

## **CHAPTER-3**

### **Impossibility of Metaphysics: Immanuel Kant**

Skepticism about metaphysics arises because of the desire to test the validity of the metaphysical doctrines. In the previous chapter we saw that the desire of Descartes' was to overcome the revived skepticism of the Renaissance which includes skepticism about the possibility of solving metaphysical problems and attaining truth in metaphysics. And to do this he banked on mathematics, especially, geometry as a model of clear and certain reasoning. Rationalist philosopher Descartes wished to give philosophy clarity and certainty analogous to the clarity and certainty of geometry. So, he applied mathematical model in philosophy. There is another empiricist philosopher Hume, who was very much influenced by the model of Newtonian physics. Hume also had sought to limit philosophy to what could be immediately traced to some sense impression. He actually made an experiment in applying the methodological limitations of classical physics in philosophy. But Hume applied this method of investigation in a more radical way than his predecessors. We have seen this kind of radical investigation in his analysis of causality and of the self. Hume's empiricism can be regarded as a psychological doctrine about the origin and formation

of ideas, or as an epistemological doctrine concerning the nature, scope and limits of human knowledge. Conceptual analysis of some concepts like mind, body, cause etc. were unified by Hume himself in his idea of the science of human nature, the study of man in his cognitive and reasoning activities and in his moral, aesthetic and social life. Hume tried to investigate the nature of man as a moral subject in terms of physics which has some methodological limitations. And this meant to restrict oneself to the evidence offered by observation alone. So, he faced a great difficulty in analyzing the meanings of concepts such as self, cause, justice, mind, body etc. because these concepts cannot be deduced from any empirical observation. Although he had a profound faith in scientific method but later on we see that science constructs its laws with the help of uniformity of nature, which remains a merely probable conviction. Hence the problem regarding certainty of knowledge persists.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant tried to resolve the problem regarding the certainty of knowledge and skepticism about metaphysics by examining the power of human cognition and reason as the basis for all claims about the laws of nature and morality. He thought that his principle task was to determine the cognitive powers of reason, to find out what it could and could not achieve in the way of knowledge. In doing this, Kant tried to mediate between two different philosophical schools—empiricism, and

rationalism. Rationalism grounds all our knowledge in reason, while empiricism grounds all our knowledge in experience. In the eighteenth century empiricism arose as an opposition to traditional rationalism, which it regarded as barren and dogmatic. Empiricism claimed experience as the principal source of knowledge and also a source from which we also form all our rational concepts and principals. It also holds the view that there is no need to assume any overarching principals of reason which would contain our highest knowledge. Rationalism had begun with Descartes', who set up reason, everyone's own rational faculty, as the sole authority and criterion of truth. Nothing in the explanation of the unchanging principles of the natural universe is to count as truth that can be doubted and is not clearly and distinctly perceived by reason. The concepts and principles needed for this explanation are part of the fabric of our minds or in other words, our mental constitution itself yields knowledge. We could not acquire this knowledge through experience. By intuiting self-evident propositions and subsequently deducing additional information, reason, provides us this kind of knowledge, such as, the laws governing the natural universe, a perfect triangle. Here the model for all science is the deductive method of mathematics, and logic. Hume's empiricism, which Kant claimed woke from his dogmatic slumbers, showed him that there is no necessity of reason involved. But later Kant saw that the empiricist doctrine formulated an intolerable skepticism, it claimed that a good number of our

beliefs about the natural world are either false or unjustified. For Hume, our beliefs in the existence of permanent things were mere collections of perceptions. The ideas of God, of unchanging morality determined by reason, of human freedom and of an immortal soul, none of which could be proved, but all of which could be seriously challenged, if sensory experience were taken as the basis of our knowledge. Here, Kant perceived an inevitable conflict with many fundamental human convictions. In the opening paragraphs of the Preface to the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's first concern is with the form of skepticism that is the inevitable response to the seemingly endless and intractable conflicts between metaphysical dogmas that seem to be well grounded but cannot all be true:

—Our reason has the peculiar fate that, with reference to one class of its knowledge, it is always troubled by questions which it cannot ignore because they are prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, and which it cannot answer because they transcend the power of human reason. Nor is human reason to be blamed for getting into this perplexity. It begins with principles the use of which is inevitable in the course of experience and at the same time sufficiently supported by it. With these principles it rises, as required by the ways of its nature, higher and higher to more remote conditions. But when it becomes aware that in this manner its work would

remain forever incomplete, because the questions never cease, it finds itself constrained to take refuge in principles which exceed every possible application in experience and nevertheless seem so little suspect that even ordinary human reason agrees with them. Thus reason becomes involved in darkness and contradictions, from which, no doubt, it may conclude that errors must be lurking somewhere; but it is unable to discover them because the principles which it follows transcend the limits of all experience and thus no longer acknowledge any empirical test. The battlefield of these endless controversies is called metaphysics...At first the rule of metaphysics, under the administration of the dogmatists, was despotic. But as the legislation still bore the traces of an ancient barbarism, intestine wars broke out and she gradually degenerated to complete anarchy, and the sceptics, a kind of nomads who despised all settled cultivation of the land, disrupted civil society from time to time<sup>»xxxiii</sup>.

Whenever human reason attempts to reach beyond the immediate limits of ordinary experience to determine the truth about such matters as the nature and existence of God, the nature of soul, the boundaries of universe—it falls into contradictions. Scepticism about the power of human reason to reach at any well-founded belief about matters of the most fundamental human concern is the equally expectable result. According to Kant, Hume's scepticism about the concept of causation lies under the skepticism about

the universality and necessity of first principles, not only the first principles of —speculativφphilosophy”, that is , theoretical cognition, but also to the first principles of practical philosophy, the basic principles of morality. Kant thought that we have to presuppose some matters beyond the reach of sense experience only when the very possibility of morality demands that. If we analyze Kant’s writings critically, we may find that how systematically he developed a bridge between the world of experience and the world beyond experience.

In the prefaces to the first and second editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* we find that Kant emphasized on the problem of metaphysics. In the preface to the first edition of *Critique* Kant said that:

—For it is vain to assume an artificial indifference concerning inquires the object of which cannot be indifferent to human nature. Nay, those supposed indifferentists, however they may try to disguise themselves by changing the terminology of the schools into popular language, if they think anything at all, fall back inevitably into those very metaphysical dogmas which they professed so greatly to despise. None the less this indifference, showing itself in the very midst of the most flourishing state of all sciences, and affecting precisely those sciences the knowledge of which, if such could be attained, we would least of all surrender, is a phenomenon well worthy of our attention and consideration. It is clearly the result, not of carelessness

but of the matured judgment of our age, which will no longer rest satisfied with the mere appearance of knowledge. It is, at the same time, a powerful appeal to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of its tasks, namely that of self-knowledge, and to institute a court of appeal which should protect reason in its rightful claims, but dismiss all groundless pretensions, and to do this not by means of despotic decrees but according to the eternal and unalterable laws of reason. This court of appeal is no other than the critique of pure reason itself.

I do not mean by this a critique of books and systems, but of the faculty of reason in general, touching that whole class of knowledge after which it may strive independently of all experience. Hence I mean by this the decision about the possibility or impossibility of metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, its range and its limits—and all this according to principles<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

So, for Kant, the question is, whether metaphysics is capable of giving us knowledge of the existence of God, of human freedom etc. as these are the main problem of metaphysics. Kant admits that there are reasons to doubt the possibility of metaphysics. As Kant explained knowledge that it begins with experience, but does not necessarily originate from it, so, for him knowledge is a joint venture of sense and understanding. Apart from sensibility and understanding, there is the reason that tries to constitute

knowledge. Hence, in Kantian view, knowledge begins with sense, proceeds thence to understanding and ends in reason. According to him, there are three ideas of reason, namely, the world, soul and God. However, these metaphysical ideas are regulative only and concerning them no knowledge is possible.

In maintaining that metaphysics as commonly understood, is nothing but an illusory and pretended knowledge, Kant was not advancing anything original. As we saw in the last chapter, Hume had entertained a view of metaphysics very near to this; and we have Kant's own admission that it was in consequence of his perusal of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that Hume's criticism of the concept of causality awakened from his dogmatic slumber. But whereas Hume was an unavoidable enemy of metaphysics, Kant concentrating upon the question as to what constituted true knowledge, refrains from dismissing metaphysical knowledge as utter nonsense. Kant's position was similar to Hume that metaphysical principles cannot be established either by deductive reasoning or by experimental inquiry, but he found Hume's conclusion intolerable. He thought that some metaphysical questions are unavoidable, particularly the questions about God's existence, the immortality of human soul etc. On the one hand he was faced by the scientific conception of the world, with the physical universe of Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, as subject to mechanical



causality and determined in its motions and on the other hand he was faced by the rational creature who can understand the physical world, set over against it, so to speak, as subject to object, who is conscious of moral obligation and freedom, and who sees in the world the expression of rational purpose. How can these two aspects of reality be reconciled? How can we harmonize the physical world with the sphere of freedom? It is not simply a matter of juxtaposing the two worlds, as though they were completely separate and independent. Man is both an item in Nature, in the physical system, and a moral and free agent. The question is, therefore, how can the two points of view, the scientific and the moral, be harmonized without denying either of them. Let us ask first, exactly why Kant supposed that the very possibility of metaphysics must be called into question. Here we may follow his own explanation.

One of the most striking passages in Hume's inquiries had been his investigation of the concept of causation. It is, as Hume and Kant agreed, generally supposed that when it is asserted that A causes, B, what is meant there by is that if A occurs, B necessarily ensues. Now Hume asked, by what right we suppose, in such a case that given the one occurrence, the other is necessary. Do we learn this by observation? No, for what we learn by observation is that when A occurs, B in fact does ensue. We do not learn that it always will be, still less that it is necessarily so. Do we then discern

by reason that A and B are connected necessarily? No, for we are required by reason to accept as necessary only those propositions the contradiction of which are impossible that is contradiction. But the denial of a causal statement is never a contradiction; although fire boils water, there is no contradiction in supposing that it should not. But if so, then we are not in a position to assert that any pair of events is connected necessarily. According to Hume when we assert this we are mistaking our own habitual, confident expectations for features of the world. This argument rests on a general doctrine that is any true proposition is either a truth of reason, necessary in that its negation would be contradictory, or a truth of fact, established as such by observation or experiment and, even if certainly true, not necessarily true. On this dichotomy Hume based the charge that divinity and school of metaphysics must be senseless and illusory. Now Kant entirely agreed with Hume that if this dichotomy were valid and exhaustive, then there could be no such subject as metaphysics as had been traditionally supposed to be. There would be only empirical sciences and on the other hand formal exercises in calculation. All necessary truths, all truths demonstrable a priori, would be on this view merely analytic; all synthetic truths, all assertions of matters of fact, would correspondingly be merely contingent.

In the course of human experience we find, whether by simple observation or by deliberate experiment, that certain events occur and certain features are present which it is possible and often easy to suppose might have been otherwise. Such things we record, of course, in contingent assertions; and it is evident that we can know such assertions to be only if we have found that our experience does in fact comprise the events or the features alleged. In contrast with this, by examining the concepts, we may have some other propositions which are certain, necessarily true propositions and the denial of these propositions leads to logical inconsistency. Thus here we have no need of empirical confirmation. But Kant holds that there is a third class of propositions, whose existence none of his predecessors had explicitly recognized — certain propositions that must be true if human experience is to occur at all, propositions that state, in Kant's phrase ——"the conditions of the possibility of experience", or, as we might say, its fundamental defining characteristics. Now such propositions will not be analytic, for it is not analytic that any such thing as human experience does not implies no contradiction. But equally they will not be ordinarily contingent, for if the truth of a certain proposition is a condition of the very possibility of experience; there will clearly be no place for consulting the verdict of experience as to whether or not that proposition is true. On the assumption that any experience occurs at all, such a proposition could be asserted a

priori. But if propositions of this class are not analytic and are not contingent then they are synthetic a priori propositions.

According to Kant in synthetic a priori propositions, the connection between predicate and subject, though not knowable by mere analysis of the concept of the subject, is none the less necessary and strictly universal. Kant gives us an example – ‘Everything which happens has its cause’. This proposition is synthetic because the predicate, ‘having a cause’ is not contained in the concept of ‘what happens’, that is, of an event. But it is at the same time a priori. For it is characterized by necessity and strict universality, the marks of a priori judgments. This kind of proposition is found in mathematics and physical science. The proposition ‘ $7+5=12$ ’ is an a priori proposition as it is necessary and universal. At the same time, according to Kant this proposition is not analytic, it is synthetic. The concept of 12 is not obtained by mere analysis of the idea of the union between 7 and 5. For this idea does not of itself imply the concept of 12 as the particular number resulting from the union we cannot arrive at the notion of 12 except with the aid of intuition. The mathematical proposition is therefore always synthetic a priori. Synthetic a priori propositions are also found in physics. Take, for instance, the propositions, ‘in all changes of the corporeal (material) world the quantity of matter remains unchanged’.

For Kant this proposition is necessary and therefore a priori. But it is also synthetic. For in the concept of matter we do not think its permanence but merely its presence in space, which it fills. So, the propositions of physical science are synthetic a priori.

In Kant's view, knowledge means scientific knowledge and this kind of knowledge is found in synthetic a priori propositions. He thinks, God, freedom and immortality of soul are the problems of metaphysics. The science whose final aim, with all its apparatus, is directed solely at the solution of these problems is called metaphysics. He said, —There was a time when metaphysics was called the queen of all the sciences, and if the will were might well have secured for her this title of honour. At present, it is the fashion to despise metaphysics...<sup>xxxv</sup>

Kant believes that there was a time when metaphysics was called the queen of all the sciences but now metaphysics has fallen into disrepute. Mathematics and natural sciences have advanced, and there is in these fields a great area of generally accepted knowledge. Nobody seriously questions this fact. But metaphysics appears to be an arena for endless disputes. Metaphysics, unlike physics has not found any scientific method the application of which will enable it to solve its problems. If we try to establish the possibility of metaphysics then at first we have to establish it

as a science. But whether metaphysics as a science is possible or not is debatable. If we bear in mind Kant's agreement with Hume concerning the impossibility of deriving necessity and strict universality from empirical data, we can see how difficult it would be for him to maintain that knowledge consists simply in the conformity of the mind to its objects. The reason for this is obvious. If to know objects, the mind must conform itself to them, and if at the same time it cannot find in these objects, considered as empirically given, necessary connections, it becomes impossible to explain how we can make necessary and strictly universal judgments which are as a matter of fact verified and which, as we know in advance or a priori, must always be verified. It is not merely that we find, for instance, that experienced events have causes: we also know in advance that every event must have a cause. But if we reduce experience to the merely given, we cannot discover there a necessary causal relation. It is thus impossible to explain our knowledge that every event must have a cause on the hypothesis that knowledge consists simply in the mind's conforming itself to objects. Kant therefore suggested another hypothesis. It has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to ascertain anything about them a priori by concepts, and thus to extend our knowledge, came to nothing on this assumption. Let us try, then whether we might not make better progress in the tasks of metaphysics if we assume that objects must conform to our knowledge. This accords better with the

possibility which we are seeking, namely of a knowledge of objects a priori, which would determine something about them before they are given to us. This hypothesis, Kant observes, is analogous to that proposed by Copernicus.

According to Kant we have to assume that the objects must approach the mind to be known at all. We have to assume that the mind lays down the conditions for the objects to become objects for knowledge. As for Kant we have two a-prior forms of sensibility namely space and time and twelve categories of understanding like substance, causality etc. an object must confirm these pre-conditions to become an object of knowledge. Suppose there are a number of holes of the various shapes and sizes in a surface of a table. Similarly, suppose that there are a number of pebbles roll down the surface. Only those pebbles will be caught up that fit into their holes. In the same way the mind lays down the conditions for the objects, to be known. Only those objects which fit into these conditions are known; those which do not fit are not known at all. For Kant spatial and temporal character of the world is a consequence of the nature of our sensibility. We are no doubt naturally inclined to think of space and time as being simply given features of the world. We think, that we find ourselves in a space of three dimensions, and that events occur successively in a single and irreversible

time order. But Kant points out that, we seem to find it inconceivable that space and time might become fundamentally different from what they are. It is a fact about the world that elephants are gray in color; we can easily suppose that they might have been pink or blue. If it were similarly just a fact about the world that space has three dimensions, it ought to be no less easy to suppose that it might have had two or four or seven. Do we know what a world in seven dimensions would be like? For another thing, we are evidently prepared to make assertions about space and time for which, if these are merely assertions of fact, we surely have not the necessary evidence. Without any qualification, we are prepared to assert that, there is only one space; what evidence has us for so vast a claim? We take it to be certain that in any part of the universe the nature of temporal sequence will be the same as it is in our vicinity; but by what right could we make assertions of fact about vast tracts of the universe which we have never inspected, which perhaps are inaccessible to our inspection? It appears then that we do not really treat assertions about space and time as ordinary assertions of fact-as assertions to which alternatives are perfectly conceivable and for which we require the warrant of empirical observation. It appears that we approach the universe with the postulate that whatever it may anywhere contain, its contents shall be in a three-dimensional space, and that whatever events may at any time be found to occur, they shall all have their places in a single time series; and it appears also that this



postulate is for us the only one that is fully and genuinely intelligible. We can say that time and space are the pure forms of all sensible intuition, and so are what made a priori synthetic proposition possible. But these a priori sources of knowledge, being merely conditions of our sensibility, just by this very fact determine their own limits, namely that they apply to objects only in so far as objects are viewed as appearances, and not present things as they are in themselves. Space and time are a priori conditions of experience. These are necessarily required for object to be known. But metaphysical object like God, soul, freedom are not in space and time. For first Kant takes it to be perfectly clear in fact that there is no metaphysical doctrine whose truth is in any degree a condition of the possibility of experience; and second, such doctrines, he thinks, are always supposed in principle to be independent of experience altogether to be established. Kant rightly thought it proper to examine more precisely the errors into which they had been betrayed. The essence of situation, as Kant saw it, is this: It is, understandably and properly, a persistent desire of rational beings to construct some picture of the world and of their own place in it that will be rationally satisfactory. But the central difficulty is: what reason may be supposed to demand of an account of reality is that it should be complete and comprehensive; of an explanation of the state of things, that it should be final and unconditional. However, Kant points out that our actual knowledge must always and necessarily be incomplete and that our

explanations can never be more than conditional. If so then there arises a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason – a conflict that is inseparable from human reason, between what we demand and what we are in a position to achieve. Metaphysics, in Kant's view, is the natural attempt to supply what our reason demands but can never have.

Kant is not content with saying simply that the knowledge which traditional speculative metaphysics claims to provide is illusory. In the preface to the second edition of *critique* we can see that:

—Metaphysics, a completely isolated and speculative branch of rational knowledge which is raised above all teachings of experience and rests on concepts only( not, like mathematics, on their application to intuition), in which reason therefore is meant to be its own pupil, has hitherto not had the good fortune to enter upon the secure path of a science...<sup>»xxxvi</sup>

He wished to illustrate and confirm the truth of his contention through a detailed criticism of speculative psychology, speculative cosmology and theology. In Kant's analysis, the traditional metaphysics of the self arises from attempting to obtain knowledge of the soul as a substance from mere representation of the self. In the —Paralogisms of Pure Reason” Kant represents the first —paralogism” about the soul as the following syllogism:

—That the representation of which is the absolute subject of our judgments, and hence cannot be used as the determination of another thing, is substance.

I, as a thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgments, and this representation of myself cannot be used as the predicate of any other thing.

Thus, I, as thinking being (soul), am substance<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Kant thought this ego of the —I think” cannot be an object of any possible experience as it is always behind experience. Because this ego is not a possible object of experience, it cannot be known under the categories. So, the traditional doctrine of soul cannot give us any knowledge. Likewise, Kant argues that all previous attempts to prove the existence of God, actually arrive at their conclusion through fallacious reasoning. Kant placed the Ontological proof for the existence of God which says:

—...In the concept of a most perfect being existence is included. For if it were not, the concept would not be the concept of a most perfect being. Therefore, if such a being is possible, it necessarily exists. For existence is included in the full complement of its possibility. But the concept of a most

perfect is the possible being. Therefore, such a being necessarily exists<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

But Kant refutes this kind of argument by saying contradictory. In the theological reflection we may seek to attribute the contingent existence of the world to the creative act of a Supreme Being whose existence must be supposed necessary. Yet, we may perhaps bare the form concept of such a Being. It is evident that nothing encountered in our actual experience to prove the existence of such a being. And it is also evident that the existence of such a being cannot be proved by mere analyzing the verbal or conceptual analyzing. Moreover, in both these cases what is sought to be proved is too vast and ambitious for any available evidence to support it. In the —cosmological ideas” Kant demonstrates the remarkable consequences of the illusory use of pure reason. Here Kant shows that metaphysics not only provides thesis which cannot be justified in the traditional way, but also produces thesis whose antithesis can be defended equally valid arguments from equally compelling premises. For example:

I.—Thesis The world has a beginning in time, and is limited also with regard to space.

Antithesis: The world has no beginning and no limits in space, but is infinite as regards both time and space.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

II. —Thesis Everything composite substance in the world consists of simple parts, and nothing exists anywhere but the simple or what is composed of it.

Antithesis: No composite thing in the world consists of simple parts, and now here in the world does there exist anything simple.”<sup>xl</sup>

In these and other ways Kant argues that the natural inclination of rational beings to push their inquiries to the limit is doomed to perpetual disappointments. It expresses indeed the natural but incoherent desire of beings whose existence is limited and conditioned to free themselves from all limits and all conditions- though they cannot really conceive what such freedom would be. Kant holds that the labors of metaphysicians are in a certain indispensable, and also, even more importantly, that their doctrines are not completely without foundation, though their proper foundation is not at all what has usually been supposed. It is important to understand that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant has no desire to eliminate metaphysics but he takes God, freedom, immortality of soul these three metaphysical principles as the central concern of his entire philosophy. As we can see that in the preface to the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant said that,

—Reason, namely, in order to arrive at this, must employ principles which extended only to objects of possible experience and which, if in spite of this they are applied also to what cannot be an object of experience, actually always change this into an appearance, thus rendering all practical expansion of pure reason impossible. Hence I had to suspend knowledge in order to make room for belief. For the dogmatism of metaphysics, that is, the presumption that it is possible to achieve anything in metaphysics without a preceding critique of pure reason, is the source of all that disbelief which opposes morality and which is always very dogmatic... Some kind of metaphysics has always existed and will always exist, but with it a naturally given dialectic of pure reason. It is therefore the first and most important task of philosophy to deprive metaphysics once and for all of its pernicious influence, by blocking off the source of its errors.’’<sup>xli</sup>