Chapter- 4

Impossibility of Metaphysics: Logical Positivists / Analytic Philosophy

In the first chapter of this dissertation, we have seen that Aristotle has defined ‗Metaphysics', as a science which explores the most basic causes or principles of all the particular sciences. As he said in his book *Metaphysics* that, ―There must be…a science of being qua being, which will be different from all other departmental sciences, which deal with some limited part of being. The study of being qua being turns out to be the same thing as the study of the primary causes and principles ...‖xlii Thus, it can be said on the basis of the above definition that metaphysicians tried to give us a picture of reality as a whole and in doing so they make a difference between the world as appearance and the world as reality. So, from Aristotelian point, the task of the metaphysicians is not an easy one. And that task of the metaphysicians has been appreciated in writings of Aristotle and many

other thinkers around the world. But metaphysics has never been without its critics.

In the beginning of the early twentieth century, a group of philosophers having scientific background, appeared in West with a unique way (method) of doing Philosophy as a meaningful discourse. In their way of doing Philosophy, they found metaphysics simply as a meaningless discipline. That group of Philosophers largely known as ‗logical positivists', and their view known as ‗logical positivism' in the discourse of academic departments around the world. In the present chapter of this dissertation, we shall critically examine the views of ‗logical positivists' concerning the nature of metaphysics.

Here it is important to mention that, in the previous chapter, we have tried to show the impossibility of metaphysics from Kantian point of view, but the purpose of this chapter is slightly different. The objective of this chapter is to show the impossibility of metaphysics from the logical positivists or analytic philosopher's point of view. Their argument is in the different line from that of Immanuel Kant.

Logical positivists belong to the tradition of empirical philosophy. They were highly influenced by the basic assumptions of empirical philosophy. However they were specially influence by David Hume, the renowned empiricist philosopher. According to this empirical school of thought,

‗experience is the only source of having knowledge'. Experience provides us with the most fundamental elements of knowledge. And it is needless to say that by the term ―experience" the empiricist philosophers mean ‗sense-experience'. By following their terminology, we may say that the only source of knowledge is ‗sense-experience'. For Hume, we do not have any thing in our mind which is not there in the factual world. If we do have any idea about something which does not refer to anything in the factual world, then it must be either a fancy or illusory idea. On the basis of that ground, Hume rejects metaphysical ideas as illusory. For Hume, metaphysics does not have any factual basis, thus it must be eliminated.

The pioneers of logical positivism like, Moritz Schlick (1882-1936), Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), A.J. Ayer (1910-1985) etc. were inspired by the philosophy of Hume, especially in regard to his position towards metaphysics. They consider the basic assumption of empiricism concerning the source of knowledge as valid. Like empiricist philosophers, they too give preference to sense-experience as the source of knowledge. However, here it is important to mention that primarily the logical positivists were associated with academic circle of the University of Vienna, famously known as Vienna circle. In 1929 the thinkers of Vienna circle issued a publication, named as in English translated as, *„The Vienna Circle: Its scientific World Conception".* In that publication, they announced their

objectives. Among these objectives, one of the primary objectives is to ‗eliminate metaphysics from the natural sciences, and human knowledge in general'.

It is needless to say that they adopted the scientific empirical method to eliminate metaphysics from the said disciplines. Prof. Michael Rea in his book *Metaphysics The basics,* tries to show that why the logical positivists select the scientific (empirical) method, in other words we may say that the method of verification instead of any other method, in solving the problems of Philosophy. He writes,

―The science enjoy a great deal of respect as fields of inquiry, and many think that the methods of science and those methods alone are the tools by which we ought to build our theories about the world. A priori theorizing about the world--the sort of theorizing that requires no lab equipment or experimental apparatus but just a rocking chair, a working brain, and a good chunk of time of free for thinking- has long been viewed with skepticism. According to many to many philosophers, metaphysical theorizing is just idle tale-spinning‖xliii

The flavor of logical positivist thought comes out most strongly in their hostility to metaphysics. The so-called ‗elimination of metaphysics' was an

explicitly proclaimed objective. The positivists rejected transcendental metaphysics on the ground that its assertions were meaningless, since there was no possible way of verifying them in experience. In other words, it can be said that for them, metaphysics is meaningless, as its sentences are not empirically verifiable in any possible way (neither by observing empirical facts nor by in principle). Logical Positivism sought to eliminate metaphysics by arguing that metaphysical claims are not verifiable through sense experience. But they distinguish themselves from the classical by declaring that they are concerned not with facts but with language. By language, they do not mean phonetics, but logic or semantics. It is because of this that they call themselves logical positivists. "Logical" because they claim to deal with the logic of language and ―Positivists" because they accept only what is positive i.e., only _given facts'. The only reason A. J. Ayer could give for the logical positivists to re-state the old philosophy was their ―attempt to make it logically rigorous and in their use for the purpose of a developed and sophisticated logical technique" xliv. The logical positivists claim that analysis of language is the only subject matter of philosophy. Ayer stated that the function of philosophy consists ―in analyzing and clarifying the concepts which figure in the everyday, and also in scientific use of language"xlv. In this way the logical positivists claimed that the subject-matter of philosophy is confined within the authority of language and the method of philosophy is the analysis of language. They

called their philosophy ‗scientific' because they claimed that analysis of concepts and propositions in science and in everyday language is meant to —elīminate metaphysics" and consequently clarify our thought. Logical Positivists for the circulation of the Scientific World-Outlook seeks to create a climate which will be free from metaphysics in order to promote scientific studies in all fields by means of logical analysis. Logical positivists have organized the principle that the meaning of a proposition consists in its method of verification. The claim that for a statement to be meaningful, in the cognitive sense, it must be empirically verifiable was made explicit by Schlick, Waismann, Carnap, Neurath and other logical positivists like A.J. Ayer.

It would presumably be agreed that the propositions of which any metaphysical theory is composed are intended to fall within the general class of statements; they are offered for our attention as being truths. It must be fair to ask how these truths are established. They might be said to be a priori, necessary truths, established purely by reasoning. But this, the positivists contends, is to say that they are true in virtue of the general rules for the use of language; their necessity consists in the fact that to deny them would be to break the rules, to contradict one's self. But this in turn is to say that their necessity rests ultimately on tautology; and if so, in a sense they say nothing; their truth is purely formal and abstract. But if they are

not of this character, if they are fact-stating and not purely formal, then surely some observation is required in order to determine whether what they say is a case of fact or not. But observation can only be empirical observation. Logical positivists assumed, there is no doubt that neither of the alternatives would be acceptable to the metaphysician. He would not be prepared to admit that his doctrines ought to be subject to experimental tests, as if they were a kind of contribution to natural science; nor would he be willing to admit that they stated no facts at all, that their validity was purely formal and ultimately dependent simply upon the rules of logic and language.

The metaphysician may indeed try to claim that not all facts are empirical facts, and hence that not all statements of facts are capable of confirmation or falsification by observation; but this is dismissed as hollow pretention. For if we do not know what sort of observations or experiences would confirm or falsify a statement, we do not know what it means; and if we are told that no observation or experience would confirm or falsify it, this can only amount to the admission that it has no meaning. If it means anything it must in principle, at least, be testable.

And here lies the positivist's central contention. For logical positivists, if the meaning of any statement could not be verified either by observing facts or by making observation in principle then it must be considered that the statement has no meaning. It thus appears to the metaphysician, if he is to save his doctrines, must present them either as abstract theory, quite devoid of factual content, like pure mathematics, or as bodies of experimentally testable statements of fact. But he could not take either of these courses while continuing to be a metaphysician; so it remains only that he must cease to be so. The idea that there is a class of metaphysical truths distinct both from truths of common experience or natural science and from formal tautologies without factual content has turned out to be pure illusion. To say that an alleged assertion is metaphysical, amounts to saying that it is bogus.

Rudolf Carnap in his article, _*The Elemination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis"* rejects metaphysics as meaningless discipline. For him, metaphysics has faced many criticisms in the past from the Greek skeptics to the empirical philosopher of 19th century. But the development of modern logic explores a new sharper way to prove metaphysics as purely meaningless discourse. In the light of modern logical theory he claims the metaphysical sentences, through which the whole body of metaphysical discourses is constructed, is purely meaningless. Through a logical analysis of the metaphysical statements it can easily be proved. For Carnap, the

metaphysical sentences fail to fulfill certain logical rules of sentence making. AS for Carnap, ―Alanguage consists of a vocabulary and syntax, i.e. a set of words which have meanings and rules of sentence formation. These rules indicate how sentences may be formed out of the various sorts of words" [xlvi] For Carnap, a logically meaningful sentence constructed through meaningful words and the meaning of a word is determined by the ‗criterion of verification'. Here by following Carnap, we may say that, a word will have meaning if and only if it designates a concept in the empirical world which can be verified through empirical verification method. Moreover, a word will be considered as meaningful if and only if we can make an ‗elementary sentence' through that word. For Carnap, an elementary sentence is the smallest form of sentence, which is constituted by a meaningful word. For him, an ‗elementary sentence' has specific truth-conditions. We think a brief explanation is needed here. By citing a quote from the said article we may try to understand what he means by elementary sentence and how it forms. As he said ―…the syntax of the word must be fixed, i.e. the mode of its occurrence in the simplest sentence form in which it is capable of occurring; we call this sentence form its elementary sentence. The elementary sentence form for the word ―stone‖ e.g. is ‗x is a stone'; in sentence of this form some designation from the category of things occupies the place of "x" e.g. ―this diamond", ―this apple." [xlvii]

According to Carnap, most of the words of metaphysics are meaningless as they do not refer to any empirically verifiable concept in the factual world; we cannot make any ‚elementary sentence' with those words. All most all the metaphysical sentences are constituted out of such word that's why the sentences of metaphysics are also meaningless, that means, ‚pseudo-sentences' in Carnap's own language. Carnap himself used the example of metaphysical word ―God" to demonstrate that how that word fails to produce meaningful elementary sentence in metaphysical discourse and thus makes metaphysics mare meaningless discipline. Let us try to clarify this point by following Carnap. In the field of metaphysics the term ―God" has been defined as an entity which belongs outside the realm of this empirical world. Thus it does not refer anything into this physical world accordingly can't be known through any empirical means. But for Carnap it will be wrong if we think that the term ―God" refers something like ‚divine entity' outside this physical world. It we will lead to mistake if we tend to do so. For him most of the metaphysicians have done that said mistake. They have tried to define the meaning of the term ―God" by pointing a supernatural entity into a supernatural spiritual world, which is obviously mistake. Carnap says that often the term ―God" has been defined by the metaphysicians as an ‚autonomous being', or as an ‚absolute being'. For

101

him such definition of the term "God" seems like a proper definition. But if we take a deep look into such definitions then we can see that such definitions are not proper definition. They are pseudo- definitions, because such definitions fail to fulfill the basic of criteria of the definition of a meaningful linguistic term. For Carnap the definition of any linguistic term must be given by certain logical combination of meaningful words, which can be verified through empirical means. If we look into the definition of the term ―God" given by the metaphysicians then we can see that the words by which the metaphysicians trying to define the term "God" is itself vague and not verifiable by any empirical means. Often they use the terms like ―absolute being", ―primordial being" etc. to define the term ―God". But the meanings of such terms itself are not very clear and verified. Thus the metaphysicians have done a mistake by using such terms to define a metaphysical concept. Furthermore he says that in doing so the metaphysicians fail to full fill the criteria of logical rules (syntactical rules) of an elementary sentence, which we have discussed earlier.

A.J. Ayer raises arguments against the meaningfulness metaphysical discourse. For him, metaphysical sentences are not meaningful sentences, because they fail to fulfill the basic criteria of meaningfulness and such lacking make metaphysics a complete meaningless discourse. Ayer does not

try to prove meaningless of metaphysical discourse by entering into any supernatural world which is the center of attraction of many celebrated metaphysicians. As for him such world does not exists at all because it cannot be verified through nay empirical means. The main aim of Ayer is to prove the meaningless of metaphysical discourse by analyzing the structure and logic of the sentences of metaphysics. He believes that the metaphysical sentences fail to full fill the criteria of a meaningful sentence. In order to have literary significant statement in the domain of Philosophy Ayer in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* provide us a verification principle to determine the meaningfulness of any statement or any assertion. In explaining the nature of verification principle, he writes:

—Thecriterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criteria of verifiability. We say that 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 observation would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not

tautology, a mere pseudo- proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him, but it is not literally significant."[xlviii]

But for Ayer, the criteria to judge the meaningfulness of any metaphysical sentences do not simply depend upon the ‗verification principle'. It actually depends upon the logic of the grammatical rules of our language. The ‗verification principle' might help us to see the violation of grammatical rules of our language.

For AJ Ayer, our language is based upon certain grammatical rules. By following these rules of grammar we make a meaningful sentence. The sentences of metaphysics do not based upon such grammatical rules. For Ayer, metaphysical sentences are constructed by following its own peculiar structure of grammar, which does not have any meaningful base. The metaphysical structure of grammar is superficial which leads to meaninglessness. In his book *Language, Truth and Logic,* Ayer shows that how the sentences of metaphysics violates the basic grammatical rules of language which makes a sentence meaningful by showcasing some examples. For him, a meaningful sentence must have a grammatical subject which corresponds to a real entity, as for example ‗the rose is red'. That statement has a grammatical subject called ‗rose', which referrers to a real entity in the empirical world. But most of the metaphysical sentences do not contain such grammatical subject. As for example, ‗God is the highest

substance', here in this metaphysical sentence the grammatical subject called ˍGod' does not refer anything into the empirical world, which can be verified through empirical means. As this metaphysical sentence is constructed by such a nonsensical grammatical subject, the whole sentence becomes a nonsensical sentence. Thus for Ayer, the metaphysicians fail to fulfill that grammatical condition of our language due to their own superficial grammatical feature. For Ayer metaphysical words/sentences are exists in to the discourse of many metaphysicians because of a ˍprimitive superstation' i.e. ˍevery word refers to a sensible property'. Due to that superstation many metaphysicians employ a metaphysical word like —substance" without introducing any sensible object that could be used as a reference of that very particular word. They often these words as a grammatical subject in metaphysical sentence to form demonstrate certain a metaphysical thesis. Ayer claims that the metaphysicians are fail to understand that they are misguided by their superficial grammatical characteristic of their language.

Thinkers like C.A Mace says that although metaphysical statements do not have any literal meaning but might have some emotional meaning, which may inspire someone in the case of morality and art. So for thinkers like C.A Mace metaphysical statements in many respects are like the poetic statements.

But Ayer rejects Mace's view about the meaning of metaphysical statements. For A.J Ayer, Metaphysical statements are not even like the poetic statements. For him, poetic statements do have certain literal meaning. Even when a poet writes about nonsense, he/she intentionally writes it to demonstrate certain facts, whereas the statements of metaphysics do not even have such sort of meaning at all. The metaphysician indeed fails to fulfill the grammatical conditions of meaningfulness in making a metaphysical statement. According to this condition, we must employ a word as grammatical subject in any sentence which does refer a sensible appearance of a thing into the actual world. Thus metaphysical sentences are nonsensical. As Ayer writes, ―It is, in fact, very rare for a literary artist to produce sentences which have no literal meaning. And where this does occur, the sentences are carefully chosen for their rhythm and balance. If the author writes nonsense, it is because he considers it most suitable for bringing about the effects for which his writings is designed. The metaphysician, on the other hand, does not intend to write nonsense. He lapses into it through being deceived by grammar, or through committing errors of reasoning, such as that which leads to the view that the sensible world is unreal. But it is not the mark of a poet simply to make mistakes of this short.‖[xlix]

From the above discussion we it can be said that the claims of logical positivist thinkers concerning the nature of metaphysics is different from Kant. Unlike Kant, they argue for complete rejection of metaphysical enquiry from the Philosophy. Thus by asserting metaphysics as purely nonsensical discourse ‗logical positivist' thinkers leave no possible room for metaphysical enquiry in the domain of Philosophy. The objective this thinkers is reflected in the following dictum of A. J Ayer, as he writes —…Our object is merely to show that Philosophy, as a genuine branch of knowledge, must be distinguished from metaphysics."[1]

However, we if regard logical positivist's view that ‗whatever is not verifiable through any empirical method is meaningless' is true then materialist philosophy also becomes meaningless. Materialist philosopher Karl Marx said, whatever exists ultimately can be explained in terms of dialectics. Marx's philosophy is known as Dialectical Materialism. The word —dialectis" is derived from the Greek word —dialeg", which means discussion or debate. It was considered that to discuss a question from all sides, and from all angles, allowing different one-sided points of view to oppose and contradict each other during the debate, was the best method of arriving at the truth. Such was the dialectics employed, for example, by Socrates. The Marxist dialectical method develops from and includes dialectics in the sense in which it was understood by the Greeks. Dialectical

materialism understands the world, not as a complex of processes, in which all things go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away. Dialectical materialism considers that, in the manifold processes taking place in the universe, things come into being, change and pass out of being, not as separate individual units, but in essential relation and interconnection, so that they cannot be understood each separately and by itself but only in their relation and interconnection.

Dialectics also considers things not only from the standpoint of their interconnection and interdependence, but also from the standpoint of their movement, their change, their development, their coming into being and going out of being. But through any empirical method we cannot show this inseparability and interconnectedness of things. The method of dialectics means to think dialectically. Dialectics teaches us to think of things in their real changes and interconnections.

The logical positivists defined metaphysics as study of supersensible reality and proclaimed to eliminate it through their verification principle. Ayer defined this Verification Principle of Meaning by saying that ―the meaning of a statement is determined by the way in which it can be verified, where it's being tested by empirical observation. Consequently, statements like those of metaphysics …of which no empirical observation could possibly be relevant are ruled out as factually meaningless"[li]. In the process of

eliminating metaphysics, thus, Ayer and other logical positivists eliminate the whole of dynamic, causally interconnected objective reality—natural and social. We are left with discrete, isolated, mental, un-connected units called sense-data or sense-contents.

Moreover, the logical positivist's understanding of the metaphysics may become subject to challenge. By following the writings of many academic writers like Michale Rea, we may say that the logical positivist fails to grasp the true meaning or the essence of metaphysics. All they have acquired a distorted picture of metaphysics, which is actually a common sense understanding of the term metaphysics. In its true essence metaphysics is not a branch of philosophy which deals with some supernatural entity. In true sense of the term, metaphysics is a branch of Philosophy that not only deals with the question of _what is ultimate reality' or _what really exists?' etc., but also deals certain basic question that we ask to lead a meaningful life, e.g. _What does it mean to be free?', _are we at all?' etc. In this regard a comment of Michale Rea is worthy to mention. He says, ―For the fact is metaphysicians examine and critically evaluate some of the most existentially important beliefs that human beings ever hold, beliefs that lie at the very heart of our conception of ourselves and our commonsense ways of thinking about the world. It matters very much to us whether we are free in a way that allow us to be genuinely responsible for

our actions, whether there might be things-perhaps even intelligent and powerful things.-beyond what we find in the material world and so on.[lii]

Thus, we can say that the criticism of logical positivist does not successfully eliminate metaphysics from the human knowledge in general. As a result, the spirit of metaphysics is still alive in philosophy of many great philosophers.

.