CAN KNOWLEDGE BE ACQUIRED THROUGH CONTRADICTION?

1. Contradiction, at least in Western thought, has always been considered as the first enemy of knowledge, in the sense that the discovery of a contradiction is the surest evidence of error, but error is the exact contrary of knowledge (Parmenides, Aristotle, etc.).

2. Why is this so? Because the principle of ‘non-contradiction’ is actually the principle of ‘diction’, i.e., one cannot claim anything without making a definite claim, and this means without distinguishing it from what it is not. Indeed claiming something and the negation of it amounts to claiming nothing at all (hence, as Aristotle says, one would be reduced to silence, one would become “like a tree”).

3. All this means that knowledge cannot consist in contradiction, but does not exclude that it may be acquired through contradiction, provided this claim be correctly understood, i.e., in the sense that it is often through the discovery and subsequent removal of contradiction that knowledge is acquired. This was already clear with Parmenides.

4. In order to see this role of contradiction more clearly one has to distinguish at least two different ways in which discovery and elimination of contradiction occur and play the role of the elimination of error: (i) contradiction within discourse, and (ii) contradiction between discourse and ‘reality’.

5. Contradiction within discourse may surface in different ways, but its being inadmissible is based on the fact that one cannot think anything without thinking something definite (see point 2 above). Hence if our discourse leads us to say contradictory things, there is no thought that could be expressed by that discourse, so that it becomes meaningless. Of course it is possible to utter (verbally) contradictions, but this does not mean that we can attach a meaning to these utterances (Aristotle said that “not all that one says, one also thinks”). Note that all this regards the semantic logos, i.e., the level of meaning, and not yet the apophantic logos, or level of ‘affirming and denying’. In Fregean terms, no Sinn can correspond to a contradictory concept (such as a
6. Logical consistency is a particular way of treating the above sketched requirement, in the sense that it forbids admitting a formal system in which contradictions of the kind \((A \text{ and } \neg A)\) may be deduced. However here the question is rather complicated, since we have at least two possibilities:

(i) The contradiction emerges because it was implicit in the premises (i.e., in the ‘non-logical’ axioms), and was brought to light by means of a set of ‘correct’ logical rules.

(ii) The contradiction was not implicit in the premises as such, but was produced by a particular logical calculus used in the deduction.

From (ii) follows the problem of characterizing logical contradiction, e.g., in terms of ‘non-triviality’, or of rejecting the possibility of deducing formulae of the kind \((A \text{ and } \neg A)\). However, it must be noted that the above aspects are interrelated, since it cannot be said whether certain premises are ‘consistent in themselves’ or not if we do not implicitly admit that they are such with reference to an ‘ideal’ correct logic to be used in deducing their consequences.

7. The case of contradiction between discourse and reality is much more complex, since it means that something which can be said in a consistent way (and hence be thought) may come into collision with something which is outside the discourse. How is this possible? One answer could be that reality ‘has its own discourse’, which is or may be at variance with ours; but this pictorial solution is actually no solution at all. The contradiction may emerge only if we are able to ‘translate’ the alleged discourse of reality into ours, so that this translation leads to a statement \(S\) of our discourse equivalent to a negation of some other statement \(A\) of our discourse, with the result that admitting \(S\) would amount to admitting \(A\) and \(\neg A\) within our discourse.

8. But so what? Is it not possible that two discourses be mutually incompatible while both being internally consistent? Moreover, why should we worry about that inconsistency, if we do not know whether the other discourse is itself consistent? But even in this case, are we entitled to presuppose that the consistency of non-contradiction we accept for our discourse is the same as the consistency of the other? In other words, claiming that we must remove contradiction between our