

## TOWARDS A COMPOSITE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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The production of knowledge about the social world is observed to be context-dependent. This paper discusses the two contexts: mind-set context and social context, and develops a theoretical framework to produce knowledge by integrating these two premises of knowledge in identifying transcendental reality that helps humans to construct day to day or other trivial realities. It explains that the production of knowledge depends upon the construction of reality; if it is done through transcendental reality, the knowledge of the social world will be comprehensive, closer to reality and altruistic. In case it is done in the absence of transcendental reality relying on egoistic attributes and based on facticity alone neglecting the purpose for which social word comes into existence and the force that it operates, the knowledge will be misleading.

**Keywords:** mind-set, social context of knowledge, plausibility structure, construction of reality, and transcendental reality

Knowledge is the cognition of a thing and situation, their nature, pattern of existence and role thereof. It develops awareness of the existence of a phenomenon, its implication and impact on others and according to Berger and Luckmann (1967: 1) demonstrates “the certainty that phenomena are real, and that they possess specific characteristics.” Thus, humans through knowledge come to be conscious of the attributes and properties of a phenomenon, share it with others and act accordingly. This is why Tim Dant (1991: 5) considers knowledge as “the construal of relations between abstract entities that are taken to represent the world of human experience, that can be shared by humans through communication and that can be used by them both to understand their experience of the world and to guide their actions.” This information facilitates humans to act, interact with others, and plan their future systematically and in a meaningful way to achieve what they want. Knowledge, thus, relates individuals to society and other fellow beings and creates a close bond between them. Tim Dant considers it ‘a key feature of societies’ and ‘part of what binds individuals and groups of humans into a larger group which we call society’. It is according to him ‘a link between each of us and everyone else who shares our society and culture’ (ibid: 1). Thus, knowledge develops a distinct ability in human beings, activates and sophisticates their minds and hearts and creates aptness to cognitive faculties to understand the world, utilize its resources, act according to its nature and live in an appropriate, comfortable and meaningful way. It is, in this context, said that knowledge is life, and is the only human attribute

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that distinguishes him/her from other creatures. Al-Atlas (1993: 149) analogically says that knowledge is the food and life of the soul. Persons who have knowledge are placed on the high pedestal, considered superior and achieved admiration of people and society as well. Same is the case with society. If it is a knowledgeable one, it develops a superior and sophisticated civilization which has appropriate and pertinent provisions of acting, interacting with others and living with all virtues and rectitude that are the characteristics of humanity. They also develop a sound mechanism to transfer their social and intellectual heritage to young generation and make it more and more effective to achieve the societal goals. This is contingent upon the fact that individuals and groups produce comprehensive, closer to reality and altruistic knowledge beneficial to humanity from all respect. It is generally assumed that such knowledge is impossible as social knowledge is grounded on existential conditions. This paper explains that such knowledge is possible if it is produced by identification and guidance of the transcendent reality that is the vital force behind the working of other realities and the cause of their existence. It spells out a theoretical framework that suggests integrating the two premises of producing knowledge: mind-set and social condition to acquire knowledge of the fact-world through its underlying force that is transcendental reality. In fact, the day to day realities are contingent upon transcendental reality and thus, be studied through its help to have composite and beneficial knowledge.

Sociology has been concerned with knowledge, its roots, structure, and impacts on human actions and society. It tries to trace the role of knowledge in the emergence of social structure. It has shown its interest in the nature and structure of knowledge and the fact how distinct knowledge develops in a distinct social setting. Sociologists' interest in studying different aspects of knowledge is so acute that they develop a separate branch, the sociology of knowledge, to deal with the issues involved in the structure and forms of knowledge. They have studied forms of social arrangements, the role of social actors and their perception of the social world. In this context, they also come across the meaning that members of a group develop and share with themselves to rationalize their views about the world and actions as well. Later, the study of knowledge became more important due to the new trends in the study of social phenomena and challenges posed to the explanation of the social world and to the methodology adopted for this purpose. New approaches were set forth to provide authentic explanation of social phenomena and; in this context, positivist bases of investigation were put to question. Social scientists preferred individuals' own account and experience of the social world and on that basis tried to develop new methods to study the social world. At the same time, attention was also diverted toward culture, its growth, the factors that shaped it, organizations that preserved and modified it and the distinct features that distinguished one culture from others. The sociological significance of cultural studies was that it highlighted and concentrated on meanings which culture

developed about itself and its products and within which the knowledge of the external world was derived, and human operation was regulated. The meanings that a society developed and its members shared provided a profundity of what members know and act in a particular situation and indicated what society preferred and valued. Tim Dant (1991) observes:

But cultural studies have increasingly paid attention to the interpretation of the meaning of the cultural products. These meanings which are consumed by so many members of the society are treated as a significant representation of the culture as a whole – they are taken to embody the values and concerns of society or at least identifiable sub-sections of it (2).

During this period, social theory emerged as an important mechanism to provide valid explanation of social phenomena and their working. Social theory in developing theoretical framework about the nature and working of social phenomena had taken into consideration issues raised by disciplines like linguistic, anthropology, philosophy and history and had been influenced by the way they tried to tackle them. This resulted into new approaches in social theory that affected the nature of knowledge. They impressed sociologists to know why particular set of ideas is prevalent in a particular group considered genuine and preferred among other alternatives. They, thus, tried to trace the origin of knowledge and explore its genesis. They asked questions “how we know what we know and why we accept or share a view of reality in preference to others” (Boronski, 1987: 2). They sought answers of these questions in the sociology of knowledge, which is thought about as a discipline “which is used to examine the social origins of knowledge and the way in which individuals and social groups claim to know and believe something, despite the variety of alternative ways of seeing the world” (ibid.).

### **Theoretical Perspectives of Knowledge**

Social philosophers and thinkers have been actively engaged to find how we can know the knowledge which we attain is reliable and what theoretical and methodological strategies we have to adopt to know what is real? In this context from the beginning of the development of theory of knowledge, they were confronted with the problems and issues involved in the relationship between knowing subject and knowable object. The relationship between these important ingredients of knowledge is still paramount in modern age and reexamined to find new perspective of knowledge. There are two fundamental premises on which perspectives of knowledge are developed. It first indicates that the source and base of knowledge are mind-set of individuals, the way they perceive, experience the outer world and form certain opinion of it. Individuals through social interaction come across the meanings they attach to their actions and exchanges, share them with other fellow beings and understand the realities of everyday life. The experience which they share with others enables them to develop a common framework to see the world and conceptualize it accordingly. The knowledge that develops in this

process is considered genuine, transmitted to coming generations, constituted the basis of reality, and adopted as truth. This theme is developed into interactionist approach and highlighted by phenomenologists. The other lays stress on the social foundation or existential connectedness of knowledge between society and knowledge guiding principles. This has been the primary focus of sociological inquiry into knowledge and asserts “to explain the connection between the social existence of people in a particular socio-historical context and the world view which they possess” (Boronski, 1987: 20). This idea is mainly manifested in the sociology of knowledge and the social construction of reality.

### **Mind-set Base of Knowledge**

Phenomenology studies the nature of human consciousness and concentrates on how cognition of the world takes form, and the world of conscious experience emerges. Individuals have numerous perceptions of the world, and they are organized into common pattern, and the world appears a familiar one. The problem is how “the general thesis of the natural standpoint,” according to Husserl (1859-1938) organize the apprehension of the world. The “fact world” amidst individuals live, exists outside them and exhibits certain features but the world individuals grasp is quite different and creation of cognition. Husserl (1962) observes:

I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong, as do all other men found in it and related in the same way to it. This “fact- world,” as the world already tells us, I find to be out there, and also take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there. All doubting and rejecting of the data of the natural world leaves standing the general thesis of the natural standpoint (96).

The ‘fact-world’ that comes in one’s mind subsumes in the peculiarities of mind-set and emerges in the world quite different from the original one; it is structured by one’s cognition and as such, creation of it. This is why Husserl says “. . . this world is not there for me as a mere world of facts and affairs, but, with the same immediacy, as a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world” (ibid. 93).

Husserl considers philosophy a discipline equipped with all rigors of science and competent to reveal the truth that is fundamental to understand the nature of objects (Husserl, 1965). As a founder, he develops phenomenology to reformulate the foundations of natural sciences to remove their weakness that creates two contradictory and dangerous views of the acquisition of knowledge. First, it is said that absolute truth is impossible as it is a matter of belief and grounded in cultural and historical positions. It indicates that science is merely a collection of opinion neither universally shared nor capable of justification. Second, the validity of scientific method is not affirmed as it is unable to ascertain the absolute truth. Science further adopts defecting procedure to discover the truth (ibid.). He was not comfortable to treat the method of natural sciences as the model of all scientific inquiry. That method cannot disclose truth as it only concentrates on spatio- temporal

world and the servability of scientific procedures (Husserl, 1962: 19). This stance adversely affects the validity of scientific method. As such, he does not like to use natural sciences' model in the investigation of human thought and consciousness because it is only concerned with observable phenomena and considers consciousness untruth or something physical. It, in fact, substitutes the visible expression of consciousness in overt behavior for the whole subjective process. Consciousness is, thus treated as an aspect of nature and subjected to the same method of investigation as employed in the study of physical facts. Husserl is against of the stance that treats consciousness as an object. He asserts that consciousness is not an object; it is also not the product of an object. It does not only reflect the world as it is but also creates it by its own framework. Thus, consciousness is both objective and subjective and has dual nature which Husserl expresses it in term of intentionality. It shows that consciousness is always of something and not of itself but goes beyond itself and intends an object. He wanted to create an absolute science and for that he tried to seek a foundation in a domain which should be certain and unquestionable. The domain lies in the depth of immediate awareness based on experience the content of which contain in consciousness. Based on this dictum phenomenology avoids two errors. First, it relies on the data of immediate experience and does not look into a phenomenon from any presupposed logic and deductive proof. It does not prefer to investigate phenomena from any particular explanatory form. Second it does not consider empirical world as the basic source of certainty and truth. It all depends upon the capacity of consciousness that how investigation is done in light of variation of factual experience. The crucial point according to Husserl is that investigation is not limited to an object in consciousness but it should be related to the process how object is grasped by the consciousness.

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was influenced by Husserl's view about the nature of consciousness and its role in understanding and explaining the structures and dimensions of knowledge. Husserl's interest was to analyze the structure of transcendental ego rather than to base the investigation on common sense individual and his/her world. Schutz felt that transcendental investigation could be more fruitful if it is directed to the systematic description of the natural attitude. His major thrust was on the common-sense understanding of the world as experienced by the generality of individuals. This according to him is the natural standpoint and forms the core of human understanding. He does not accept Husserl's term "constitution" as "the clarification of the sense-structure of conscious life but "as the foundation of structure of being." Schutz (1966) observes:

But unobtrusively, and almost unaware, it seems to me, the idea of constitution has changed from a clarification of the sense-structure, from an explication of the sense of being into the foundation of the structure of being. It has changed from explication to creation. . . (83).

Husserl's view of constitution indicates that the world is the product of character of consciousness. It seems that ideals are the source of all things and that locate in human mind. For Schutz, ideals are beyond the thinking of common-sense individual who understands the world without it. However, common-sense understanding is more important that constitutes the core of Schutz' phenomenology. The other factor that, according to Husserl plays its role in the formation of consciousness is the knowledge of other minds that influences the transcendental investigation. It is characterized as intersubjectivity and occupies an important place in Husserl's theoretical framework. Schutz does not consider it an issue for common-sense individual as it is already taken into consideration in common-sense thinking. The common-sense individual is not concerned with others but performs his action. Schutz (1962) explains:

But the solution of this most difficult problem (intersubjectivity) of philosophical interpretation is one of the first things taken for granted in our common-sense thinking and practically solved without difficulty in each of our everyday actions (57).

Intersubjectivity, according to Schutz exists and persists by two reasons. First, it is the outcome and trait of the mind-set of common-sense individual and thus subject to phenomenal investigation. Second, it relates to the social context which molds individuals' perception. This approach signifies the ideas that cannot be verified immediately and thus, cannot be considered phenomenological. Schutz, in this context discusses two important processes through which knowledge develops. One is the reciprocity of perspectives or the structural socialization of knowledge, and the other is the social origin of knowledge or genetic socialization of knowledge (ibid.: 11). The reciprocity of perspective refers to the interactional situation where the common-sense individuals involve with other in the assumption that both have the similar perception of the world. The point is not whether reciprocity actually exists but whether it is believed to exist and it should be manifested in consciousness. The social origin of knowledge indicates that knowledge develops within socio-historical conditions and thus it is affected and shaped by the perspective existed and preserved by the society. Individual through interaction with others particularly significant one learns the world as assumed and perceived by others. He in fact internalizes the world as seen by others or preserved as a heritage of a group or society. Individual's social existence is important and related with intersubjectivity. It plays a crucial role in shaping the individual's vision of the world, behavior and action accordingly. As this aspect of knowledge places individual in a larger context, phenomenology does not take it into account.

In this context, Max Weber's (1864-1920) analysis of behavior is important, which also influenced Schutz, particularly Weber' view of social phenomena relating to the behavior of people. Weber rejected behaviorism as it takes a narrow view and confines scientific explanation to the connection between environment (stimulus) and its impact on behavior (response). Further, behaviorism does not

consider actor's mind as the locus of the connection. Schutz shared this view with Weber. Weber asserted that behavior can better be analyzed in terms of the meaning which an individual attaches to it. The apparent form of behavior is futile and of no value in scientific explanation if it does not show the subjective intention of individuals. It does not provide the causal understanding of human behavior which is one of the criteria of scientific explanation. Weber distinguishes between two types of human behavior, one where meaning is present and the other where meaning is absent. Schutz realizes the role of meaning in human behavior as it is consciously directed toward the attainment of certain goals. Schutz clarifies the nature of meaning in the description of conscious experience. Meaning, according to him, lies in intentionality or intentional activities of human subject who through conscious experience makes it identifiable and distinct from other experiences.

### **Social Context of Knowledge**

The second premise on which the explanation of nature of knowledge is provided accentuates the close relation between knowledge and society. It is claimed that knowledge is grounded in social condition in which collectivity of individuals lives, operates and in this process in due course of time develops certain set of ideas according to prevalent ideological framework and shares them with other fellow members. Individual's perception of the external world and of social reality is shaped by social condition and signifies the existentiality of knowledge. Thus, it is observed that "knowledge in the broadest sense is context-dependent and somehow constrained by social factors" (Stehr and Meja, 2005: 3). The social pattern, bases of relationship and existential conditions are, in one way or the other, manifest in the corpus of knowledge that develops in a particular physical and intellectual setting. This premise is manifested in two other strands. One is expressed in structuralist approach to society represented by functionalism and to some extent by Marxism. The other is manifested in societal or sociological approach to knowledge vehemently supported by sociologists of knowledge.

Structuralists claim that knowledge is rooted in the social system, and we can better understand the nature and origin of knowledge when we study the principle and process by which parts are structured in the whole. Society is the basic unit, and it produces different kinds of phenomena. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) explains how individuals living together develops a force that expresses in a form that we call a society. The emergent force is quite different from its components and, thus, cannot be explained by them. The distinct feature of Durkheim's view is the transformation of one sort of reality through interaction and structural relation into another, which is of course a higher one and molds and controls the previous one. This is the fusion of one sort of reality into another one (individuality into sociability) as we find in natural elements. Whitney Pope (2008) explicates:

The interaction, organization, structural relations and interconnectedness of phenomena at one level of reality give rise to new, emergent phenomena at the next higher level: most importantly, the physical to the chemical, chemical to biological, biological to psychological and psychological to sociological. Emergent phenomena must be explained in terms of causes at their own level of reality and cannot be explained in terms of, that is, reduced to, causes at some lower level (78).

Durkheim explains society in both the connotations as a body opposed to individual and as a structural functional system. In a general sense, it is viewed that individual and society exhibit opposed forces that often, according to Durkheim, create conflict and tension. Individual contrary to society is quite different from the individual structured into society. The former is detached from social life and has no impact of society. This situation, in fact, alludes to unsocialized part of individual personality. This also refers to the individual who pursues his/her own interest guided by egoistic trends. The latter is the integrated part of society molded by social pattern and process, carries social ideals and exhibits social ethos. This individual is the true embodiment of social being and develops all human, intellectual and social traits from his/her social existence. According to Pope such individual acquires all the best from social existence as “thought, language, world-views, rationality, morality, aspirations, in short culture, derive from society” (ibid.: 79).

The other connotation in which Durkheim uses society is human organism. It is the potential explanation influenced by biology and forms the core of Durkheim’s theory of society. It treats society as an organic whole like human body in which all parts are so integrated as to give it a new structure, that is, new form and body that function on its own system, and all parts contribute to its functioning according to their position and capacity. Society, though made of individuals, is above and apart of individuals, forms a composite unit, a single moral community, supports and regulates its parts to make contributions necessary for the survival of the whole. The force that binds individuals together and keeps them up is ‘collective conscience’. It is the common ideas and beliefs that a society or group holds, cherishes, considers good and standards of behavior. Collective conscience is set of ideas that a society accepts and supports and treats it as its ethos and disposition. It is the inner force that makes society work and shapes human perception of the world. Thus knowledge is the product of society and develops in due course to maintain and strengthen the social solidarity.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) also observes that there is close relation between ideas and society. He explains society in terms of material condition that shapes human mind and his entire life. As such ideas and human consciousness are the product of material existence or mode of production. The basic feature of a society is how it organizes material production. This is the foundation, according to Marx, on which the nature and structure of societies rest in every period of history. Marx emphasizes real human activities that produce human consciousness. The first act that humans



performed in the annals of history was to produce means of subsistence, an essential condition for their survival. Thus, Marx argues that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1987:261). The importance of human being lies in their social existence by which they develop their capacities and determine their life-prospects in a society. Marx views that society is, by and large, divided into two prominent groups: dominant which has means of production and subordinate which is deprived of that. The dominant group due to its privileged position also captures power and is called ‘ruling class’. It rules the society and develops such system of ideas that helps it to retain power and maintain its dominant position. The set of ideas and beliefs that develops in every society to justify the social set-up based on a distinct mode of production and provides the lion’s share of the privileges of the state and society to the dominant group is called ‘ideology’. Thus, the dominant group does not only control the means and mode of production but also controls the minds of people and convince them that this is the appropriate way of production and development of society. Ideology occupies a central place in Max’s explanation of society as it provides rationalization of the system that justifies the domination of one class over the other. It “helps to justify a system of inequality and makes it seem natural” (Boronski, 1987: 4).

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) expatiates on the concept of a system to explain how societies are structured and function on a pattern to achieve their goals. He identifies four systems: the cultural system, the social systems, the personality system and behavioral organism. The cultural system is based on meaning or symbolic systems shared by individuals and transmitted to them by socialization. Socialization is the process through which societal values are internalized by the members of society who make them their own (Wallace and Wolf, 1999: 27). Thus, humans reflect values, norms and ethos of society. The social system refers to the process of interaction where individuals interact with each other for the “optimization of gratifications,” and their relation is based on “culturally structured and shared symbols” (Parsons, 1951: 5). The personality system is the individual actor guided by his/her needs, motives and attitudes that motivate individual actor toward gratification. The behavioral organism is the physical structure of human person and the physical environment in which humans live and work. “Thus the values come from the cultural system, the corresponding normative or role expectations are learned in the social system, the individual identity comes from the personality system, and the biological equipment comes from the behavioral organism” (ibid. 29). In spite of these functions all these systems are interrelated and interpenetrate in each other’s boundary. This shows that individuals are mere product of society and they are completely molded by the culture.

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003) explains the distinct universes of discourse in a society challenge the validity and legitimacy of each other and create distrust

between groups. The conflicting situation leads one to think why it happens so instead of verifying the validity of each discourse. As a result thought is functionalized and interpreted in terms of existential conditions (Merton, 1968: 513). He feels that the relation between knowledge and social structure should be studied in epistemological framework and modified by empirical inquiry.

### **Sociology of Knowledge**

The relation between knowledge and social realities is identified by philosophers and social thinkers. Now it is recognized that “knowledge is a social construct” and “is of crucial and growing importance in social, political and economic relations” (Stehr and Meja, 2005: 2). Sociologists perceive that knowledge can be understood within social configuration in which it emerges. This contention became so important that special branch the sociology of knowledge was developed to analyze the content of knowledge in relation to social context. The chief proponent of this branch of knowledge was Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) who advocated the social context of knowledge and discerned that ideas and knowledge are determined by condition based on particular history. He, thus, sets forth interconnection between historicism and a theory of social basis of knowledge. Accordingly ideas develop within distinct historical perspective and determined by social existence of persons who hold them. It is observed that “the very possibility of sociology of knowledge is dependent on an ontology that formulates knowledge and social being and their relationship in a particular way” (Tim Dant, 1991: 15). This limits the degree of validity of knowledge claims. Mannheim takes a different position from epistemologists who base the validity of knowledge on the distinction between true and false. Mannheim feels that epistemology is based on the knowing subject evaluated in terms of other knowable objects. In this context there are two extremes. One is an empiricist’s explanation according to which knowledge of the subject is determined by objective factors. The other claims that subject itself is explored for knowledge about the world. This is expressed in rationalist tradition of philosophy. Mannheim goes beyond subject/object dichotomy and situates the subject in history instead of concentrating on mental set-up of the subject. Tim Dant (1991) explains:

In historicism, the repository of knowledge is located in the ‘dynamic totality’ of history rather than in either the knowing subject or a realm of objective factors. This means that absolute knowledge is impossible. The knowing subject cannot transcend the total process of history but can only attempt to grasp it (15).

Mannheim feels that except for natural sciences, the knowledge of the social world is determined by the existential conditions in which it emerges and which people hold them because societies and groups are characterized by their broad views and perspectives of the world that develop ideas and beliefs. According to him, there is no absolute standard by which we can judge what is true and what is false. He identifies two types of knowledge: ‘ideological’ and ‘utopian’. Ideology is the set

of ideas that supports the existing system that is favorable to a group and saves its interest. Utopia refers to ideas held by a particular group that does not like the existing social order and proposes a new one. The sociology of knowledge has to explain the relation between social existence of people and the world view they hold. This is possible when sociologists place themselves in the position of others and tend to know the meaning whereby they interact with others. Boronski (1987) elaborates it:

The role of sociology of knowledge, for Mannheim, is to explain the connection between the social existence of people in a particular socio-historical context and the world view which they possess - be it ideological or utopian. The way the sociologist is to do this, according to Mannheim, is by using the phenomenological method of placing oneself in the position of people being studied. In this way, the sociologist can better understand that particular group's world view. He calls this the 'documentary method of interpretation', which starts from the assumption that there is no meaning in society other than that which actor (people) themselves places upon the social interactions they engage in (20).

There are various pitfalls in Mannheim's theory of knowledge. They are lack of uniform standard to judge validity of knowledge, unfeasibility and relativity of knowledge to mention a few. Mannheim tackles the problem of relativism in knowledge and tries to avoid it by giving the idea of relationism. He clarifies that there are persons who are interested in scientific enterprise of knowledge, do not belong to any class and produce social scientific knowledge, which has greater truth content than any other knowledge. He identifies such persons as 'free-floating intelligentsia', who are not influenced by any ideology, think beyond class affiliation and produce knowledge, which has practical application. They can consider views of different groups, different standpoints and approaches, reconcile and synthesize them and present a 'total world view' based on different shades of opinion and views. This theoretical position he calls 'relationism' that can produce knowledge closer to truth not absolute truth. Mannheim observes:

Relationism signifies merely that all the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from their reciprocal relationship in a given frame of thought (Mannheim, 1936:76).

Tim Dant elaborates relationism differentiating it from absolutism and relativism as follows:

Whereas absolutism evaluates according to the truth/falsity of the contents of knowledge, and relativism merely recognizes the impossibility of such an evaluation because of the multiplicity of truths, relationism eschews an evaluative approach in favor of understanding knowledge in a social context. The relationist position claims that knowledge is by no means illusory but is real and effective in guiding the business of actual life. The elements of meaning in any given situation derive their meaning from their reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought, and it is in this sense that knowledge is relational (Tim Dant 1991:17).

### **The Social Construction of Reality (1967)**

Pete Berger and Thomas Luckmann presented the above sociological treatise which supplements Mannheim's theory of knowledge but in a modified form. They exclude epistemological and methodological problems from the sociology of knowledge to avoid complications. Thus, it is different from its originators: Scheler's and Mannheim's conception of the discipline and others who follow them. They treat the sociology of knowledge as the part of the empirical discipline of sociology. As such they are more concerned with the theoretical aspect of the discipline and highlight it, but their theorization is based on concrete problems rather than on the foundation of the empirical discipline as philosophy does (Berger and Luckmann, 1976: 14). According to them "in sum, our (their) enterprise is one of the sociological theory, not of the methodology of sociology" (ibid.). This is the reason that they "redefine the task of the sociology of knowledge on the empirical level, that is, as theory geared to the empirical discipline of sociology" (ibid). They realize that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with intellectual history or history of ideas that is very important aspect and task of sociological inquiry. Ideas, according to them, are only the part of the larger problem of the sociology of knowledge but not the central part. The fundamental problem for the sociology of knowledge for them is "everything that passes for knowledge in society" (ibid.:15). They observe:

Theoretical thought, "ideas," *Weltanschauungen* are not *that* important in society. Although every society contains these phenomena, they are the parts of the sum of what passes for "knowledge." Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of "ideas," and in the construction of *Weltanschauungen*. However, everyone in society participates in its knowledge, in one way or another (ibid.: 15).

Theoretical thought is not sufficient to understand the real fabric of knowledge and thus, not the main focus of the sociology of knowledge. It is even, being socially available knowledge, difficult to understand if not studied in general framework of knowledge. Similarly theoretical formulation of reality is not the whole depiction of reality for the members of a society. Thus, it is necessary to know the people's image of reality; what they know as reality in everyday life. This is the reason they focus on commonsense knowledge. They state:

In other words, commonsense "knowledge" rather than "ideas" must be the central focus of the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this "knowledge" that constitutes the fabric of meaning without which no society could exist. . . The sociology of knowledge, therefore, must concern itself with the social construction of reality (ibid. : 15).

Berger and Luckmann observe that in every society, there is a distinct standpoint of the world, human and society and a system of its explanation. This constitutes the 'universe of meaning' according to which acts, events and situations are interpreted and explained. The explanation of the external world from that standpoint provides the members of the society with satisfaction and comfort of their thought

and actions about the mysterious and complex world. This reflects the nature of everyday life that people share with them, treat it reality, consider it 'subjectively meaningful' and perceive the world as a coherent one (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:19). The reality of everyday life is subject to social context of meaning that people develop and share with all. However, there are spheres of reality within which consciousness operates and among them, there is a special sphere that is common to all, and they call it as 'reality par excellence'. They state:

Among the multiple realities, there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life. Its privileged position entitles it to the designation of paramount reality (21).

They are conscious that there are various ways of understanding and experiencing the life and the world. One of the most important and widespread of them is religion that also provides the strong source of legitimation but according to them, the most common mode to most people is the sphere of everyday life. The way everyday life operates fills the consciousness of people, provides ground to develop knowledge about it and thus occupies an important position in human life. The sphere of everyday life is consistent because it is shared by people and what is shared by people is significant for them and as such 'knowledge of everyday life'. They argue:

Most importantly, I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between my meanings and their meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality. The natural attitude is the attitude of commonsense consciousness precisely because it refers to a world that is common to many men. Commonsense knowledge is the knowledge I share with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life (23).

### **Problematic Issues**

Both the theories of acquisition of knowledge based on mind-set and social contexts have certain limitations. It is not appropriate to say that any one of them work fully and explain the complex process by which humans acquire knowledge and perceive the external world. It is true that we acquire the information of the external world according to the character and capacity of our consciousness. When one experiences the spatio-temporal world one gets certain ideas about it and accommodates it within the set of ideas that already exist in one's mind or what is said by phenomenologists according to the nature and character of human consciousness. This is why phenomenologists say that what humans grasp about the external world is not the same as the world is. The problem is that mind or the character of human consciousness forms up and develops not in vacuum but within a distinct social and intellectual setting. As such the nature and character of mind is influenced and shaped to a great extent by the set of ideas prevalent in a society in which it exists and operates. Mind, in one way or the other, reflects the ethos of a society and of a

time. In a few cases individuals apply their creative abilities think independently but within the framework of existing set of ideas. Moreover, mind or human consciousness is not separate from human organism which is an integrated and interdependent whole where every part is influenced by each other. Thus, human consciousness is influenced by derives, desires, and ambitions of individuals. What one likes or what appeals an individual, mind projects it as appropriate and tries to rationalize it. The situation becomes explosive and dangerous when an individual, community or nations have wild desires and ambitions of spreading their rule and domination over others and for this purpose they by their superior power and skill subjugate others, capture their resources, deprive them of their rights and endanger their survival on the earth. The irony is that such people and nations rationalize their acts, sets forth argument that they are superior civilization and, thus, are justified to supersede others to deliver good to humanity.

The social context of knowledge is also problematic. The connection between the social existence of people and the world view is challenged. It is said that worldview develops on certain ideological and intellectual bases rather than on conditions because principles apply to conditions and not conditions to principles. Social world is quite different from the physical world; it is shaped on and operates along the meanings which individuals and society attach to human life. These meanings are derived from cardinal principles, which are, by and large, based on 'a priori knowledge'. There are certain ideals and values which people cherish and consider them most important and on that basis they direct social actions and explain social phenomena. Any act or explanation of the world in contradiction with those principles is considered bad and irrelevant. Social grounding of knowledge as explained by Mannheim has no objective standard by which one can judge good, appropriate and relevant view of the world.

The other problem is the ambiguity in developing a societal worldview or a definite set of ideas. When we assume that every society, and every group within society have different existential conditions and as such, they have a different view of the world, how then society develops a common worldview. The ideal situation is that society should integrate all views of its different groups into a composite one and would develop a grand one, but this does not happen. Society generally develops a single broad worldview based on the view of the majority of people or of the dominant group and neglects others. Further, it may be possible that views of minority group or others are more appropriate and good vis- a- vis societal but societal is considered more important because they are the views of majority or of dominant group.

The third problem is the universality of knowledge. Social world is subject to certain cardinal principles which we call goodness. Social world emerges and in due course refines because people consider certain ways, procedures and facts beneficial, good and in their overall best interest, thereby they cherish them, and

accordingly structure their relations with tangible and intangible objects and direct their operation in the world. These are enviable to lead harmonious, peaceful and prosperous life in the world. These are identified by different names: as values, truth, goodness and virtues but they are, in fact, universal as they are related to the wellbeing and prosperity of entire humanity. Their foundation is the same though they are expressed in different forms and ways. For example values are those that are most good; they are worth their weight in gold. Plato in Republic identifies two kinds of values: instrumental and intrinsic. An instrumental value is worth as a means to get something that is good and an intrinsic value is worth for itself not a means to something else. John Dewy (1859-1952) finds affinity between values and goodness that come into being to balance “ends in view” (1939).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) stresses moral values and considers them absolute rather than relative as they are universally identifiable. He identifies two types of goods: ‘hypothetical and categorical. Hypothetical goods are related to “if” clause, e.g. A exists if condition B prevails. Categorical goods do not depend upon others; they operate across all categories of judgment.

Similar is the case of truth. In general sense it corresponds to the correct characteristics of an object. Kant gives nominal definition of the term. According to him, “truth, it is said, consists in the agreement of cognition with its object. In consequence, of this mere nominal definition, my cognition, to count it as true, is supposed to agree with its object” (1801: 557-58). The significance of the term lies in its axiological explanation whereby it refers to what is perfect, most good, absolute and consummate. Religions place much importance to it, consider it modality of God and impress upon humans to identify it establish its authority on the world and manifest it in their actions. Catholic Encyclopedia explains that “in a religious context perfect knowledge of truth about all things (omniscience) is regarded by some religions, particularly Buddhism, and the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), as an attributes of a divine being”. Hinduism regards truth ‘unchangeable’, “that which has not distortion”, “that which is beyond distinctions of time, space, and persons”, “that which pervades the universe in all its constancy”. *Patanjali’ Yogasutra’* explains that “satya’ is ‘*Parahit’ va’umanaso yatha’rthatvam’ satyam* (satya is the benevolent use of words and the mind for the welfare of others or in other words responsibilities is truth too).

These pre-eminent principles, whatever name one gives to it, provide individuals with distinct meaning to the life and the world according to which they perceive the reality of everyday life. The significant fact is that religion brings forth these principles, impresses on individuals their validity and authenticity as well as applicability to entire humanity. Thus, religion provides the structure of meaning to the complexities of the world. Berger (1969) also identifies the role of religion in providing comprehensive structures of meaning in a world of chaos and uncertainty. Religion creates ‘a universe of meaning’ and a system of justification

to preserve the sanctity of that universe and save it from outer challenges and criticisms. Berger and Luckmann (1967) call it 'legitimation' and find religion as the most important source of legitimation. Bronski (1987) observes:

According to Berger and Luckmann, one of the most important and widespread sources of legitimation which has ever existed is religion, for it is through religion that most societies in the past have been able to place their way of life within the realm of supernatural forces. Their universe of meaning is thus provided with internal strength and cohesion (6).

This aspect of religion is prominent in sociological tradition. Durkheim was the first who accentuated the role of religion in producing human knowledge. Later, Berger and Luckmann explained how religion acted on human cognition to know the external reality and produced knowledge. This is the reason that they felt that both sociology of religion and sociology of knowledge are linked together and without any of them sociological theory is not possible. They said:

Our understanding of the sociology of knowledge leads to the conclusion that the sociologies of language and religion cannot be considered peripheral specialties of little interest to the sociological theory as such, but have special contribution to make to it. . . We hope we have made it clear that the sociology of knowledge presupposes a sociology of language, and that a sociology of knowledge without a sociology of religion is impossible (and vice versa) (185).

### **Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Knowledge**

The pitfalls of theories of knowledge based on cognition and social context require thinking a new, taking all factors that play their part in producing knowledge into consideration. Producing knowledge, particularly of the social world, is a complex phenomenon. It has many elements and facets; all of them should seriously be considered, systematically be contemplated and earnestly thought about with a keen urge to know the truth. One should be free from one's personality derivatives and have some criteria for the validity of the knowledge. A comprehensive theory of knowledge is based on the following ingredients:

1. Both the premises of knowledge; cognition and societal condition have a role in producing knowledge, as such they are required to be integrated to assess the external world.
2. There should be a plausibility structure universally applicable giving meaning to the social world and its various phenomena.
3. The universe of meaning a society or an individual develops should be based on the plausibility structure.
4. The subjective facet of the social world should be given due importance and it should be related to certain ethical and moral values beneficial to humanity.



5. The concept of reality requires to be interpreted in terms of goodness rather than in terms of its occurrence and physical appearance.

We acquire the information of the external world when we are exposed to it and try to know what it is about. We perceive it by our cognitive abilities, and the idea that we draw by our observation assimilate within the cognitive structure of mind, which remodels the idea according to its own parameters. The outcome is not the exact manifestation of 'fact- word' rather tinged with the preferences of mind-set. We further want to know how for our perception is correct and valid; we corroborate it with the existing knowledge shared by other people. We peruse both types of knowledge and, by and large, try to synthesize them. Society affects the process of producing knowledge in two ways. One when it affects the character of mind or consciousness because it develops within a distinct intellectual and social setting and receives their impact on it. Second when one takes into consideration the existing societal knowledge and tries to evaluate it by one's own acquired knowledge by using one's cognitive abilities. In spite of the twofold impact societal condition or knowledge alone is not responsible for producing knowledge and affecting human perception of the world. The character of human consciousness or the structure of human mind where the information is grasped, adopted and accommodated within its own purview is also responsible. Thus mind-set and societal condition both are responsible for acquiring information about the external world and shaping human perception, so, that being so, both need to be integrated in order to acquire knowledge closer to reality.

Every type and piece of knowledge developed in a social setting and shared by the majority of people cannot be valid unless it is based on plausibility structure. There is a need of a valid and appropriate benchmark or touchstone to judge the validity of knowledge. In the absence of that every sort of knowledge, even harmful to humanity, may be considered valid by one or other section of society because according to postmodernist approach, every type of knowledge is valid though it is opposed to general will and contradictory to wellbeing of people. It puts on view that there is no absolute knowledge and, as such, there is no universality of knowledge, all are localized knowledge. The reason is that postmodern approach rejects an arch type structure of validity of knowledge and tries to demolish it. The fact is that there must be some fundamental principles that govern not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the entire human operation on earth otherwise society will face anarchy. The more plausibility structure is sound, rational and down – to – earth, the more it will be acceptable universally. In natural sciences plausibility structure is based on observation operative by human senses. This does not apply to social sciences because social phenomena come into being by and for meanings, serve certain purpose and contain values. Religion provides most vigorous plausibility structure that gives meaning to the world, life and human operation. It impresses on individuals that explanations of phenomena within the

framework of this structure is authentic and beyond that every explanation is meaningless. The plausibility structure that religion provides is more often than not universal.

The meanings to the social world and social phenomena that individuals and society create are based on plausibility structure, which provides sound legitimization to the meanings and riposte to all criticism and challenges to them. Thus, the universe of meaning that develops and exists in a society has rational ground and convinces people to follow it not because of the fact, that majority of people believes it to be relevant but because of its utility and well-being to humanity. The universe of meaning further provides sanctity and different degree of importance to different activities and objects according to which people pursue activities and establish relation with them. The universe of meaning will be intact, operative and followed by the people till the plausibility structure maintains its potentiality and rules the mind of the populace. A situation comes when plausibility structure loses its strength and becomes ineffective. It is a chaotic situation that Durkheim calls 'anomie'; it impairs the nature of the universe of meaning where people began to attach new meanings to acts and objects according to their own comfort. It continues till the new plausibility structure acceptable to the majority of people emerges which is in case of religion seldom possible. This situation affects the stability of a society thereby it tries to maintain the universe of meaning and makes it more and more viable to the people.

Social world has two aspects, one, which appears, and we observe by our senses, the other which lies behind the outer framework and is hidden in it. A social phenomenon, a part of a social world consists of both the aspects one which we see, and the other is the spirit that lies behind it, and the purpose for which it comes into being. These are characterized as objective and subjective aspects of the social world. A correct understanding and assessment of a phenomenon are only possible when both the aspects are taken into consideration and tried to know the relation between them, particularly which one affects whom. Berger and Luckmann (1967) realize the complexity of society. They point out:

Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning. . . It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning that makes it "reality *sui generis*." . . .(18).

Natural sciences, by and large, concentrate on the objective aspects because reality for them is limited only to it (objective aspect). If anyone is constrained to study subjectivity, he/she studies it through objectivity because it is assumed that objectivity determines subjectivity. The social world is quite different. Here subjectivity determines the nature and forms of objectivity as the social world in different form and shape comes into being in order to attain distinct subjective meanings. In other words, we can say that subjective meanings are objectivized or objectivization of subjective meanings takes place in different forms and ways

that are considered best. The basic question I share with Berger and Luckmann (1967) is how meanings create social world or in other words how objectivization of subjectivity takes place. Social sciences have to address this vital question in order to produce realistic and beneficial knowledge. They discern:

The central question for sociological theory can then be put as follows: How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities? Or, in terms appropriate to the aforementioned theoretical positions: How is it possible that human activity (*Handeln*) should produce a world of things (choses)? In other words, an adequate understanding of the “reality *sui generis*” of society requires an inquiry into the manner in which this reality is constructed (ibid.).

Knowledge, as Mannheim propounded and later Berger and Luckmann shared, is grounded in society that is in social condition, ideas, beliefs and experiences of life-condition or in the nutshell, the way reality is constructed. The difference between Mannheim and Berger and Luckmann is that the former is concerned with higher-level knowledge, particularly religious beliefs, political philosophies and ideologies which a section of individuals develops to live in this world. Berger and Luckmann are mainly concerned with the reality of everyday life, and the knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life (19). For them only theoretical thought is not important but commonsense world of everyday life is more important as it gives birth to thought. They consider everyday life as reality which men interpret and consider them subjectively meaningful in intellectual framework and in the conduct of their lives. Thus, everyday life is a world that originates in their thought and action and, as such is the foundation of knowledge. It is “the objectivation of subjective processes (and meanings) by which the intersubjective commonsense world is constructed” (20). In simple words the construction of reality is grounded in existential conditions. My contention is that existential condition is not the only but one of the factors that help the construction of reality. How one conceives, perceives and grasps the existential condition is the second factor and an important one. Third is the concept and nature of reality as taken for granted by common men. The commonality of everyday life is not the reality per se but it is the affirmation or negation of the transcendental reality form which reality of everyday life is derived. The problem is what reality is; how one conceptualizes, and defines it? What importance one attaches to it and tries to follow it in ones thought and action.

Reality, in general sense, is the essential features of a thing or situation as they actually exist. It signifies “a thing that is actually experienced or seen” (Oxford Dictionary, 2010: 1256); it talks about “what is on fact true” (Macmillan Dictionary, 2006: 1175) or what actually happens (Longman Dictionary, 1995: 1181). Berger and Luckmann define it in the similar but sophisticated way as “quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot “wish them away” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 1). It shows that

constant occurrence of events or activities may be considered reality as in positivist tradition causal laws as essential ingredients of science are derived on that basis. Roy Bhasker who presents a systematic realist account of science as an alternative to positivism observes that constant conjunction of events is not only not sufficient but it is also not necessary condition for a scientific law (2008: 12) that enables us to identify reality. He argues that in an experiment the experimenter is the causal agent and not the causal law identified by the sequence of events. It signifies “that there is ontological distinction between scientific laws and pattern of events’ (ibid). It is explained that ascription of a law requires a theory that should have, according to him, conception of a ‘putative causal or explanatory link’ to prove that law is genuine. Thus, theory relies on ‘a conception or picture of a natural mechanism or structure at work’ (ibid). He explains:

. . . if experimental activity is to be rendered intelligible, that natural mechanisms endure and act outside the conditions that enable us to identify them that the applicability of known laws in open systems, i.e. in systems where no constant conjunctions of events prevail, can be sustained. This has the corollary that a constant conjunction of events cannot be necessary for the assumption of the efficacy of a law. This argument shows that real structures exist independently of and are often out of phase with the actual patterns of an event (13).

Bhasker, further, contemplates that the causal structures and generative mechanisms of nature are the essential conditions that generate events but they exist and act independent of the pattern of events and the actions of men. Similarly, events also occur independent of the experience in which they are apprehended. He, thus, concludes that “structures and mechanisms then are real and distinct from the pattern of events that they generate; just as events are real and distinct from the experiences in which they are apprehended” (56). He identifies three domains of reality (the domains of real, the actual and the empirical) and explains how they are collapsed into one ‘by secreting an ontology based on the category of experience’ ( Bhaskar 1989: 15).

Mechanisms, events and experiences thus constitute three overlapping domains of reality, viz. the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical. . . By constituting an ontology based on the category of experience, as expressed in the concept of empirical world and mediated by the ideas of the actuality of the causal laws and the ubiquity of constant conjunctions, three domains of reality are collapsed into one (Bhasker, 2008: 56-57).

The fusion of these domains of reality into one form is the true character of a reality. To confine the intelligibility of a reality only to its form or appearance is a postulatory and methodological error. The fact is that reality is not limited only to the appearance of a phenomenon, or as it exists but it also contains the spirit, power or force that gives it a distinct form, assign particular function and determine its purpose. There is an ontological structure behind it that determines its nature and functioning in a particular framework. The reality which we observe

in everyday life is the reflection of a vital force that provides the former with vitality and buoyancy to exist and operate. It is nothing but transcendental reality from which all realities get strength and vitality to exist and operate. The events and activities that take place or crop up in everyday life are the manifestation of human cogitation of transcendental reality in its true or deviational forms.

An individual, when comes across a situation or faces an object animate or inanimate, acquires knowledge about it through his/her mind-set that comes into being by his/her cognitive abilities as well as social condition in which he/she lives. Mind-set is the set of ideas or overall perception of an individual about the external world that he/she develops through his/her experience of and encounter with the situations or objects. It is, in fact, the combination of social situation and one's own priorities of thinking. Mind-set in due course of thinking process develops plausibility structure according to which one evaluates the validity of ideas and the perception of the external world and the objects that lie in it. Sometimes individuals share the plausibility structure with the majority of fellow beings and that is prevalent in society, sometimes they use their own innovations. In most of the cases the plausibility structure depends upon the identification of reality. If one considers the day to day activities or the social world as it is as real, one participates in it with a view of obtaining maximum advantage. On the other hand if one considers it as the manifestation of broader reality, one involves in it to obtain the purpose for which social world comes into existence or day to day activities takes place or takes shapes. The momentous point to consider is that day to day activities or the social world or what Berger and Luckmann call as 'reality of everyday life' is not the reality per se. It depends upon two important facts. First, it is the manifestation of broader reality determined by the transcendent reality; it comes into being to serve certain specific purpose and for that it is shaped in different way and form. Second, its importance lies in the force that activates it to work and operate in a particular way. The fact is that the external world is the manifestation of the broader reality that gets strength from transcendental reality. It depends upon the nature of human mind-set how it comprehends it and translates it into action. Transcendental reality is a great force that influences the mind-set, social condition and the external world because it provides them with vitality and strength to operate. It plays an important role in formulating the plausibility structure. The formation of mind-set and plausibility structure takes place, to a great extent, with the guidance of transcendental reality. Mind-set and plausibility structure are the two vital avenues through which humans perceive the world and acquire knowledge, and of course that knowledge is closer to reality. They look toward fact- world through mind-set or the structure of ideas which they have in mind, grasp the fact-world, develop ideas about it and evaluate it by the plausibility structure. This is explained in Fig. 1.

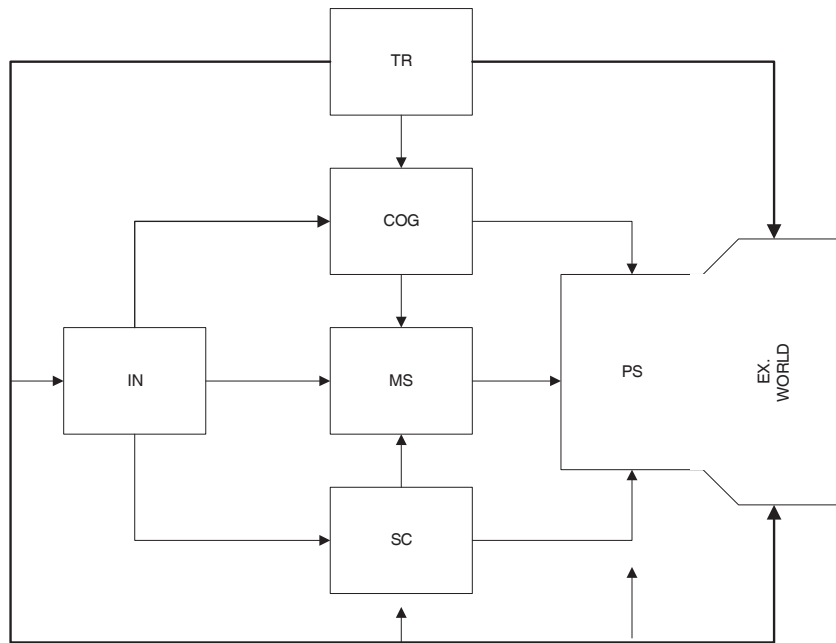


Figure 1

TR = Transcendental Reality

IN = Individual

COG = Cognition

MS = Mind-set

SC = Social condition

PS = Plausibility structure

EX = External

### Conclusion

Two important premises cognition and social condition have certain pitfalls. They alone are not sufficient to produce knowledge. Both of them combined together formulate mind-set through which humans perceive the fact-world and acquire ideas about that. They ponder over and judge those ideas through plausibility structure and come to an eventual idea and produce knowledge. Thus, mind-set and the plausibility structure are the two potential avenues by which humans acquire knowledge and both are formulated by the transcendental reality. If humans comprehend and grasp transcendental reality, they construct other trivial realities in conjunction with that and acquire comprehensive and altruistic knowledge. The paper indicates that the social world or the day to day activities are not the reality

per se, but they are the manifestation of the broader reality determined by the transcendental reality. They should be comprehended in concomitance with transcendental reality that gives them vitality to exist and operate.

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