

Possibility, Validity and Limit of Knowledge in Kant

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I, in this paper, am trying to explain Kant's concept of possibility, validity and limit of knowledge. Kant's philosophical system tries to determine the possibility, validity and limit of scientific knowledge. These three concepts are closely connected to each other. He explores such concepts in his text *Critique of Pure Reason*. "On the basis of what is cognizable in principle and what is incognizable, the epistemological problems in Kant arise. He expresses those problems in terms of possibility, validity and limits of human cognition. His analysis of epistemology is based on his concepts of space and time and the categories which constitute the sources of human cognition."¹

The major problem with Kant was the explanation of human knowledge. Such knowledge is possible in physics and mathematics but the same knowledge is not possible in metaphysics. According to him no knowledge is possible of metaphysics. In the course of inquiry into knowledge Kant adopted critical approach along with transcendental method. His philosophical discourse is critical in the sense that he discusses critically two major traditions: rationalism and empiricism. Kant's greatest contribution to philosophy, in primary stage, is to compile both rationalism and empiricism, and to offer new different model of knowledge on the other. Hutchings has aptly pointed out:

Kantian critique begins according to his own account, in his dissatisfaction with the unsustainable claims of rationalism and the scepticism of empiricism. The premise of the critique is that reason is neither all-powerful nor powerless, but that is limited. The critique of reason is the process through which the proper limits, and therefore the legitimate legislation of reason can be determined.²

Kant was in a critical dilemma as to which method he would adopt for investigation the limits for validating the possibilities of sensible knowledge. Kant prefers to adopt transcendental method. Kant's idea in limiting the noumenon or transcendent in entering the realm of possible knowledge, is to prove knowledge, is to prove that pure knowledge is a priori, transcendental, necessary and objective. This nature

proceeds from the nature of experience in general to the necessary conditions of its possibility.

So far as possibility of knowledge is concerned, he considers phenomenon only and noumenon is beyond the possibility of knowledge. According to him all possible knowledge is confined to phenomenon. Since possibilities and validity of knowledge is confined to phenomenon, knowledge is possible to a certain extent beyond which there is limitation as no knowledge is possible. Kant is not optimistic about the ability of the human mind to acquire theoretical knowledge of any reality lying beyond the boundaries of human experience. We know phenomenon is knowable or understandable world of the concepts of twelve categories of understanding. We know things because they have been given in space and time and then the same is known through the categories of understanding. He lays a formidable foundation of his philosophy in following words:

"Thus the expectation of obtaining knowledge which while extending beyond the limits of possible experience is likewise to further the highest interests of humanity, is found, so far as speculative philosophy professes to satisfy it, to be grounded in deception, and to destroy itself in the attempt at fulfilment."³

As far as validity of knowledge is concerned, Kant indicates phenomenon is only object of knowledge and noumenon is object of faith or intellect. Kant denies the possibility of noumenon could be known through concept of understanding. He strictly limits the use of the concept of understanding to phenomenon. He wanted to discuss knowledge in terms of proving its nature. This is also true these categories have no valid application beyond the sphere of experience. Therefore, to understand how we are able to know the world it is important to understand how we are able to experience things spatially and temporally. Whatever we experience is due to the fact that they are given in space and time and they are known through the categories of understanding.

The realm which is beyond the spheres of experienced world is known as transcendent. Here, Kant transcends the

¹ Singh, R.P.. *A Critical Examination of Kant's Philosophy*, p.25.

² Hutchings, K., 1996, *Kant, Critique and Politics*, p.12.

³ Kant, Immanuel., 1973, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 378.

limits of human sense experience where validity of knowledge is grounded which are appearance. Kant's transcendentalism establishes limitation of knowledge whose validity is confined with the realm of phenomena. The applicability of the categories of understanding goes beyond space – time, determines the limitation of knowledge which draws a boundary between phenomenon and noumenon. And noumenon is not knowable since it is not within space and time, so categories of understanding cannot apply to them but object intellect and pure concepts. Kant does not discuss any mediating point into these two separate worlds since these two worlds are separate world. In these circumstances Kant is bound to say that noumenon is unknown and unknowable but not devoid of thinkable. So we conclude that all possible knowledge is valid knowledge if they come under space and time and if the same is known through the categories of understanding. I believe that it would be quite legitimate to analyze all aspects of knowledge while discussing the concept of limitation of knowledge in Kant. He never says that we can know everything rather he says we have our own limitations. Human capacity is limited that they cannot know everything.

Here Kant suggested limitation of knowledge which draws boundary. Without limitation no knowledge of Pure Reason can be explained. But this question is also important: is there any way to avoid limitation into knowledge? I think limitation cannot be avoided in the philosophy of Kant as it has gained the status of a concept. There is always fix limitation under knowledge. We cannot discuss about knowledge unless we have some sort of divisions. As we know everything is in the intermingled form. Which generate concealed errors? In this way knowledge becomes fallacious. To avoid this he has made limit beyond which we cannot go.

If all negations are limitation, human will to know everything remains limited; but certain things never cease to be unlimited. Things unlimited are not devoid of *concealed errors such as dogmas*, falsehoods and superstitions. Quest for objectivity in the limitation of knowledge is difficult as it invites procedure of the exclusion of concealed errors from pure knowledge. Kant's concept of limitation tends to be an objective parameter for analysing the external value as well as internal value of limitation as object intellect. Since objectivity is demanded in the field of philosophy, one has to find a method in the term limitation that divides, discrete and sets the pure concepts into an order but after the exclusion of the concealed errors. A limitation not only limits but also permits pure knowledge about certain things, beyond which there is no knowledge. Since human mind is incapable of knowing a world that exists independently in wider space, Kant considers this world as noumena. The world beyond, in spite of being unknowable remains thinkable in terms of object intellect. Kant attests thinkable applicability to experience by saying, transcendental is something which is not derived from experience but applicable to experience. "An argument is transcendental if it 'transcends' the limits of empirical enquiry, so as to establish the *a priori* condition of

experience."⁴ Human will to pure reason including an altered state of limitations as object intellect compels us to enter into a new method of new belief system rational thinking. It's through pure reason we flush out what is dogmatic, superstitious and false. Let men have pure understanding by dwelling upon the principles of exclusion and quest freely with the altered state of limitation that remain manifest in object intellect.

References

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- [3] Scruton, R., 1995, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, Routledge: London and New York.
- [4] Singh, R.P., *A Critical Examination of Kant's Philosophy*, New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House.

⁴ Scruton, R., 1995, *A short History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 23.