

THE ROLE OF REASON AND EXPERIENCE IN THE CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

General Remarks :

There have been generally two different attitudes in philosophy with regard to our knowledge of the external world viz. rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism traces the source of all our knowledge in reason and empiricism in experience. Sometimes, the two attitudes are regarded as completely opposed to each other, each regarding the other as a recalcitrant element hindering our perception of Reality and the growth of knowledge, as is done by the Intellectualists on the one hand and the Phenomenologists and the Existentialists on the other; sometimes the two are regarded as not opposed but complementary elements, each having its legitimate place in the organisation of our knowledge, neither one being reducible to the other, reason being the regulative principle and experience, the constitutive principle of our knowledge, as is done by Kant, Russell and the Logical Positivists. Although, philosophers and common people use both the methods, yet the problem arises as to which one is more fundamental than the other. For the rationalists, reason is more fundamental than experience in as much as the very experience is not possible without a rational element into it. For them, knowledge consists in universal essences which are categories of thought and can never be derived from experience, i.e., Reason is both the constitutive and the regulative factors in knowledge. As against this, empiricists maintain that true knowledge consists in elementary statements which contain no universal element in them. If a statement does contain a universal element, it is a generalisation from experience and is completely reducible to it. For them, experience is a constitutive and reason a regulative factor in knowledge. For pure rationalism, both matter and form are provided by Reason; for pure empiricism, they are all derived from experience. Pure rationalism believes in innate ideas which are applicable to the world; pure empiricism is absolutely opposed to the doctrine of "innate ideas". For empiricism, any idea, if it is to be applicable to the world, must be derived from sense-experience, or they would only be figments of imagination. For it, there are no logical presuppositions of knowledge : all principles of the mind are a-posteriori and have

to be empirically derived. Rationalists' and Empiricists' thoughts differ with respect to the derivation of the Form and the Matter of knowledge; they quite agree at least in one thing that without Reason, a mental faculty, no knowledge can be had. Rationalism applies the word Reason both for Rational Intuition and for Reasoning; empiricism applies the word Reason only for Reasoning from elementary statements to general propositions and then from general propositions back to elementary statements.

With these preliminary remarks, let us now examine the respective roles played by Reason and Experience in the constitution of human knowledge.

Historical and Eternal Statements :

Prof. George Boas has distinguished between two kinds of sentences : the historical and the eternal. A historical statement is one which is true only of a dated and localised event.¹ For instance, any statement of fact like, "It is raining" or, "The snow-drops are in bloom", or, "I cannot find my rubbers", may be taken as examples of a historical statement. In the instances given above, the date is the "present" and the place the "here". But the date and the place need not be confined to only the "present" and the "here", it may refer to any date and place. Thus, the tense and locality are indifferent to the nature of the sentence. As against these historical sentences, there are some which are true or may be true irrespective of date and place. Universal laws, general propositions and mathematical formulae come under this category and are called "eternal sentences." "Rain falls on the just and unjust alike", "Snow-drops are the first flowers to blossom in the spring", "Men who are absorbed in philosophical writing misplace their personal possessions".— are examples of eternal statements, even though they may not be true. The only thing is that the people who make these statements, take them to be true always and everywhere. "They are eternal in the sense of being timeless, not in the sense of being immortal or everlasting".²

Observation is a Violation of Some Eternal Statement :

We are surrounded by a number of things about us, as for instance, the books on the table, a radio-set nereby, the plants growing in the garden, the chirping of the birds just over our

head and a lot of other things in the environment. These are the things about which we hardly make any comments and sometimes they do not catch our attention at all. But suppose that I am writing something on my table, and suddenly it begins to rain. This will immediately catch my attention as I did not expect it to rain since when I came to my study table, it was all a sunny day and the weather was quite fair. Had it been a cloudy weather and it were raining when I entered the room, I would not have made the comment that I do now that "it is raining". We do not make any comment about the "obvious" which are expressed in eternal sentences or scientific laws. We do not observe or care to observe things which usually happen in nature. Our mind is completely at rest about usual and regular happenings in nature. If we are convinced that it would rain every morning from 10 O'clock until noon, there would be little ground for saying at 10 A.M. that "It is raining". But suppose that one day, at 10 O'clock in the morning, I look up into the sky and find that it is not raining then certainly it would be a matter of observation and inquiry for me and I would ask, "Why, the sun is shining". Behind this questioning attitude of the mind lies the philosophical assumption that "the natural order ought not to change but should exhibit a constant and predictable pattern".³ Consequently, whenever we make a descriptive assertion of fact, it can be interpreted as emerging out of the observation that some eternal law or statement has been violated. This philosophical assumption of the regularity of nature or of the possibility of always discovering some unity beneath or behind or above the apparent diversity is the source of all science. "The unity is what we are looking for; the diversity is what we encounter"⁴. It is the diversity that we meet within experience and the unity that we have to establish by reason. "In short, experience is the origin of science and philosophy only in the sense that it gives rise to our questions. It becomes the terminus of knowledge when it answers them".⁵

What we encounter in experience, to begin with, is no knowledge; it is simply a suggestion, prompting or provocations. The suggestions, promptings or provocations are expressed in historical statements. They are transformed into knowledge proper when the subjects indicated by them "have been elevated to the realm of eternity or they have ceased to be things and have been purified

into concepts".⁶ This hammering of the content out of the historical statements and turning them into eternal statements is done by the scientist's power of abstraction. Let us take a simple instance : When Galileo formulated the Laws of Falling Bodies, he had in mind not this or that falling body made of wood, stone or papper, falling in air or through water. He must have known that bodies like bits of paper or big dry leaves do not obey the Law of Falling Bodies at all, for they certainly fall more slowly through the air than stones do. But his genius enabled him to conceive a situation in which an eternal statement could be framed eliminating all the variations in fall, that is, the material out of which the bodies were made and the medium through which they fell. He had no prior information to the effect that the medium or the nature of the body would make any difference to the Law; he concerned himself simply with a conceptual situation in which an eternal statement could be made independent of all the variations in fall. And we all know that he was successful in framing a law governing all falling bodies irrespective of their materials and their media. It provides us with a rule by which we can determine whether things are as they ought to be. The law defines the diversity of events as deviations from the norm, but only apparently and not really. For example, when we find feathers fluttering down through the air and not falling like stones, we may observe it to be a deviation from the law of falling bodies. But this observation would not constitute knowledge; it will be elevated to the rank of knowledge when it is incorporated into an eternal statement or a set of eternal statements. Knowledge arises when a general idea has been precipitated out of experience and then it can be extended well beyond experience as well. Thus Kant's famous statement that "There can be no doubt that all knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises out of experience"⁷, stands fully justified here.

The Nature of A-Priori Propositions :

We can make a fresh bid to contrast rationalism and empiricism with regard to the nature of apriori propositions. There are two alternative modes of formulation of this contrast, one with regard to the problem of content and the other with regard to the problem of analyticity. According to the first mode, namely the problem of content, empiricism is defined as the view that apriori

propositions tell us nothing about reality, possibly, they are about ideas or language. According to the second mode viz. the problem of analyticity, empiricism is defined as the belief that an apriori proposition is analytic in the sense that it does not express a synthetic connection between two distinct things or notions but is only an analysis into its components of the entity or notion expressed by its subject. Rationalism, correspondingly, is often construed as the denial of one or both of these assertions.

Let us consider, first, the second of the two above definitions about the empiricist-rationalist issue.

Empiricist's rejection of the synthetic character of apriori propositions rests directly on his atomism. To empiricism, it is inconceivable that two events which are independent of the mind can be both two and yet necessarily connected. So, if there were any synthetic apriori propositions, they would be about necessary connections of different events in an independent world. Accordingly, empiricists reject the theory of the synthetic apriori, for them all apriori propositions are analytic in character.

As regards the above view of the empiricists, we can point out that what are necessarily connected into an apriori proposition, are not events or facts but concepts. Hence it does not go against atomism. Again, if apriori propositions are about concepts it does not mean that they are not synthetic. They are synthetic inasmuch as they are prompted or suggested by experience.

According to the first definition rationalism is distinguished from empiricism in that for it, there is an apriori knowledge of independent reality to which empiricism does not subscribe. The empiricist believes that apriori propositions are not about any reality either internal or external but are only about our own concepts or language. As to the reasons why apriori propositions cannot be about any independent reality, the empiricist could give the following :—⁸

A. The only reason for our belief in any proposition should be that it must be evidenced by directly inspectable data. But there are only two sorts of data that can be directly inspected, sense-data known in sensation which account for our belief in

aposteriori judgements; concept-data known to us in reflection or introspection which account for our belief in apriori judgements.

Now as to independent realities, it is generally assumed that only sense-data form part of independent realities, concept-data being only derivatives from sense-data. Hence, it is only the sense-data which warrant our belief in aposteriori judgement, that can be actually inspected; concept-data cannot be inspected at all on this assumption and consequently, no apriori judgement can be warranted by inspection.⁹

B. If *apriori* propositions cannot be evidenced by inspection of *realities*, they cannot be about such realities. Nor can they be evidenced by some other thing, for a proposition can be about one thing and evidenced by another thing only if there be some knowable connection between the two things. In our present case, our concepts or meanings could be taken as evidence for a truth about an independent reality only if there were some knowable connection between the ideas or the meanings on the one hand and independent reality on the other. Moreover, the connection would have to be necessary and known *apriori*. But we have seen by the argument A that independent reality cannot be directly inspected. Hence one end of the supposed concept-reality connection cannot be inspected. Therefore, the connection cannot be established by inspection, i.e., it cannot be known *apriori*.¹⁰

The above refutation of rationalism at the empiricist's hand it based on a curious view of the empiricist's conception of what rationalism it. According to him, rationalism is a doctrine that truth about independent reality can be known by reasoning or a juggling of concepts. The empiricists are quite right when they say that mere juggling of concepts could give us no certain knowledge of any independent reality. But this view of rationalism may be true of some forms of rationalism, yet is certainly not true of all forms of rationalism.

A typical doctrine of rationalism does not hold the view that *apriori* knowledge consists in *judgement* about something un-inspectable. *Apriori* knowledge, however, is not supposed by rationalism to be prior to all inspection whatever, but only to sensuous inspection. Reason for a rationalist, is not essentially

reasoning but rational seeing, intuition. *The essence of rationalism is its belief that other modes of consciousness besides sensation and introspection are forms of acquaintance or there is such a thing as non-sensuous inspection or seeing.* Empiricism, on the other hand, limits acquaintance to sense-experience and thus remains committed to the sensationalism of Hume in that only sensation and reflection are admitted as original sources of knowledge. All other modes of consciousness being but "ideas" derived by processes of compounding, abstracting etc. from these original data

To sum up : As far as our practical knowledge about the world is concerned, there is no doubt that it is prompted by experience, but it will be called "knowledge" only when it is purified into concepts. Knowledge consisting in concepts, does not mean that it is not about reality. It is about reality, since it is suggested by experience. Therefore the empiricists are wrong when they say that *apriori* propositions are only analytic and not synthetic. Again, empiricism is also wrong in thinking that rationalism essentially means reasoning.

The true meaning of rationalism is rational seeing or intuition or a direct preception of Reality.

Allahabad University,
Allahabad.

J. S. Shrivastava

NOTES

1. Boas, G., *The Limits of Reason*, p. 17.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
7. Kant, E., *Introduction to the Second Edition of the Critique of Pure Reason*.
8. Moore, A., *Rationalism, Empiricism and the Apriori*, in *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 36, July 1959.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*