

CHAPTER - IIPreludes to Kant : Descartes and Hume on Imagination

It may appear that there is a jump in the discussion as it takes up the critical philosophy after an discussion of Plato's thought. For, the concept of imagination was treated by a number of philosophers after Plato and before Kant. Leaving aside certain relatively less known philosophers such as Bruno and Paracelsus, it seems that the major ones have given a negative evaluation of the concept. Philosophers like Descartes and Hume have given a secondary position to imagination in their philosophical analysis. Their understanding of imagination resembles that of Plato. Plato, as we have seen understands imagining as imaging. For him imagining consists in giving rise to images which are perfect copies of the "particulars", and hence twice removed from reality. Imagination, as understood by Plato, has no role to play in the attainment of true knowledge. Descartes, too, is critical of the role of imagination and frequently contrasts it with that of reason. For him, imagination is misleading in nature and can never give rise to certain and indubitable knowledge. According to him, "to imagine is nothing else than to contemplate the figure or image of a corporeal thing." (Descartes, 1955, p. 152). According to him, it is not an essential element in the composition of human personality. Human beings, by nature, are rational. "I remark besides that this power of imagination which is one, in as

much as, it differs from the power of understanding, is in no wise a necessary element in my nature, or in the essence of my mind, for although I did not possess it I should doubtless ever remain the same as I now am, from which it appears that we might conclude that it depends on something which differs from me. And I easily conceive that if somebody exists with which my body is conjoined and united in such a way that it can apply itself to consider it when it pleases, it may be that by this means it can imagine corporeal objects, so that this mode of thinking differs from pure intellection only in as much as mind in its intellectual activity in some manner turns on itself, and consider some of the ideas which it possesses in itself, while in imagining it turns towards the body and there be holds in it something conformable to the idea which it has either conceived of itself or perceived by the sense." (Descartes, 1955, p. 186). From the above passage it becomes quite clear that Descartes does not accord a respectable status to imagination.

For Hume, too, imagination does not constitute a faculty which may give rise to knowledge. It is experience which yeilds knowledge. According to Hume, the functioning of imagination consists only in re-organizing the ideas into a new idea. "Nothing is more free than the imagination of man, and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision. It can feign a train of events with all the appearance of reality,

ascribe to them a particular time and place, conceive them as existent, and paint them out to itself with every circumstance that belongs to any historical fact which it believes with the greatest certainty." (Hume 1946, p. 47).

Hume too basically understands imagining as imaging for according to him, imagination can never exceed the original stock of ideas furnished by sense experience. He sees it as being on purely empirical level and also being responsible for beliefs, prejudices and whims. However, he also writes that imagination has rather mysterious character and hence cannot be fully grasped by the human mind. This is a point which later on Kant also makes. Hume writes, that imagination is a "Kind of magical faculty in the soul which though it be always most perfect in the greatest geniuses and is properly what we call a genius, is, however, inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding." (David Hume, 1946, p. 24).

Thus, despite the differences in their accounts of imagination, there appears to be a similarity between approaches taken by Plato, Descartes and Hume. All the three treat imagination on the level of images for the imagination is purely psychological in nature and consists in either (1) Creating images which resemble reality, or (2) Combining and reorganizing various ideas both of which give rise to 'fictions', and hence cannot give rise to knowledge. This is where the originality of the treatment that Kant gives to imagination becomes evident.

---