

SOME REFLECTIONS ON KANT'S CATEGORY THEORY

In the present paper I propose to examine Kant's category theory in the general framework of other categorial schemes propounded by Western philosophers. My basic purpose is to show that the categorial approach to metaphysics is doomed to failure. Categories are merely make shifts or convenient devices for successful manipulation of empirical objects. But any categorial scheme instead of revealing the true nature of reality simply furnishes distortions of it. Kant is the only Western philosopher who realized this truth but even he could not resist the temptation of using the categorial scheme for determining the nature of those things which he himself showed to be beyond the jurisdiction of categories.

The category theory has been a respectable theory in Western metaphysics from Aristotle to Strawson.¹ It states that the objects of knowledge can metaphysically be divided into a fixed number of categories. Here I shall discuss briefly the origin and classification of the Kantian categories. But my main emphasis will be on the concept of the category itself, particularly whether the categorial approach to metaphysical problem or basic fact or existence or experience is tenable. I shall show that the category theory is the main reason for the stagnation of the Western metaphysics. Actually it is a groove which has been tied to the neck of metaphysics. Few metaphysicians tried to free metaphysics from this age-old groove. But now when metaphysics is not only eliminated but also banned under the pressure of this theory, it is the need of the hour to remove this Aristotelian groove from the neck of metaphysics and give a new lease of life to metaphysics. Those who defend metaphysics accept the categorial scheme of thought and those who reject

metaphysics also do so by showing the illegitimacy or meaninglessness of category theory. This is why the Western metaphysicians as well as the anti-metaphysicians have failed to realize that a true metaphysics of being as such is possible. So long as we remain within the circle of categorial scheme, we cannot understand the true nature of reality. Categories may be convenient devices but they do not provide us with a genuine knowledge of reality. The categorial framework gives us only one way of knowing things. It does not exhaust all possible dimensions of knowability. So I believe that a genuine metaphysics is beyond the narrow schema within which the supporters and the critics of the category theory fight their battles.

There appears to be four main theories of categories, first, Aristotle's metaphysical theory of categories, second, Kant's epistemological theory of categories, third, Russell's logical theory of types of categories and fourth, Strawson's descriptive theory of categories. But these theories of categories have been refuted by nominalists, idealists, positivists and others. There are idealists like Bradley who believes that reality is not categorial.² Similarly there are language philosophers like Wittgenstein who downright reject the notion of categories as a conceptual scheme of language.³ Likewise there are formal logicians like Hempel who start with truth-functional connectives and construct and develop a systematic language of well-formed formulas which has no use of categories. In this way the pros and cons of the category theory is found in the philosophical literature of the West, which probably swings a bit favourably for the theory itself. This is why the category theory has become all too important for Western philosophy. It is thus necessary to examine Kant's view of the category theory to have a proper assessment of this theory.

Kant in his 'Critique of Pure Reason', tries to

show that the knowledge of the objects presupposes certain apriori forms and concepts. Without these forms and concepts no objective knowledge of things is possible. The forms are space and time through which we apprehend whatever is given to our senses, namely, the sense manifold. The concepts which make experience possible are not, however, the immediate conditions of experience. They are such that without being immediate conditions of experience, they are the necessary conditions of experience. Kant calls them categories. Kant's main purpose in the 'Critique' is to determine the origin, validity and limits of these categories.

Prior to Kant no Western philosopher, not even Aristotle, had connected his categories with any unitary principle. Kant tries to remove this lacuna by grounding the categories on the understanding. He argues in the metaphysical deduction of the categories that the understanding is the faculty of concepts. There are some concepts which are formed on the basis of sense-experience. Some concepts are formed arbitrarily. But the range of the applicability of these concepts is confined to some particular phenomena. On the other hand, there are some concepts which are genuinely universal. These concepts, according to Kant, are neither empirically derived nor arbitrarily formed. They emanate from the understanding itself. In this sense they are the concepts of the understanding. The only use that the understanding can make of them is to use these concepts in judgments. That is why the understanding is also called the faculty of judgment.⁵ The relationship between the concepts and the judgment is so intimate that the concepts independent of judgment are only abstractions. What can exist independently is the judgment and not the concept. In other words, a list of the concepts of the understanding can be obtained only by examining the forms of judgment. According to Kant the understanding has two

functions : (i) logical and (ii) real. The logical function of the understanding consists in uniting the various representations in the unity of a judgment and the real function of the understanding is to impose a synthetic unity on the manifold of intuition. In the words of Kant, "the same understanding through the same operations by which in concepts, by means of analytical unity, it produced the logical forms of judgment, also introduces a transcendental content into its representations, by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general."⁶ Thus corresponding to the various forms of judgment there are the categories of the understanding. Kant divides the judgments into the four heads : (i) the quality of judgments; (ii) the quantity of the judgments; (iii) the relation of the judgments and (iv) the modality of the judgments. Each head is divided into three types. Thus the total forms of judgment are twelve and accordingly Kant furnishes a list of twelve categories. The third category under each head is the result of the combination of the first two categories. Here we find clearly a hint for the Hegelian dialectic which consists of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis.

This metaphysical deduction of the categories has been characterized as the weakest point of Kant's first 'Critique'. It is said that Kant blindly accepted the Aristotelian classification of judgment and distorted it arbitrarily to derive a list of already prepared categories. It is further pointed out that the forms of judgment, as given by Aristotle and modified by Kant, do not yield the requisite categories. Without going into the details, I would like to point out that Kant has failed to give any satisfactory reason for selecting some of the concepts and elevating them to the honourable status of the categories. Moreover, there is no plausibility in his view that the forms of judgment are also the principles according to which the manifold

of intuition are synthesized. It is simply the expression of his allogical commitment to certain categories for which there is no logical validity and warrant. But even if this difficulty is ignored his transcendental deduction of categories has its own difficulties.

The transcendental deduction has several aspects. Firstly, Kant discusses the need for the synthesis of the manifold and the subjective principles involved therein. Secondly, he tries to prove the objective validity of the categories in general and for this he explicates the role of the transcendental unity of apperception in the knowledge situation. Thirdly, he considers the transcendental schemata of the temporal conditions under which alone categories can be applied to objects. Fourthly, he labours to establish the applicability of the categories, derived from the forms of judgment, to the empirical world.

According to Kant the contents of intuition have no relation with one another. In order to know them as contents of an object a three-fold synthesis is necessary. The contents of intuition must be taken up in intuition, reproduced in imagination and recognised in concept. The synthesis of reproduction and recognition can be performed not by the sensibility which passively receives them but by the understanding in accordance with certain apriori principles of synthesis or categories. The synthesis of recognition implies at least potentially self-consciousness. No recognition is possible without self-consciousness. As Hintikka has put it, all knowledge is at the same time self-knowledge. In other words our knowledge of the empirical objects presupposes self-consciousness. But self-consciousness, according to Kant, presupposes consciousness of objects. Kant's argument as modified by Strawson, can be given briefly in the following manner : In order to ascribe self-consciousness to myself, I must ascribe consciousness to others. But consciousness can be

ascribed to others if and only if I can distinguish persons from material objects. Material objects can be known only by using certain concepts. It is through concepts that objects can be identified and re-identified. An object is not merely a series of sense-contents. It must be a substance interacting with other substances in accordance with the category of causality. The upshot of Kant's argument is that without categories objective knowledge is not possible. The crux of Kant's transcendental deduction is given in the following statement of Kant; "Concepts which yield the objective ground of the possibility of experience are for this very reason necessary."⁷

There seems to be a genuine truth in Kant's category theory in so far as experience of objects presupposes some basic concepts. But his theory of schematism and the individual proof of the categories do not seem to be satisfactory. If concepts are necessary for the knowledge of the objects, there is no need of any artificial mechanism to help their application. Similarly, even if concepts are necessary for experience, there is no reason why these concepts are the same as given by Kant. Hegel has given a number of other categories and the positivists have shown all concepts to be of the same status.

Kant's category theory has two inevitable consequences, both of which are against a genuine metaphysics. Firstly, he confines knowledge to categorised thought and categorised thought is limited to manifold of sense-intuition. It is for this reason that he makes the noumenal self and the noumenal object as unknown and unknowable. It is not surprising that he accepts the possibility of a metaphysics of sense-experience and the rest is thrown to the realm of faith. Secondly, his talk of the noumenal self and the thing-in-itself or the noumenal object is based on an illegitimate use of the categories which he manifestly confines to the phenomena only.

It is under the pressure of the category theory that Kant retains the epistemological distinction between the subject and the object or the self and the not-self, even at the level of faith of aesthetic experience. It is again under the misleading influence of the same theory that he makes the self, the very condition of knowability, as beyond the ken of all possible knowledge. He correctly realized that the knower cannot be brought in the circle of known objects, that the self can never be realized in the objective mode, that the transcendental self is the very ground of all categorial schemes; but he fails to realize that the non-categorial knowledge is also possible and the self is known through this non-categorial apprehension or detached contemplation as Professor J.N. Chubb would like to call it.

Here a significant lesson can be learnt from the history of Indian philosophy which does not attach any metaphysical importance to the category theory and which recognizes with reservations simply logical value of this theory. Kanada started his Vaisesika philosophy with a list of six categories which was later developed into a standard list of seven categories. But absolutists like Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Samkara and Sriharsa refuted all these categories with such powerful arguments as could not be refuted by the later upholders of the category theory. Their main contention was that every category is infected with a serious contradiction. Sriharsa finds this contradiction in the very notion of category itself.⁸

Dignāga, the founder of Buddhist logic associated categories with conception (*Vikalpa*) and naming (*Śabda*) and maintained that reality is immune from categories as it is free from conception and naming. Patanjali the commentator of Panini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, postulated four categories for naming but Bhartrhari criticised these four categories as they were simply

appearances of the reality. The upshot of the argument of the Indian philosophers in general is that there can be no universal class of any thing which may be termed as category. They prove that there is only one universal thing and that is existence pure and simple. And this existence defies all categorisation. So categories, if any, are only temporary structures which are raised to reach existence but which are demolished the moment the existence is reached. This is all that can be said forcefully in favour of the category theory.

In Western philosophy also each category propounded by Aristotle or Kant has been refuted. Russell himself finds that the word category is incomprehensible.⁹ Although he tries to revive the category theory by his theory of logical types, yet his theory of logical types is not universally accepted and can be replaced by some other simpler logical devices like the theory of hierarchy of languages.¹⁰

Reality or thought or language is not a closed system. That is why it defies all categorisation. Needless to point out that the category theory is applicable only to a closed system. It is like the theory of the four castes of Hindu society. As the theory of the four castes is not applicable to a growing and open society so the category theory is not applicable to the growing and open reality or thought or language. Kant also perceived this truth when he said that no category is applicable to noumenal entities like things-in-themselves. Further, Kant also pointed out the mutual connectedness of all phenomena. So both transcendently and phenomenally nothing can be subsumed under any category exclusive of other categories. A category is applicable to a thing which is constructed by means of its help. So every categorised object is vitiated with a *petitio principii*.

Moreover Occam's razor can be applied to the categories which are set up over and above classes, when the notion of classes is sufficient for explaining the objective character of thought there is no need of categories besides them. Categories are not classes but classes of classes of classes. So this notion itself is vitiated with infinite regress.

Existentially also there is no cleavage between the subject and object. Experience is a whole. It is not dichotomised existentially into the subjective and the objective which are pure abstractions. The subjective has an invariable reference to the objective and vice versa. So the very ground of categorisation of experienced objects as separate from experience itself is not available at all. Existential and phenomenological analysis of consciousness and intentionality have thus given a final blow to the category theory of metaphysics.¹¹

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NOTES

1. Although there is a variety of the meaning of the word category, yet there is a sense which can be taken as inclusive of all the meanings of categories. That sense can be well described as any basic notion, concept or principle in a system of philosophy.
2. At the end of the Chapter III of 'Appearance and Reality' Bradley has proved to his satisfaction the theoretical unintelligibility of terms and relations. He has condemned almost without hearing the great mass of phenomena. Space, time, motion and change, causation, things an individual objects and the self etc. have all been labelled as appearance and not

reality in so far as they all are governed by the categories of terms and relations.

3. See 'The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. two, p. 54.
4. See I.M. Copi's 'Symbolic Logic', Chapter VII.
5. Immanuel Kant, 'Critique of Pure Reason', translated by N.K. Smith, The Macmillan Press Ltd., London. B. 94.
6. Ibid. B. 105.
7. Ibid A 94, B 127.
8. See Khandan Khandakhādyā, Chapter IV, where in Being, Non-Being, Individuality, Causality, Universal and Negation etc., have been refuted. See also Sārivaka Bhāṣya 2.2.17. Vaiśeṣika theory of discrete and separate categories is untenable because non-substance categories are dependent inseparably on substance.
9. "What exactly, is meant by the word "Category" whether in Aristotle or in Kant and Hegel, I must confess that I have never been able to understand. I do not myself believe that the term "category" is in any way useful in philosophy, as representing any clear idea." A History of Western Philosophy, pp.195-202. Allen and Unwin, Ltd., London.
10. Reference to linguistic expressions rather than entities avoids a vicious circle fallacy because the hierarchy of types asserted by the theory then includes only the totality of expressions within a given language, not the totality of all entities.... But in neither case is there the simple assertion that the class of all entities comprises an infinite hierarchy of logical types" The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. two, p.50.
11. See the analysis of consciousness by Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre.