

CHAPTER IV

THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF KNOWLEDGE

Rationalism as a theory of the origin of knowledge

Rationalism is the theory according to which *reason* or *intellect* is the main, if not the only source of valid knowledge. Knowledge is given by the clear vision of the intellect or reason. According to Rationalism, the self is essentially active and rational, and sensations are accidents to it. Knowledge, according to rationalists, is actively produced by the self out of its own inner ideas with the help of reason, which is the self's true essence.)

Socrates and Plato were the earliest rationalistic philosophers. According to them, true knowledge originates in reason. Sensation and feelings cannot give real knowledge, and the so-called knowledge which sensation and feelings are supposed to give us is variable and never necessary. (Rationalism formulated by Socrates and Plato became increasingly articulate in the philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.)

(The rationalists differ amongst themselves regarding the proper function of sense experience.) But all consider knowledge derived through the exercise of reason unaided by observation, as absolutely certain and perfect. Some rationalists reject sense-experience as wholly misleading, and others attach some value to it as giving us imperfect and confused knowledge of thing and qualities. The report of our senses are relative to the particular points of view of the individual observer, and as such there cannot be any universal agreement in them. Knowledge derived from sense-experience is different in different minds and varies with the change of time and place. But true knowledge must be universal and necessary. We possess absolutely valid knowledge whose opposite is inconceivable. The mathematical truths are of this type. No one can question the validity of proposition like 'part is less than the whole', 'A cannot be both B and not-B at the same time' etc.

Descartes divides ideas into three kinds—adventitious ideas, fictitious ideas, and innate ideas. The ideas imposed on the mind from outside or sensations are adventitious. They are not clear and

innate, such ideas would be equally present in all minds and would be universally accepted. But there are no such ideas. Observation seems to show that children, idiots and uncivilised people are not conscious of any innate ideas or principles.)

(Moreover, if there were innate ideas they would be of the same nature in all minds. But the ideas of God, morality etc., are found to be different in different societies, and in different ages. They differ in different persons even at the same time in the same society.)

The general principles which are regarded as innate are not really the first principles of knowledge, but are derived from sense-experience. The first facts of knowledge are particular instances of experience from which the general laws are derived. A child knows that sweet is not sour long before he understands the principle of contradiction.

(If knowledge consists in deducing truths from the innate self-evident ideas, the theories established by the rationalists should be identical. But this is not the case.)

Hence (the rationalistic contention that true knowledge originates in reason or is wholly *a priori* is untenable. The world of ours is not identical with the world of mathematics. Thus the mathematical method cannot be the sole method of philosophy. Philosophy deals with the concrete world of experience. So mere reason cannot be the source of the knowledge of the world.) To say that true knowledge originates in reason alone, and experience is unreliable is sheer dogmatism. The knowledge of the world that is obtained by logical deduction from certain self-evident innate principles must agree with the concrete world of ours before this knowledge can be accepted as true. This verification is possible on the evidence of sense-experience. (The part which does not spring from experience is *a priori*.) But this *a priori* cannot exist independent of sense-experience. (Hence rationalism as a theory of the origin of knowledge is one-sided and dogmatic.)

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