

**ANALYSIS AS A METHOD IN PHILOSOPHY WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO A. J. AYER**

The 20th century analysts are unanimous in their claim that the subject matter of philosophy is language and its legitimate method is analysis.¹ For, they conceive that philosophy, unlike other disciplines such as Botany, Zoology, Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy etc., does not have any subject matter of its own to deal with. In order to save philosophy from this rather awkward situation analysts claim that they have assigned a special function to philosophy which is a unique feature of philosophy. The assigned function of philosophy is the logical clarification of our everyday language and science. By analysing the concepts of everyday language and science, analysts felt that the so-called philosophical puzzles can be solved. A. J. Ayer, who was a chief patron of logical positivist movement in Britain, holds the view that a philosopher neither does indulge in experimentation nor does he patiently observe the behaviour of any natural objects, yet the statements of a philosopher purport to provide us 'knowledge' which is different from the 'knowledge' of science. Then the question before Ayer was what kind of 'knowledge' does philosophical analysts provide us? To put it simply—what then is philosophical analysis? In an attempt to answer this question, Ayer maintains that philosophical analysis is concerned with the use and function of language. This analysis, according to Ayer, attempts to rewrite the sentences of everyday language and science in such a way that these sentences exhibit their proper

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logical form; consequently their meaning becomes clear. As a result of this approach, believes Ayer, the traditional problems of philosophy are found to disappear. He opines that the problems of philosophy appear and reappear due to muddled thinking and this muddled thinking itself is largely the product of our improper use of language.

In what follow I have made a sincere attempt to show the futility of analysis as a method in the acquisition of knowledge of objective reality. In other words, Ayer's notion of philosophy deprives philosophy of its empirical content. In addition to that, Ayer's supposition that the sole function of philosophy is mere analysis of language is not at all convincing as philosophy does not confine to one particular subject matter or the other. In order to accomplish our project, let us examine the views of Ayer with regard to nature and method of philosophy.

I

Trying to vindicate his claim, namely, the sole function of philosophy is logical analysis of language, Ayer views that philosophy is not a search for 'first principles'. This is because 'the foundation of these first principles to provide certain basis for our knowledge, it is clear that they are not to be found among the so-called laws of nature. For, we shall see that the 'laws of nature', if they are not mere definitions, they are simply hypotheses which may be confuted by experience'.² Ayer argues that the 'first principles' are not deduced from an intuitively preceived truth upon the basis of which a philosopher proceeds to construct a deductive system. They are, contends Ayer, no objects of speculative knowledge which lie beyond empirical investigation. If one wants to deduce all knowledge from the 'first principles' without trespassing into 'metaphysics', then one must take a priori truths as his premises. And from one set

of a priori truths (tautologies) one can deduce another set of a priori truths.³ Thus, Ayer envisages that it is not possible to deduce all our knowledge from the 'first principles.' It implies that there is some amount of knowledge that can be derived from the 'first principles' (a priori truths). Then it is none other than the knowledge of logic and mathematics.

In the first place, Ayer's attack on the view that philosophy is a search for 'first principles' can be understood as an attempt to disapprove Cartesian view-point. For, Descartes aimed at making philosophy as exact as mathematics. By virtue of his commitment to this view, Descartes had to look for the 'first and indubitable' foundations or principles of philosophy from which a consistent philosophical system can be constructed. In addition to that, Descartes relied on two important powers of human reason, namely, intuition and deduction as two main tools of his inquiry. According to Ayer, the knowledge deduced from such premises cannot have any informative content since one set of analytic truths leads us to another set of analytical truths. He also maintains that the 'first principles' cannot be found among the so-called 'laws of nature' for, the laws of nature can be confuted by experience. Consequently, it is not possible to derive the 'first principles' either from intuition or from sense-experience. What is spurious with Ayer's notion is that he could not distinguish between the 'laws of nature' and mere 'statements of tendency'. A law is something which does not fail to occur in a given set of conditions. Laws of nature are well established scientific truths. They can neither be verified nor be falsified. Ayer's main contention is to show that the activity of philosophizing does not involve in the search for 'first principles' What then does this activity of philosophizing consist of?

Ayer asserts that the activity of philosophizing is essentially analytic. In support of his assertion Ayer holds that "those who are commonly called philosophers have actually been engaged in carrying out analyses."⁴ Not only that, "it can be shown that the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily not metaphysicians but analysts".⁵ From this it follows that to be a philosopher one needs to be an analyst. Apart from that, the greatness of any philosopher lies in his being an analyst rather than a speculator. Accordingly, Ayer considers his empiricist predecessors (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) as great. Of Locke and Berkeley, Ayer writes that Locke was not a common-sense philosopher in the sense in which G. E. Moore is a common-sense philosopher. Neither he (Locke) tried to prove common-sense beliefs on a priori grounds, nor he affirmed or denied the validity of any empirical matter but only analysed them in terms of sense-experience. Similarly, Berkeley was not a metaphysician as he was commonly understood to be. Like Locke, he too was indulged in analysing the reality of material things.⁶

As a matter of fact, Ayer follows the footsteps of his empiricist predecessors Berkeley and Hume in reducing the statements about material objects to statements about sense-data. The phenomenalist analysis of material objects of Berkeley and Hume has been converted into linguistic phenomenalism. The very purpose of this reductionist analysis is to show that the existence of material objects is somehow inferred from the sense-data. With regard to Hume, Ayer says that Hume is opposed to metaphysics (transcendental kind of metaphysics). It is only a belief that Hume has put forward the views concerning the nature of philosophical propositions. In fact, what is considered to be philosophical are his works of analysis. The whole misunderstanding about Hume's philosophical position is the outcome of his treat-

ment of causation that is often misunderstood.⁷ Ayer himself advocates the same Humean conception. While dealing with the nature of causation Ayer writes that "our conception of causation is the same as his (Hume's)."⁸ In this way Ayer illustrates that the activity of analysis is an unique feature of British Empiricists.

According to Ayer, philosopher as an analyst is not concerned with 'facts' or 'notions' or 'things'. In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual but only linguistic in their nature. They express definitions or formal consequences of definitions.⁹ In this way, Ayer, a professed empiricist, dispenses with all empirical facts as irrelevant to philosophy. For him a philosopher is only concerned with the stipulative definitions of his own inventions. It is clear from the following passage of Ayer.

I must say not that I see the cigarette case, if this is to carry the implication that there is a cigarette case there, but it only seems to me that I am seeing it...the next step, continuing our example, is to convert the sentence 'it now seems to me that I see a cigarette case' into, 'I am now seeing a seeming cigarette case! And this seeming cigarette case, which lives only in my present experience, is an example of a sense-datum.'¹⁰

Indeed, it is in a pickwickian sense, i. e., regardless of their actual or literal sense, that 'facts' or 'notions' or 'things' can be analysed.

Proceeding further, Ayer tries to distinguish philosophy from other sciences. With regard to philosophy Ayer holds that philosophy is distinguished from other arts and sciences not because of its methods but because of its subject matter. Philosophers utter statements which are intended to be factual but in the final analysis it is realised that they are not the statements

about matters of fact. The theories of philosophy are not tested by any observation.¹¹ What follows from the above assertions of Ayer is that the questions such as whether the material objects are real, whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived, cannot be decided on the basis of scientific information. According to Ayer, these are not the questions which could be settled by observation but can be resolved on the basis of analysis of language. To quote Ayer's remarks in this context, "What is in dispute in such cases is not whether, in a given set of circumstances, this or that event will happen, but rather how anything at all that happens is to be described."¹² In short, the activity of philosophical analysis consists in providing definitions.

Regarding the nature of philosophical analysis, Ayer holds the view that the definitions which philosophy provides are not 'explicit definitions' but 'definitions in use'. In an attempt to illustrate this point, Ayer writes that "a lexicographer also seeks to give information about the usage of words, but the philosophers differ from him in being concerned...but with the use of particular expressions...and whereas the propositions of the lexicographer are empirical, philosophical propositions, if they are true, are usually analytic."¹³ Thus a lexicographer is considered to be an empirical scientist who glosses antecedent facts, whereas the true propositions of philosophy do not express anything new but only clarify what is already expressed by the propositions. In short 'the definitions in use' show "how the sentences in which it (a symbol) significantly occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences, which contain neither the definition itself, nor any of its synonyms".¹⁴ The very purpose of philosophical analysis, according to Ayer, is to translate certain sentences into their equivalents. For example, the sentence 'The round square does not exist', is equivalent to 'No one thing can be both square and round', and the sentence 'The author of Waverley

was Scotch ' is equivalent to ' One person only, wrote Waverley, and that person was Scotch '.¹⁵ Susan Stebbing in her review article on Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* points out that the statement ' The author of Waverley was Scotch ' is translated into an equivalent statement or sentence that ' One person, and one person only wrote Waverley and that person was Scotch ' violates the rules of analysis provided by Ayer. Stebbing argues that if the word " that " is used referentially, then " that person was Scotch " is equivalent to the whole of the original; and if it is used demonstratively, the defining expression " is not a translation of the original at all ".¹⁶ In defence of his position against Stebbing's criticism, Ayer argues that " the object of analysing ' The author of Waverley was Scotch ' is not just to obtain an accurate translation of this particular sentence, but to elucidate the use of a whole class of expressions, of which ' the author of Waverley ' serves merely a typical example ".¹⁷ According to Ayer, the examples of this kind are only meant to show how certain class of expressions can be explained in our ordinary language. If a philosopher sticks to this kind of analysis, claims Ayer, he will avoid either interfering in the sphere of natural science or involve himself in metaphysics.

In an attempt to define an ambiguous symbol, Ayer states that " a symbol is constituted by signs which are identical with one another in their sensible form, and in their significance, and that a sign is a sense-content, or a series of sense-contents, which is used to convey literal meaning, is not to say that a symbol is a collection of system of sense-contents. " ¹⁸ From the above statement of Ayer we can deduce that he is heading for ' reductive analysis '. Every symbol is reduced to signs which are identical in their sensible form. This kind of ' reductive analysis ' as Ayer believes is equally applicable to material object statements. This is to say that the statement about material objects

can be translated, without residue, into the statements about sense-data. Ayer presupposes "The problem of giving an actual rule for translating sentences about material things into sentences about sense-contents, which may be called the problem of the 'reduction' of material things to sense-contents, is main philosophical part of the traditional problem of perception." ¹⁹ Ayer states that the reason for adopting this reductive analysis is to eliminate certain problematic entities and to replace them with relatively less problematic entities ²⁰ It implies that the propositions that express the facts of ordinary perceptual knowledge are not simple, and so are not the ultimate constituents of reality. For example, the expressions such as 'table', 'chair' etc, are problematic in the sense that they are philosophically disputable entities. And when the propositions containing such expressions are analysed, then they will be expressed in terms of ultimate constituents of knowledge (sense-data). In other words, the ordinary unanalysed knowledge seems to be about such things as 'table', 'chairs' etc., but analysis will make clear the ultimate constituents of knowledge. In this way, Ayer identifies philosophy with analysis and claims that "the only positive contribution that philosophy can make to knowledge is in the field of analysis". ²¹

Thus Ayer who does not wish to break too finally the empiricist tradition could maintain that Berkeley in his analysis of 'physical objects', Hume in his analysis of causation were doing philosophy as conceived by logical positivists. The business is still the old reductive analysis (phenomenalism) even if it is under new management.

II

As it is discussed above, the chief aim of Ayer in identifying philosophy with analysis is to dismiss the aspects related to

objective material world. If all that a philosopher can do is the logical analysis of concepts of everyday language and science then what kind of knowledge do we acquire about the objective reality? Thus the analysis of Ayer leads us away from the path of knowledge into the path of empty arguments about words and concepts.

Let us consider some of the main objections raised by Max Black, John Wisdom, Gilbert Ryle and Maurice Cornforth against this kind of 'analysis'. This does not mean that they are negating the analysis as a useful method in philosophy but interpret analysis in a different way altogether.

Max Black expresses the view that analysis is a method of ostentation. Accordingly, the business of analysis is the analysis of facts but not of meaning of statements. For instance, the facts such as 'Mr. Jones sat down', 'Mr Jones is in his study' etc., can be pointed out to. Black tries to differentiate 'philosophical analysis' from 'logical analysis'. For, he believes "that the analytical method under consideration is either considered with analysis of facts in the sense of fact in which the same fact corresponds to different sentences, or, if it is regarded as concerned with analysing the meaning of statements or sentences, analyses of those statements into conjunctions of statements entailed by, but not having the same meaning as the analysandum. It is this fact which distinguishes ostentation or philosophical analysis from logical analysis which is concerned with the expression of statements into statements of identical meaning".²² Thus Black asserts that philosophical analysis is identified with ostentation. In other words, in philosophical analysis facts are pointed out to, whereas logical analysis is concerned with the analysis of meaning of statements or sentences. Black makes it clear that the analysis practised by him is totally different from the analysis practised by logical positivists.

Like Black, Wisdom too holds the view that philosophical analysis is an old and very useful method in philosophy. But unlike Black, Wisdom distinguishes 'philosophical analysis' from 'material analysis'. He illustrates "Whenever one analyses the fact that 'S' is 'P', one gives an ostensive translation of the sentence "S" is "P" ... that is because to do the one is to do the other with a certain intention. It does not follow from that to analyse the fact, the economic man always buys in a best market is to analyse the sentence 'the economic man always buys in the best market'. To suppose that it does follow is to fail to recognise the distinction between saying that analysis is translation and saying that it is a logical construction out of i.e., may be philosophically analysed, into, translation. It is non-sense to talk of analysing sentences".²³ The only noticeable difference between Black and Wisdom is that Black identifies philosophical analysis with ostentation, while Wisdom identifies philosophical analysis with logical analysis. However, both Black and Wisdom are in favour of ostentation.

The problem with ostentation is that it is not always possible to point out to each and every fact in reality. There are several social facts which defy the norms of ostentation and still be recognised as material facts. The social aspects of reality cannot be pointed out.

On the other hand, Ryle, in line with his ordinary language school philosophy, asserts that there are a number of type of expressions which he considers to be misleading. They are quasi-ontological statements such as 'Mr Baldwin is objective', 'Mr Pickwick is subjective', quasi-platonic statements like 'Colour involves extension, etc. Ryle holds that the business of a philosopher as an analyst is to restate propositions which do not exhibit their real form of the fact in a way in which the form will be duly exhibited. But a new point of 'analysis' is suggested

i.e., our purpose is no longer the ontological one of getting a clear view of structure of reality but to clear up puzzlement, prevent misconceptions of language and expose absurd theories. Thus 'Mr. Baldwin is a politician' exhibits the form of fact and is not in need of analysis. Whereas the statement 'Mr Baldwin is objective' does not exhibit the form of fact, hence it needs to be analysed. Without analysis it is misleading.²⁴ Ryle opines that the basic task of philosopher is to treat the expressions like 'Mr Baldwin is objective' which mislead to absurd theories and inferences.

Ryle's approach towards analysis is far more superior to the other analysts. As rightly pointed out by Ryle one must analyse only those statement which lead us astray. Nevertheless, Ryle, like any other analyst, believes that the sole function of philosophy is the clarification of our thought. In this manner, in spite of their subtle differences in carrying out analysis (philosophical analysis) the common claim acceptable to all these philosophers is that the subject matter of philosophy is language and its legitimate method is analysis.

It was Maurice Cornforth who castigated the analysts on the whole; as the method of analysis has reduced primary or basic entities into secondary or derivative entities. Against the method of analysis, Cornforth argues that the 'analysis' adopted by recent analytic philosophers explains that the elements of facts displayed in a new level analysis are "more ultimate than those which were displayed before the analysis took place".²⁵ Cornforth argues that this interpretation then seeks to show that the ultimate and basic elements to which our scientific and common-sense knowledge refers are sensations or sense-data. Thus, the whole tendency of philosophical analysis is in the direction of phenomenalism and concludes that "analytical philosophy is just as speculative as speculative philosophy".²⁶

The above account of Maurice Cornforth has brought out clearly the difficulties that arise out of practising analysis as a method in philosophy. To supplement the view expressed by Maurice Cornforth, we would like to affirm that philosophy does not have any fixed subject matter as such. Philosophy deals with the most general account of the world and man's place in it. This is all the more important because analysts are far more unanimous on this point. As we have shown elsewhere, Ayer and other analysts maintain that there is no integral philosophical system and that a philosopher creates his own. They believe that philosophy has occupied an intermediary position between science and metaphysics. Accordingly, all definite knowledge belongs to science and all dogma as to what supercedes definite knowledge belongs to metaphysics. Between science and metaphysics there is third line exposed to attack. This third line is philosophy. In his exposition of the subject matter of philosophy, Ayer makes it clear that the main purpose in introducing analysis as a method in philosophy is to prevent philosopher from trespassing either into science or into metaphysics. It tantamounts to saying that philosopher is deprived of both the definite knowledge of science and the subject matter of metaphysics. Thus, Ayer's philosophy has mere functional purpose without any objective inquiry. The analytical method practised by Ayer and other analysts deprives philosophy of any cognitive import by restricting philosophy to mere subjective analysis of language.

In opposition to Ayer's interpretation, we would say that the analysis practised by Ayer and other analysts is purely in a logical light. In other words, what is stressed in the analysis of a proposition and its meaning and what is neglected is the epistemological distinction between discovery and analysis. Discovery of facts is the principal motto of science whereas the interpretation of the results of various sciences (social as well as

natural) is the business of a philosopher. Hence, it would be irrational to create a philosophical system and draw a picture of the world or reality without having any firsthand information about the reality.

Department of Philosophy
Pondicherry University
Pondicherry—605104

K. SRINIVAS

NOTES

1. There are two types of analysts; world-analysts and word-analysts. The world-analysts like Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein of *Tractatus* etc., held the view, though there are subtle differences among themselves in holding this view, that language represents reality, while the word-analysts like Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ayer, Ryle, Austin etc. restricted their analysis to the concepts of ordinary language and science.
2. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (Hornmondsworth, 1975) 2nd edn, p. 62.
3. *Ibid.* p. 63.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
10. A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of knowledge* (Hornmondsworth, 1977). p. 96.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*
13. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 34.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
15. To explain the nature of analysis Ayer freely used the illustrations given by Russell in connection with his "Theory of Descriptions".
16. L. S. Stebbing, "Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic," *Mind* (London) N. S, Vol XLV, No. 45, 1936, p. 358.

17. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 31
18. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 86.
20. A. J. Ayer, "Philosophy and Language" in his *Concept of Person and Other Essays*, (London, 1973), p. 13.
21. A. J. Ayer, "Philosophy and Science" in his *Metaphysics and Common-sense*, (London, 1973), p. 82.
22. Max Black, "Is Analysis a Useful Method In Philosophy?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement* (London), Vol. 13, No. 13, 1934, p. 55.
23. John Wisdom, "Is Analysis a Useful Method In Philosophy?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 1934, p. 65.
24. Gilbert Ryle, "Systematically Misleading Expressions" in his *Collected Essays*, (London, 1971), p. 61.
25. Maurice Cornforth, "Is Analysis a Useful Method In Philosophy", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 1934, p. 90.