

Philosophy and Logical Positivism

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Abstract

Logical positivists claim that the whole of human knowledge can be reduced to analytic and synthetic sentences, and this means that the only possible knowledge is provided by science. Metaphysics is thus meaningless, because its sentences do not comply with the rules set forth by logical analysis of language. What, then, is the philosopher's job? The members of the Vienna Circle answer that his task is to clarify the concepts used within empirical and formal sciences, while analytic philosophers stress instead the importance of ordinary language's analysis. But the outcome is in both cases clear: philosophy is linguistic analysis. However, by reducing the whole of reality to empirical reality, logical positivists do metaphysics. We do not have the "elimination" of metaphysics, but just the proposal of an empiricist brand of metaphysics.

Keywords: Logical positivism; Metaphysics; Vienna Circle; Analytic philosophy.

What is Philosophy for Logical Positivism?

According to logical positivists, the sole true knowledge is empirical and based on immediate observational data; furthermore, they reject the Kantian synthetic *a priori*, even though Kant's influence on their philosophical outlook is quite strong. In other words, they attribute a pivotal role to formal logic because, in their opinion, it allows us to formalize in a rigorous manner the intuitive inferential processes of ordinary language. In our day logical positivism is less popular than it used to be until a few decades ago, although maintaining a considerable influence (especially in Great Britain and North America). The so-called "post-empiricist turn" questioned practically every single point of its general outlook on philosophy and the world (an outlook that is often defined as the *received view*, just to stress the fact that, despite its many shortcomings, it is the starting point of a trend of thought whose importance within contemporary philosophy cannot be denied). Later on a successful philosopher of science like Paul K. Feyerabend endorsed views that are practically opposed to those held by logical positivism. This means, however, that if we want to understand Feyerabend's popularity, we are bound to read the logical positivists' works very carefully. In my view it is not correct to claim - as many contemporary authors do - that the logical positivists are *completely* wrong. This is clearly an overstatement, because the members of the Vienna Circle - along with their allies of the German Berlin Circle and of Polish the Lvov-Warsaw School - can at least be credited with one great merit: they compelled philosophers to take science seriously into account in a period when

it was largely believed that philosophy and science are totally independent fields of inquiry (a position that, unfortunately, many philosophers still endorse nowadays).

If we try to identify the position of logical positivism in the map of contemporary philosophy, we will soon find out that it can be characterized by a few basic and radical theses:

(A) first, logical positivism is not a philosophical system but, rather, a general *attitude* towards philosophy which denies any validity to the way philosophical work has been carried out in the past centuries;

(B) second, the logical positivists think that philosophy is not a *speculative* discipline: it is, rather, a logical-linguistic activity aimed at clarifying scientific propositions;

(C) third, there are only analytic (*a priori*) and synthetic (*a posteriori*) propositions. The first class is formed by logical and mathematical sentences, and the second by the sentences that can be found in the empirical sciences (where physics has a predominant role). There is, thus, no Kantian “synthetic *a priori*”.

It follows that the whole of human knowledge can be reduced to the two classes of sentences just mentioned, and this means that the only possible knowledge is provided by science. Metaphysics is thus meaningless, because its sentences do not comply with the rules set forth by logical analysis of language. What, then, is the philosopher’s job? The members of the Vienna Circle answer that his task is to clarify the concepts used within empirical and formal sciences, while analytic philosophers stress instead the importance of ordinary language’s analysis. But the outcome is in both cases clear: philosophy *is* linguistic analysis. It may be observed that logical positivism certainly has some ancestors in the history of philosophy: the sophists of ancient Greece like Protagoras, the nominalists of the Middle Ages like Ockham, the classical British empiricists (and especially Hume), the positivists of the 19th century like Comte. Their radicalism, however, is rather new. The logical positivists want to rebuild philosophy *ab initio*, just making *tabula rasa* of what has been said and done in many centuries of philosophical speculation. And their attitude is based on two undeniable facts:

(a) the enormous results, both speculative (knowledge of empirical reality) and practical (technological applications) accomplished by modern science from Galileo on; and

(b) the spectacular achievements of formal logic which, starting from Frege and Russell, set forth the project of accomplishing the Leibnizian dream of the *calculus*, i.e., the complete formalization and mechanization of human reasoning.

The logical positivists are, then, despite their official lay spirit, the prophets of the “new scientific world-perspective”. Their stance is a full-fledged *scientism* and, needless to

say, Feyerabend's position, i.e., an anti-scientific outlook growing within philosophy of science itself, can perhaps be better understood if we take it to be a reaction to the "received view" of logical positivism.

If we now examine the logical positivists' alleged destruction of metaphysics, it is possible to note that their attack actually missed the target due to its essential vagueness. *Whom, or what, do they mean to attack?* It is quite evident, in fact, that the word "metaphysics" has an incredibly high number of semantic and historical connotations. Plato and Aristotle are both metaphysicians, but is this sufficient to associate them? Hegel and Bergson, too, are metaphysicians, but who dares to claim that this fact makes them similar? We must recall that logical positivism is, first of all, a reaction to the predominance of idealism in the Austrian and German academic circles during the last decades of the nineteenth century: the real targets of the members of the Vienna and Berlin Circles (and of their Polish allies) are in fact Hegel and their contemporary Martin Heidegger. Taking again into account the essay by Rudolf Carnap "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language",¹ it is easy to verify that, in order to show the purported meaningless of metaphysics, Carnap just analyses from a logical viewpoint some statements made by Hegel and Heidegger:

"Just like the examined examples 'principle' and 'God', most of the other specifically metaphysical terms are devoid of meaning, e.g. 'the Idea', 'the Absolute', 'the Unconditioned', 'the Infinite', 'the being of being', 'non-being', 'thing in itself', 'absolute spirit', 'objective spirit', 'essence', 'being-in-itself', 'being-in-and-for-itself', 'emanation', 'manifestation', 'articulation', 'he Ego', 'the non-Ego', etc. These expressions are in the same boat with 'teavy', our previously fabricated example. The metaphysician tells us that empirical truth-conditions cannot be specified; if he adds that nevertheless he 'means' something, we know that this is merely an allusion to associated images and feelings which, however, do not bestow a meaning on the word. The alleged statements of metaphysics which contain such words have no sense, assert nothing, are mere pseudo-statements."²

But it is not difficult to understand that to criticize two particular philosophers does not imply attacking metaphysics as such: if it may be justified to claim that Heidegger often plays with the "magic of words", certainly this charge cannot be addressed to such rigorous philosophers as Aristotle or Leibniz. The situation becomes even clearer if one takes into account the classical essay *Language, Truth and Logic*, written in the 1930's by Sir Alfred J. Ayer. In this work, in fact, some remarks may be found that are very important for our purposes:

"The belief that it is the business of the philosopher to search for first principles is bound up with the familiar conception of philosophy as the study of reality as a whole. And

¹ R. Carnap (1959), pp. 60-81.

² R. Carnap, cit., p. 67.

this conception is one which is difficult to criticize, because it is so vague. If it is taken to imply, as it sometimes is, that the philosopher somehow projects himself outside the world, and takes a bird's-eye view of it, then it is plainly a metaphysical conception. And it is also metaphysical to assert, as some do, that 'reality as a whole' is somehow generically different from the reality which is investigated piecemeal by the special sciences. But if the assertion that philosophy studies reality as a whole is understood to imply merely that the philosopher is equally concerned with the content of every science, then we may accept it, not indeed as an adequate definition of philosophy, but as a truth about it. For we shall find, when we come to discuss the relationship of philosophy to science, that it is not, in principle, related to any one science more closely than to any other. In saying that philosophy is concerned with each of the sciences (...) we mean also to rule out the supposition that philosophy can be ranged alongside the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge. Those who make this supposition cherish the belief that there are some things in the world which are possible objects of speculative knowledge and yet lie beyond the scope of empirical science. But this belief is a delusion. There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give (...) With this we complete the over throw of speculative philosophy. We are now in a position to see that the function of philosophy is wholly critical." ³

On the one side Ayer's statements are very clear, but on the other they make us understand why the elimination of metaphysics could not be carried out (and this also justifies the length of our quotation). Let us take into account, for instance, the concept of "reality as a whole". Ayer remarks that, in claiming to study reality as a whole, the metaphysician pretends to project himself outside the world taking a bird's-eye view of it. Assuming that any serious metaphysician really means to do this (which is, at least, questionable), there is a sentence that clearly reveals Ayer's hidden thoughts. In fact, he goes on claiming that "there is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give". It is possible to note, then, that in pronouncing these statements Ayer is not talking about a reality which is investigated "piecemeal" by the special sciences. He speaks, instead, of: (1) a reality *as such* which has an exclusively empirical character, and (2) of a purported unified method which natural science uses in order to investigate reality.

But, at this point, two facts are neatly exhibited: (3) by reducing the whole of reality to empirical reality, Ayer is doing metaphysics. A metaphysical system needs not be idealistic: there is an empiricist metaphysics, as is shown by the developments of nineteenth century's mechanism; and (4) even Ayer's reality turns out to be "reality as a whole". Science, as conceived of by Ayer, is in fact nothing but a tool for knowing

³ A.J. Ayer (1990), pp. 32-33.

reality as such. We do not have the “elimination” of metaphysics here, but just the proposal of an empiricist brand of metaphysics. And this fact confirms, once more, that we must distinguish what the logical positivists *say* from what they actually *do*.

Bibliography

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