

Impossibility of Metaphysics in Philosophy: with special reference to Hume and Kant, Early Wittgenstein and Logical Positivists and Nietzsche and Derrida

Shaista Akhter

Research Scholar, Dept of Philosophy, Aligarh Muslim University

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, western philosophy in particular has focused heavily on questions of metaphysics. Philosophy was conceived in the past as being *super scientific*. It is thought to be among the most fundamental of all sciences, uncovering only deeper and more profound truths than those that natural science was able to discern. The classical philosophers literally let loose a flood of metaphysics *onto cosmological* speculation, without any clear-cut methodological or philosophical framework. Their rich conceptualizations and abstract ideas gave rise to a wide range of philosophical systems as *idealism, Materialism, Monism, pluralism, Theism, Determinism, Realism, Nominalism, Phenomenalism, naturalism* etc. Ironically, each philosopher presented his own version of an "ism" as the only valid and comprehensive explanation of the cosmic circumstances. The classical philosophers developed theories about the nature and structure of conceptual categories such as *God, Mind, Matter, Spirit, Reality, Space, Time, Good, Evil, Freedom, Substance, Beauty*, and so on, believing that they could investigate their nature and structure by outlining reasons and arguments in support of their points of view and rejecting philosophical views advanced by their opponents. Their primary epistemological assumption was that 'reason' was capable of proving or disproving anything and accepting or rejecting anything. In fact, they provided *ontological, cosmological, and teleological* evidence to support God's existence. Naturally, they assumed that the mind-boggling dilemma of God's existence was finally settled because they provided nothing less than proofs. However philosophy is an evolving and ever-growing enterprise. Its nature, scope and conceptual field undergo a constant change, with the ongoing march of history. One can never stipulate a fixed role for philosophy and that too far all times to come. Being inherently iconoclastic, no assumption or postulate can ever qualify to become the *sanctum sanctorum* for philosophical thinking. The metaphysical issues that are at the heart of philosophy are brought to the fore. The conventional questions regarding the very nature of philosophy were raised, including the fundamental metaphysical question, which was, "What is philosophy?" This question generated quite a number of sub issues, including: what is the nature of *philosophical judgment*; is it a *verifiable statement of fact* or a *deductive statement of logic*; does philosophy have any method; why does a philosophical disagreement arise and can it be resolved; whether or not different philosophical systems have any logic or whether they are merely ostentatious; and which may or may not be accepted, what criteria of accepting a philosophical world-view or metaphysical questions like what is ultimately Real, what is Being, what is Becoming, what is the status of the universe in which we live, what is the place of a man in this universe, Is man free or is he determined and what is space and time etc.

Keywords: *Metaphysics, Impossibility of Metaphysics, Philosophical judgment, Empirical Verification, ultimate Being, Space and Time, Free will.*

INTRODUCTION ON METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that uses broad concepts to define reality and our understanding of it. Metaphysical studies, in general, seek to explain fundamental or universal elements of reality that are difficult to discovered or experience in our daily lives.

Many metaphysical theories have been proposed by philosophers of the mind to address these sorts of questions as *what is ultimately real*, has been the basic metaphysical question. Religious philosophies or theologies have posited God to be ultimately real. Ideas, consciousness, mind, matter, and will are all concepts that metaphysicians have argued are fundamentally real. For example, Plato's *theory of ideas as Truth, beauty, goodness, justice, and knowledge*, according to him, are not only abstract concepts but rather everlasting, universal, substantial, unchangeable realities that transcend both space and time. Following Plato or disagreeing with some of his ideas, thinkers such as Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, etc. evolved their own metaphysical theories. The various accounts of the nature of reality put forward by *Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Chinese, and Islamic* thinkers, among others. Important theories in metaphysics include *Advaitavada, Shunyavada, and Anekantavada*, and *wahdat ul wujud*.

Social scientific research in the nineteenth and twentieth century's was influenced by the development of scientific methods in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Physical, chemical, and biological sciences' methodological standardization contributed significantly to the standardization of social scientific research. Indeed, philosophical, theological, ethical and aesthetic questions too were subjected to scientific criteria of evaluation and validation, although such questions are hardly amenable to resolution in keeping with the requirements of scientific method. Nevertheless, we have achieved a significant level of clarity and transparency with regard to the logic of philosophical and theological discourse against the very backdrop of the scientific methodological paradigm.

The whole metaphysical scene was vitiated due to the rampant methodological field-confusion throughout the super scientific career of metaphysical philosophy. Philosophy system-building had a mushroom growth without any concerted and articulate effort on the part of philosophers to have paused in order to critically examine their metaphysical formulations. Thus neat and clean metaphysical theories were spine out and thought to be truly reflecting the factual states of affairs so far as the multiplex cosmic situational matrices were concerned and metaphysical arguments were deemed to be establishing conclusively certain fundamental truths about the "Reality as a whole".

Philosophers have spent countless years trying to comprehend the purpose of philosophy in addition to delving into important philosophical issues. They have been engaging in a fierce intellectual battle to establish the *locus standi* and *modus operandi* of philosophy. In course of time, various visions and missions of philosophy have blossomed into great cultural achievements and abiding civilizational accomplishments. However, no interpretation or vision of philosophy may be regarded as definitive. Our understanding of philosophy discusses significant radical shifts and changes; the paradigmatic philosophy does not exist. In light of this, we are unable to uncover a *noumenal, ahistorical, transcendental*, and eternal philosophy's essence. There will always be a historical and cultural context for philosophy.

Impossibility of Metaphysics:

The classical super-scientific conception of philosophy was powerfully challenged. Philosophers naturally gravitated toward the investigation of metaphysical doctrines and the elucidation of the complexities deriving there from. The metaphysical questions are being susceptible both to empirical verification and logical demonstration. Although concept analysis is not a recent development, it has been practiced either implicitly or explicitly from the dawn of philosophy up until the 20th century. There have been critics of metaphysics of all along, ancient *Charvaka* did not accept the metaphysical theories of *Vedic* tradition, and they found their doctrines or theories pertaining to *God, Soul and after life* to be untenable or unjustifiable. Ancient Greeks *Sophists* severely criticized the pre-Socratic *onto-cosmology* or metaphysics of the time. One may argue that *postmodernism* is a potent critique or denial of the fundamental aspect of the Modern Age. *Modernists* and *postmodernists* also declared metaphysics to be impossible on epistemological grounds. I specifically address Hume, Kant, *Early Wittgenstein*, and *logical positivists* in this section, as well as their views that either directly contradict or reject the central tenets of metaphysics.

David Hume:

In Modern European philosophy various powerful philosophers have argued that metaphysics is impossible. We can especially cite here Kant and Hume bringing out the thesis that metaphysics is impossible. According to Hume, if we accept sense experience as the only primary source of knowledge, then we cannot establish any metaphysical theories or doctrines e.g we cannot establish that there is a material or a spiritual substance, we cannot establish that behind our sensations we exist as a continuous *identical self*, Hume writes "When I enter intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself, at any time, without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception".

The mind is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a flux and movement. The mind is kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their

appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations, and supposed though falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity. we cannot establish the validity of inductive statements or causal connection, sense experience can never provide us to demonstrate inductive statements such as ‘All human beings are mortal’ on the basis of counting of all living beings being mortal, we can demonstrate that ‘A is the case of B and there is a necessary connection between A and B. According to Hume, our belief in causal connection is not based on any proof. We can say that A precedes B but we cannot say whenever A then B.

Similarly we can achieve certainty in propositions which expresses “relations of ideas” such as “ $2+2=4$ ”, “All triangles have three angles”. However we can never achieve certainty in propositions which expresses “matters of fact” e.g we can never be sure that “oxygen helps in the burning of fire”. In view of these considerations, it is not possible to establish the validity of metaphysical statements or theories; we cannot even establish the validity of scientific knowledge, therefore Hume advocate wholesale *skepticism*.

Immanuel Kant:

Following Hume, Kant worked out his theory of knowledge. He examined both rationalist and empiricist theories of knowledge and came to the conclusion that while scientific knowledge is possible, metaphysics is impossible. He agreed with the empiricists that all our knowledge originated from sense experience. However, sense experience can give us only countless sensations, these sensations by themselves cannot be deemed as knowledge, when these sensations are classified or systematized by the categories of our mind, does knowledge become possible. Our sense experience provides us raw material with regard to external world, when that raw material is systematized by our faculties of understanding such as quality, quantity or relation, can we achieve valid genuine propositions of expressing scientific knowledge. However, metaphysical propositions with regarded to God, soul and cosmos cannot achieve genuine knowledge. It is because sense experience cannot furnish us with any raw material. In view of the same Kant came to the conclusion that scientific knowledge is possible but metaphysics is impossible, human reason cannot establish metaphysical truths, although it will always workout metaphysical speculations. For example, Categories like *cause and effect, substance and accident*, which are perfectly legitimate when applied to the *phenomenal order*, have no meaning when transferred to a *noumenal world*. Metaphysics too often forget this and confusing *phenomena* with *noumena*, applies to the transcendent reality the concepts which are valid only in our world of sense. In this way it falls into error and illusion. Which as distinguished from ordinary sensory illusion, Kant calls *transcendental illusion*.

Early Wittgenstein:

The impossibility of metaphysics in twentieth century was advanced by such analytical philosophers as early Wittgenstein and logical positivists. Early Wittgenstein following Russell’s logical atomism also accepted the analytical method. He said language as it is complex or compound, the complex or compound propositions of language need to be reduced to simple or simplest possible propositions. When we analyse complex or compound propositions we reach a level where further analysis is not possible. Thus from complex propositions we see the *atomic propositions*, these atomic propositions picturing atomic fact, it is the picturization of atomic facts by atomic propositions that atomic propositions become meaningful. There are no metaphysical *atomic facts* which can be picturizing by metaphysical atomic proposition. Infact there are three kinds of meaningful propositions are:-

- Tautologus
- Contradictory
- Descriptive or empirical.
- Tautologus propositions are true under all circumstances.
- Contradictory propositions are false under all circumstances and
- Descriptive or empirical propositions are both true and false under all circumstances.

Now, according to early Wittgenstein metaphysical propositions are not tautologus, they are not contradictory and they are not empirical or descriptive as well. Therefore they are neither true nor false; they are not rather meaningless and non sense. Therefore metaphysics is impossible to be achieved or established.

Logical Positivists:

Logical positivists are twentieth century *Vienna circle* philosophers of science such as schlick, carnap and others were deeply impacted by the “Tractus Logico Philosophus” of early Wittgenstein. Logical positivists divided language into *cognitive propositions* and *non cognitive or emotive propositions*. Mathematical, scientific and logical propositions are *cognitive propositions*, they are meaningful and they can be verified by verification principle. *The non cognitive or emotive propositions* expressing attitudes, feelings or emotions etc are found in such disciplines as *metaphysics, ethics, poetry, theology and mysticism* etc.

The logical positivists carried the philosophical analysis or what may be called, propositional reductionism to its logical conclusions. They maintained that for any statement to be true or false there must be certain actual or possible observable conditions through which we can verify what it wants to communicate. If there are no such conditions the statement is neither true nor false but simply a meaningless pronouncement. Here observable conditions or some sort of possible mode of verification becomes *sinoq-non* for meaningfulness. Because metaphysical statements fail to pass the test of the verification principle, they are nonsensical and meaningless. The classical metaphysical formulations assumed to be asserting super-scientific knowledge is sheer pieces of nonsense and methodologically unwarranted. Metaphysical philosophy cannot give us any factual information as it is dressed up in speculative conceptualizations. There are no transempirical facts to be discussed or superscientific truths to be offered, careful analysis reveals that metaphysics has pretended to be what it is not.

The *cognitive propositions* are of two types, *analytic a priori* or *synthetic a posteriori*, mathematical and logical proposition are analytic a priori, in their cause the predicate term is already contained in the subject term, so when somebody says "All angles have three triangles" he is saying something which is obvious, it is not a new piece of information. However synthetic a posteriori propositions such as "Diamond is the hardest metal" or "oxygen helps in the burning of fire" etc, do not say something that is obvious. They provide new pieces of information such propositions need to be verified or they can be either verified or verifiable. Metaphysical propositions such as Real is rational or ideas are beyond space and time etc, sound to be empirical or synthetic a posteriori, but they have no method of verification, therefore metaphysical propositions are emotive or non cognitive, they cannot be said to be true or false, they have got to be meaningless and non-sense. Metaphysical theories can be liked, inspired and motivating etc. But methodologically speaking, they have no cognitive meaning or they are meaningless and non-sense.

There are other European philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida who have tried to show the impossibility of metaphysics. However, at this point of time I also summarize and throw some light on their arguments with regard to impossibility of metaphysics. What needs to be emphasized is that throughout history of philosophy, there have been very powerful critiques of metaphysics trying to show the impossibility of metaphysics.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Derrida shares with Friedrich Nietzsche the skepticism regarding philosophy in general, but particularly its style and truth claims. Derrida, like Nietzsche, is conscious that we are prisoners of our perspective, and both pay attention to the subversive process of reversing one's perspective, reversing subject/object, truth/error, and moral/immoral. Nietzsche's famous proclamation "God is dead" and his attacks on Christianity and the Western metaphysical tradition shattered the very core of Western thought, creating a void.

Nietzsche wrote philosophy in a manner calculated more to provoke serious thought than to give formal answers to questions. In this regard he resembled Socrates and Plato more than Spinoza, Kant, or Hegel. He produced no formal system because system building, he thought, assumes that one has at hand self evident truths upon which to build. It was his belief that building a system is to lack integrity, since honest thought must challenge precisely these self evident truths upon which most systems are built. One must engage in dialectic and be willing at all times to declare himself against his previous opinions. Nietzsche believed that the philosophers must be less pretentious, pay more attention to questions of human values than to abstract systems, and concern himself with immediate human problems with an attitude of fresh experimentation and a freedom from the dominant values of his culture. Because he took a variety of positions on important problems, it was certain that Nietzsche's ideas should be interpreted in contradictory ways. Moreover, he expressed his views on issues with brief aphorisms instead of detailed analyses, leaving the impression of ambiguity and ambivalence, Although Nietzsche formulated many distinctive views, which emerge from his writings with considerable clarity.

Although Nietzsche was by temperament an atheist, he contemplated the Death of God with mixed reactions. He was appalled at the consequences that would follow once everyone had become fully aware of all the implications of the death of God, a cultural event that he said not yet become apparent to modern man, contemplating simultaneously the collapse of religious faith and the mounting belief in the Darwinian notion of a relentless evolution of the species. At the same time, the death of God meant for Nietzsche the opening of a new day, a day when the essentially life-denying ethics of Christianity could be replaced with a life-affirming philosophy. His ambivalent reaction to the nihilistic consequences of the death of God turned Nietzsche's mind to the central question of human values. In his search for a new foundation for new values in a day when God could no longer be the goal and sanction of human conduct, Nietzsche turned to the atheistic dimension of human nature as the most promising alternative to religion. It was the Greek genius he believed, that had originally discovered the true meaning and mode of human endeavor. He initially drew his fundamental insights about man from the Greek conceptions of Apollo and Dionysus.

Jacques Derrida

Derrida was one of the most influential postmodernist and poststructuralist. Derrida has managed to turn much of Western thought on its head, but he has only been able to do this by standing on the shoulders of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Saussure. In Derrida's writings, the postmodern mind tries to reach the heights of self-awareness that Hegel reached. Derrida shows that knowledge isn't something you find, but something you make. Human thought can't say anything true that isn't connected to how it was made. Language shapes the world to meet human needs and also changes it. Derrida says that there is nothing before the text and that there is no point of reference beyond the text that is always true. Derrida shows how hard the western philosophical tradition has worked to find a fixed and permanent center. When we talk about things like Plato's theory of forms, Aristotle's immovable mover, The God of The Bible, Cartesian clear and distinct ideas, Spinoza's substance, Kant's transcendental ego, Hegel's absolute mind, etc., we usually use capital letters. Western philosophers use language in a way that makes sense if they talk about something fixed or permanent.

After much buildup, Derrida launched a major attack on established metaphysics. His "Deconstruction" is not a technique but rather a practice of "decentering," a new manner of reading or judging the texts. This exercise draws our attention to the prominence of the center term, and then encourages us to challenge that term in an effort to elevate the status of the marginalized term. The outcast term momentarily topples the established order. The second step in deconstructing literature is to question the authority of the privileged term by illuminating the potential centrality of the suppressed, marginalized interpretation. After Ferdinand de Saussure's insistence on the arbitrary nature of the verbal sign served as inspiration for Jacques Derrida's deconstructive tactics, they became a fundamental part of postmodernism, especially in post-structural literary theory and text analysis. In order to reveal the prejudice on which the western world is based, a deconstruction of philosophy requires examining the much hierarchical antagonism of cause and effect, presence and absence, speech and writing.

For Derrida, meaning and truth can never be transcendently grounded. It is so because language which was mistakenly supposed to be a system of the communication of meaning and truth is actually a play of differences. They have been attempting to fix the play of differences. Every such attempt has assumed a binary opposition, one term of which is taken to be prior to and superior to other. The second term is made out to be derivative, accidental and unimportant in relation to first, which is taken as an ideal limit and the central concept of a metaphysical system. The second term is either effaced or suppressed. Thus such a second term is subordination leads to hierarchisation. Derrida points out that these hierarchies are embedded in everyday language and western metaphysics is permeated by these hierarchies as well as numberless other presuppositions inherent in language. Metaphysicians knot these presuppositions into a metaphysical system.

Derrida has tried to find systematic contradictions, twists, reversals, and betrayals in metaphysical writings. He has tried to show how different Western ideas are and also tried to break down the philosophical presuppositions inherent in a text. He has attempted to demonstrate that the way the text is written has nothing to do with anything outside of it. Philosophers are condemned to endless alternations of words, expressions, and metaphors. However, it is an exercise in ceaseless play of substitutions.

CONCLUSION

We can never conclusively decide any metaphysical problem this way or that way. We can try to prove God, we can also disprove God. We can try to prove the existence of soul and we can also disprove it, we can try to prove man is free or prove he is determined. Therefore in this sense metaphysics is impossible. In science or mathematics we can prove or disapprove propositions there are methods present there.

Following Wittgenstein, logical positivists argue that philosophy is an analytical and clarificatory activity rather than a search for basic principles or superscientific truths. When philosophers ask questions like "what is mind," "what is time," "what is matter," and so on, they are not asking for more information, as is commonly assumed, but rather for an understanding of "matter," "mind," and "time," among other things.

There are no absolutes or fixed points as postmodernist claims. Therefore, the cosmos we live in is decenter. According to postmodernists, our standards of judgment, whether *aesthetic, moral, or empirical*, our valuation preferences and aims, and even how we view the world's objects, are derived from our community's culture, language, and conceptual framework. There is an irreducible multiplicity of languages that are mutually incommensurable in terms of conceptual



framework. Postmodernists have pushed an uncompromising form of cognitive relativism by arguing that there are no cross-cultural criteria or impartial frameworks in which we may compare distinct versions of reality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. *Mir, Sanaullah. (2012). Metaphilosophy of John Wisdom (pp.1-4). Aligarh (U.P) India: National Printers and Publishers.*
- [2]. *Ibid., pp.4-5*
- [3]. *Ibid., pp.6-10*
- [4]. *Ibid., pp. 29-33*
- [5]. *Ibid.,pp.27-33*
- [6]. *Powell, Jim. (2000). Derrida for beginners, (New Delhi) India: Orient Black Swan.*
- [7]. *Samuel Enoch, Stumpf. (1966). Socrates to Sartre: A History OF Philosophy (pp.282-285) (U.S): Mc Graw-Hill inc.*
- [8]. *Ibid.,303-310*
- [9]. *Thilly, Frank. (1984). A History of Western Philosophy (pp.82,160). India Allahabad: Central Publishing house.*
- [10]. *Khawaja, J. (1965). Five Approaches to Philosophy (p.65). New Delhi: Allied Publisher*
- [11]. *Edward Paul, Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol.8, 1967, p.325*
- [12]. *Ayer, A.J. (1936). Language, Truth and Logic. London: Gollancz*
- [13]. www.imw.at/publications/junior.../Nietzsche's-perspective-beyond-truth-as-an-ideal.
- [14]. <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- [15]. <http://binupeni1.com>> 2017/07(part 1).