

## DESCRIPTIVE METAPHYSICS AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE

Metaphysics has been generally described by the modern philosophers as that which, by the help of a set of basic presuppositions, seeks to interpret the universe of experience as a whole. We have not taken here the other concepts in which philosophers describe metaphysics as dealing with transcendent entities beyond experience. The set of basic presuppositions or categories in the former sense form a sort of conceptual framework for various branches of studies including sciences. In the field of sciences, these basic presuppositions are most important, as the scientists work within the framework prescribed by the presuppositions. This has been pointed out to be the cause of immense progress in the field of sciences. In case of metaphysics, however, there is no such presupposition to start with. It is actually concerned with framing them appropriately, so that the system consisting these presuppositions would explain the world of experience adequately.

This way of characterisation of metaphysics is related with the question of language. Accordingly, different conceptual schemes would give rise to different types of language systems in various branches of studies. In the case of natural sciences, while explaining the world of experience, the conceptual scheme and the language system related to it play most important role. In the words of A. J. Ayer<sup>1</sup>, “. . . to ask what the world is like is to ask of any given empirical proposition whether it is true or false, and this means that what counts for us as the world depends upon our conceptual system. It is, however, at least conceivable that our conceivable system should be radically different and in that case the facts would be different too.” He goes further in the same work and says . . . “Thus there is above all a sense in which philosophy can change the world, not indeed materially, for that must be left to science, but formally, by refashioning the structure of language. In this way it may help to determine what fact there can be.”<sup>2</sup>

Following this line of thought we may say language with different conceptual schemes would give different accounts of the facts

of experience. Accordingly, different conceptual schemes would give rise to different observational languages also. Again, from this it may follow that any language in use should have a conceptual scheme lying at the core of it and explaining the universe of experience in some particular way.

Ordinary language of every day use, therefore, has some particular conceptual scheme embodied in it. It gives some sort of account of the particular facts of experience. It may therefore, be said that the observational language of every day use has its own 'metaphysical theory' behind it though commonly, they are taken as 'observational' or 'factual'. Some philosophers hold that the metaphysics or the conceptual scheme consisting of categories and concepts lying hidden in the ordinary language is more serviceable rather than any other brought from outside. The metaphysics of ordinary language would be more adequate to explain the universe of experience according to the ordinary language philosophers. Hence, the metaphysicians should only 'describe' the categorical concepts of ordinary language—in order to have a proper conceptual frame-work. This trend has been called as 'descriptive' in comparison to the other trend of metaphysics which aim to 'revise' the old categorical concepts and devise new ones in order to have a better conceptual scheme. The former seems to give a 'descriptive metaphysics' in contrast to the other which has been called as 'revisionary' metaphysics ( We follow here P. F. Strawson's classification ).

The ordinary language philosophers hold that a metaphysician should try to build up a metaphysics only by 'unearthing' and 'revealing' the categories lying hidden in the ordinary usage and describing them without any bias or 'pre-conceived ideas'. Sometimes it is also held that a metaphysician's study should consist of studying the traditional metaphysical categories in their ordinary uses and try to find out how the uses of these words are learnt and taught etc. The same sort of enquiry may be undertaken about the other words also. These ideas may be found to criss cross each other as Wittgenstein says, [and none of them may be found basic or essential. Some ideas of the traditional metaphysics may thus be found senseless or meaningful in the linguistic structure unearthed and validated. Again different

categorial concepts may also be related to each other and organised into a definite metaphysical system. In this attempt to build up a metaphysical system, the philosophers would be guided by the grammar of the functioning language and the need of communicating experience among the fellow-beings.

There has been some attempts to build up metaphysics by inventing the presuppositions and categories lying in our ordinary language and relating them in order to make a systematic whole. We may take Fred Sommer's article 'The ordinary language tree'<sup>3</sup> as an attempt of this sort. Fred Sommers holds that some ontology is necessarily implied in our ordinary language. Thus we always see that there were some expressions which are used as both subject and predicate forms of an intelligible statement and there are some other expressions which are not so. In this pattern of meaning relation a sort of hierarchy culminating in an apex is revealed when one passes from the lower level of this hierarchy to the higher, one passes from expressions that are not used together as subject and predicate to more general expressions that are used with each of these at the lower level. The expression 'shape' is used with both physical body and circle, though it cannot be said that physical body is a circle or a circle is a physical body. Now 'shape', 'physical body' and 'circle' are all related and 'shape' stands on a higher level than the other two. According to the structural requirement of such a hierarchy, the expression at the apex level can be predicated of all the other words in the language. This expression can be used as a predicate of all the other words and so it is a universal category. It can never be misused. The expressions like 'exists', 'can be talked about' are the examples of such universal category. By studying these categories an ordinary language ontology may be devised.

The strong faith in the ordinary language philosophy has been asserted on various grounds. E. Hall claims "Philosophy can discover and express the fundamental dimensions of reality, the categories only through or by means of the terms of sentences we use to talk about the world."<sup>4</sup> He goes further and says. . . . "that predication in every day language functions in several radically different ways, that these different ways are easily distinguishable by any one who has a sense for common usage, and that,

when differentiated clearly by setting up a normal form of sentence for each, they reveal basic dimensions of reality."<sup>5</sup>

Without going into detail, we may mention that E. Hall has distinguished among four types of predications (by constructing four normal forms of basic sentences) which he holds differ fundamentally in the ways the predicates are ascribed and claims that it can be shown how each of the reveal some sort of dimension of reality. The four sorts of basic sentences are (a) descriptive declarative, saying the 'individual', 'a' has the property 'f' (example, table is blue), (b) revelatory declarative sentences in which 'a' is a property and the property is predicated of it, (example, green is between yellow and blue), (c) valuative sentences include imperative, hortative, optative and the value statements 'a ought to be f'. (example— it were good that the table has the property of blueness) and (d) Semitic declarative sentence speaking about language, for example, a sentence characterising the event which is an occurrence of some linguistic expression. He has tried to show that each of them have some metaphysical implication as they reveal some dimension of reality. We shall not, however, discuss whether this sort of system is adequate or these predications are the only sort of predications which may be contained in the language.

The faith in ordinary language philosophy has been demonstrated by many other philosophical works though the mode prescribed for building up a metaphysical system on the basis of ordinary language may vary. Stuart Hampshire holds, on the line of the philosophers we have discussed, that for defining some one's philosophy it is enough to discover what existential statements he takes to be unproblematical and in need of no further explanation. And in order to discover what existential statements he takes as unproblematical, it must be enough to discover what kind of discourse provides him with this absolute certainty in the use of language—'This as certain as anything can be' (e.g., 'as that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ' or 'as that I am sitting in this room'). "There has always been this connection between the so-called theory of knowledge i.e. the critical comparison of the conditions of certainty in application attached to expressions of different types and metaphysics; in fact the two cannot be separated or even in the end distinguished. Some one who in exaggerated

respect for the common sense at the moment, refuses to make such weighted and critical comparisons, refuses to enter the domain of Philosophy<sup>6</sup>."

Such a view that the study of ordinary language is sufficient for obtaining a proper metaphysical system, naturally goes against the view that the ordinary language may be reformed in the light of the categories which are not derived from ordinary language. Ordinary language has rich resources, they say, and is more well grounded than the categories which are devised and brought from outside the ordinary language. J. L. Austin argues, "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the life time of many generations<sup>7</sup>."

He goes further and adds that these words "are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle... than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs on an afternoon<sup>8</sup>."

It has been claimed also that the conceptual frame-work revealed by the language cannot be revised in the light of some other devised conceptual frame-work. Since that would mean stepping out of the ordinary language which is impossible for any one. Stuart Hampshire holds in conformity to such a view,— "We cannot step outside the language which we use, and judge it from some ulterior and superior vantage point<sup>9</sup>." Language, he seems to think, is something which is determined by the 'form of life' which every body must share with other members of his society. Language evolves in this 'form of life' so that it would be understood by people having that 'form of life'.

Stephen Toulmin and Stuart Hampshire have tried to analyse the whole structure of ordinary language and in doing so, they try to discover the rules which must be obeyed in any use of any linguistic expression under any circumstances so that the expression would be communicable intelligibly.

J. L. Austin, however, seems to be the pioneer working in this direction. He seeks to find out the nuances in the ordinary uses of significant words and then to organise in a new and instructive fashion, the limits provided by them.

However, it has been noted in the history of Philosophy that the conceptual frame-work in terms of the categories taken from the ordinary language, may not be satisfactory to all thinkers. Sometimes the established uses may be held as such that they ignore some important aspects of our experience whereas a conceptual frame-work in terms of the categories that are not actually derived from ordinary language but devised by some metaphysicians may be preferred for such purposes. In such case one may change the uses in ordinary language in the light of these categories or in other words may revise the ordinary language taking these new categories as nothing but proposals of possible uses. Thus the terms like 'gravitational potential', 'absolute temperature', 'electric field', 'Psi function' etc. are not derived from our ordinary language but were devised for explaining some aspects of experience. Development in the field of scientific researches made it necessary and at the same time possible to devise such terms for explaining certain aspects of experience which previously were not explained or were explained but only unsatisfactorily. The renowned Scientists like Einstein, Plank, Heisenberg and Schrodinger are responsible for such revision of language, yet so far as they are building up some systems of sciences they are also fulfilled metaphysicians.

A metaphysician thus, has to elucidate the rules of the category words either in ordinary use or in proposed use. In both the cases metaphysical activities are interpreted in terms of language system. Aristotle and Descartes among others may be mentioned as those who proposed for important uses of some new keywords for the subsequent scientists and philosophers. Wittgenstien among others in recent days has changed the uses of some old terms and also introduced some of the extra-ordinary uses. Many others again prefer to stick to the categories of ordinary language only. We may take P. F. Strawson,<sup>10</sup> a celebrated ordinary language philosopher, for a short review as he tried to build up a "descriptive metaphysics" on the basis of ordinary language in the book "Individuals". He, like the other ordinary philosophers we have already discussed, declares that metaphysics should only describe the 'actual structure of our thought about the world'. It is not 'revisionary' since it would not propose

for a revision of the conceptual frame-work "which is revealed in the study of ordinary language". He admits, however, that strong demarcation between the 'descriptive' and 'revisionary' metaphysics is not possible. He also holds that only a close examination and analysis of the ordinary language would not be sufficient to reveal the hidden structure of thought lying submerged in ordinary language.

The particular theory that Strawson has built upon the language of ordinary use has been and may be criticised on various points. His endeavour to build up a descriptive metaphysics on the basis of ordinary language has drawn attention of the recent thinkers. It has been a detail work to establish the claim of the ordinary language philosophers. Hence, we shall take up the basic presuppositions prescribed by him and examine the possibility of an acceptable descriptive metaphysics.

The most important presupposition seems to be that the proper conceptual system constitutes the essential structure of ordinary language by which people talk to each other about the publicly identifiable and re-identifiable objects. So the descriptive metaphysics exposing and explaining the conceptual system has to be built upon the basis of ordinary language. We can see that the conceptual system would provide the essential structure for any medium of ordinary communication. Again as the history is full of records of changes in concepts, it may be said that the conceptual scheme of understanding and explaining the universe is in a process. So it does not seem reasonable to hold one particular conceptual scheme at one point of time as the 'actual'.

To these doubts, however, Strawson would reply that the human thought in its massive central core does not change at all. Hence the categories and concepts in their most fundamental character would remain unchanged always. Consequently new truth is unlikely in descriptive metaphysics. This, however, does not mean that the metaphysical activities would come to an end when the right conceptual scheme is reached. Strawson has accommodated the historical fact of endless metaphysical activity. He holds that though the Central subject matter of descriptive metaphysics does not change, the critical and analytical idiom of philosophy changes constantly. The permanent relationships are described in an important idiom and it reflects both

climate of thought of the age and the individual philosopher's personal style of thinking. So all philosophers must re-think other's thought in their contemporary terms.

The question, however, remains : how to know that one has discovered truly the actual conceptual scheme lying hidden in one's contemporary language. Only when one is convinced about a particular conceptual scheme, its rethinking may be taken up.

When talking about the 'actual' conceptual scheme, Strawson seems to be thinking of the 'right' conceptual scheme. But then, he also uses the word 'actual' in the sense of 'adequate' or 'suitable'. Since the purpose of the conceptual scheme is obviously to enable us to interpret and understand the world around us, the revisionary metaphysicians always claim that they are concerned with discovering a better or more adequate conceptual scheme than the existing one for a better interpretation of the world. Strawson also recognises the claim and the merit but he maintains that the revisionary metaphysics may be ascribed this merit only because there is descriptive metaphysics.

This confidence of the descriptive metaphysicians in the unchangeable 'actual' or the 'right' conceptual scheme seems to be based on a changeless categorial core of human thinking. This faith has been shared by many celebrated thinkers. Yet, we cannot ignore the historical fact that the most important concepts of one time have been changed or are discarded, and new concepts are devised for the sake of science and philosophy from time to time.

The contention of the descriptive metaphysicians along with the emphasis on the serviceability of the ordinary language has been supported by the view that the concepts of classical physics are refined concepts of ordinary language and they are fundamental for scientific discourse and investigation since they serve for unambiguous communication about events, about setting up of experiments and the results. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, though admits the importance and necessity of the concept of classical physics, it also shows that the application of these concepts would be limited by the relations of uncertainty. Thus Heisenberg holds that in quantum theory, the initial position and velocity of the electron could be determined by some sort of experiment but then there would be an inaccuracy



following at least from the uncertainty relations. It may, however, contain more errors because of the difficulty of the experiments. So what is obtained is a probability function representing the experimental situation at the time of the measurement which include the possible errors of the measurements also. This probability function would allow us to calculate the probable result of the measurement of experiment.

The Copenhagen interpretation of classical physics has been criticised by many philosophers like Bohm, Janosy, Einstein and Vonlake etc. They have tried in their different counter-proposals to show that concepts of classical physics are more serviceable for the purpose of sciences. Accordingly, the categories derived from ordinary language and the ontology involved in it would be more preferable for the scientific discourse—as the ordinary language philosophers claim.

Following W. Heisenberg in his book "Physics and Philosophy"<sup>11</sup> we may observe that these critics of the Copenhagen interpretation of classical physics try to cling to classical physics without reservation—in contrast to the Copenhagen interpretation. They however, admit the experimental results of the Copenhagen interpretation as adequate. Again, in this criticism of the Copenhagen interpretation the essential symmetry properties of the quantum theory have been sacrificed. If this feature is taken as a genuine feature of nature, these counterproposals cannot be supported.

In view of this discussion, it seems that the categories derived from the ordinary language and the materialistic ontology in it, though necessary, is not sufficient for the formation of a framework of scientific investigations. The scientific investigation based upon the frame-work would only yield a probable result. Hence; a mere description of the categories of ordinary language would not be sufficient for a metaphysical theory.

Strawson assumes in building his 'Descriptive metaphysics' that one conceptual scheme pervades all ordinary language of current use. But with due respect for the recent philosophical researches trying to establish a similar point of view, we may point out that the modern linguists have reached the conclusion that the categorical schemes of different languages are different from each other, cutting the universe of human experience supposedly

at the joints—in quite different way. It has also been found that many of these schemes are fairly successful and one of them cannot be preferred with sufficient reasons rather than others.

Again, ordinary language has vast dimension, many purpose to serve and accordingly many characteristics. One word may be used in various ways under different circumstances. It does not seem possible that one person would be able to detect all the possibilities some of which are very often vague. In such case a philosopher with particular bent of mind, like a positivist, or an idealist would come to note some features of the language—while overlooking the others which may seem important to another philosopher. Hence different categorical schemes would be built up on the basis of ordinary language. Again, new usages of the old words etc. may be introduced along with some new-ones while emphasising some vague 'categories' lying hidden in the language. This may lead to a change in the structure of ordinary language. Hence, we cannot say following Strawson that the structure of ordinary language is logically necessary.

No doubt there are many reasons to take up ordinary language as the starting point in building up metaphysics. It is more appropriate and reasonable than other starting points. Since it has evolved from the 'form of life' of our society which we share with each other. Again, this language is the fund of varied lessons of innumerable experiences gained from our life. But for the reasons mentioned above, it cannot be the end. Since the language would have a new look as soon as the new categories are revealed. The philosophers may try to reform the language so that these categories would be made more clear and prominent. From the other point of view, the new interpretations of the world would bring new categories and concepts to language in use. So the change of ordinary language becomes obvious. In view of these possibilities, a descriptive metaphysics should describe the categories and changes and indicate their future states of progress.

It may be argued that if men were capable of inventing theories lying hidden in ordinary language, they can also invent new theories and new languages. When a new theory seems to be more serviceable, it would be better to abandon the theory along with the old language.

The point seems to be that a metaphysical theory or conceptual frame-work contained in the ordinary language of every day use has to change when better theories come to be conceived due to progress of knowledge or the new theories have to be reduced into the old theory embodied in the ordinary language. If change in the categorial concept and conceptual frame-work is accepted, a revisionary metaphysics cannot be denied. But the reduction of one theory into another has been found inadequate in most of the cases. A detailed discussion has been taken up by P. K. Feyerabend amongst some other philosophers about the inadequacy of reduction. Some philosophers have suggested the possibility of reduction of the dispositional concepts of sciences like 'temperature', 'gravitation' etc. which seem to be beyond the level of ordinary language, into the empirical concepts of ordinary language. Similarly, the theoretical concepts of sciences like 'absolute temperature', 'electric field' etc. obviously do not belong to the ordinary language. Philosophers have tried to interpret them in terms of empirical concepts or ordinary language by the help of what they call as 'correspondence rules' or 'bridge rules' etc. This could bring the dispositional terms and the theoretical terms of sciences into the level of ordinary language. However, a complete interpretation of the theoretical concepts by the 'correspondence rules', in terms of empirical concepts of ordinary language has been found inadequate and even unprofitable for the sake of sciences. Similarly, the Scientists would prefer to use the dispositional terms as they are, even if it would be possible to reduce these terms completely into the observational vocabulary of ordinary language. We do not intend to enter into the detailed discussion of this problem which has been taken up exhaustively by R. Carnap, C. Hempel and others.

It has been pointed out by many philosophers that 'reductionism' sometimes, is a sort of perversion of the principle that one should seek unity in diversity and that one should try to render the complex into simple. We may also note that a close study of ordinary language itself warns against forceful denial of significant differences which may result from 'reductionism'. In fact, it has been suggested that the irreducibility of the new concepts into the older ones suggests the revolutionary progress in the field of sciences and forceful preservation of the older con-

cepts would be undesirable. P.K. Feyerabend writes that "wherever such preservation is observed, we shall feel inclined to think that the suggested new theories are not as revolutionary as they perhaps ought to be and we shall have the suspicion that some ad-hoc procedures have perhaps been adopted. Violation of ordinary usage and/or other 'established' usages, on the other hand, is a sign that real progress has been made and it is welcomed by any body interested in such progress provided of course that this violation is connected with the suggestion of a new point of view or new theory and is not just the result of linguistic arbitrariness"<sup>12,\*</sup>

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#### NOTES

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- 4 & 5. *Categorial analysis*. E. Hall. Ch. 'The Forms of Sentences and the Dimensions of Reality', p. 71, University of North Carolina Press, U.S.A., 1964.
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