CHAPTER III: KNOWING MYSELF AND OTHERS

The word ‘know’ is a curious one. It can have different meanings depending upon the contexts in which it is used. Knowing, for instance, might mean ‘knowing how’ or ‘knowing that’. ‘Knowing how’ of course, is not important where the knowledge of other minds is concerned. It is the ‘knowing that’ that assumes the all-important role. When I say ‘I know that he is angry’, it is a knowing that statement or a propositional knowledge.

3.1 BEING ONE TO KNOW ONE

The question that needs to be faced at this juncture is how do I arrive at such a proposition and believe it to be true when the proposition is not the result of any direct awareness on my part? I can never share the feelings or sensations of another. So how can I see him to be
angry? My answer might be ‘because he is clenching his fist, gnashing his teeth, his facial color and expression have assumed a particular character at present, his voice is high-pitched and so forth.’ But philosophers like J. Wisdom can rephrase the question and say ‘how do you know a person is angry when you are absolutely ignorant of his emotion?’ Is it not the case that you do not ‘know’ but only believe him to be angry? I might answer that ‘belief’ when corroborated by evidence is called knowledge and here his behavior supports my belief. But this, we have discussed in the previous chapter, is not enough proof according to the skeptics for his anger might just as well be phony. That a person can feign anger is, according to the skeptics, proof enough for the conclusion that I can never know whether a person, other than myself, is angry.
It is true that people do feign, act, lie, play-act, deceive etc. and so it might be difficult to know the real emotional state of a person other than myself. But do one or two mistakes nullify the possibility of knowledge altogether? We all know that machines are inherently liable to break down; but that alone does not prohibit us from using them and getting the required results. J. L. Austin has rightly pointed out that the possibility of breaking promises is no reason for not making promises in the first place. In the like manner, we can say that the possibility of being mistaken cannot be the sole reason for not knowing a person’s anger. If I say of someone, ‘I know that X is angry’ I am sure, under normal circumstances, that that is the case. My being mistaken on an occasion or two is by itself no bar in knowing others, any more than the fact that promises are broken is a bar to making them.
Skeptics are not ready to accept knowing other minds, basically because they take infallible direct awareness to be the only form of knowledge. They are of the opinion that we are directly aware of our mental states hence they are infallible in nature. Therefore, to know mental states per se requires direct awareness of the subject of knowledge. Self and others are radically different in this respect. As a person does not have the privileged access to other minds s/he cannot ‘know’ them.

What this argument demands is that knowledge should be infallible not only by nature but also by principle. And those who believe this put forward the prime example of the knowledge of one’s own mental state. When I say ‘I am in pain’ this is knowledge according to the skeptics for this I know for certain and hence is infallible. But is this
at all a knowledge situation? When I say ‘I know that I am in pain’
what I really mean is ‘I feel pain’. So this is a statement of feeling,
and not a knowledge situation. So I do not know but rather feel my
pain. And as this is not a propositional knowledge situation it cannot
offer any criterion towards the infallibility of knowledge. My feeling
of my pain is infallible but not knowledge. So on the basis of this it
will not be prudent to say that if I know I cannot be wrong. On the
other hand, in order for knowledge to be absolutely infallible it should
be true crossing the space and time limit and in that sense only logical
truths can be categorized as knowledge. Empirical knowledge, on the
other hand, always runs the risk of being mistaken. But it is not
‘predictive’ in such a way that future always proves it wrong. In
future we can revise our ideas about a person but that does not mean
that we are unable to form an idea about him right now. So far as
certainty or surety is concerned do statements like ‘he is in pain’ and ‘the ball is red’ really differ? How do I prove that the ball before me is red or even that it is a ball in the first place? I might say that the ball is red because it looks red when put under standard white light, or it so appears to other people and so on. But do these prove the color of the ball to be red conclusively? Even if I restrict myself to a statement like ‘the ball looks red to me’ it does not guarantee the certainty that skeptics are looking for. This is because the ball might cease to look red to me in the future, or when held under a monochromatic beam of green light. Therefore, so far as certainty is concerned, all empirical statements, whether mental or physical, do not seem to vary much.

But the question is ‘the ball’ cannot intentionally camouflage its color whereas, a person can camouflage his mental states. They often
pretend and lie. A person might project every symptom of pain without feeling any. Therefore it is he alone who knows the truth of such a statement.

But is it necessary that one has to have a certain experience to know that experience? Is it not true that the word ‘know’ has different senses? When I say, ‘I know that there are members of Parliament’, ‘know’ might mean ‘being able to identify’. When I say ‘I know why Indian governments are so unstable’, ‘know’ might mean ‘to describe and explain’. When I say ‘I know what it is like to give birth to a child’, ‘know’ might mean ‘to have the same experience as’. None of these senses should be considered as wrong. In fact, if the word ‘know’ only means ‘to have identical experience as’ then the sense of the word ‘know’ becomes either an absurd proposition because what
is required is the absurd criterion, namely, to be identical with someone other than himself. However similar experiences of two people might be, the way they experience the same incident will be really different. So if skepticism insists that ‘being one’ is both a necessary and sufficient condition of knowing one then its order is fallacious by nature. The order itself is not only wrong but also absurd. One is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition of knowing one. I would like to make the point clear with the help of an example. Suppose, some person ‘A’ is Hindu by religion. But it is quite possible that even being Hindu by birth he might not know what being a Hindu really means in the fullest sense of the term. He might practice Hinduism yet might not know much about the history, the dogmas, the meaning of certain practices etc but yet he is a Hindu by religion nonetheless. So being one is not a necessary condition of
knowing one. Knowing an experience is more than just having it, it should enable the knower to identify, describe and explain it. Knowing how, of course, helps knowing that, but not always. A doctor, who has never had a heart attack, knows that it is happening when a patient shows the relevant symptoms. Is it not true that sometimes others like doctors, psychiatrics, friends or enemies know us better? Many a times contradictory beliefs, desires, ambitious are so muddled up that we cannot sort ourselves out and are not clear about ourselves. Whereas others who can distance themselves from the situation, can more readily grasp the connections between our feelings and experiences on the one hand and external situations on the other. In such situations when we hide ourselves through self-deception out of fear, guilt or self-protection we make ourselves opaque to us. Under such circumstances others often can see through
us. They know us better. Therefore, being one is neither necessary nor sufficient condition of knowing one. As no strict connection exists between being and knowing, the definition of ‘know’ as ‘to have the same experience as’ appears to be inadequate.

3.2 A “WITH-WORLDISH” KNOWLEDGE

When we want to know someone we want to understand him and by understanding him I mean a sense of what he says and how he behaves in a given situation. I do not want to ‘feel’ him but do want to make sense of him. And this is true of us also. It is not ‘feeling’ but sense or meaning that we must have, to be said to know someone including ourselves. Knowledge does not only consist of the experience itself but in grasping the sense of this experience too. Therefore, to know others is to make sense of their experience.
Moreover, others play an important role in molding us as we are. Many of the ideas and attitudes, which comprise me, are derived from others. I acquire my distinctive selfhood from others. Many of our characteristic experiences like feeling deceived or jealous or ashamed etc. are generated from the interaction with others. Others provide the raw material out of which feelings like shame, jealousy etc are fashioned.

Jean Paul Sartre in his famous book ‘Being And Nothingness’ argued that we achieve consciousness of ourselves only when we become conscious of other beings who are conscious of us\textsuperscript{xxxvii}.

One cannot be conscious of his own self without the experience of being an object of another consciousness. At its very inception therefore, self-consciousness is essentially social. In this self-
consciousness I not only become aware of myself as a conscious being but also become aware of the fact that there is a potential difference between how I look at myself and what others see. This awareness further gives birth to situations such as play-acting, pretending, lying etc. So, I can never be an entity with a cocoon woven around me in such a way that nobody can penetrate this cocoon and I also cannot communicate with other beings. No self constructs its own private individual world, nor does it live in one. Rather each self is a self because of its being “a part of a community of other selves that build up a public, social world which uses a common system of symbols and which underwrites an ongoing pattern of interaction whereby these selves recognize and respond to one another.”
In fact, the knowledge of the world depends upon some form of conceptual framework. That we basically live in the same world can be shown with the help of a seven-step argument:

(i) To claim that the others live in a different conceptual world from us is still to claim that they speak and think.

(ii) To claim that others speak and think we need to know that they are actually saying something (and not just producing noises).

(iii) To know that others are saying something we need to know at least some of what they mean.

(iv) To know what others mean we need to be able to translate their utterances into our language.
(v) But to translate their utterances we need to ascribe to them various beliefs, desires, attitudes and ways of connecting these mental elements.

(vi) But to ascribe such mental elements to them we must assume that they share with us a background of common beliefs, desires and principles of thought that we live in the same world.

(vii) But to have a shared background of epistemic capacity, belief, and principles of reasoning is to live in the same world as they do xxxix. If this is true then the thesis that others can live meaningfully within worlds incommensurable with ours, is mistaken. Heidegger xl holds that a man constantly enters into all kinds of associations with other men, this is not the result of the “fact” that he is not the only one of his kind in the world, but the other way round: he can recognize others
like himself in the world and enter into relations with them, because his own being is disclosed to him as ‘being-with’. Even when he is alone, the existence of others is ensured by his loneliness, by his missing others.

Heidegger rejects the theory that the other is ‘analogous’ to oneself. In fact, man is never a world-less subject, never an other-less ‘I’, but is always ‘I-myself-with-other-selves’. That is why man does not need to find his way to other men but being-with-others is the basic structure of each man’s self. On the basis of this irreducible ‘with-structure’ of his being, man is essentially ‘with-worldish’. This idea of being-with-others-in-the-world is the only basis from which, according to Heidegger an ontological analysis of man can even start.

Now, this ‘others’ are not this one or that one, they are just ‘people’,
and we essentially belong to them. So ‘in his everyday being-in-the-world’ it is not man himself who is there, but it is ‘they’, people, who are there, one self among them. In the first place and for the most part, the ‘who’ of everyday-ness, the everyday self is the ‘they’ (Das Man). Therefore, as man understands self as being in the world and the enquiry into the being of world goes hand in hand with the analysis of man’s existence and in inquiry into the being of other beings goes hand in hand with the analysis of man’s own existence (self) and of world. In this way Heideggarian theory of being avoids the threat of skepticism.

3.3 COMMUNICATION AND INTERPRETATION

In fact solipsism overstates the difference between oneself and others while not understating what is shared and similar. But we all live in
the same world and understanding of others often change the understanding of ourselves. So the relationship between self and other cannot be of radical distinction. But skeptics hold that self and other are radically different owing to the fact that the self knows his or her ‘self’ directly whereas that of others only indirectly. Going back to the Cartesian thesis, skeptics hold that consciousness is fundamental to what a person is and thus a person had privileged access to his own mental life only. From these two propositions it also follows that the person cannot know others, as he does not have the privileged access to other minds. But if so then social science would be absurd and impossible. We cannot deny the fact that we live in a society where normally we do understand each other and more than often successfully interact with each other in spite of the fact that cases of deceit, misunderstanding etc may occur. Believing in other persons is
an essential part of the act of communicating and we always perform that act. But why do we do so? It is true that we do not introspect the feelings of others but still we know their feelings and believe them to be true because, we belong to a common linguistic and socio-cultural framework that supplies a rationale for our beliefs.

Moreover, the common language that we share is always ‘intentional’ in character because to use a word correctly one must know what it means and what the word means depends upon the fact that what the speaker is intending it to mean. When a speaker makes an utterance the thought of the speaker gets transferred into words, marks, symbols etc. that he uses. If uttered meaningfully, those words, marks, symbols have intentionality that is derived from the speaker’s thoughts. Therefore, the meaningful sentences, uttered by a rationally
intelligent speaker, do not only have the conventional linguistic meaning, but also the intended speaker meaning.

Searle\textsuperscript{xlii} takes the example of a German speaker named Friedrich. If Friedrich, Searle holds, says ‘Es regnet’ he might utter these words intentionally and mean it, then he is performing a complex act with a few conditions of satisfaction\textsuperscript{xliii}. “When we communicate to people, we succeed in producing understanding in them by getting them to recognize our intention to produce that understanding. Communication is peculiar among human actions in that we succeed in producing an intended effect on the hearer to recognize the intention to produce that very effect.”\textsuperscript{xliv} Therefore, my speaker’s meaning and my communication intention to produce in the hearer the same kind of knowledge will be successful if:
(1) I correctly utter a sentence in any language with its conventional meaning;

(2) My utterance should have conditions of satisfaction; and

(3) The hearer should recognize intention (2) by means of his recognition of intention (1) and his knowledge of the conventions of the same language\textsuperscript{xlv}.

If all these conditions are fulfilled a successful communication between a speaker and a hearer is possible. The important point is that if these conditions are fulfilled successful communication will be possible even if I am lying. “This is a key point: even if I am lying, by saying something and meaning what I say, I am committed to the truth of what I say.”\textsuperscript{xlvi} Therefore, I am committed to the truth even if I am lying\textsuperscript{xlvii}. Therefore, play-acting or lying does not eliminate the
possibility of proper communication. So when a person A says ‘I am in pain’ and another person B understands it making successful communication possible, it does not make any difference even if A is lying because both of them know the truth conditions for such an utterance. As we see, lying or play-acting cannot deter us from knowing ‘other minds’ and thereby the skeptical claims of ‘not-knowing’ other minds on such basis gets nullified.