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A CRITICAL STUDY ON KANT'S IDEALISM

Saikat Bandyopadhyay

Assistant Professor, WBES

Department of Philosophy, Government General Degree College

Singur, Hooghly, West Bengal,India

Abstract: I have tried to appraise the concept of 'transcendental idealism' formulated by Immanuel Kant in 'Critique of Pure Reason'. Kant refuted idealism in both of the editions of the said book. Naturally, question of inconsistency may appear. But have tried to show there is no inconsistency to accept Transcendental Idealism whence denying idealism because Kant did not refute idealism as such, but empirical idealism, as upheld by Descartes and Berkeley. The paper attempts to show the actual position of empirical idealists and Kant's contrariety. The distinction between Transcendental Idealism and Transcendental Realism is also deliberated in the paper. Finally, I strive to show that transcendental idealism, more or less, is similar to assertion of empirical realism. Transcendental Idealism is the doctrine that claims that objects we perceive are appearances, not things-in themselves. But we must not deny the reality of things-in-themselves. Hence, various interpretations have been generated like 'two-world' & 'two-aspect' reading. If we accept 'two-world reading' as advocated by Strawson, project of transcendental idealism will arrive at dead end. Here we have followed Alison's two-aspect reading to interpret transcendental idealism, though such interpretations may not even save from challenges. Thus, Kant's observation will keep alive amid challenges.

Key Words: Idealism, Transcendental, Appearance, Things-in-themselves, Space, Time, Categories.

Full Article: Immanuel Kant, the most influential philosopher of all time, framed 'Transcendental Idealism', the doctrine about the nature of the objects of our knowledge, in his philosophical journey. But during systemization of his critical philosophy, he refuted 'idealism' as well. Frederick Copleston, the writer of 'History of Philosophy' mentions- 'Both editions of the Critique of Pure Reason contain a refutation of idealism'¹. The question may naturally be aroused here – how did he accept 'Transcendental Idealism' at the same time when he had refuted Idealism in his philosophy? In what sense did he advocate transcendental idealism which poles apart from idealism? Is it not an inconsistency?

If we glimpse through Kant's philosophy attentively, we see he used the term 'idealism' in a different sense from traditional usage when he went for 'transcendental idealism'. Ordinarily 'idealism' is the doctrine 'holding that the reality is fundamentally mental in nature'² and the entire universe is an extension of mind or ideas. The doctrine further advocates that the outer object or thing-in-themselves, have no real existence; these are nothing but collection of sensory ideas. For example, a flower is simply a collection of sensory ideas as we are immediately aware of when we perceive it. But the question may appear in what sense he used 'idealism' in 'transcendental idealism'. It is called idealism because Kant believed that object of experience is conditioned by a priori forms of our mind and in cognitive situation objects must conform to knowledge. Kant observed that there are two faculties of mind-sensibility and understanding. Space and time, being the a priori forms of sensibility, intuit objects. While understanding with his certain peculiar forms of categories, synthesizes intuited manifolds and makes knowledge of objects possible. But he advocated that both forms of sensibility and the categories are ultimately based on the unity of self-consciousness, termed as 'Transcendental Unity of Apperception'. This self-consciousness along with the forms of sensibly and the categories of understanding is actually responsible for knowledge of objects. Thus, as consciousness represents the objects of experience, it may be labeled as 'idealism'. It is necessary to note that he used the term 'transcendental' which must not be confused with 'transcendent' precisely means 'passing beyond all experience'. Kant himself said 'the word: transcendental – whose signification, which I indicated so many times, was not once caught by the reviewer dose not signify something that surpasses all experience, but something that indeed precedes experience (a priori)³'. In other words, 'transcendental' does not signify something passing beyond all experience but something that indeed precedes it a priori, but that is intended simply to make cognition of experience possible. Clearly, Kant's transcendental idealism refers to that theory which asserts that object of knowledge depends on our cognitive faculties of our mind and such cognitive faculties are independent of experience but at the same time must be applicable to all possible cognitive experience relating objects. To quote Henry, E. Alison 'Kant's idealism is transcendental in the sense that it is grounded in a reflection upon the conditions of the possibility of such cognition. What makes it a form of idealism is the thesis that these conditions, henceforth to be called "epistemic conditions," reflect the structure of the mind rather than the nature of a pre-given reality'⁴.

From above discussion it is clear that in Kantian thought 'idealism' used in 'Transcendental Idealism' has different connotation from that of traditional sense. It does not intend to assert that there are only human mind and its ideas. Transcendental Idealism claims that the objects we are concerned as conformed to the conditions of our faculties of mind, are not things-in-themselves, are actually appearances. So, our knowledge is limited to appearance or phenomena only. We have no knowledge of



things-in-themselves or noumenon which lies behind the phenomenal world or world of appearances. Neither through inner sense nor outer sense we have knowledge of things-in-themselves. He said 'Things in themselves are not known, because we have no intuition of them'. By both senses, i.e. inner and outer, we get only representations and those representations give us appearance. External objects, according to this theory, are nothing but a species of representation and labeled as appearances, and as a representation they exist in us. But from this we must not deny the reality of things-in-themselves. Kant held that although things in themselves are not known by us we can very well think of them and assert their being. Thinking is not identical with Knowing. Thinking is confined in thought or idea. But in case of Knowing we need intuition along with ideas. Kant offered an argument in favour of the reality of things-in-themselves. He said, if we are to understand anything as appearance, we must contrast it in our thought with something which is real and not 'appearance' as such. If there is no entity outside appearances, then appearance would not be possible. An appearance cannot be a mere appearance without there being something of which it is an appearance. The something which is not appearance must be treated as things in themselves. So, the idea of appearance necessarily leads us to think things-in-themselves as real. Thus, what Kant actually refuted is not idealism as such, but only empirical idealism which envisages external objects as things-in-themselves have doubtful existence. Then, the aforesaid inconsistency does not arise. To express the concept of empirical idealism he said in his Critique:

'One would also do us an injustice if one tried to ascribe to us that long-decried empirical idealism that, while assuming the proper reality of space, denies the existence of extended beings in it, or at least finds this existence doubtful, and so in this respect admits no satisfactorily provable distinction between dream and truth. As to the appearances of inner sense in time, it finds no difficulty in them as real things, indeed, it even asserts that this inner experience and it alone gives sufficient proof of the real existence of their object (in itself) along with all this time-determination.'⁵(A491/B519)

From this passage of Kant, it is understandable that to Kant empirical idealism is the doctrine that all we know immediately is the reflection of our own mind and some sort of 'our temporally ordered mental states'. External objects are not immediate objects of knowledge and thus we can only infer the existence of their being in space. As we use inference in this case, this escorts us to uncertainty or skepticism regarding the external world of objects. But, Kant thought, on the contrary, external objects are not things-in-themselves, are actually mere appearances and as appearances they are not doubtful at all. This view, we think, may be regarded as a higher form of idealism which Kant called 'Transcendental Idealism'. It expresses nothing but the outer appearances as mere representations which exist in us. In Kant's language: 'I understand by the transcendental idealism of all appearances the doctrine that they are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not things in themselves and according that time and space are only sensible forms of out intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or conditions of objects as things-in-themselves.'⁶(A369) This is why Kant proclaimed 'Transcendental Idealism' in his philosophy while he refuted 'empirical idealism' and in his view the acceptance of the former involves denial of the latter.

Kant typically distinguished two forms of empirical idealism and rejected the both. Problematic Idealism and Dogmatic Idealism are the forms. Kant supposed Problematic Idealism that we find in Descartes' philosophy. According to this view the existence of external things in space is doubtful and indemonstrable. External objects in space may exist, but we are unable to know exactly what they are. The only single certain empirical proposition - 'I am'. Descartes had applied hyperbolic doubt to the existence of external things and asserted that we have consciousness of ourselves independently of external things. After knowing certainty of our own ego or consciousness we go forward to know that there are external things.

Kant was against such kind of view. His argument goes like this- I am conscious of my own being as determined in time and all determination in time is of succession and presupposes the existence of something permanent in perception. But such permanent entity cannot be present within us. It follows, as a result thereof, the consciousness of my own existence in time is possible only if something real exists outside my existence. Consciousness in time, therefore, necessarily conjoined with the existence of outer objects. In other words, we become conscious in perceiving external objects. Thus, question of inference and doubt does not arise.

Positive philosopher George Berkeley offered 'Subjective Idealism' which in Kant's opinion is dogmatic idealism. According to the theory, objects in space are mere products of imagination; they do not exist at all. Kant advocated that dogmatic idealism explicitly denies the existence of external objects and asserts that objects in space are nothing but fictions or product of imagination. Norman Kemp Smith says in this regard, 'Berkeley in his dogmatic idealism maintains that space, with all the things of which it is the inseparable condition, is something impossible in itself, and he therefore regards the things in space as merely imaginary entities (Einbldungen)'.⁷The kind of idealism is unavoidable if one regards space as a property that is to pertain to the things-in-themselves; for then, it along with everything for which it serves as a condition, is a non-entity.

Against dogmatic idealism Kant remarked that if we accept this idealism, it cannot be shown that space is an apriori form of sensibility which applies to phenomena, not to things-in themselves. If space, following Berkeley is supposed as a property of thing-



in-themselves because it is the inseparable condition of all objects indeed, then the concept of space can be shown to be something unreal and impossible. And it involves in its ruin the things of which it is supposed to be a property, and which must therefore be accounted for mere products of the imagination. But in Transcendental Aesthetic of Critique of Pure Reason Kant had proved that space does not represent any property or relation of things-in-themselves. For, if it belonged to things in themselves, then we could know it through sense- experience, and no a priori intuition of space would have been possible. Space, to Kant, is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense. We cannot know any object of outer sense without representing it as in space. Thus, following Kant it is absurd to accept the view that space is a property of things-in themselves, for this case space, together with all objects of which it is an inseparable condition, would be non-entity.

To identify ‘Transcendental Idealism’ Kant often distinguished it with ‘Transcendental Realism’ which ‘regards space and time as something given in themselves (independent of our sensibility)’⁸.(A 369) The supporters of transcendental realism accept external appearances as things-in-themselves, which exist autonomously and independently of us. But Kant did not agree to this position. He rather believed that space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, so they are subjective. They are not determinations given for things-in-themselves. Kant’s ‘transcendental idealism’ may have the parity to empirical realism in the sense that he grand undoubted existence of external objects as appearances. As an appearance they are nothing but a species of my representations. But that does not mean that external objects do not exist. Kant maintained that external things exist as well as my own self, and indeed both exist on the immediate testimony of my self-consciousness. The only dissimilarity is that representation of self belongs solely to inner sense while external objects belong to outer sense. But they both, according to Kant, are representations, the immediate awareness of which is at the same time a sufficient proof of their reality. Thus Kant, as a transcendental idealist at the same time may be treated as an empirical realist who accepted matter as appearance, a reality which does not need to be inferred, but is immediately perceived. Rasvihary Das said in this regard, ‘against empirical idealism Kant supports empirical realism in that he grants the undoubted existence of external objects as appearances’⁹.

From the above discussion it is clear to us that transcendental idealism is the doctrine that asserts the self and external world are phenomenal and no one can penetrate into their inner nature as they are in themselves. It is assumed from what Kant had asserted that there are two distinct world- i) world of appearances and ii) world of thing-in-themselves. Appearances and things-in-themselves constitute two ontologically distinct realms of being. In other words, reality consists in two ontologically distinct worlds of phenomena and noumenon. The first one is inherited within space and time and the other one rests in some sort of transcendental realm of things-in-themselves. Although the two-world reading has two apparent outcome– first, it suggests that Kant’s transcendental idealism is to be understood as a form of subjectivism, according to that our mind is acquainted only with its own representations. Secondly, it requires the postulation of a distinct set of things in themselves to which our mind can have no cognitive entrance. Here we may raise objection by asking that if noumenon is unknowable and cannot cognitively be accessed, how can we be able to know that they are responsible for phenomena? It seems that in Kantian thought things-in-themselves do not fall within the category of ‘possible human experience’ and, as a result thereof things-in-themselves of noumenon have no capacity to be verified and have no significant meaning as theoretical concepts. In this context Strawson, in his book ‘The Bound of Sense’, equated transcendental idealism with Berkeleyan idealism, for both the thesis deny the affirmation of things-in-themselves. Strawson further advocated that human experience must be the product of some ‘complex quasi-causal relation’ between phenomena and noumenon, the relation he termed as ‘A-relation’. Strawson observed that if space, time and causation do not exist beyond those appearances, how is it that ‘A-relation’ possible? If we don’t have any cognitive access to noumenon then how does such kind of relation possible? This is a real problem in Kantian thought which has no easy way out and for this Strawson, ‘tolls the death knell’ for transcendental idealism.

There is a point to be noted that Alison, one of popular interpreters of Kant, did not read Kant’s transcendental idealism in the way Strawson did. According to Alison, we must not conceive Kant’s version of transcendental idealism in terms of two worlds reading. Rather we must understand it through two-aspect reading. Alison expressed that there are things-in-themselves beyond phenomena but the former has no distinguished ontological status in the way Strawson interpreted. He maintained that what distinguishes things-in-themselves from appearances is not the realm of existential status rather the way in which the human mind considers it. The phenomena and things-in-themselves are ‘the very same things’, but differently seen when viewed from different point of view. We cognize phenomena as they are observed by the framework of space and time, ornamented with categories of understanding. But in case of noumenon or things-in-themselves are the same manifestations devoid of such conditions. In this way it retains a sort of methodological or formal status, but by no means an ontological one¹².

This type of interpretation provided by Alison may avoid Strawson’s criticism regarding Kant’s transcendental idealism. Further this reading provides things-in-themselves with a viable position within Kantian epistemology and helps Kant to get out from untoward consequences resulted from two-world interpretations. Strawson in his ‘bound’ assumed that Kant is describing two different classes of objects belonging to different realm: The tulip as we experience and the tulip as it is in self and of itself. But



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Alison believed that Kant's Critique does not advocated two distinct yet somehow interactive tulips, but a single tulip viewed in two different ways. This is how Kant's transcendental idealism may escape from the untoward consequence.

It is a matter of fact that Kant's exposition of transcendental idealism is not so clear in the Critique as it results various interpretations because Kant himself moves to and from between a two-world and a two-aspect position. In this context we may mention the remarks of Allen Wood, saying-'I think much of the puzzlement about transcendental idealism arises from the fact that Kant himself formulates(it) in a variety of ways and it is not at all clear how or whether, his statements(...) can be reconciled or taken as statements of a single, self-consistent doctrine. I think Kant's central formulations suggest two quite distinct and mutually incompatible doctrines'¹³.

It is clear from the above discussion that Kant's transcendental idealism is, by no means, a straightforward theory to figure out. Rather its formation is so complicated that different interpretations may have been followed from it. Some of the interpretations may ruin its original spirit. Even one can challenge transcendental idealism on the basis of truthfulness of knowledge. As Transcendental Idealism was being stated by Kant, it is followed that objects we are concerned as conforms to the conditions of our faculties of mind, are not things-in-themselves, but are actual appearances. So, our knowledge is limited to appearance or phenomena only. We have no knowledge of things-in-themselves, the reality behind the phenomena. But since by 'knowledge' we usually mean the cognition of things as they truly or really are, rather than as they may appear to us under such and such conditions, this seemingly entails that Kant's proposed notion of 'knowledge' is not really knowledge at all. Thus, if Kantian transcendental idealism is being thought as the theory of object of knowledge of things as it appears and the same thing as it is itself devoid of cognitive access, this would surely be an error which would diminish the possibility of human knowledge.

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