



THE STUDY OF UNKNOWN AND UNKNOWABILITY IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

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The present aim of this paper is to highlight the shortcomings in Kant's philosophy. Kant in the sphere of ontology discusses the distinction as well as interrelation between noumenon, thing-in-itself and phenomenon. Ontology is defined as a branch of philosophy which is concerned about theories of being. As we know ontology is concerned about being, he mainly shows distinction between material and spiritual being. Kant's ontology is always surrounded by controversy regarding about his status that whether it is idealists or materialistic. In order to resolve this problem, here I am taking the help from Lenin and two of the successors of Kant, i.e. Fichte and Hegel who tries to solve it in a novel manner. Here it is necessary to give us outlook about his view on ontology and according will solve the problems which are raised by the time of discussion. Noumenon and Phenomenon are different aspects of his ontology which do not have any meeting point. Noumenon is the realm of spiritual wherein lies the basis of Kantian morality and we can get all the noumenal entities like freedom of will, immortality of soul and existence of god. These noumenal entities are known as ideas of reason. Unlike from noumenon, phenomenon is sphere of actual possible scientific knowledge wherein categories (quantity, quality, cause-effect) have their applications. He tries to point out that apart from scientific knowledge there is a realm of spiritual world wherein scientific knowledge cannot enter into it. So he limits the scientific knowledge to phenomenon,

"...in order to leave room for faith."¹

The sphere of faith is regarded by him as noumenon from which human knowledge cannot be penetrated. Unlike from noumenon, about phenomenon Kant says:

"Appearances, so far as they are thought as objects according to the unity of the categories, are called phenomena. But if I postulate things which are mere objects of understanding and which, nevertheless, can be given as such to an intuition... such things would be entitled noumena."²

According to him, the object which is given to us by means of sensibility and yielded by intuition is phenomenon and it is also determined by unity of categories. Whereas noumenon is beyond the realm of sensible intuition and it is not regarded as object of understanding. So that it need a higher kind of intuition which is known as



intellectual intuition. In this context Kant define two senses thorough which noumenon can be defined. In the negative sense,

“... a thing so far as it is not an object of our sensible intuition, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it...”³

In the positive sense, it is

“An object of a non-sensible intuition, we thereby presupposes a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual.”⁴

Therefore, individual knowledge is limited within the world of phenomenon only. Intellectual intuition is special kind of intuition which is beyond the possession of human being. That is the reason it is called as unknown and unknowable. The presence of noumenal entities (freedom of will, immortality of soul and existence of god) makes it as ideas of reason. Ideas of reason is unconditional in it nature. It is in this sense ideas of reason which are transcendent is different from transcendental which are transcendental. He holds that everything present in the phenomenal world in conditional, but reason is always seeks for what is unconditioned. As we know that behind everything present in this empirical world must have a cause. It is impossible to conceive the concept of unconditioned in this empirical world. It is necessary to cut short my discussion about noumenon and phenomenon because of my topic which is study of unknowability that does not present in the phenomenal world.

Again we can find that noumenon and thing-in-itself are two different aspects of Kant's ontology. About things-in themselves, Kant say:

“It must lie behind the appearance as their ground.”⁵

He assumes that existence of things-in-themselves on the basis of appearance which is ground and cause of appearance. Like Noumenon, it never given manifold of sensible intuition and understanding has no application in it. The idealist interpreters of Kant try to build up a comparison between noumenon and thing-in –itself. N. K. Smith in his book *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* says:

“It is the concept of noumena in negative as equivalent therefore simply to the thing-in-itself, that alone is involved in the doctrine of sensibility. For its determination the categories cannot be employed that would demand a faculty of non-sensuous intuition, which we do not possess, and would amount to the illegitimate assertion of noumena in the positive sense. The limiting concept, indispensably presupposed in human experience, is therefore the bare notion of things-in-themselves.”⁶

Similarly Korner offers a similar argument that,

“They are the entities of understanding to which no objects of experience can ever correspond, and contrast them with phenomena which can be object of experience.”⁷

From this above interpretation shows that there is huge difference between noumenon



and thing-in-itself. As a limiting concept, the function of noumenon is to prevent sensibility enter into the field of spiritual realm. In Kant's philosophy, noumenon represents the idealistic aspects of its ontology. Noumena are neither ground nor the cause of appearance, because they can never affects our senses nor be conceived in terms of existence. Thing-in-itself regarded as the materialistic aspect which is the cause of appearance. Thing-in-itself is never a limiting concept, but Kant declares it as unknown and unknowable, he does so by applying the term noumena to things-in-themselves. Thus, appearances are the representation of the unknown and unknowable things-in-itself. In this sense thing-in-itself is related to the sphere of phenomenon, because the material element in the phenomenal world depends on thing-in-itself.

Kant's approach towards thing-in-itself involves certain confusions. On the one hand, he tries to say the things-in-themselves are alleged to be the cause of appearance. On the other hand, it cannot be regarded as cause because causation of categories of understanding and categories cannot be applied to it. When we say that certain things exist in the world, it presupposes that it might have some cause and also have some effect. In this sense unknown and unknowability of Kant's thing-in-itself is self-contradictory. Kant says:

"If we know that a thing exists and is a cause, we know that the concepts of existence and causation apply to it. We have therefore, some knowledge of it, and it is not unknowable and ever unknown."⁸

The basic problem regarding Kant's thing-in-itself is that although it is the ground or cause of appearance but categories of understanding have no application in it. In this context he differs from Aristotle which says categories of understanding are derived from sensible intuition. He believes that categories are apriori. But Kant realizes the fact that no knowledge is possible without sensible intuition and categories of understanding. In order to bring these two concepts together he introduced transcendental schema which works as a mediator. Further transcendental schema and categories of understanding are put together in unity of apperception. The unity of apperception perceives all things and events in the form of space and time, and comprehends them under the categories of unity, reality, substantiality, causality, etc. About unity of apperception Kant says:

"The principle of apperception is the highest principle in the whole sphere of human cognition."⁹

So, thing-in-itself represents materialistic aspect of human cognition in Kant's ontology. Kant misleads it by it as unknown and unknowable. It is true there are many things presents in this world which is beyond the knowledge of human being but that does not mean it remain unknowable. It is due to our ignorance, maybe lack of training which obstructs us to know the real knowledge. So we can say that things are unknown to us due to some reason but it is not unknowable as Kant suggests. Here I am referring view of Lenin in order to vindicate this statement. According to Lenin:



“The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotches is practice, namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian incomprehensible ‘thing-in-itself.’”¹⁰

Lenin tries to suggest that it is practice which makes human cognition perfect. By doing practical activity, he manipulates the things which are necessary for him and also realize its correctness. That’s way he is getting closer to thing and it cannot be remain unknowable for him. He further says:

“In the theory of knowledge, as in every other sphere of science, we must think dialectically, that is, we must not regard our knowledge as readymade and unalterable, but must determine how knowledge emerges from ignorance, how incomplete, inexact knowledge becomes more complete and more exact.”

Knowledge is not at all static; it is always a growing phenomenon. We must not think that it is always remain same and unchangeable. When we commit certain mistake tries to rectify it, then only knowledge can proceed. It is true that it immerges out of ignorance, and then our knowledge became more perfect and more certain. Thus, we can say thing so far as unknown to us, but it became known to us through our practical and cognitive activity. Lenin sufficiently justifies his view by providing certain argument. But it is impossible to conceive knowability of in Kantian framework because he kept far away from categories of understanding to thing-in-itself which is regarded as the basic of problem of his epistemology.

In the similar manner Kant’s successors, Fichte and Hegel were not satisfied with view of unknowability in thing-in-itself. They are not at all ready to accept it within the realm of idealism. Fichte criticizes the thing-in-itself because it contradicts his concept of phenomena and thus, creates a

“dualism between phenomena and things-in-themselves.”¹¹

In order to reject this dualism, he states that the first and fundamental principle is the, “postulation of its own existence by the ego, in postulating his own existence, necessarily assumes the existence of non-ego.”¹²

Thus, he tries to suggest that individual existence is prior to the object and object is dependent on human beings who identify its nature. Unlike from Fichte, Kant shows that objects are possible when thing-in-itself, which exists independent of subject. But for me both the object and subject are necessary in order to get the sufficient knowledge. I am not denying the fact that existence of object is prior to individual, but it is also true that it is individual who identify the object by making use of them. So, in a way both are necessary, we cannot ignore any of them.

Hegel also rejects the unknowability of Kant which limits human knowledge. In Kant, understanding cannot be applied in the domain of thing-in-itself. For him



categories of understanding have their relation to object which gives us sensible intuition. That is reason human knowledge is limited within the world of phenomena only, noumena is something unknown and unknowable. It is the reason which played central role in Kant which no relation to the world phenomena and it provides us noumenal entities form which human can never possess. But Hegel believes that it is understanding which makes knowledge possible. At the same moment he believes that reason unifies the contradiction which was created by understanding (universal and particular, identity and difference). Unlike from Hegel, it is unity of apperception which mediates between senses and categories of understanding. In order to resolve the unknown and unknowable Hegel formulates his own view by saying that,

“All reality is at least potentially and in principle accessible to cognition.”¹³

Hegel tries to suggest no knowledge is unknowable forever. We can say that some knowledge is unknown because of our limited capacity or of ignorance, which obstruct us know the reality. But the reality has all the potentiality to unveil the truth which was present in implicit mode. The concept of unknowability is mysterious kind of things, which is present in the noumenal world. After this kind of observation, immediately one question came to my mind that if our knowledge is limited within the world of phenomena then what is point of so much discussion about noumenal world where we do not have possession. Is there any world really exists? Kant immediately argues that apart from scientific world there is a world of faith where we cannot enter into. Faith is also having blind idea, without some knowledge we cannot say that God or soul exist. In our daily life, we feel the presence of him through our activities which guides us to certain act which is harmful for other life. In this context Hegel says:

“How can we say there be anything beyond knowledge, that is, beyond mind or *Geist*, for *Geist* turns out ultimately to be identical with the whole or reality? More specifically, the opposition is overcome in the fact that our knowledge of the world turns ultimately into *Geist's* self-knowledge, for we come to discover that world which is supposedly beyond thought is really posited by thought, that it is a manifestation of rational necessity. And at the same time the thought which was supposedly over against the world, that is our thinking as finite subjects, turn out to be that of the cosmos itself, or the cosmic subject, God whose vehicle we are. In the higher version of speculative philosophy, the world loses its otherness to thought, and subjectivity goes beyond finitude, and hence the two meet. We overcome the dualism between subject and world, between knowing man and nature, in seeing the world as the necessary expression of thought, or rational necessity, while we see ourselves as the necessary vehicle of this thought, as the point where it becomes conscious. And become conscious it must, for the rationality necessary order of things includes the necessity that this rationality order appear to itself.”¹⁴

From this above passage indicates us that Kant somehow treats thing-in-itself as abstraction. Hegel did a novel work by resolving the unknowability of thing-in-itself and noumenon by saying that we can only know those things which is appears to us



and has an existence in this world. Thing-in-itself is regarded by him as empty of content.

To sum of this, I can say that Kant somehow tries to mislead us by saying noumenal entities and things-in-themselves are unknowable concept. As we aware of the general notion there is nothing impossible for human being. This principle is seems to be contradictory with Kant's approach towards unknowability. In one sense he says thing-in-itself is the ground and cause of appearance which makes it similar to its concept of phenomenon which is knowable to human being. But in another way he show us although it is cause of appearance, it cannot be given us sensible intuition, therefore it is unknowable. Lenin by rejecting Kant's unknowability said that knowledge is possible, only so far we make use of them. When we apply it in our practical life, then only we can able to identify its original nature. No one is perfect by birth, hard work and dedication is the key factors which make us perfect. Likewise, our knowledge is able to get its higher status when we apply in our life. Fichte also attempt to abolish unknowability in thing-in-itself by identifying ego with non-ego. Kant, as objective idealists always believes that object is prior to individual existence. But for Fichte objects are possible when the thing-in-itself, which exists independent of the subject or the transcendental consciousness, acts on human senses. And for him both ego and non-ego depends upon absolute ego in which an ego can assume its existence and existence of object external to it. Finally, Hegel says there is no knowledge which is unknowable in principle. We can say it as unknown because it is far away from human knowledge. But the moment we try to know about the unknowability, and then it is never called as unknowable. Although we cannot get sufficient knowledge about this concept because of our ignorance, at least get some rough idea about it. It is somehow similar to the concept of God, we have never seen him in our eyes, but it is our faith toward God which feels its existence in our life.

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