

COMMUNICATIONS

METAPHYSICS---NON SENSE OR

COMMON SENSE?*

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Modern criticism of metaphysics—of whatever variety it might be rationalistic or religious—centres on the claim by the moderns that all metaphysics is based on an illegitimate_a priorism. This in turn has its roots in the total reliance and faith that modern science¹²⁵ has placed on its epistemology, namely empiricism or sense experience. Though we live in an age ruled by science and are overwhelmed by the many changes and revolutions it has periodically brought about in our lives we might as well pause here to consider if what modern thought_ and especially science—claims for its ruling epistemology is true and valid.

Science here has two faces. When treating of ancient beliefs and ideologies it points to its many and overpowering changes and innovations as

*If the reader should detect in this a dig at the Logical Positivists, one is certainly meant here.

¹²⁵ It will be seen that I have used the term 'modern science' It is not science, per se, or the methodology of traditional sciences, which were wedded to a wholistic and, one might rightly say, salutary wisdom (Hikmah) that is being criticised here. For more on this see the works of Rene Guenon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings but especially Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Although all these authors are proponents of the traditional school of thought' they are not alone in criticising modern science and its methodology. In this connexion three other main strands in contemporary thought deserve mention. One comprises Western critics who base their criticism on moral and ecological grounds, people like Jerome Ravetz, Theodore Roszak, Nicholas Maxwell etc. They are joined by some outstanding Muslim scholars not necessarily representing the traditional school of thought and these are represented by Ziauddin Sardar, S. Parvez Manzoor, Munawwar Ahmed Anees and Gulzar Haider.

The third group, albeit a fringe one, can be called the subjectivists represented by Robert M Pirsig (see his *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, London, Fontana, 1974 and subsequent editions).

proof of its validity if not truth, (Truth sounding as it does like an old word is not much in vogue therefore rationalists for one would like it if it were thrown out of the window. But here again, because of the aura of sanctity that the word 'truth' carries with it, it is pragmatic to retain it for some rainy day.) In pointing to its seemingly dazzling achievements as proof of its overpowering superiority over systems of yore, science assumes a pragmatic stance. This stance implies that there is nothing in science that is intrinsically superior to the systems that it condemns. The older systems then are criticised not on moral but on efficacious grounds. As long as its worldly, efficacy continues then by its own standards, science should not fall from grace, as it were, but only so long. But while the success lasts it has lent science such an air of overweening authority that to the common, therefore practically gullible, man all that science propounds is, to use a very strange transfer symbol here, gospel truth. All that passes the tests of science the standards of which are really set by some inner sanctum reminiscent of the mafia—(see below) is acceptable even if not true.

While the first face is characterised by unspeakable hubris the second is the exact obverse, one which is extremely modest. This is one which when, subjected to critical scrutiny, lowers its gaze sheepishly, as it were, and starts confessing the stochastic nature of its tall claims and its essential fallibility. Though this description is as yet admittedly vague we shall presently afford it more detailed treatment. But, it will be rightly asked, what is the cause of this volte face? Well, for one thing its epistemology namely sense experience. Sense experience for all its obviousness has the failings of being notoriously subjective and probabilistic. But while the problem of subjectivity may seem surmountable using extremely refined techniques and extremely precise and sophisticated equipment, Kant's bequest to his western descendants¹²⁶ is such that no amount of precision and sophistication can obviate the subjectivity that Kant believes inheres in all human experience. To elucidate, Kant showed—or thought he showed—that although all our knowledge comes through sense experience yet the experience does not remain unalloyed on its

¹²⁶ This is brought out quite lucidly by Hilary Putnam, Professor of the Philosophy of Science in Harvard University in his conversation with Bryan Magee, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. The conversation is published in *Men of Ideas*, edited by Bryan Magee, (London, OUP, 1985).

way to becoming knowledge. Briefly,...what happens is that elements of sense experience must pass through the (Kantian) inherent twelve chambered structure of the human mind which organizes and in the process refracts those elements. Although the refraction leaves us with something which is infinitely more organized than the principal sensations with which we started it leaves us all the more uncertain as to the essential nature of reality. So much for Kant's 'Copernican' revolution and its effects on modern science.

Let us not forget probability either. in the context of science what this means is that scientific theories for all the painstaking care at ensuring precision and sophistication are yet built upon the uniformity and similarity common to a finite number of instances hitherto observed and thence generalised to cover all such instances in future. But what shall ensure the recurrence of similar patterns in future given the absence of any Omnipotent Being in the scientific universe to bring this about? For this the scientist relies on what he calls the (Law of) uniformity of nature, a quintessentially metaphysical notion for sense experience fails to give us even one instance of this quaint thing called uniformity of nature. One might well remark that this is metaphysics sneaking into the scientific citadel with the full connivance of the custodians of that citadel, the scientists themselves, the high priests of scientism. -

Confront the high priests with this and they will apologetically tell you that if this small prop should help to keep a public enterprise going there should not be many objections, in fact this should be condoned. You might interject to point out that if their chosen epistemology poses such a great and fundamental problem for their seemingly monolithic edifice why not temper it with something more reliable, comprehensive and sound?- Here you draw a blank. And why is that

so?

On closer scrutiny and after some deep digging you will find that not unlike those schools of thought which science denigrates for holding a metaphysical position a priori and generating there-from a supporting epistemology, the scientists too begin from a metaphysical position_ this metaphysics being the most vulgarised the tradition has ever undergone_ that

is held a priori. It is the position that reality consists merely of matter and its various determinations and modifications and no other kind of reality no other level_ may be admitted of. They find no better way-to perpetuate this ideology than a fierce dogmatism¹²⁷ and a successfully beguiling dissimulation. Dogmatism pertaining to their insistence on matter as the sole reality and dissimulation regarding their a priori posture vis-a-vis that reality in contrast to their public exclamations of being totally empirical, therefore, a posteriori in their approach to study reality.

in view of all the above can we any longer regard methaphysics as mere non-sense? I think not. I think that all the differing even contrasting claims of the various schools of thought notwithstanding the various pressing issues that mankind has ever faced and will ever face, however varied and multifarious they might be can be discussed and a result means to their solution found only within the framework of a comprehensive metaphysics. And what better than a metaphysics which instead of condemning and denigrating the sensual level of reality, as, some of the ancient Greeks did, should incorporate this and other levels of genuine human experience into a salutary and salvational whole. By this, I mean, of course, Islam.

¹²⁷ As to dogmatism, this is quite clearly exposed by Martin Lings and Huston Smith, the former in his *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1980, Lahore, 1988) and the latter in his *The Forgotten Truth* (Harper & Row, New York, 1976, Lahore, 1985).