know' in its first person use to the act of promising. He thinks that both 'I know' and 'I promise' are performative utterances. According to him, those who intend to show that 'knowing' is a description of a special state of mind are guilty of committing
the 'descriptive fallacy'. It seems to me that 'knowing' has both a descriptive and a performative aspect. Our knowledge must be described in terms of a proposition. It has also an illocutinary or performatory force, for when we say 'I know something to be so-and-so!', I am performing some mental act. Nevertheless, Austin himself subsequently rejects the hard and fast distinction between the descriptive and the performative uses of the verb 'to know'. Austin's merit lies in the fact that he denies the view that knowing consists in the description of a special mental state. From the fact that I believe a particular mental state to be true, it does not follow that it is really true. But this does not mean that knowing is nothing but the performance of some act like promising. The first-person use of 'know' does not throw light on all aspects of knowledge. So Austin's view, though it avoids some difficulties of the traditional concept of knowledge, gives only a partial analysis of knowledge.

Fourthly, it is often claimed that our knowledge claims will be justified if the state of affairs believed to be true is causally connected with the belief. By 'cause' we mean an event or state of affairs preceding another event or state of affairs called the effect. We have seen that the causal conditions suggested by the philosophers are
either too strong or too weak. If they are too strong, then many things will fall short of knowledge. If, on the other hand, they are too weak, they cannot avoid the Gettier-type counterexamples. In case of non-inferential knowledge, we can very well discover a causal link between two states of affairs. The proposed counter-examples can be removed if we carefully perceive the object to be known. For example, in the barn case, Mary's doubt can be removed if he himself goes to the barn and touches it. The case of knowledge can be discriminated from mere lucky guess in this way. But in case of inferential knowledge, it is very difficult to find such a link. In the latter case, there may always be some unknown factor in the causal chain which prevents us from knowing. In case of deductive inference, two states of affairs are logically connected with each other so that nothing can prevent our resulting inference. But the empirical knowledge of ordinary human beings cannot be proved by deductive inference. Our inference is inductive, and in this case, there may always be a chance of being wrong. So the causal condition required for inferential knowledge does not cover all cases of knowledge. But in everyday life, we always make inductive inference and very often our inferences come out to be true. So we can say that there is a causal relation between our belief state and the factual state of affairs. Our failure to know is due to our failure to notice the causal link in question. So
although causal relation is not a logically necessary relation in case of our empirical knowledge, we often discover a causal link between our belief state and the factual state and make inferences on them.

Fifthly, according to some philosophers, in order to reach the status of knowledge, our justification must be indefeasible. A person's justification is indefeasible if and only if it is not capable of being defeated by any evidence that the person in question does not possess. The propounders of the defeasibility theories make the condition of an indefeasible justification so strict that it shows that knowledge is unattainable. The proposed conditions are always open to counter-examples which prove that a person's justification may always be defeated by some unknown factor. But the question is, who will determine that in a particular case, the justification of a person is being defeated by some unknown factor? The defeasibility theorists always assume some absurd situation which defeats a person's justification. But who will tell that the supposition is correct? An advocate of the defeasibility theory, who assumes such a situation, places himself in the position of a divine, omniscient being who knows everything. But in fact, his supposition, being merely human, may equally be defeated by
some unknown factor. Thus those who intend to show that our justification is defeasible as there is always the possibility of being defeated by some unknown fact or situation, always assume their supposition to be absolutely certain. So their supposition can be defeated by their own theory.

Sixthly, the foundationalists have claimed that a particular type of knowledge called basic knowledge provides the ultimate foundation on which our non-basic factual knowledge is built. The strong foundationalists and the modest foundationalists offer different accounts of the concept of foundation. According to the strong foundationalists, basic statements are essentially incorrigible or indubitable and are concerned with observational data directly evident to an observer. The modest foundationalists, however, soften the requirement of basic knowledge. According to them, basic beliefs, though subject to revision or correction, are still non-inferentially evident or self-warranted.

In my opinion, a basic statement need not be absolutely certain or incorrigible in the sense in which a logical statement is claimed to be absolutely certain. For in case of an absolutely certain logical statement, we deduce other statements from it. But non-basic beliefs cannot be deduced
from basic beliefs by applying the deductive method. Moreover, although deduction preserves the certainty of our basic premises, it does not increase our knowledge but only makes our implicit knowledge more explicit. If our non-basic beliefs are inferred from basic beliefs by applying the method of induction, we can reach beyond the level of what is immediately given. But we can do this only at the cost of involving uncertainty. The simple fact is that in case of empirical knowledge, we are 'beyond reasonable doubt' about some beliefs or propositions. When we say that our empirical knowledge ultimately derive their justification from some foundational or basic beliefs, we mean that such basic beliefs are 'beyond reasonable doubt'. That is to say, no rational man can suspect the truth of these propositions or beliefs.

Seventhly, an alternative approach to analyse the concept of epistemic justification is made by the coherence theorists. But their analysis of 'coherence' is not upto the standard of providing a satisfactory account of complete justification. To attain complete justification of our true belief, it is required that our belief must cohere with others within a system of beliefs. The Explanatory Coherence theory, according to which, a justified belief should itself be explained somehow and also offer explanation of certain other things, involves circularity in reasoning. As every belief
in the system will be in the ancestral chain of every other, it will be one of its own ancestors. Subjective coherence, with its doxastic system and corrected doxastic system, cannot yield knowledge. It provides only subjective justification and not complete justification.

Thus neither explanatory coherence nor subjective coherence can adequately explain complete justification. The notion of 'complete justification', however, is essential for knowledge. We cannot attain knowledge of anything unless we are completely justified about it. But this notion is not adequately explained either by the foundationalists or by the coherentists.

Eighthly, we have seen that both the advocates of the justification theory and those who try to supplement it by some additional conditions fail to provide a satisfactory account of knowledge. The reason is that all of them want to show that knowledge is infallible, while some supposed unknown factor prove that it is fallible and thus open the gate for the sceptics. We have to determine whether human knowledge can be said to be infallible at all. In order to do this, we must first of all make it clear what is meant by 'infallible'.

The sense in which human knowledge is said to be infallible is different from the sense in which divine knowledge is infallible. Divine knowledge is infallible in the sense
that it can never be subject to subsequent rejection or revision. But in case of human beings, knowledge is infallible if and only if no rational person can put doubts on it. In our everyday life, we know various objects and facts without any doubt about them. Does it not prove that human knowledge is infallible in a special sense? The point is that we have to use the word 'infallible' in the sense in which it is applicable to human knowledge and not knowledge of a superhuman being.

In normal cases, our perception, memory and inference generally give us correct result, for example, my knowing that there is a table in front of me, or my remembering that I have to meet John on Sunday next, or my inferring that the cloudy sky indicates the possibility of heavy rain. As our senses, memory or inference sometimes fail to produce the correct result, there is no guarantee that they will always do so. From the fact that we sometimes fail to know, it does not follow that knowledge is unattainable. In most cases, we correctly perceive objects of the world, remember them and correctly infer about some events and act on the basis of our perception or memory or inference. This proves that human knowledge is infallible as in most cases we have true knowledge. But if we (strict to) Plato's standard of infallibility, only divine knowledge can be said to be infallible and human knowle-
dge, compared to divine knowledge, will be 'fallible', or in Plato's terms, mere 'true belief.' But we are here concerned with human knowledge and not divine knowledge.

Thus it is apparent that despite the continuing efforts of the contemporary analytic philosophers to solve the traditional problem of knowledge, none of the solutions proposed so far is truly adequate or satisfying. The issue, therefore, remains one of the great open questions of epistemology today. The proposed analyses have reckoned conditions for knowledge, or justification, to be so strict that it becomes reasonable to hold that the conditions are never met. So we are tempted to draw the conclusion that there is no knowledge, or that no propositions are epistemically justified. This can lead only to scepticism which is certainly not a desired result. The problem is whether we can avoid this unhappy consequence. It can be said that the failure of the analytic philosophers to prove the certitude of non-basic factual knowledge leads us back to Plato's two separate worlds for knowledge and true belief. Plato suggested that knowledge is a matter of the ideal world and is indubitable, universal and real; on the other hand, justified true belief, being merely human, is always dubitable and has every chance of being unistaken. Plato's idea of knowledge is superhuman or divine. But our aim is to give an account for human knowledge. Human
knowledge is not incorrigible or infallible in the same sense in which divine knowledge is incorrigible or infallible.

Human knowledge, however, may be infallible in the sense that the person who knows has no doubt about it. It is fallible only in comparison to divine knowledge. Moreover, to say that human knowledge is fallible is not to mean that it is unattainable in so far as it is liable to error, though it is an admission that absolute certainty as regards some issues can never be reached. Those who are sceptical of the possibility of human knowledge should take into consideration the individual knowledge claims of scientists and historians, or certain 'certainties' of everyday life, such as John's knowing that his water-bucket is empty after careful investigation. Knowledge claims can justifiably be made in a wide variety of circumstances. In particular, we need not in principle restrict the possibility of knowledge to necessarily true propositions or to self-guaranteeing ways of knowing. Factual, contingently true propositions cannot be ruled out as possible 'objects' of knowledge simply because they could have been false, nor can observation be ruled out as a possible source of knowledge simply because it is 'subject to error.' Knowledge of different persons and even of the same person may differ in degree. But this does not mean that in all cases we have to make a probability calculus in order to weigh our degrees of knowledge in everyday life.
So we can conclude that knowledge is the natural fruit of human enquiries in different spheres of life. Since the contemporary analytic philosophers fail to give an adequate definition of knowledge, it does not follow that knowledge is unattainable. The errors found in the analysis of knowledge are due to the failure to realize its exact nature. Human knowledge differs in degree according to its different varieties. The following passage from Russel is illuminating:

"Knowledge is a matter of degree. The highest degree is found in facts of perception, and in the cogency of very simple arguments. The next highest degree is in vivid memories. When a number of beliefs are each severely in some degree credible, they become more so if they are found to cohere as a logical whole. General principles of inference, whether deductive or inductive, are usually be obvious than many of their instances, and are psychologically derivable from apprehension of their instances."

[ Bertrand Russell,
Human knowledge:
its scope and limits, ]

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