

TWO EPISTEMIC WORLDS: INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND WITTGENSTEIN'S EPISTEMOLOGY

* Dr. Moumita Banerjee

Abstract:

This paper examines the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Ludwig Wittgenstein's epistemology to explore how distinct philosophical traditions conceptualize knowledge. The **Introduction** outlines the significance of comparing these epistemic worlds. The section on **Foundational Concepts of IKS** describes how Indian epistemology, through *pramāṇas* and action-oriented cognition, understands knowledge as reliable, purposeful, and transformative. **Wittgenstein's Conception of Knowledge: An Overview** discusses his later philosophy, where knowledge arises from language-use, forms of life, and practical certainty rather than abstract mental states. In **Practical Dimensions of Knowledge in IKS and Wittgenstein**, the study highlights their shared emphasis on lived experience, contextuality, and the demonstration of knowing through action. The section on **Similarities** identifies common ground in their practical and community-based perspectives, while **Dissimilarities** reveal contrasts in metaphysical orientation, aims, and epistemic foundations. The **Conclusion** synthesizes these insights, showing that both systems illuminate the fundamentally practical and human-centered nature of knowledge. Together, they contribute to broader contemporary epistemological discussions and foster meaningful cross-cultural philosophical dialogue.

Keywords: Indian epistemology, Wittgenstein, knowledge systems, language-games, *pramāṇa*

* *SACT*, Dum Dum Motijheel Rabindra Mahavidyalaya

Introduction

Human understanding of the world has always depended on how different cultures define *knowledge*, how they justify it, and how they use it in life. Across history, two major intellectual traditions—the **Indian Knowledge System (IKS)** and the philosophy of **Ludwig Wittgenstein**—have offered deep yet distinct ways of thinking about what it means to know. Although they emerge from different eras, regions, and philosophical goals, both contribute significantly to global epistemological thought. Exploring them together reveals insightful contrasts as well as surprising resonances.

The **Indian Knowledge System** is a vast and sophisticated network of philosophical, scientific, and cultural ideas developed over thousands of years. From systems like **Nyāya**, **Mīmāṃsā**, **Vedānta**, **Buddhism**, and **Jainism**, Indian epistemology provides diverse methods for understanding truth and experience. Central to IKS is the concept of *pramāṇa*—the means through which valid knowledge is obtained. These include perception, inference, comparison, verbal testimony, and more. The Indian tradition treats knowledge as something deeply practical: it is not merely theoretical understanding but a tool for right action, moral growth, and ultimately, liberation (*mokṣa*). Thus, Indian epistemology is inseparable from ethics, spirituality, and the pursuit of human well-being.

Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, takes a radically different yet equally profound approach. His later works, particularly *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, shift the focus from abstract metaphysical questions to the everyday use of language. For Wittgenstein, knowledge is embedded in **language-games**—patterns of speech and practice that give word

their meaning. Instead of asking “What is knowledge?” in the abstract, he asks, “How do we use the word ‘know’ in different contexts?” He further explains that certain basic beliefs function as **hinge propositions** — unquestioned assumptions that make thinking and inquiry possible. Wittgenstein’s framework thus roots knowledge in social practice, rule-following, and ordinary life.

When we compare these two epistemic worlds, we encounter both divergence and convergence. IKS emphasizes plurality in the sources of knowledge and includes metaphysical possibilities beyond language, while Wittgenstein stresses the limits of language and the importance of practical usage. Yet both systems agree that knowledge is **contextual, purpose-driven**, and connected to the lived experiences of individuals. Both reject the idea of fixed, universal meaning and instead highlight how understanding emerges from specific situations, practices, and human goals.

This comparative study is important not only for philosophical scholarship but also for developing a richer global understanding of knowledge. It demonstrates how ancient Indian traditions and modern analytic philosophy can engage in meaningful dialogue. By placing IKS and Wittgenstein side by side, we open a space where Eastern and Western approaches meet—allowing us to appreciate how different cultures grapple with similar questions about meaning, truth, and human experience.

Foundational Concepts of Indian Epistemology

Indian epistemology (*pramāṇa-śāstra*) is one of the most sophisticated knowledge traditions in world philosophy. Its primary concern understands how valid knowledge (*pramā*) arises,

what its sources are, and how truth can be distinguished from error. Across various schools—Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism—several foundational concepts consistently shape the epistemic framework, even though each school interprets them differently. A central foundational idea is the concept of **pramāṇa**, meaning “means of valid knowledge.” Indian thinkers developed a pluralistic epistemic system, recognizing multiple reliable paths to knowledge. Depending on the school, these *pramāṇas* include perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), verbal testimony (*śabda*), comparison (*upamāna*), postulation (*arthāpatti*), and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*). This pluralism reflects the Indian belief that no single method can capture the full complexity of reality.¹ Another key concept is **pramā**, or “valid cognition.” Indian epistemology emphasizes that not all cognitions are equally trustworthy; only those that correspond to reality without contradiction count as valid. The validity of cognition is often tested using criteria such as non-contradiction (*avirodha*), practicality (*pravṛtti-sāmarthyā*), and reliability. Nyāya philosophers, for example, insist that cognition must lead to successful action to be considered true, connecting knowledge directly to human experience.² A further foundational concept is **doṣa**, referring to the “defects” or factors that lead to false knowledge (*apramā*). These may include sensory errors, defective perception, linguistic misunderstanding, doubt, or cognitive bias. Indian philosophers analyze these errors with great precision to explain illusions, dreams,

hallucinations, and fallacies. This detailed error-theory ensures that the distinction between true and false knowledge is systematic and philosophically rigorous.³ Together, these foundational concepts—*pramāṇa*, *pramā*, and *doṣa*—provide the structural foundation of Indian epistemology. They reveal that Indian thinkers approached knowledge not merely as abstract theory but as an inquiry grounded in human life, logic, and practical success.

Wittgenstein’s Conception of Knowledge: An overview

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ideas on knowledge cannot be separated from his broader reflections on language, meaning, and everyday practices. His later philosophy, especially in *Philosophical Investigations*, shows that knowing something is not merely having a mental state but **being able to participate in a shared human activity**. Knowledge, therefore, is grounded in how we use words within our social and cultural forms of life.⁴

Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of a word comes from its **use**. Similarly, knowledge is not a fixed object but something that becomes meaningful only within a **language-game**—a rule-governed activity where words perform functions. To know is to act, respond, and take part in practices where certain statements count as knowledge. Thus, knowledge is **contextual**, dependent on the situation and the community’s agreement on what counts as evidence. In his later work *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein also shows that some beliefs lie at the foundation of all knowing.

¹ Matilal, B. K. (1986). *Perception: An essay on classical Indian theories of knowledge*, pp. 15–19. Oxford University Press

² Chatterjee, S. C., & Datta, D. M. (1984). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*, pp. 76–83. University of Calcutta

³ Mohanty, J. N. (1992). *Reason and tradition in Indian thought*, pp. 41–45. Oxford University Press

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 43

These are not things we doubt or prove; rather, they make our practices of knowing possible. He refers to these as **hinge propositions**—basic, taken-for-granted certainties such as “The world exists” or “My memory is generally reliable.” Without such hinges, the idea of knowledge would collapse because doubt itself requires a stable background of certainty.⁵ Wittgenstein also rejects the traditional philosophical search for absolute certainty. For him, the idea that knowledge must rest on infallible foundations is misguided. Instead, knowledge grows out of everyday human activity, where **certainty is practical, not theoretical**. We trust shared human behaviours, not abstract philosophical proofs. The stability of our language-games—not metaphysical structures—makes knowledge possible.⁶ In this way, Wittgenstein shifts the discussion from defining knowledge to understanding how knowledge works **within human life**. Knowing is not a private or inner act but a public and social phenomenon. What we call “knowledge” is deeply tied to practices, norms, and forms of life that we inherit as members of a linguistic community.

Practical Dimensions of Knowledge in IKS and Wittgenstein

The practical nature of knowledge is a central theme both in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and in the epistemology of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Though these two traditions arise from different cultural and philosophical backgrounds, they converge in viewing knowledge not as an abstract mental state but as something that is **demonstrated, lived, and practiced**. In both frameworks, knowledge

becomes meaningful only when it participates in human life, action, and experience.

In the Indian Knowledge System, especially in classical philosophical schools like Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Yoga, knowledge (*jñāna*) is defined as a cognition that is *instrumental in achieving a successful action*. This idea reflects the Sanskrit concept of “*pravṛtti-janakatva*”—knowledge must generate successful activity. The whole theory of *pramāṇas* (valid means of knowledge) exists to explain how truthful and reliable knowledge leads to effective engagement with the world. For example, *perception* produces a valid awareness such as “there is fire,” which becomes meaningful only when it guides action—warming oneself, avoiding danger, or cooking food. Thus, the very criterion of correctness in IKS is **practical success**, not abstract theoretical justification. Similarly, in the dharma-based traditions, the value of knowledge lies in transforming the knower. Knowledge is seen as a guide to right action (*dharma*), right living, and even spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). Whether it is ethical knowledge in the Bhagavad Gītā, ritual knowledge in Mīmāṃsā, or meditative knowledge in Yoga, the emphasis is on **how knowledge is used** in concrete life—moral decision-making, duties, bodily discipline, or spiritual practice. Knowledge without practice is considered incomplete or even meaningless.

Wittgenstein, particularly in his later work, arrives at a remarkably similar insight. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he argues that meaning is not something hidden in the mind but arises from **use within a form of life**. For him, knowing is inseparable from **doing**: it is

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), pp. 12–13

⁶ Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 89

displayed in skills, actions, and the ability to participate in language-games. To say “I know how to use this word” is not to claim possession of a mental state but to show competence in a practice. Like IKS, Wittgenstein dissolves the separation between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement. His idea of “**knowledge as a practice**” becomes clearer in *On Certainty*, where he states that certainty arises not from proofs but from our shared human activities—opening doors, measuring weights, trusting memory, or using tools. These activities form the background of all knowing. Just as IKS grounds knowledge in *pramāṇas* that function within everyday life, Wittgenstein grounds knowledge in the lived patterns of human behaviour. Knowledge is woven into our routines, skills, and social agreements. Another important connection is the rejection of purely intellectual or metaphysical notions of knowledge. Both systems stress that *to know* is to be able to participate meaningfully in a world shaped by practical norms. In IKS, knowledge guides moral, ritual, and empirical action; in Wittgenstein, it guides linguistic, social, and behavioural participation. In both cases, knowledge is verified by **success in practice**, not by abstract certainty. Thus, despite belonging to two different epistemic worlds, IKS and Wittgenstein converge on the deeply practical character of knowledge. Both view knowledge as an active, lived process—embedded in life, shaped by context, and inseparable from human action.

Convergences between Indian Epistemology and Wittgenstein’s Thought

Despite belonging to different philosophical cultures, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Wittgenstein’s epistemology share several conceptual convergences. Both emphasize that knowledge does not exist in isolation but grows out of human practices, context, and lived experience.

First, both systems agree that **meaning and knowledge are context-bound**. Indian epistemological traditions argue that a cognition becomes valid only when contextual aims—*prayojana*—are fulfilled. Likewise, Wittgenstein maintains that the meaning of a word arises from its use within a particular language-game and form of life.⁷ Second, both IKS and Wittgenstein understand **knowledge as practical, functional, and action-oriented**. In Indian thought, the validity of knowledge is often tied to its capacity to lead to successful action (*pravṛtti-sāmarthyā*). Wittgenstein similarly notes that knowing is shown in action: our certainty is expressed in the way we behave, not merely in what we claim.⁸ Third, both traditions accept **the limits of language**. Advaita Vedānta and early Buddhist epistemologists argue that ultimate truths transcend linguistic representation. Wittgenstein also famously suggests that when language reaches its boundary, we must remain silent.⁹ Fourth, both IKS and Wittgenstein highlight the **central role of shared human practices** in sustaining knowledge. Indian epistemic systems, especially Nyāya, rely on social trust and

⁷ Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.), p. 43. Basil Blackwell

⁸ Matilal, B. K. (1986). *Perception: An essay on classical Indian theories of knowledge*, pp. 18–22. Oxford University Press

⁹ Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, p. 89. Routledge & Kegan Paul

conventional usage (*saṃketa*) for verbal testimony (*śabda*). Wittgenstein too insists that understanding arises through shared language-games based on communal agreement.¹⁰ Fifth, both deny that meaning comes from rigid definitions. Indian traditions accept multiple *pramāṇas*, each suited to a particular purpose, rejecting a single universal source of truth. Wittgenstein proposes “family resemblance” concepts, where meaning emerges from overlapping similarities rather than fixed boundaries.¹¹ Sixth, both systems recognize that **knowledge and doubt operate together**. Indian logicians use tests such as non-contradiction (*abhāva*) and consistency (*avirodha*) to validate cognition. Wittgenstein similarly argues that doubt is possible only against a background of unquestioned beliefs—his hinge propositions.¹² Seventh, both IKS and Wittgenstein affirm that **knowledge is rooted in lived experience**, not isolated intellectual abstractions. Indian traditions connect knowledge with moral development and liberation. Wittgenstein anchors knowledge in everyday activities, behaviour, and forms of life.¹³ Finally, both traditions acknowledge that **rules and norms structure knowledge**. Indian philosophies develop elaborate rules of debate and inference. Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations show that knowledge is sustained by shared norms governing language and action.¹⁴

Divergent Epistemic Frameworks: IKS and Wittgenstein Compared

Although the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Wittgenstein’s epistemology share certain convergences, they differ fundamentally in purpose, structure, and philosophical orientation. These dissimilarities reveal the uniqueness of each tradition and show how differently cultures may approach the idea of knowledge.

First, the **aim of knowledge** differs sharply in the two systems. In IKS, knowledge is intimately tied to human flourishing, ethical life, and ultimately *mokṣa* (liberation). Knowledge has a transformative and spiritual purpose. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s philosophical project aims not at liberation or metaphysical insight but at **clarifying language** and dissolving philosophical confusion. His idea of knowledge is practical and descriptive, not spiritual or liberatory.¹⁵ Second, IKS accepts a **plurality of *pramāṇas*** (means of knowing), such as perception, inference, verbal testimony, comparison, and postulation. These multiple sources of knowledge are justified through detailed logical systems. Wittgenstein, however, does not classify or systematize sources of knowledge; instead, he roots knowledge in **linguistic practices**, rule-following, and background certainties.¹⁶ Third, the Indian tradition gives full legitimacy to **metaphysical claims**, such as the existence of *ātman*, Brahman,

¹⁰ Ganeri, J. (2011). *The lost age of reason: Philosophy in early modern India 1450–1700*, pp. 112–118. Oxford University Press

¹¹ Mohanty, J. N. (1992). *Reason and tradition in Indian thought*, pp. 54–58. Oxford University Press

¹² Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*, pp. 12–18. Basil Blackwell

¹³ Bilimoria, P. (2011). *Indian philosophy and philosophy of religion*, pp. 101–107. Routledge

¹⁴ Chatterjee, S. C., & Datta, D. M. (1984). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*, pp. 91–100. University of Calcutta

¹⁵ Mohanty, J. N. (1992). *Reason and tradition in Indian thought*, pp. 34–38. Oxford University Press

¹⁶ Matilal, B. K. (1986). *Perception: An essay on classical Indian theories of knowledge*, pp. 55–63. Oxford University Press

karma, and liberation. Schools like Advaita Vedānta and Nyāya construct extensive metaphysical frameworks supported by epistemic reasoning. Wittgenstein, especially in his later period, remains **deeply anti-metaphysical**. He refrains from making metaphysical assertions and instead encourages examining how language is used in everyday life.¹⁷ Fourth, **verbal testimony (śabda)** plays a central and authoritative role in IKS, considered an independent and often reliable means of knowledge—especially in Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya. In contrast, Wittgenstein does not elevate testimony as a special epistemic category. Instead, he treats believing others' statements as part of ordinary language-games that rely on trust and human practice, not as a formal *pramāṇa*.¹⁸ Fifth, the Indian tradition places strong emphasis on **formal logic and debate techniques**, especially in Nyāya philosophy, which develops a systematic method of inference (*anumāna*), fallacies, and debate rules. Wittgenstein instead critiques rigid logical structures and focuses on the flexibility of natural language. He sees logic as one of many human practices rather than as an ultimate foundation.¹⁹ Finally, IKS often asserts that **ultimate truth is ineffable**, pointing to states of realization such as Brahma-jñāna or nirvāṇa, which transcend linguistic expression. Wittgenstein, although acknowledging the limits of language, does not propose any transcendent knowledge beyond it. Instead, he concludes that **what cannot be spoken of must simply be passed over in silence**, without suggesting any mystical insight.²⁰

These differences reveal that while IKS offers a comprehensive metaphysical and ethical framework for knowing, Wittgenstein prefers modest, practice-based, and anti-metaphysical approaches. The Indian system seeks liberation through knowledge, whereas Wittgensteinian epistemology seeks clarity through ordinary language.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Wittgenstein's epistemology reveals that, despite belonging to different cultural landscapes and historical periods, both traditions offer profound insights into what it means to *know*. By comparing these two epistemic worlds, we discover that knowledge is not simply a matter of collecting facts or forming beliefs; rather, it is a dynamic, lived, and practice-oriented process rooted in human life, experience, and community. This conclusion brings together the central ideas discussed in the previous sections and highlights the broader philosophical significance of this comparative study. The Indian Knowledge System presents knowledge as something purposeful and transformative. Whether we examine the Nyāya school's emphasis on reliable cognition, the Mīmāṃsā tradition's focus on action-guiding knowledge, or the spiritual pathways outlined in Yoga and Vedānta, we find that the ultimate test of knowledge lies in its ability to lead to meaningful and successful action. Indian epistemology considers knowledge (*pramā*) valuable only when it helps individuals navigate the world—physically, morally, or

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.), pp. 66–68. Basil Blackwell

¹⁸ Chatterjee, S. C., & Datta, D. M. (1984). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*, pp. 150–157. University of Calcutta

¹⁹ Ganeri, J. (2011). *The lost age of reason: Philosophy in early modern India 1450–1700*, pp. 201–207. Oxford University Press

²⁰ Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, p. 90. Routledge & Kegan Paul

spiritually. In this sense, knowledge is deeply connected to *dharma*, daily duties, social responsibilities, and the search for liberation. It is an active force that shapes life's direction.

Wittgenstein, too, approaches knowledge not as a mental possession but as something embedded in activities. His famous idea that "meaning is use" implies that knowing something is revealed in how we act, speak, and respond within shared human practices. Knowledge, for him, is inseparable from language-games and forms of life. We know how to use words, tools, concepts, and social norms because we participate in the ongoing practices of a community. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein adds another dimension by showing that our most basic certainties—the things we never question—form the foundation upon which all knowing stands. These hinge propositions operate silently in the background, allowing doubt, belief, and knowledge to function. Thus, knowledge is built upon a form of trust in the world and in the practices of human life. When we compare IKS with Wittgenstein, we notice both harmony and difference. On one hand, both systems see knowledge as *practical*, contextual, and grounded in human activity. Both reject the idea of knowledge as a purely abstract or metaphysical entity disconnected from life. On the other hand, IKS often embraces a wider metaphysical and spiritual framework, where knowledge plays a role in achieving liberation or moral fulfillment. Wittgenstein, in contrast, avoids metaphysical claims and remains within the boundaries of ordinary language and everyday life. Yet these differences only enrich the comparison, showing that diverse traditions can illuminate different aspects of the same human experience. Understanding these perspectives together broadens our view of knowledge. It encourages us to think of knowing not only as acquiring information but also as developing the

ability to engage with the world meaningfully. It highlights the role of context, culture, and community in shaping what we call knowledge. In a world that often treats knowledge as data or information stored in devices, this comparative study reminds us that real knowledge grows through practice, interaction, and lived experience. Moreover, this comparison opens doors for cross-cultural dialogue. It shows that Western philosophy, represented by Wittgenstein, and Indian philosophy, represented through various classical schools, can speak to each other in meaningful ways. Each tradition offers something the other can learn from: Wittgenstein gives precision to the ordinary, and IKS provides a broader vision of the purpose and value of knowing.

In the end, the study of Indian Knowledge Systems and Wittgenstein's epistemology demonstrates that knowledge is a human phenomenon—rooted in life, shaped by culture, and oriented toward action. It is something we live out every day, in how we speak, behave, think, and strive. Recognizing this shared truth across traditions enriches our understanding of ourselves and deepens our appreciation for the diverse ways human beings make sense of the world.

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