
UNIT 4 BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN METAPHYSICS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the history of western metaphysics. Without getting a historical knowledge of metaphysics, one cannot hope to get a real grasp of the metaphysical problems and the solutions offered by different philosophers. All great philosophers have been metaphysicians; they have dealt with the problem of reality. In the present unit, we will deal with the metaphysical systems in Greek, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary western philosophy. This is not a mere summary of different systems; rather it aims at showing the inter-connections among different metaphysical systems.

Thus by learning this unit the students should be able:

- to acquire an in-depth knowledge of metaphysics of the important metaphysicians in western philosophy.
- to see how the metaphysics of each successive thinker functions as a criticism/ modification of previous thinkers.
- to relate metaphysics with other branches of philosophy.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, metaphysics is defined as the science of being as being, or of reality as such. The western metaphysics has a historical character in so far as the metaphysical reflection of different philosophers unfolds historically, very much like events in human history. Indeed, the thought of each successive thinker functions as a critique or modification of previous thinkers. The present survey attempts to clarify this intimate link among the metaphysical systems of different thinkers. Being the foundational discipline in philosophy, metaphysics is related to other branches of philosophy, especially epistemology—the theory of knowledge. Traditionally, epistemology was considered as the first part of metaphysics. We may say that as metaphysics is, so is

epistemology, and also vice versa. Moreover, metaphysics is related to cosmology, philosophical anthropology, natural theology; for, the nature of ultimate reality determines material objects, man and God. Finally, it is also related to ethics in so far as morality is determined by the nature of man, which in turn is dependent on the interpretation of ultimate reality. We will deal with other branches of philosophy only in so far as they are needed to clarify the relation among the metaphysical reflections of different philosophers.

4.2 GREEK METAPHYSICS

Pre-Socratic Metaphysics

We find nascent metaphysics even in Thales' philosophy, the first western philosopher, who held that everything can be explained in terms of water. Anaximander criticized this position, and posited the 'infinite' as ultimate reality; and Anaximenes in his turn differed from Anaximander, affirming 'air' as ultimate. Pythagoras, being a mathematician, and impressed by the harmony of nature, taught that numbers constitute the essence of reality. It was Heraclitus who for the first time in western philosophy proclaimed becoming or change, as more fundamental than permanence. According to him, everything that exists, including man, exists because it is in a process of continuous change. Only becoming or change is real, and being or permanence is mere illusion. Not only do things change from moment to moment; even in one and the same moment they are, and are not, the same. It is not merely that a thing first is, and then a moment later, is not; it is both, is and is not at the same time. The at-onceness of 'is' and 'is not' is the meaning of becoming. To signalize the reality of incessant change, Heraclitus chose as his first principle the most mobile substance he knew, namely, fire. Fire is not an abiding substratum in all change, but the denial of all substances. It is an exact parallel of the metaphysical principle of becoming.

Parmenides challenged Heraclitus' teaching that everything changes. How can a thing, both be and not be at the same time? To say that it can, is to say that something is, and is not, which is a contradiction. Parmenides denies becoming and affirms being. Hence from being only being can come, and nothing can become something else; whatever is, always has been, and always will be; everything remains what it is. Therefore there can be only one eternal, unchangeable being. Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus tried to reconcile the problem of permanence and change, holding that there are some permanent elements in reality, and also some other elements which are the causes of all changes.

The Sophists and Socrates

The Sophists and Socrates were mainly concerned with the problem of knowledge. Because the previous thinkers held different opinions regarding the nature of ultimate reality, the Sophists came to the conclusion that it is impossible to attain true knowledge about reality. Hence metaphysics is impossible. Since they were unable to know reality, there cannot be a morality based on the nature of reality; ethics was merely conventional. Socrates attempted to confront the Sophists' problem of knowledge head on. He demonstrated that knowledge through concepts is attainable making use of dialectical method. Since knowledge is attainable, there is also the knowledge of morality; according to him knowledge is virtue.

Plato

Plato starts his metaphysics with Socratic concepts. Now, the concepts have no validity unless there are realities corresponding to them. Plato was interested in mathematics, especially geometry. Since he did not find perfect geometrical figures such as circles, squares, triangles, etc., in this world corresponding to their concepts in human mind, Plato concluded that these exist in a transcendent, ideal world. Similarly, corresponding to all ideas in the mind, there exist essences or forms in the ideal world—the highest form, being the idea of the Good. Now these forms can be known only by rational mind. Compared to the ideal world, the world of experience is mere shadow. Matter is evil. Senses which perceive this world are not dependable sources of knowledge. To explain the reality of man, Plato invented the myth of the pre-existence of human soul which, inhabiting a star, contemplated the forms of the ideal world, and fell due to desire for this world. Thus rational knowledge is innate. The soul is imprisoned in matter; matter being evil, human body too is evil. Hence moral action consists in suppressing the body, and liberating the soul for the contemplation of forms. Plato's philosophy ended up in a dualism between the world of experience and ideal world.

Aristotle

Aristotle's metaphysics starts with the rejection of Plato's ideal world of forms. For him, forms do not exist in a transcendent world, but they exist in the things of the world of experience. In his view, both senses and intellect co-operate in the acquisition of knowledge—universal ideas—through the process of abstraction. Corresponding to the universal ideas in our minds, there exist essences in things. Aristotle drew up ten categories such as substance and nine accidents, classifying all realities according their modes of existence. The substances of natural bodies, including man, are constituted out of matter and form; and these possess accidents such as quantity, quality, etc. Motion is explained as transition from potency to act. Reflection upon the fact of motion in this world led Aristotle to conclude that there exists an unmoved mover—God; God is thought-thinking-thought. This prime mover is not the creator or efficient cause of the world, nor does he know the world, because God has no ideas in his mind. For, Aristotle had already rejected Plato's world of ideas. God moves the world only as a final cause. Aristotelian metaphysics ended up in a dualism between the uncreated world and uncreated God.

Neo-Platonism

Neo-Platonism of Plotinus is a monistic synthesis of Platonism. In his metaphysics, the One—the ultimate reality—corresponds to the form of the Good in Plato's metaphysics. The world of *nous* is the ideal world, and there is the world-soul and matter. Other realities emanate from the One, each subsequent stage proceeding from the one which is just previous to it. Just as Plotinus' metaphysics deals with the emanation from the One to matter, so his moral philosophy is concerned with the reverse process or the return of man to God by means of purification from matter. Such purification is marked by three stages: practical, contemplative and ecstatic.

4.3 MEDIAEVAL METAPHYSICS

Augustine

Medieval metaphysics marks the synthesis of the metaphysics of Plato and of Aristotle with Christian faith. The great philosophers, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas,

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attempted to Christianize Plato and Aristotle. Augustinian metaphysics is almost completely Platonic except for the fact that he brings in God with the doctrine of exemplarism. There are exemplars—forms of Plato’s ideal world—in the mind of God according to which he created the world. Universal ideas are obtained through divine illumination.

Thomas Aquinas

Though Thomas is known to be an Aristotelian, at the heart of his metaphysics is the Platonic doctrine of ideas; he borrowed from Augustine exemplarism — the doctrine that there are ideas in the mind of God according to which he created the world. Thomas’ contribution to Aristotelian metaphysics is his theory of essence and existence. All created beings are constituted of essence and existence. Different members of the same species possess similar essences; for example, Peter and Paul, have similar essences or human natures. In material things, essence itself is composed of matter and form. Thomas makes the distinction between contingent beings and necessary being; essence and existence are distinct in contingent beings, whereas in necessary being—God—they are identical; that is, God is existence itself. The principle of individuation—that which makes an individual thing to be that thing different from another thing—is matter limited by quantity. In the acquisition of knowledge, Thomas gives a subordinate role to sense image in so far as abstraction of universal ideas is the work of agent intellect. Corresponding to these ideas there exist essences in things. The intellect knows individual things only indirectly through sense image, since the direct object of intellect is the universal essences in things. God is both the efficient and final cause of the universe. God created the world according to the ideas in his mind. Thomas accorded primacy to intellect over will in God and also in man. In creating this world, God’s will was guided by the intellect; hence the world is rational. In ethics, Thomas held that moral laws are based on human nature with their transcendent foundation in the ideas in divine mind. In his thought, Thomas affirms the threefold existence of the universals: in the mind of man and of God as concepts, and in things as essences. There is no dualism in the metaphysics of Thomas.

John Duns Scotus

With Duns Scotus started the decline of medieval philosophy. Though he followed St. Thomas on important metaphysical doctrines, he differed from him on crucial points. Though universal ideas are acquired through abstraction, Scotus gave an important role to sense image in this process, whereas Thomas accorded primacy to intellect. The latter taught that universal essence is the direct object of the intellect, and so the intellect knows the individual only indirectly. But Scotus held that the intellect knows also the individual thing directly since the higher faculty understands also what the lower faculties—senses—know. Moreover for him, the principle of individuation is thisness—*haecceitas*. Regarding the doctrine of universal essences, Thomas would hold that if X and Y are two men, their two essences or natures are similar. Though Scotus spoke of a common human nature, he would not mean that the actual nature of X is similar to the actual nature of Y. Further, he held voluntarism—primacy of the will—both in man and in God. Thus in creating the world, God assigned to everything its own nature: to fire that of heating, to water that of being cold, and so on. He could have created a universe ruled by laws opposite to those which presently govern it. Because all things are dependent on the will of God, nothing in the universe is rational. Hence moral laws are not rational. God has prescribed them. Therefore, he could have made a society in which murder and polygamy would not be wrong. With regard

to the Decalogue, the first three commandments regarding God are necessary since they follow from God’s love of himself. In effect, all these doctrines imply a denial of ideas in the mind of God—the foundation of rationality in the universe—the rejection of universal ideas and essences, and the affirmation of the individual.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Compare the metaphysics of Plato and that of Aristotle.

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2) What are the differences between the metaphysics of Aristotle and that of Thomas Aquinas?

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4.4 MODERN METAPHYSICS

Greek and Medieval philosophy started philosophizing with object; and this experiment came to an end with the skepticism of Occam. Both rationalism and empiricism in modern philosophy start philosophy with subject; that is, what is given in the subject: rationalism with innate ideas, and empiricism with sense impressions.

René Descartes

Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are the rationalist philosophers in modern philosophy. Descartes’ philosophical background was provided by the skepticism of Occam. Agreeing with the skeptical doctrine, he proceeded to doubt everything; but doubting itself is thinking, and if he is thinking, Descartes concluded, he exists: *Cogito ergo sum*. He is certain about the existence of self. Now, the self finds in itself many ideas—the innate ideas. One of the ideas is that of God. Since the idea of God is the idea of a perfect Being, God must have placed it in the self, and hence God exists. There are also ideas about the external world, and we have a belief that such a world exists. God who is truthful would not give us this belief if such a world did not exist. After having established the existence of self, God and world, Descartes proceeds to build up his metaphysical system. He proposes his metaphysical categories—substance, attributes and modes—in the place of the ten categories of Aristotle. Substance is a reality which so exists that it needs no other reality to exist. So defined, there can be

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only one substance, namely, God; but Descartes admits relative substances, such as matter and mind. The essential characteristic property of substance is called attribute. Thought is the principal attribute of mind, and extension that of body. But there are also modes, such as particular thoughts in mind, which are separable, in the sense that mind can exist without them. Matter and mind being entirely different, Cartesian metaphysics ends up in dualism.

Benedict Spinoza

Taking Descartes' definition of substance strictly, Spinoza builds up a deductive system of metaphysics. Given this definition, there can be only one substance, namely, God. Mind and matter are the attributes of God so that Cartesian dualism is transformed into pantheistic monism. Spinoza accepts Descartes' concepts of attributes and modes. For him, God has infinite number of attributes of which we know only mind and matter. There are also infinite modes and finite modes.

Gottfried Leibniz

According to Leibniz, the ultimate substance is monad which is the center of force. He got the notion of monad from a synthesis of the concepts of physical atom and mathematical point. In physics, atom is the smallest unit which is real, but divisible. But in mathematics, a point is indivisible, but not a real entity. Neither atom nor mathematical point can be substance because substance must be real as well as indivisible; and it should have also the element of motion. Monad is such a real and indivisible substance, as center of force. They are the metaphysical units of all living and non-living objects, including God.

John Locke

Empiricism was another experiment at philosophizing which started with subject—with sense impressions in subject. Locke, Berkeley and Hume are the empiricist philosophers. According to Locke, we have no innate ideas as held by rationalists; all our knowledge come from experience—sense impressions. In order to reach the world of objects from sense impressions, he makes use of the principle of causality. External objects are the causes of impressions in us. Locke makes a distinction between primary and secondary qualities of material objects; primary qualities such as extension, figure and so on, are objective, whereas secondary qualities such as colour, smell, taste, etc., are subjective. Though as an empiricist, he cannot affirm metaphysical realities, he holds that there are substances such as matter and mind. A body is a substance supporting primary qualities such as extension and impenetrability. There are spiritual substances or souls with the qualities of thinking and willing. There is also pure spirit, namely, God.

George Berkeley

George Berkeley agrees with Locke that sense impressions are the objects of our knowledge. But he rejects the distinction between primary (objective) and secondary (subjective) qualities; according to him, even primary qualities are subjective, since primary and secondary qualities cannot be separated. Apart from primary and secondary qualities, there is no material substance holding together these qualities, as held by Locke. For, if this substance is separate from qualities, it is unknowable, and so is meaningless. But if it is connected with qualities, it exists only when perceived. Hence if primary and secondary qualities are subjective, and if there is no material

substance apart from these qualities, then the so-called material world does not exist objectively. Its reality consists in its being perceived by the subject; *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived. More precisely, to be is to be perceived—as impressions; or to be is to be a perceiver—as mind. Minds or spirits, and their perceptions, are all that exist. The objects of experience are not material things; they are perceptions in our minds.

David Hume

David Hume drew the logical conclusion of empiricism. If experience is the source of knowledge, metaphysics which claims to attain knowledge of reality beyond experience is impossible. Hence he rejects the metaphysical concepts of substance and causality. For Hume, substance is a meaningless concept. We think of extension, figure, colour, sound, and other properties of bodies, as qualities which cannot exist by themselves. Imagination feigns something unknown and invisible—substance—which is unchangeable despite the change of different qualities. This is a fiction. Moreover, there is no metaphysical concept of causality. Our knowledge of the relation between cause and effect is based on experience. Sense impressions are associated with one another, and they succeed one another with a certain constancy.

Immanuel Kant

Hume's skepticism is said to have aroused Kant 'from his dogmatic slumber.' With his Copernican revolution in philosophy, the turn to the subject that started with Descartes reached its climax. Most of the philosophers who came after Kant, even contemporary philosophers, merely extended Copernican revolution in different areas of thought. Most of the thinkers till Kant's time held that for knowledge to be true, it must conform to the object. Kant literally reversed this doctrine—and this is the Copernican revolution—and maintained that it is the 'object' that is to be conformed to the 'subject,' or rather to the conditions of cognition. The cognitive structure of 'mind' is viewed as the source of certain conditions to which the 'object' must conform in order to constitute knowledge. This does not mean that there is an 'object' waiting to be conformed to 'mind,' nor a 'mind' to which the 'object' is conformed. Rather an object is that which is conformed to certain a priori cognitive conditions.

Kant investigates these a priori conditions of knowledge employing transcendental method. These conditions are a priori forms of space and time of sensibility, and twelve categories of understanding; these are not obtained from experience of objects, but rather they are presupposed in all experience. On the level of sensibility, sense impressions are organized by the forms of space and time. But in order to constitute rational knowledge, there must be a higher synthesis employing twelve categories of understanding. Two such categories are substance and causality. For example, in order to make the causal judgment that stone breaks window glass, the experiences of a stone coming into contact with glass and immediately afterwards the continuous pane of glass being replaced by falling fragments are subsumed under the category of causality.

Now, the ultimate condition of the possibility of knowledge, according to Kant, is the transcendental 'I' or the transcendental unity of apperception. This unity is not derived from experience, but is a necessary presupposition of the synthesis of the manifold sense data into an intelligible whole. The objects conformed to a priori forms of space and time, and twelve categories of understanding are called phenomena. Noumena or things-in-themselves are objects existing independently of knowing subject. We know only phenomena, the product of organization of experience by means of forms and

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categories. What things are in themselves—noumena—what is it that causes sensations in us, we do not know. Hence science and mathematics dealing with phenomena are possible, but metaphysics dealing with noumena such as world, man and God, is impossible.

Just as objects are to be conformed to a priori forms and categories in order to constitute knowledge, so human acts are to be conformed to the form of will, which is called categorical imperative; it is the command to do duty for its own sake. Moral act is good when it is done solely from respect for duty regardless of consequences. It is this a priori form of will that determines empirical elements, namely, human actions, and makes them moral. Similarly, an object is judged to be beautiful when it is conformed to the faculty of taste. The sense of beauty is not built up by repeated experiences of beautiful objects. In experience I apprehend the object only in its sensible qualities and its spatio-temporal dimensions. I must have the form of beauty which I attribute to the object; or else even the simplest experience of the beautiful will be impossible. Kantian philosophy ends up in the dualism between phenomena and noumena.

German Idealism

German idealists—Fichte, Schelling and Hegel—looked upon themselves as the philosophical successors of Kant. That metaphysical idealism developed out of the system of a thinker whose name is associated with skepticism about metaphysical knowledge is one of strangest developments in the history of western metaphysics. The starting point of German idealism is Kantian notion of thing-in-itself or noumena. Idealists proceeded to eliminate thing-in-itself in order to complete Kant's project. Given Kant's premises, there was no room for an unknowable entity supposedly independent of mind. Kantian philosophy had to be transformed into a consistent idealism; this meant that noumena had to be regarded as products of thought, as in the case of phenomena.

Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling

For Fichte, the Absolute as thought is the ultimate reality, and nature is the projection of the Absolute. Individual egos and material things are its manifestations. The Absolute cannot become conscious of itself unless it is opposed by non-ego or nature which it projects. The Absolute ego becomes conscious of itself in this act of creation. Schelling accepts Fichte's concept of Absolute ego as ultimate reality, but differs from his concept of nature. Schelling rejects the view that nature is the projection of the Absolute. According to him, the Absolute must be conceived as the indeterminate identity of spirit and nature. Production of nature is due to the fact that the pole of nature prevails over the pole of the spirit through the unconscious action of the Absolute. Schelling conceives nature and mind as progressive stages in the evolution of the Absolute that expresses itself in inorganic and organic realms, in individual life and social life, in history, science and art. The Absolute reaches its highest goal—self-consciousness and freedom—in man. It is in man that the original identity of nature and spirit is manifested through aesthetic intuition. The artist imitates the creative action of the Absolute and becomes conscious of its activity. In artistic creation, the Absolute becomes conscious of its own creative force.

Georg Hegel

Hegel accepted Fichte's insight that the Absolute ego is the metaphysical principle creative of all reality, and Schelling's intuition that this Absolute is not static, but a

dynamic process which evolves. Reality—the Absolute Spirit—for Hegel, is a dynamic process of evolution in which something that is undifferentiated differentiates itself and assumes many contradictory forms until all the potentialities are realized, and all contradictions reconciled. Every stage in the process contains all the preceding stages and foreshadows all the future ones. Reality is full of contradictions and negations. For example, the plant germinates, flowers, withers and dies. In understanding these processes, we must predicate each of these contradictions, and show how they are reconciled and preserved in the whole. They must be understood as parts of an organic system. The movement of the Absolute manifesting itself in nature and mind in its journey towards self-consciousness is called dialectical movement, with its three moments of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. It cannot become conscious without a world, and it achieves full self-consciousness in the minds of human beings. In rational thought, the Absolute becomes fully conscious of itself. Metaphysics expresses the content of the Absolute through the proportionate medium of rational thought. The Absolute contemplates itself as objective existence.

4.5 CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICS

Edmund Husserl

In Husserl's phenomenology, we find another variety of idealistic metaphysics along Kantian lines. According to Husserl, Kant was not radical enough. He discovered the region of meaning conferring, object constituting subjectivity—the transcendental I—but did not reach the pure ego which constitutes not only scientific objects—the phenomena—but also all varieties of objects and sense of the world. By taking a more radical transcendental turn, Husserl was able to reach the pure subjectivity, and show how the world of everyday experience is its accomplishment. He could accomplish with respect everyday world what Kant could achieve regarding the world of science. He was able to account for those transcendental structures of conscious activity that are presupposed by our capacity to constitute the sense of the world of experience.

Husserl makes use of the methods of epoché—bracketing the world of existence—and eidetic reduction—abstracting from the particular—in order to reach the region of transcendental ego which is the meaning-giving, object constituting subjectivity. For him, the transcendental subjectivity is the source of all meanings of the world and of any worldly facts.

Martin Heidegger

Heidegger's philosophy of being is yet another experiment at extending the Copernican revolution initiated by Kant, and modified by Husserl. Kant left the dualism between phenomena and noumena; and Husserl's technique of epoché—bracketing the world of existence—in fact separated the world of transcendental subjectivity from the real world. Heidegger proposes to employ phenomenological method without epoché, and to deal with everyday world in view of clarifying the problem of being. According to him, traditional philosophers were 'forgetful' of being. They asked the 'why' question, and ended up with the Supreme Being—God—as the ground all beings. Hence Heidegger calls traditional philosophy 'onto-theology.' He attempts to separate 'onto-' from 'theology,' that is, detach literally ontology from theology, thereby 'destroying' the traditional onto-theological metaphysics.

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Since traditional philosophy was ‘forgetful of being,’ Heidegger proposes to ask the question of being anew. He starts this project with the very being who asks this question, namely, man, christened Dasein. Dasein is the transcendental self in relation to being. According to Heidegger, Aristotle interprets human existence in terms of categories that are alien to man. His system of categories is taken from the domain of natural things, the basic category being ‘substance.’ Heidegger claims that the notion of substance does not fit Dasein. Instead, he analyzes Dasein on the basis of its own fundamental experience. Traditional categories taken from nature are replaced by existentials—the concepts that describe the being of Dasein. On the basis of such phenomenological description of Dasein, Heidegger inquires into the question of being.

Now, Dasein is described as being-in-the-world; and its various dimensions are brought under the key concepts of existentiality, facticity and fallenness. Existentiality is correlated with understanding and projection, facticity with anxiety, and fallenness with being-amidst and concern with things. And the totality of Dasein’s structural whole comprehending existentiality, facticity and fallenness is called care. The significance of existentiality is being-ahead-of-itself, of facticity is being-already-in-the-world, and of fallenness is being-alongside the entities within the world. These are the essential features of Dasein’s ‘everyday,’ inauthentic mode of existence. In order to get an integral vision of human existence, Heidegger proceeds to analyze the phenomenon of death. In anticipating death, man achieves the overarching unity that gathers up all the possibilities of human existence; and Dasein is made painfully aware of its temporality. Thus it is temporality that constitutes primordially the totality of the structure of care, with its dimensions of existentiality, facticity and fallenness. These three dimensions of care receive temporal interpretations in terms of a futural being-ahead (existentiality), a past being-already (facticity), and a present being-amidst (fallenness). Thus Heidegger gives a final interpretation of the basic constitution of Dasein in terms of temporality with its three dimensions of present, past and future—the future given priority.

Now what about the question of being and of ground? Traditional metaphysics attempted to ground the irreducible facticity of human’s selfhood as well as that of nature on the Absolute or God. But Heidegger accepted the facticity of the self as such; that is to say, he sought to interpret Dasein in terms of its own structure, and the ultimate constitution of Dasein is found to be temporality. Rather than providing a ground outside Dasein, temporality has been recognized as its essential constitution. Thus Dasein is grounded in nothing outside itself. Dasein, held out into nothing, is beyond all beings, and has in this sense attained ultimate transcendence, the goal of metaphysics.

Alfred North Whitehead

Whitehead’s process thought is a neo-realistic metaphysics of becoming. He was opposed to the idea which had dominated metaphysics since the time of Aristotle that every entity consists of a permanent substratum supporting different qualities. Now, if we start with permanence, change can only be an appearance; but if we start with change, we can explain permanence and self-identity as the repetition of relatively enduring patterns of activity. This is the Whiteheadian strategy. Whitehead interprets reality as an organic process. The word ‘process’ implies temporal change and interconnected activity. He calls his metaphysics ‘the philosophy of organism.’ The basic analogy for interpreting the world is organism, which is a highly integrated and dynamic pattern of interdependent events.

According to Whitehead, reality is constituted by interrelated events rather than by separate, unchanging substances. For him, transition and activity are more fundamental

than permanence and substance. The ultimate constituents of reality are actual entities. These are microcosmic units of process that may be linked to other actual entities in order to form things of everyday experience. An actual entity endures only for an instant—the instant of its becoming; that is, its active process of self-creation out of the elements of perishing past, to become the datum for succeeding generations of actual entities. Thus actual entities are in the process of perpetual becoming and perishing, but as they perish they are taken up into the creative advance of the whole, and are passed on to other actual entities. The universe is a process of perpetual becoming, flux, and change, in which actual entities come to be and pass away.

Coupled with this doctrine of flux is the notion of permanence of all things. While Whitehead rejects an unchanging substrate underlying all change, he does not discard the concept of substrate as such. But this substrate does not exist apart from individual becoming. In order to explain permanence, Whitehead brings in the concept of definiteness or form; for there can be no becoming of actual entities, which is not definite or determinate. But becoming itself cannot generate definiteness out of itself. The factors of definiteness whereby the becoming of actual entities acquires determinate character are called ‘eternal objects’ which are in the primordial nature of God. These forms of definiteness are capable of specifying the character of actual entities. Thus instead of definite things—substances—undergoing change, becoming takes on definite patterns of reality through forms of definiteness.

The doctrine of God completes Whitehead’s metaphysics of becoming. God has two natures—primordial and consequent. As primordial nature, God is unlimited potentiality. Whitehead ascribes the function of ordering of potentialities to God. In this function God is thought of as an abstract, impersonal principle. As such, he lacks actuality. As unlimited potentiality, God’s primordial nature includes eternal objects which account for order in the becoming of actual entities. But the consequent nature of God is subject to the process of actualization in the actual world. As such, God is the ground of novelty as well as of order, presenting new possibilities with open alternatives. He elicits the self-creation of individual entities and thereby allows for novelty as well as structure. God influences the world without determining it. He does not determine the outcome of events nor violate the self-creation of each being. Every entity is the joint product of past causes, divine purposes, and new entity’s own self-creation.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the transition from Kant’s philosophy to German idealism.

2) What are the differences between Kant’s synthesis and Husserl’s phenomenology?

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

After having made a brief survey of western metaphysics, we find two important characteristics therein. The first concerns the starting point of metaphysics. In general, Greek and medieval metaphysics started with the object, whereas modern and contemporary metaphysics with subject. Second, in western thought, we find metaphysics of permanence and metaphysics of change. The former interprets reality as static permanence, and for the latter reality is dynamic becoming. Most of the western metaphysicians understand reality as static, except Heraclitus, Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead and Heidegger who interpret reality as becoming. Western metaphysics is comprehensive in so far as it deals with most important metaphysical problems. For the student who has a general understanding of western philosophy, the present summary provides a firm grasp of western metaphysics. It is indeed the story of metaphysics in the west.

4.7 KEY WORDS

- Metaphysics

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As mentioned in the introduction, metaphysics is defined as the science of being as being, or reality as such.
- Subject

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Subject is traditionally interpreted as that which knows, as opposed to object as that which is known.

4.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Plato is known as idealist since his metaphysics was concerned about the forms of the ideal world; whereas Aristotle is called a realist since he dealt with the world of our experience. Plato held that corresponding to our concepts, essences or forms exist in a transcendent world. But for Aristotle forms are in the things of this world. For Plato, this world is a shadow; according to Aristotle, this world is real.
- 2) Though St. Thomas is an Aristotelian, there are crucial differences between both of them. At the heart of his metaphysics is the theory of exemplarism: that there are ideas in the mind of God. This is tantamount to bringing back Plato's ideal world, which Aristotle rejects. Aristotle does not admit creation; God is only the final cause of the universe. For St. Thomas, God is not only the final cause of the universe, but also its efficient cause—creator. Moreover, St. Thomas introduces the doctrine of essence and existence, which Aristotle does not have. According to this theory, created beings are composed of essence and existence. In material things there is a double composition; they are composed of essence and existence, and essence itself is constituted out of matter and form.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) According to Kant, there is a dualism between phenomena and noumena. The German idealists wanted to eliminate noumena. They attempted to do this by regarding noumena as products of thought. For this, the transcendental I of Kant had to be transformed into the creative ego—the Absolute subject. Kant's work dealt with the activity of transcendental I. The thinking ego is the coordinator of the data of experience; the practical ego is the legislator in morality; the sentimental ego is source of beauty and finality in nature. Still there is the dualism between phenomena and noumena. Now, the activity of the ego is transcendental. Hence German idealists extended the activity of the ego beyond truth, morality and beauty to reality itself—noumena. Thus they transformed the transcendental I of Kant into the absolute subject which creates all reality.
- 3) Husserl's phenomenology is an extension of Kant's Copernican revolution. According to Kant, the objects of knowledge are to be conformed to the cognitive conditions in the subject. He discovered the region of meaning conferring subjectivity—the transcendental I. But he was mainly concerned with the possibility of science and scientific objects—phenomena. In his phenomenology, Husserl attempted to reach the transcendental subjectivity which confers meaning, and constitutes not only scientific objects, but also all objects of everyday experience. Thus Husserl was more radical than Kant. Moreover, unlike Kant, Husserl does not accept noumenon or thing-in-itself. For him, the only world that is real for us is the world of phenomena. He does not accept thing-in-itself, because it would imply that what actually appears in experience is not the real thing; that the phenomenal object is merely a substitute for something else beyond experience.