

## IN DEFENCE OF METAPHYSICS\*

BISHNUPRIYA SAHA

Western philosophy began with metaphysics. The term “metaphysics” is derived from a collective title of the fourteen books of Aristotle. In its original use, the term “metaphysics” means no more than ‘after-physics’. Aristotle characterized metaphysics as the study of ‘being qua being’ or ‘of being as such’. Aristotle equates philosophy with metaphysics. Metaphysics for him was “First Philosophy”. His “First Philosophy” is the study of causes and principles of being qua being. Like Aristotle ancient and medieval philosophers also hold that philosophy and metaphysics are equal. According to them metaphysics means what exist ultimately or what could be the ultimate explanation of everything. The early Greek philosophers were on a quest for the underlying natures of things. Some said everything is ultimately water, others said everything is fire, and still there is other group of philosopher who said everything is air. Heraclitus observed the world is all in flux, so it is impossible to step into the same river twice. Other hand Parmenides said ultimate reality had to consist only of unchanging things. Actually ancient philosophers of Greece were always in a search, they thinks, whenever we search, we search the things that exist ultimately and this is metaphysics.

At the beginning of the movement of Logical positivism Rudolf Carnap, A. J. Ayer and other dismissed metaphysics as non-sense. As metaphysics means any theory of reality beyond what could be grasped by sense experience, it was declared ‘out’ by the positivist philosophers. The reasons given by the positivists against metaphysics were: (i) they were empirically convinced that all knowledge ultimately depended on sense experience; and (ii) their logical analysis of language revealed that even compound linguistic statements could be resolved into simple ones so as to convey some reports of immediate sense-experience. Following Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Logical positivists like Schlick held that the structure of all meaningful language represented the structure of the facts of

---

\* I am thankful to my supervisor Dr. Koushik Joardar for his valuable guidance in framing this paper.

experience. Whether a sentence like: “that was green” was true; we had to refer to the experience to the state of affairs that made the sentence true. To understand whether it was true or false, it could be said that the method of ascertaining the significance of a sentence was the same as that of its verification. A.J. Ayer clarified the principle of verification as ‘a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express - that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept it as being true or reject it as being false’<sup>44</sup> The Logical positivists maintained that the meaning of a sentence was the method of its verification. Thus, when the method of verification was applied to metaphysical doctrines regarding the concept of ‘ultimate truth’, ‘the Idea’, ‘the Absolute’, the doctrine became meaningless as these entities could not be verified by any sense-experience.

The fact that metaphysics is concerned itself with non-empirical questions about the character and makeup of the world that made any philosopher uneasy with the whole enterprise. The sciences enjoy a great deal of respect as fields of inquiry, and many think that the methods of science alone are the tools by which we ought to build our theories about the world. Sharing a similar view Rudolf Carnap said that metaphysicians are like musicians without musical ability. His point was that metaphysical theories are devoid of cognitive content and not even endowed with aesthetic value. On his view, the questions discussed by metaphysicians do not rise to the level of being meaningful. Underlying this view is the idea that a question is meaningful only if it can be answered somehow by appeal to observation, empirical theory, or the meanings of the words in the question. In other words, the meaningful questions are ones that science can be answered by appeal to analytic truths—sentences like “bachelors are unmarried”, which are commonly said to be purely conceptual truths, expressible by sentences that are “true by definition”, or such that their truth is grounded solely in the meanings of the terms involved. If the questions can’t be answered in one of these ways, then they are meaningless; and if they can be then they are meaningful.

For Logical positivists, each of the special sciences deals only with a fragment of the world. Metaphysics goes beyond them in being concerned with reality as a whole.

---

<sup>44</sup> *Language Truth and Logic* (1936), A.J. Ayer, p.16.

There is one way of attacking a metaphysician who claimed to have knowledge of a reality which transcended the phenomenal world would be to inquire from what premises his propositions were deduced. He must not begin with the evidence of his senses. But if so, then what valid process of reasoning can possibly lead him to the conception of a transcendent reality? To answer this question a metaphysician may say that he was endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition which enabled him to know the facts that could not be known through sense-experience. If it could be shown that he was relying on empirical premises then his venture into a non-empirical world was therefore unjustified. The metaphysician whose theories are not similarly testable by observation would have nothing to contribute.

So, from the previous discussion it is clear that Logical positivists view regarding the meaninglessness of metaphysics is based mainly on same assumptions, that - (i) metaphysics deals with the things beyond our sense-experience so metaphysical entities are not verifiable through any empirical method and,(ii) metaphysical-sentences violate the rules of syntax. But metaphysics is not just about what is 'really' or 'ultimately' exists. Historically, the following questions have been almost universally acknowledged as falling within the domain of metaphysics:

- Is change really possible? If so, what does it mean to say that something has changed?
- Is the passage of time possible?
- Are human beings free? Is free will even possible?
- What is the meaning of life?
- Is it possible to live after death?

There are many such questions that can be enlisted, but I think the above mentioned are sufficient to represent the kind of issues dealt with by metaphysics. What do these questions have in common? One can say that what they have in common is that they are nonscientific questions about what exists. It also could be said that it is a kind of hodge-podge or meaningless discipline? Let us see. In this regard we can consider the question about human free will.

Sometimes we say, whatever will be, will be. Most often, these famous words simply express a carefree attitude towards the future: let things unfold as they will; whatever will be, will be! Nothing I do can make any difference to what happens; the future is set, and there is nothing I can do about it. I can do about it. I cannot do anything except sit and wait to see what happens. There are some people who believe

that the laws of nature are deterministic. They think that the universe is like a machine that has to unfold in one very specific way. But there are some other people who reject this view. Regarding the questions of human freedom we find mainly two theories- (i) determinism and (ii) indeterminism. Determinism is commonly defined as “the doctrine of universal causation: it says only that every event has a cause. It does not say whether the cause is mental or physical, whether it is inorganic nature or organisms or people or God”<sup>45</sup>. Whereas Indeterminism is the thesis that determinism is false. “Indeterminism denies that every event has a cause”.

The question about the free-will is a deliberately asked question by the philosophers. The problem of determinism arises because many have thought that our acts are determined in various ways, and these forms of determination all seem to preclude our having genuine control over our actions. Some people believe that the laws of nature are deterministic, that the universe is like a machine that has to unfold in one very specific way. Others reject this view. If determinism is true then there is no room for human freedom. But that does not mean that opposite is true. Then what is about the will. What does it mean to be free, or to act freely? In this regard we can offer three other concepts with which it is closely connected. Firstly, the concept of freedom is connected with the idea of control: To be free is to have a certain kind of control over one’s acts. Secondly, the concept of freedom is connected with the notion of responsibility: Our free acts seem just to be those acts for which we can be held responsible. Thirdly, the concept of freedom is connected with the idea of being able to choose among incompatible courses of action. Together, these claims give us a pretty good idea of what we mean when we say that an agent acts freely. However, each of them is problematic. Here we can take a look on John Locke’s view of free will. According to Locke, the will is nothing but a power, a power to choose. For Locke, freedom is also a power: a power to act as one chooses. Thus, on his view, to say that a person’s will is free is to say that his/her power to choose has a certain power to act. So, for Locke it is simply confused to ask whether the will is free or not. The problem of determinism arises because our actions are subject to various kinds of

---

<sup>45</sup> *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (1953), John Hospers, p.322

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.322.

local determination. If we admit, everything is determined then I am not an agent of my action and so, my action could not be judged as moral or immoral. But moral philosophy recognizes the freedom of will as a postulate of morality. Because, if we do not admit free will then we will be not in a position to judge one's action as moral or immoral.

So we can see that the questions regarding the free-will, the causation are occupying much space in the mind of philosophers. These questions are not meaningful in Logical positivists desired way. Actually Logical positivists view about metaphysics is a one sided view. Generally, they characterized metaphysics as the idea that it is the study of what 'really exists' or it is 'the study of things, which are beyond our sense-experience'. But metaphysics is also deals about human beings and the fundamental features of reality. It is not so much easy to define human beings in terms of truth or false, because human beings are full of emotions, contradictions.

**Bibliography:**

- Ayer, A.J. *Language Truth and Logic* (1936), Penguin Books, England.
- Ayer, A.J., *The central Questions of Philosophy* (1973), Penguin Books, England.
- Hospers John, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (1953), Allied Publishers, Delhi, India.
- Locke John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding collected and annotated, with Prolegomena, Biographical, Critical, and Historical* By Alexander Campbell Fraser ( 1956, vol.ii),Dover Publications, New York.