

## Has Logical Positivism Eliminated Metaphysics?

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**ABSTRACT :** The trend of the Refutation of metaphysics is very old in the history of philosophy. In different periods of time different philosophers eliminated metaphysics on different grounds. Of them Kant clearly stated that metaphysics as a science is impossible. He said that thing in itself is supersensible and there is no means to know It. But the ground offered by the logical positivists in rejecting metaphysics is something new. Its rejection is based on the analysis of language. In this paper we shall try to examine the arguments put forwarded by the logical positivist, particularly A. J. Ayer, in rejecting metaphysics. To do this we should take different arguments given by Prof. Ayer in his book *Language Truth and Logic*. There are ample reasons to think that the arguments which Ayer himself put forwarded in this book in rejecting metaphysics is sufficient arguments which can be taken against the logical positivism itself.

**KEY WORDS:** Experience, Logical Positivism, Metaphysics, Non sense, The Principle of Verifiability.

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**DISCIPLINE:** PHILOSOPHY

**SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION:** Contemporary Philosophy.

**METHOD OF RESEARCH:** The method adopted in this research paper is analytic and critical.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of western philosophy different philosophers dominated at different times. In the first half of twentieth century a new trend of philosophy came into existence known as logical positivism. With the establishment of Vienna Circle in 1928, this trend of philosophy came into existence. With the chairmanship of Moritz Schlick, a group of philosophers and scientists with a little philosophical knowledge were combined in Vienna Circle and they expressed their dissatisfaction with the philosophy that were prevalent at that time. They declared this philosophy as unscientific, speculative and non empirical. Thus based on science and experience they tried to give a new turn in philosophy and thereby they expressed their reaction against all speculation. Speculative philosophy in the past, according to them, looked all kinds of truth and validity. So, they wanted to introduce a new type of philosophy abandoning all speculation in philosophy. It is a difficult task to say what metaphysics is. But still there are certain conceptions about it. Philosophers of ancient and medieval period thought that metaphysics has to be defined by its subject matter, as it is found in other disciplines of science. They thought that metaphysics is a science which studies 'being as such' or 'the first principle of the universe' or 'things which are unchangeable.' But this definition of metaphysics is no longer acceptable because there are many philosophical problems such as, the problem of free will or the problem of mental and physical, which are not related to the first principle or unchanging things but still these are now considered as the problems of metaphysics.

In twentieth century it is generally believed that metaphysics deals with the problems that are beyond this physical world that transcends the subject matter dealt by Newton, Einstein and Heisenberg. But such impression is not correct. It is true that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. the term 'metaphysics' came in to usage to denote the part of the philosophical heritage of Greek philosopher Aristotle. The most important part of his philosophical doctrine is called by Aristotle the 'First Philosophy'. The subject matter of this first philosophy, according to him, is the highest principles amongst all existent things that cannot be known through sense organs but can be comprehended through reason alone and which is essential for all sciences. In the subsequent philosophy the term 'metaphysics' was used in this sense. In the middle ages philosophy we find that metaphysics was used to validate theology philosophically. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century both metaphysics and ontology were used in the same sense. The 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz and others thought that there is a close connection between metaphysics and natural and humanitarian sciences. But in the 18<sup>th</sup> century this connection was broken and this is particularly found in the ontology of Wolff.

In modern philosophy metaphysics is understood as a method of thinking which is wholly anti dialectical as in cognition it is one sided. It does not believe any internal contradiction which is the source of development in nature and society and therefore things and phenomena exist independent of one another and as such these are not mutable. The first philosopher who used the term metaphysics in its anti-dialectical sense was Hegel.

## **II. THE AIM OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM**

J. Weinberg in his book "An Examination of logical Positivism" has mentioned two principal aims of Logical Positivism. He said, "The official programme on which the Vienna Circle was first organized had two principal aims: to provide secure foundation for sciences and to demonstrate the meaninglessness of metaphysics." Thus there were two aspects of Logical Positivism, one is positive and another is negative. In its positive aspect, it tried to make strengthen the foundation of sciences, to make science free from metaphysical concept, which is pseudo according to them, and to prepare its foundation purely on empirical principle. In its negative aspect it attempted to refute metaphysics. The traditional philosophy, according to positivist, is futile as it has no meaning at all. Metaphysics is invalid and it misleads people and thereby they condemned it. According to positivist, whatever is beyond our empirical proof has no meaning and no sense at all and therefore, to indulge in speculation is just to sheer waste of time and energy.

## **III. ELIMINATION OF METAPHYSICS**

Logical Positivist's elimination of metaphysics can be attacked from different angles. One of them is the criteria by which metaphysics is eliminated. The method by which positivists reject metaphysics is the theory of meaning. This theory is also based on the Principle of Verifiability. According to this principle, a statement is said to be literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. Metaphysical statements are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, so these statements are meaningless and thereby nonsense. That is why the positivist eliminates metaphysics. But there are many objections against the theory of meaning and the principle of verifiability. These objections are based on the classification of proposition into analytic and synthetic. The theory of meaning is undoubtedly arbitrary and narrow in its nature. Again, metaphysical statements or propositions are very much different from our ordinary empirical statements and thereby the principle of sense verification cannot be applied to this. This point is admitted by Ayer himself when he says that metaphysical statements are non sense. Here the term 'non sense' is taken to mean that which is not sensory. Moreover, there are critics who remarked that even the principle of verifiability itself is unverifiable and such remarks cannot be refuted by anybody convincingly.

Centering round the principle of verification there is another point and that is the classification of statements into analytic and synthetic. Positivists suppose that this classification of statement is exhaustive, but in fact this is not. Proposition that cannot be brought into any one of the classes are treated as pseudo propositions and thereby these are non sense. It is only by definition and not by argument that the possibility of synthetic apriori propositions is excluded. This attitude is undoubtedly dogmatic in nature but in philosophy dogmatism has no place. Ayer's elimination of metaphysics can be refuted by taking some factual evidence. This can be done by giving an answer to the question, 'what is metaphysics?' We can compare the idea of metaphysics that we get from the history of philosophy with that of Ayer's conception of it. By doing this task we can show that Ayer has not really eliminated metaphysics. In this process of comparison if it is possible on our part to show that in Ayer's conception of metaphysics there is some serious omission then we need not examine the various theories on metaphysics. If the idea of metaphysics that derived from the history of philosophy is compared with that of Ayer's view then we can easily show that Ayer has not eliminated metaphysics. So in this process, we may take Ayer's view first and it can be examined whether this view is same as that of the concept of metaphysics usually taken. To do this we do not need to examine different theories on it. If it is possible to find out some serious omission in Ayer's conception of metaphysics, this will be sufficient to show that Ayer has not eliminated metaphysics. What he rejected is only pseudo metaphysics. The thing what Ayer does is that he assumed the existence of two types of propositions – analytic and synthetic. He also believes that this classification is true. Apart from these two types of propositions, there is no other type of proposition. But metaphysical statements, according to him, do not belong to any one of these classes and thereby these are non sense. He says, "We may accordingly define a metaphysical sentence as a sentence which purports to express a genuine proposition, but does, in fact, express neither a tautology nor an empirical hypothesis. And as tautology and empirical hypothesis form the entire class of significant propositions, we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are non sensical." This assertion of Ayer in no way destroys metaphysics but only eliminate it.

Ayer has put forward different assertions in the chapter on 'The Elimination of Metaphysics' of his book *Language Truth and Logic*. From these assertions we can get some idea about the implication of metaphysics according to him. He holds that the proposition like "There is a non-empirical world of values or that men have immoral souls, or that there is a transcendental God" is metaphysical. He has written in another place "we may begin by criticizing the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense." Moreover, he thinks that to criticize metaphysics "it is convenient for us to take the case of those who believe that it is possible to have knowledge of a transcendent reality as a starting-point for our discussion." From the above statement it is evident that by metaphysical statement Ayer means those assertions which concern with transcendental entities and all the arguments that he put forward are against the doctrine of transcendent. His rejection of metaphysics is, in fact, based on the assumption of transcendent and for which he wants to discard metaphysics from philosophy. Thus Ayer's rejection of metaphysics has justification only if his conception of metaphysics is correct. If anything is totally beyond the reach of our thought and experience, then none can have a least of ideas about it.

But if it can be shown that the subject matter of metaphysics is not necessarily transcendental entities then it would be sufficient to prove that Ayer's elimination of metaphysics is not correct. Now we examine whether metaphysics deals with transcendental entities or not and for doing this we must be clear about the meaning of the term 'transcendent'. The term 'transcendent' itself does not carry any precise meaning, and as such it is relative. For example, when someone utters the statement that 'X transcends' or 'X is transcendent', he is not precisely asserting anything. In this connection an obvious question springs up – X transcends what? The statement will certainly carry a precise meaning if it is said that X transcends our sense experience. Similarly, when it is said that metaphysical entities are transcendental, the statement does not state anything clearly. Here it must be specified as to what metaphysics transcends. This can be answered by analyzing three possible sources of knowledge – sense experience, reasoning and intuition. Metaphysical entities certainly cannot be known through sense organs and as such these entities transcend sense experience. All the metaphysicians as well as the logical positivist will agree with this view although their rejection is on different grounds. The logical positivists believe that there is no reality beyond our sense perception. As the metaphysical entities cannot be perceived through sense perception, so these are not real. The metaphysicians also believe that metaphysical entities are beyond our sense perception. Metaphysical entities cannot be acquired by reasoning and as such these transcend our thought. The metaphysicians will accept this view partially. They believe that metaphysics is a genuine study and thought or reasoning alone cannot explain it because thought is discursive and it can comprehend its own concept only. They hold the view that the knowledge of metaphysical entities is derived through intuitive experience. They believe that apart from sense experience and reasoning, intuition is an independent source of knowledge. Thus metaphysician claims that metaphysical entities, although transcendent to sense experience and reasoning are not transcendent to intuitive experience. Thus intuition validates metaphysics.

But Prof. Ayer is firm in his conclusion. According to him, metaphysical entities are also beyond intuition. But we should maintain that such a view of Ayer cannot be accepted. He is not clear about the conception of intuition. By intuition metaphysician means a kind of direct and immediate experience. But for Ayer, the meaning of intuition is something different. His conception of intuition is very much similar to sense intuition and thereby narrower in its meaning. Thus Ayer's concept of intuition is in no way equal to that of the intuition of mystics. Ayer thinks that with the help of intuition scientific hypothesis are derived. Thus if by intuition he means sense intuition, then it is totally impossible to have metaphysical entities with the help of this weapon. Certainly metaphysical entities are not within the reach of intuition. Thus according to Ayer, valid knowledge about metaphysical entities cannot be attained by intuition. But if it can be shown that the two types of intuition, namely, sense intuition and mystic intuition are different then it will be helpful to establish that different from sense intuition, mystic intuition is an independent source of knowledge. Finally, we will be able to establish that metaphysical entities are there although these are not within the reach of sense experience.

Prof. Ayer puts forward arguments in order to show that metaphysical entities cannot be validated by intuition. He says that if mystic claims that valid knowledge can be attained by intuition then they must have to explain it in an understandable way. In this connection he says "if a mystic admits that the object of his vision is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describe it". But the argument that Ayer extended cannot be accepted. Because the mystical experience of mystic are not indescribable. The mystic also describe their experiences to other and the other people are convinced by the mystics and that is why mystic's description bear meaning to others. Sometimes it may happen that a mystic is unable to describe his experience by ordinary language. But it does not mean that such an experience is indescribable.

Rather it means that for the description of mystic experience requires a revised form of language as we find in the case of expressing scientific theories. Ordinary language is not sufficient for expressing scientific theories as is realized by the scientists but for this it would not mean that they should eliminate it. They rather revised their language so that they can express their theories with full satisfaction. As long as metaphysician and mystic attempt to explain their experiences with the help of ordinary language, there is every chance of confusion, even it may be unintelligible to many others. But this does not mean that intuition fails to reveal mystical experiences and thereby metaphysics is nonsense. Further Ayer holds that intuitive findings cannot be validated by itself. In this connection he refers scientific laws, which although often given through intuition are also tested by actual experience and that is why these are acceptable. He identified the concept of 'actual experience' with empirical observation. This is evident from his assertion "we do not deny apriori that the mystic is able to discover truths by his own special methods. We wait to hear what are the propositions which embody his discoveries, in order to see whether they are verified or confuted by our empirical observations". Such an explanation of Ayer is due to his idea that mystic statement and scientific hypothesis are same. It is found that in many cases scientific hypothesis are given in intuition but subsequently by empirical observation these hypotheses are validated. So, Ayer expects that like scientific hypothesis the metaphysical statements are also to be validated by empirical observation. He thereby makes an analogy between scientific hypothesis and metaphysical statements. Bu this analogy cannot be taken as true because both differ in many respects.

Firstly, the most important respect in which metaphysical statements differ from scientific hypothesis is that while the former is intuited but the latter is imagined. In explaining certain phenomena a subject may imagine in different way and afterwards he can explain the phenomena with the help of a particular hypothesis. Thus a scientist must have to verify his imagination in experience. The hypothesis of the scientist is tentative and it needs verification and as such it is not assumed as true. Secondly, the main concern of scientific hypothesis is relations of objects that are given in experience. But in the case of mystic experience there is no reference to objects rather there is a direct and immediate contact between mystic and something else. The mystic experience is as like as sense experience on the ground that as the sense experience is validated by another sense experience so the mystic intuition, if requires, can be validated only by another intuition. Thirdly, in the case of scientific hypothesis there is a possibility of suspension. If by empirical verification one hypothesis is found to be false then the scientist are bound to reject it. But in the case mystic intuition there is scope of rejection. The intuitive experience once acquired is taken as true and there is no scope of doubt in it. Thus intuition cannot be rejected on the plea that empirical observation cannot validate it. It is rather the suggestion of the mystic or metaphysician that it is mystic experience in which their statements are validated.

There is a possibility of argument on the part of Prof. Ayer that he does not have any intuition of transcendent. He may even claim that the explanation given by the natural sciences is sufficient to explain phenomena and thus there is no need of intuition. But this criticism of Prof. Ayer is very weak. Because there is no justification in claiming that nobody has intuition as because Prof. Ayer does not have it. Metaphysics is certainly meaningful to those persons who possess intuition. Prof. Ayer may not get any sense out of metaphysics but for this he cannot eliminate it. It is as like as the rejection of a particular colour by a colour blind person. The colour blind person has no vision of a particular colour but for this it does not mean that there is no colour of this particular type. The colour blind person even has no right to claim that there does not exist the particular colour which he fails to perceive.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Thus in rejecting metaphysics the initial blunder which Prof. Ayer committed is the assumption that experience means only sense experience. This assumption is undoubtedly a dogmatic attitude in his theory. Ayer's rejection of metaphysics reminds us the rejection of substance, causality etc. in Hume's philosophy. From the above analysis it is evident that Prof. Ayer extends his utmost effort to eliminate metaphysics. But the arguments which he tries to establish are very weak and as such are not convincing. All these prove that in eliminating metaphysics the logical positivism has not succeeded.

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