

## CHAPTER - I

### **THE CONCEPT OF IMAGINATION : A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

If we consider the development of the concept of imagination, and its role in theory of knowledge in Plato, we shall be able to discover important linkages between Plato and Kant. If we consider the history of ideas expressing epistemic terms, we discover that the concept of imagination has been subjected to extreme views which are reflected in the very understanding of the nature and function of imagination in the process of knowledge on the one hand, and the so called non-epistemic activities like arts on the other. The aim of the present chapter is to trace the philosophical history of the concept of imagination. Such a perspective is important because it throws a light upon the development of the concept of imagination. It is also interesting to see how various philosophers place imagination in their respective frameworks of epistemology. However, in tracing such a history of the concept of imagination, I have selected in particular two philosophers namely, Plato besides, Hume and Kant. The reason for selecting them is that both Plato and Kant have been highly original in the treatment they gave to imagination, and their way of handling the concept of imagination influenced to a great extent the thought of the next few generations of philosophers. Their philosophies, therefore, provide a general background against which the various trends and approaches to imagination can be fruitfully understood. While discussing such a philosophical history of the concept of imagination, I have also discussed the views of Hume and Descartes. But I shall be emphasizing more upon Plato and Kant. The present chapter is divided into two main sections, first dealing with Plato, the second with Kant. And it is well-known that both Plato and Kant have influenced the theory of literature in more than one way. It was Shelley who translated Plato's *Republic* into English, and Coleridge, we shall see, brought Kant to England.

## **Plato on Imagination : The general position concerning the certainty of knowledge.**

Any historical consideration of such epistemic terms as knowledge, belief, opinion, imagination, intuition, etc. must give a considerable attention to Plato's thought. For, even though philosophising as such was present in Greece much before Plato, it was Plato who well articulates several important issues in epistemology and ontology and analyses them systematically. However, his analysis of the theory of knowledge is not presented in an elaborate manner in any one of his *Dialogues*. In this regard, one has to read *Theateus*, *Phaedo* and *Republic* together, so as to have an idea of Plato's understanding of knowledge. But the task of summarizing the Platonic epistemology and presenting it in a systematic form is difficult because the ontological and epistemological views are often intermingled in Platonic *Dialogues*. However, a tentative outline of Plato's epistemological position can be attempted in the following way.

Sense experience is inadequate as far as the attainment of the knowledge is concerned, for it can never reveal that which is necessarily real. For, the objects of perception themselves are not changeless. They are constantly changing, no matter how slight is the change. Therefore, perception which can tell us only about the objects can never give us knowledge. For, knowledge must be of the real which is not mutative. Similarly, perception itself can deceive us many times. We can have delusions or dreams which clearly distort our usual perceptions, thus giving us wrong information. Therefore, perception cannot be a valid source of knowledge, nor can the objects around us be the true objects of such knowledge. What gives us knowledge is rational reflection, for it tells us not about the actual particular thing that is before us, but about the *essential features* of that thing. This essence is what Plato called a Universal or an Idea or a Form. According to him this Idea is changeless. Individual men may live and die, but the Idea of Humanity can never perish. It is, therefore, the true object of knowledge. What gives us knowledge is the rational element in man. Man can never perceive the truth, he can only apprehend it.

Plato assumes that knowledge is attainable and that knowledge must be, (i) infallible and, (ii) must be a knowledge of the real. True knowledge must possess both these characteristics. An absolute and infallible knowledge is

attainable but it cannot be the same as sense-perception, which is relative, elusive and highly subjective. The object of true knowledge must be stable and abiding, fixed and capable of being grasped in terms of definitions. In other words, it must be a 'Universal' or an 'Idea'. True knowledge is knowledge of the Universal. Particular instances change but the concept of Universal remains the same and it is by reference to this stable concept that we judge the particular instance as such. Knowledge of a particular instance, which is a lower kind of knowledge, itself requires the universal for its being.

The development of the human mind on its way from ignorance to knowledge, lies over two main fields, that of opinion and of knowledge. It is only the latter that can properly be termed as knowledge. But what exactly is the distinction between opinion and knowing? The difference between the two is based upon a differentiation of their objects. Opinion is concerned with 'images' while knowledge is concerned with originals or arche types. Opinion is concerned with that which is relative and transitory, knowledge with that which is stable and objectively real.

### **Imaginative Devices used by Plato :**

Plato, while discussing his theory of knowledge, has adopted a certain style of writing. This style is dramatic and certain points get unfolded as the *Dialogues* proceed. In this process, Plato makes ample use of a number of literary devices such as myths, metaphors, illustrations, allegories, etc. These occupy an important position in Plato's general thought, for without them, his philosophy would not only lose its charm but many significant points as well. In fact, it is my claim that Plato's thought derives much of its force and acquires philosophical significance from these very devices which have been imaginatively employed by him. This can be substantiated with reference to *Phaedo*, *Theatetus*, *Meno* and *Republic*.

In *Phaedo* Plato discusses the problem of knowledge as it is connected with the notion of human immortality. Here, the relationship between the human soul, death, and knowledge has been explored. Here Plato holds that the human soul is immortal, and imperishable. "When death comes to a man, the mortal part of him dies, but the immortal part retires at the approach of death and

escapes unharmed and indestructible" (Cornford, 1935, p.88).

It is due to this nature of the soul that death does not destroy the human soul, a myth has been referred to by Socrates. With the help of this myth, Plato attempts to show that there is life for the soul after the death of the body and therefore, death must be faced by the philosopher with great courage. This is possible for him because he knows the true nature of reality. The *Theatetus* contains a long discussion of Plato's notion of knowledge. In this dialogue, Socrates converses with *Theatetus* to find out the meaning of the word 'Knowledge'. *Theatetus*, in the beginning makes the mistake of giving a list consisting of the various items of knowledge. Upon this, Socrates invites him to define what knowledge is irrespective of the various things of which knowledge can be had. The discussion after this falls into three main parts in which the claims of (1) Perception, (2) True opinion or belief and (3) True belief accompanied by an 'account' or 'explanation' of same kind are examined and rejected. In this dialogue, apart from the discussion of epistemological issues, another important issue regarding the method of philosophizing itself also emerges. In the *Theatetus* there is a description of the art of midwifery that all learning is the recovery of latent knowledge which is always possessed by the immortal soul. "Socrates calls himself a midwife because his method of teaching was of that kind ... for he prepared his pupils themselves to make statements about the subject by unfolding their natural ideas and articulating them in accordance with the doctrine that what is called learning is really recollection and that every human soul has had a vision of reality and needs not to have knowledge put into it, but to recollect" (Cornford, 1935, p.28).

This notion of midwifery itself is a simile which Plato uses to explain a particular method of philosophizing. Knowledge is not a new addition to our already existing stock of information. It is, rather, a discovery of something which we latently possess. The imaginative use of 'midwife' throws light upon this point.

Similarly, in *Meno*, where Plato discusses the recollection theory of knowledge, a use of an illustration has been made by Socrates. To exemplify the theory of recollection, Socrates asks an illiterate slave-boy a number of questions in geometry. The boy guided by Socrates, is able to answer correctly all of them. In this way, Socrates convinces *Meno* that the knowledge is inherent in all human. But since it is in latent form, they have to be reminded of it.

Knowledge is recollection and not acquisition. When Plato includes the incident of the slave-boy answering questions in geometry, what is evident is that he is giving an illustration of this very thesis regarding knowledge and giving such examples or illustrations is itself an instance of imaginative or even creative philosophizing.

In the *Republic* Plato makes use of myths as well as allegories. In fact, his allegory of the cave is quite important in the present context for it contributes significantly to Plato's notion of knowledge.

### **The Allegory of the Cave :**

In order to analyze Plato's notion of knowledge and the use of a literary device of an allegory that he makes in propounding it, I will focus on the famous Allegory of the Cave.

This allegory occurs in *Republic* when Plato is discussing the problem of knowledge. The allegory in its paraphrase is as follows:

In an underground cave, which has an opening towards the light, there are living human beings chained from childhood in such a way that they face the inside wall of the cave and have never seen the light of the Sun. Above and behind them, i.e., between the prisoners and the mouth of the cave, is a fire, and between them and the fire is a raised way and a low wall, like a screen. Along this raised way there pass men carrying statues and figures of animals and other objects, in such a manner that the objects they carry appear over the top of the low wall of the cave, cannot see one another nor the objects carried behind them, but they see the shadows of themselves and of these objects on to the wall they are facing. They see only shadows. The word shadow is important in the context of Plato's epistemology as it stands for the unreal, which nevertheless has a specific relationship with the real. A reference to the notion of shadows and thus to the allegory itself can be found in the *Sophist* where all forms of image-making have been discussed. The prisoners represent the majority of mankind. Most of the human beings perceive only the shadows of reality and hear only the echoes of truth. This understanding of the world around them is totally inadequate. These people exhibit no wish to escape

from their prison-house, for they do not know that they are prisoners. They also do not know that what they perceive is not the true reality. However, if one of the prisoners manages to unchain himself and escapes into the outer world, he is almost blinded by the powerful light of the sun. He gazes in great wonder at various objects of which he had seen but the passing shadows. His total world-view undergoes a transformation, for now he knows that what he had regarded as knowledge was not knowledge but simply a faint and fleeting reflection of it. Now he sees the prisoners for what they are, namely, prisoners in the bonds of ignorance and sophistry. Plato remarks that if someone after ascending to the sunshine, went back into the cave, he would be unable to see properly because of the darkness and so would make himself ridiculous. If he tried to free another and lead him up to the light, the prisoners, who love the darkness and consider the shadows to be true reality, would even put him to death, if they could catch him.

The above cited Allegory makes the following points :

(1) The knowledge that humans claim to have through perception is an unreal and elusive as the knowledge of the shadows that the prisoners have.

(2) In order to have true knowledge, one must make an effort, for such knowledge is not attainable easily.

(3) True knowledge involves having an experience which transforms the entire world-view of the knower. For he attains a new way of looking at reality.

Plato has conveyed these points forcefully through the allegory. Perhaps, these points might have become philosophically controversial if he had stated them literally or directly. But in the allegory they have been naturally suggested.

Now, the question for us is to consider the role of imagination in the process of knowledge.

## Imagination in Knowledge and Poetry :

It appears that Plato understands imagining more or less as 'imaging'. Plato himself treats imagination in its root etymological sense of having images of an object which is not directly given to us in experience. (The Random House Dictionary).

It is evident from Plato's views on knowledge that such image-making faculty, i.e., imagination is to be denounced for it distracts man away from the path of truth. It creates beautiful images, which are not truly real, thus creating the appearance of a charming world which is far removed from the real one. However, the world created by imagination is not entirely false, for after all, it reflects the real world, it is a copy of the real world. However, imagination also excites passions and needless emotions when it creates works of art. Plato's believes in the life of reason as opposed to the life of passion. In fact, Plato's philosophy is summed up in the *life of reason*. "The sense organs grasp only the passing and the concrete, the realm of principles and standards is accessible to the true light of reason alone". (*Demos*, 1892, p.X).

Imagination cannot promote or give rise to knowledge It is hindrance in the process of knowledge acquisition which is guided mainly by reason, Plato in his *Republic* writes about poetry as one of the creations of imagination. "Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up, she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue". (Plato, 1892, p. 864). In fact, Plato severally attacks all the fine arts for they are nothing but alluring constructions of images, images which portray the sensible particulars that the artist perceives around him. According to him, the imitative arts lend us away from the true path of knowledge. If acquisition of knowledge is the main aim, poetry or painting hardly have any status in that respect. They do not give us any information about the nature of reality. They have a charm, an alluring power which attracts the human mind. They create another world in which the intellect is trapped without ever realizing it. Hence, instead of shedding true light upon the nature of reality, mimetic art conceals it from man by creating pseudo realities. In fact, while commenting upon the artist, i.e., what he does, Plato indirectly illustrates how art functions.

"Then the imitator, I said is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part is an image

e.g. a painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts, and if he is a good artist he may deceive children, or simple persons, when shows them his picture of carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter ... the imitator or the maker of the image knows nothing of true existence, he knows appearances only. The poet and the painter are deceitful". (Plato, 1892, p. 855)

Plato's criticism of the mimetic arts is a matter of great philosophical interest. For, as Friedlander points out, it was not that Plato lacked an artistic sensibility. He was not oblivious to the charm or to the moving power of poetry. He himself expressed great respect for Homer. But despite all this, it gradually became his firm conviction that truth alone mattered and that it could not be subordinated to any thing else like the fine arts.

### **Imagination in Plato : A Dilemma ?**

There is a puzzling element in the *Dialogues*, however, Despite Plato's contempt for poetry and images, the *Dialogues* themselves are rich in their use of metaphors, images, myths and many such typical literary devices. They also exhibit a dramatic style and beautiful language which create a deep and lasting impression on the reader's mind. But then, does it not suggest that there is some kind of inconsistency in Plato ? How does one reconcile the Plato, the critic of poetry and art with the Plato, the creator of some unforgettable metaphors and images?

### **A possible Answer to the Dilemma :**

It was this understanding of 'imagination' that led Plato to criticize it vehemently. Understood thus, imagination essentially stood in direct opposition to his notions of knowledge. If Plato's criticism of imagination is looked at in terms of his understanding of it; we no longer find a discrepancy between his critique of imagination and his own style of writing. "The crucial point is that Plato himself simply did not possess a word ( or a single concept) containing the very wide complex of connotations we have found to be inherent in the modern term 'imagination'. We cannot hope to discover whether he thought imagination in one or more of its richer modern senses, could legitimately be

used to name a cognitive faculty or mode of metaphysical insight". (Moran, 1973, p.221).

The point here is that there is a great deal of difference between the contemporary understanding of imagination and Plato's understanding of it. The contemporary understanding of imagination would not consider it simply as 'imaging' but many other activities like *anticipating, comparing, hypostatizing, supposing, creating or even having an insight* into some profound truth, etc. The view that imagining is a deep, free and spontaneous penetration of a metaphysical reality is often taken to be a contribution of the Romantists. It is said that the Romantists elevated the faculty of imagination and held that it was by virtue of possessing it that man was able to fathom the meaning of reality and of his very existence. The conception later on became popularized and influenced to a great extent the development of literature. Modern philosophy, too, has to take into account this Romantist understanding of imagination. But if we consider the import of platonic *Dialogues*, we can find that the seeds of the Romantist conception of imagination are present in Plato. This way of looking at the concept, thus, would offer us a new way of viewing Plato's notion of knowledge as a whole. For as it is quite obvious from the *Dialogues*, the notion of a 'vision' plays a significant role in Plato's analysis of knowledge. Plato talks frequently of the power of the 'eye' and of knowledge imparted by vision. The image of the 'eye' is to be found repeatedly in the *Dialogues* and Plato definitely had a purpose in his choice of images. In the allegory of the cave, we encounter expressions from the world of visions. The prisoner who escapes from the cave into the world outside is at first blinded by the sunshine. But vision which he now has, transforms his very notion of reality. There is now a complete change in his mode of perception. Even if now he goes back to the cave, he will see the things in an entirely different manner. This is because he has seen what the world really is. He will not mistake shadows for reality.

Of all our sense-experiences, the visual is the most illuminating and obvious one, conveying a sense of immediacy as well as of reality of the thing perceived. Plato intended to suggest that these must be the features of a true experience of knowledge.

Reference to 'vision' and 'perception' can be found repeatedly in Plato's other *Dialogues* such as the *Symposium* or the *Sophist*. "Conceivable as it

may be that our imagination might express the ultimate value envisaged by the human soul in a symbolism from the world of sound, the Greeks preferred one from the world of vision. This is particularly true of Plato, who, corresponding to 'the keenest of all physical senses' as vision is called in the *Phaedrus*, even endows the mind with an eye capable of grasping the highest reality" (Friedlander, 1958, p.69).

Along with the concept of vision, another image occurring repeatedly in the *Dialogues* is that of light. Plato viewed the ascent to knowledge as an ascent towards light from darkness. The darkness of the cave in the allegory and the sunshine in the outer world symbolize the notions of ignorance and knowledge respectively. Plato viewed knowledge as a realm filled with purest brightness. The image of light predominates the allegory in the *Republic*. It occurs in *Phaedrus* where the soul dwells in pure brightness. The same image can be found in *Phaedo*. Plato generally viewed knowledge as an ascent which culminated into a sudden and overpowering experience of knowledge comparable to a vision of dazzling light.

Such an understanding of knowledge is quite consistent with the modern understanding of imagining which regards imagining as a 'a revealing insight into' as one of its meanings. For, as it has been pointed out by Michael Moran, '... in fact a broader look at Plato's thought strongly suggests that Plato would have taken no exception to Blake's use of "Imagination" could it have been translated for him. (Blake wrote in 1802 : "Vision or Imagination, is a Representation of what Eternally Exists Really and Unchangeable - *Blake*, p. 145). For "Insight" in the sense of an "intellectual vision" - something certainly covered by the modern world "imagination' as its meaning was modified and handed down to us by the romantists - is central to Plato's whole conception of philosophical knowledge. A movement from darkness to light is everywhere used by him to convey the true path from ignorance to wisdom, unconsciousness to consciousness, from error and illusion to truth and reality." (Moran, 1973, p. 211). This way of considering Plato's theory of knowledge reveals that imaginations it is understood today can possibly be traced in his epistemology too. This claim is further reinforced if we consider the use of myths that Plato makes in the *Dialogues*.

## Myths and Imagination in the Dialogues :

Plato has most effectively used myths in *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus* and the laws where he explores the relationship between man and the cosmos. The same can be seen in *Gorgias* and *Meno* where myth attains a new philosophical dimension by insisting upon the pursuing of truth actively. The Greeks before Plato's time had strongly believed in the creative powers of man and this belief had shown itself in the form of their acceptance of myths as well as in the creation of tragedies. This atmosphere, however, changed with Socrates who adopted a critical attitude, directly opposed to that of poetic or mythic creation. Plato, the disciple of Socrates, learnt from one person to another ready-made. It consists in an activity of raising and contemplating critical questions. Myths are generally handed down from generation to generation. No matter how insightful they are, they cannot be considered as knowledge, they have to be placed in the stream of philosophical thinking. They play the role of a vehicle that suggests certain truths. But they themselves are not to be treated as knowledge. Therefore, Plato himself has created certain myths, has manipulated the existing ones in order to convey certain important philosophical insights. This is highly significant and only a brief consideration of an analysis of "myth" can make us see its importance. According to the analysis given by Cassirer, a myth cannot be regarded as a "subjectivistic illusion forever at the mercy of psychology and psychologism". (Cassirer, 1955, p. XIV). Rather, it is to be understood as the manifestation of the relationship which man has with nature with all its adjustments. Cassirer writes that myths are not to be regarded as being irrational and therefore opposed to all forms of knowledge. They represent a primary awareness of the human condition, of the relationship between man and nature, which is prerequisite for having 'knowledge' itself. The creation of myth, therefore, is an important stage as far as the process of acquiring knowledge is concerned. "Knowledge does not master myth by banishing it from its confines. Rather, knowledge can truly conquer only that it has previously understood in its own specific meaning and essence". (Cassirer, 1955, p. XVII).

The point of great significance is that Plato introduces myths in the *Dialogues* imaginatively for the sake of making some important philosophical point. He does not use them as ornaments or as mere pieces of decoration. He uses them for the purposes of exploring the realm of truth. And in doing so, he takes the myths themselves on a philosophical plane. He introduces such elements in them which make them philosophically profound.

The use of myths in the *Republic* supports this point. As Cassirer writes, "these are the Fates, daughters of necessity, who are clothed in white robes .... God is justified." (*Republic*, p.616). In this magnificent vision which once again epitomizes the whole spirit of mythical creation peculiar to the Greeks and particularly to Plato, we have nevertheless departed from the sphere of myth. For here we find the fundamental Socratic idea of man's moral responsibility for himself as opposed to the idea of mythical guilt and Fate." (Cassirer, 1955, p. 133). Plato always lifted myth out of its basic, primary level and rendered its meaning rich by fusing it with the method of philosophizing. In this connection, Vogelin writes, "on the most archaic level the mythical forces express themselves in symbolic actions, i.e., in the form of rites ... On a higher level the myth appears in the narrower sense of a "mythos" i.e., of a tale of anonymous origin which interprete the rites.... On the third level the anonymous, Collective character of the myth begins to break and the personal psycho makes it appearance... The free use of the more archaic symbolic materials by the artist on the higher level of spiritual consciousness, however, changes the attitude of man toward the mythical symbols. For when the myth need no longer be taken literally (if it ever was), the symbols can be manipulated and transformed deliberately in order to fit the exigencies of differentiated, personal experiences. This is the fourth level represented by Plato, where the myth retains the seriousness of its 'truth' but is at the same time consciously an imaginative play". (Vogelin, 1957, p. 185). It is quite clear that Plato makes use of the imaging capacity by using myths, and also by manipulating certain elements in them in order to express philosophical truth. However, this use of imagination by Plato himself could probably to justified on the ground that it was for the sake of 'truth' and not for the attainment of momentary pleasure.

### **Plato : A Two-fold Influence -**

The consideration of the role of imagination in Plato's thought reveals a tension inherent in his philosophy. This tension is between the rationalist and the non-rationalist elements in the *Dialogues*. Plato's account of human experience and knowledge has both the streams of reason and intuition running into it and this is borne out by further philosophical developments influenced by Plato's thought, carried out by the Neo-Platonists on the one hand and Aristotle on the other.

As it becomes clear from the foregoing discussion, it is difficult and even incorrect to hold any one of following positions exclusively regarding Plato's understanding of the role of imagination.

(1) Plato rules out imagination as a source that can provide us with true knowledge.

(2) Plato at least indirectly, encourages a favourable treatment to be given to imagination.

None of the above two propositions can be accepted independently of the other if we are to have a complete understanding of his notion of imagination. Therefore, while concluding the present discussion, one can only say that a distinction must be made between Plato's own understanding of imagination and his criticism of it on the one hand, and the modern understanding of imagination and the place it can find in Plato's thought, on the other. Even though Plato criticized the faculty of imagination, from a consideration of his metaphysics one may say that he would not have objected to imagination in its contemporary sense.

"There are two conflicting major strains in Plato and in the Platonic tradition. With respect to the deepest and farthest reaching cleavage separating philosophical or religious systems he stood on both sides, and his influence upon latter generations worked in two opposite directions". (Lovejoy, 1948, p. 24). This is very obvious, for his outright criticism of imagination establishes him as the severe critic of any nonrational activity. It represents him as having views on knowledge that do not admit any scope for a subjective contribution made by the knower. His criterion of infallibility gives his notions of knowledge an uncompromisingly logical character.

"To this extent, therefore, those scholars seem to be right who see Plato as the initiator of that long tradition of philosophic distrust of imagination that can be clearly traced from Aristotle and Stoics, through the church fathers and school men, to thinkers like Hobbes, the 17th Century rationalists and beyond." (Moran, 1973, pp. 210-211).

However, Plato's conception of knowledge was not one sided, by reason he did not understand only the rational activity of man dissociated from other faculties. He did not separate reason from emotions. Reason for him, was not merely detached understanding, it was conviction, fired with enthusiasm. It was inseparable from a 'seeing' which would transform human life and values. "The pursuit of knowledge is animated by the cross for the ideas, and the final truth cannot be conveyed by concepts. So Plato has recourse to myths and allegories and vivid unforgettable images, in order to convey ultimate truths. His thought is both technical and mystical, his style both abstract and poetical." (Domas, 1892, p. XI).

Yet another philosophical trend can therefore be traced back to Plato, a trend which is diametrically opposite to the one mentioned above. This is seen to have been carried out mainly by Neo-Platonists like Plotinus, Paracelsus, Bruno, etc. They regarded knowledge as a 'vision' as a direct personalized experience and gave imagination an important place in their hierarchy of faculties. For them, knowledge was not to be achieved solely by discursive means but by a kind of vision. Therefore, "It becomes evident, that historically Plato also provided a powerful impetus in a direction very different, almost diametrically opposed, to that most often attributed to him" (Moran, 1973, p. 211).