

In Defense of Metaphysical Knowledge

Funmilayo A. ADE-ALI, PhD

Abstract

Metaphysics by its nature, is a fundamental branch of philosophy from the ancient period, through the medieval, modern and to contemporary thoughts. The subject-matter of metaphysics and the issues discussed by metaphysicians have always been complex, speculative, supra-sensible and mostly non-veridical by experience and scientific paradigms. It is for this reason that metaphysics has suffered several attacks and castigations not only from scientists and empiricist scholars but also from philosophers - particularly from empiricist philosophers like David Hume, logical positivists and a host of others like the nineteenth century Immanuel Kant, who later built his own brand of metaphysics. It is on this note that it is argued in this paper that in spite of all attacks and castigations on metaphysics, metaphysics as a traditional branch of philosophy still remains a distinct field of cognition. That apart, the paper argues that the cognitive import of metaphysics cannot be over-ruled in that its subject-matter and the cognitive issues handled within the context of metaphysics by metaphysicians can hardly be juxtaposed by an empirically based field of thought whose level of its intellectual enquiries in contemporary time has taken not only philosophical but metaphysical dimensions. It is therefore concluded in this paper that metaphysics, a cognitive aspect of philosophy, is existentially relevant to our daily life and the contemporary intellectual mind in that it does not only promote rational discourse but also forms the basis for the validation and justification of transcendental knowledge and knowledge of universals that cannot be resolved empirically.

Keywords: metaphysics, metaphysical knowledge, logical positivism, scientific paradigms, universals

Introduction

This paper defends the position that metaphysics forms the basis and constitutes the central foundation upon which many philosophical endeavours solely depend and the validation and justification of matters of knowledge that cannot be resolved empirically and scientifically. This is against the backdrop of several criticisms against metaphysics and its objects of knowledge arising from different scholarly fronts. Some of such critics of metaphysics across philosophical schools include among others, the empirical philosophers like David Hume, Immanuel Kant, a classical German philosopher; Ludwig Wittgenstein and the logical positivists like A.J. Ayer, Moritz Schilick, Rudolf Carnap, among others in recent times.

Conception of Metaphysics

The word 'metaphysics' has been popularly attributed to Aristotle. However, it was found that the term was first used by Aristotle by mere accident. Aristotle proposed 'metaphysics' as the 'first philosophy' (Stumpf, 1994:99). In 70 B.C., one Andronicus of Rhodé was said to be collating the works of Aristotle, and he inadvertently placed the 'first philosophy' after Aristotle's treatises on physics. His subject of physics was mainly about the physical world, that is, the observable entities in the *phenomenal* world. The physical world was regarded by Plato as contingent world (Miller, 1993:45). This is the world of opinion, imagination, illusion, dominated and studied by science. Consequently, the subject of metaphysics was labelled as "the treatise after the physical treatises" (Edward, 1967:289). This literally refers to the study of conceptual issues requiring transcendental consideration. That is, things that are not explainable using experiential prowess. It is for this reason that scholars refer to Aristotle's metaphysics as a type of knowledge that aims at investigating 'wisdom' underlying ultimate realities, and this work thus begins with the statement that "all men by nature desire to know" (Stumpf, 1994:88). This desire is somehow driven by an inner knowledge, says Aristotle. However, this desire to know is a kind of desire to pursue knowledge, escape ignorance, in order to know and not for practical or social end (Aristotle, 1956:34). This is obviously a pragmatic notion as there is in every person a desire to know certain kinds of things simply for the sake of knowing.

Given this background, we can deduce that metaphysics is about knowledge of something which is over or beyond empirical or physical analysis. It is an aspect of study that is based on the real essence of things, about things-in-themselves, (the *noumena* as Immanuel Kant calls it), the absolute, and on such metaphysical theories whose focus are to investigate and examine the conceptual issues underlying the universe as a whole.

That apart, the conceptual issues involved in metaphysical study are handled by metaphysical doctrines and these doctrines are viewed basically from two perspectives of the fundamental theories of monism and dualism. From the monist perspective, we learn that there is only one principle on which all 'that is', is founded. The dualists, on the other hand, propose two principles: materialism and idealism. While materialists are of the view that all that is, is in its essence material, that is, physical, observable, occupy space and time; the idealists on the other hand, opine that all 'that is', is spiritual. To this end, metaphysics is not all about the absolutely spiritual things but also about the essence of material things in nature.

In this regard, metaphysics by its doctrine, deals with how we

interpret nature and existence of things like God, the cosmos or even our own thoughts. Therefore, the domain of metaphysics covers the ontology of *being*, the cosmological order of the universe as a whole, the psychology of human mind, the spiritual entities like God, issues in natural theology, general abstract properties of things in existence and beyond the physical and scientific explanations. In essence, the business of metaphysics is to examine and justify where necessary, the ultimate assumptions of science. This clearly implies that metaphysics as Aristotle puts it, is about the first principle underlying every assumption of things. Metaphysics being the study of the first principles, attempts to study the whole universe, the place and the nature of man in it as it attempts to search into the question about the ultimate life. In a nutshell, as Ade Ali puts it, “metaphysics is the search for reality, the ultimate principles of human existence as well as an enquiry into the ontological and the constitutive elements of the universe and of the status of the phenomena” (Ade-Ali, 2010:3).

On Metaphysical Knowledge

Metaphysical knowledge is the type of knowledge arising from a philosophical study that seeks to explain and presents inherent and/or universal elements of reality which are not easily discovered, experienced or come by through a common-sensual approach. By illustration, Kant’s ‘*synthetic a priori* knowledge’ like the intuitive knowledge as in Cartesian metaphysics is distinct from all other forms of knowledge such as empirical, veridical, analytic, inductive and deductive knowledge.

Indeed, such a metaphysical knowledge of the form of *synthetic a priori* is a form of knowledge by Kantian formulation arising from a factual but necessarily rational true propositional analysis and judgment of geometry and physics (Merriam online). Characteristically, it is this form of knowledge by nature, the peculiarity of the subject-matter of metaphysics as a field of philosophical study and non-veridical nature surrounding metaphysical analyses as a whole that largely begets the critique and subsequently the rejection of metaphysical knowledge by some philosophers.

The Rejection of Metaphysics

Metaphysics has suffered several attacks and castigations not only from scientists and empiricist scholars but also from philosophers – particularly, from empiricist philosophers like David Hume, logical positivists and a host of others, including Immanuel Kant, who was to later build his own brand of metaphysics. The logical positivists for instance, reject metaphysics and metaphysical assumptions based on the fact that the metaphysical

propositions are unobservable and that the truth of metaphysics cannot be proven empirically using empirical verification criteria. The attack against metaphysics is that its propositions are meaningless in that their verification and falsification are not compatible with the empiricist and logical positivist mode of verification. That is, the ability to observe, verify and justify the meaning of metaphysical propositions synthetically and/or analytically is unachievable. And also, neither such propositions could be verified nor falsified by experience. Faced with a dispute about the nature of the absolute, or the purpose and essence of the universe, or the Kantian notion of things-in-themselves (*noumena*), the logical positivists pick up a quarrel with the metaphysicians by challenging them that there is no justifiable means to validate the veracity of such universals (Anthony, 2006:369).

Wittgenstein in the same vein casts aspersion on metaphysical knowledge by asserting that it is a futile reflection on the platter of language. In other words, Wittgenstein, an analytic philosopher, like any member of the Vienna Circle, objects to the relevance of metaphysics. Wittgenstein as demonstrated in his book: *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (1953) and *Philosophical Investigation* (1921) is perhaps one of the most articulate critics of metaphysics after Kant. The efficacy of metaphysics has been called to question and trial in the new and revolutionary conception of philosophy particularly in a 'critique of language' as a branch of study that neither describes nor explains any facts of reality but that which consists purely a critical activity of logical analysis and elucidation or the meaning or significant use of language. Wittgenstein purportedly rejects metaphysics on the ground that metaphysics is a speculative branch of knowledge and pursuit of the trans-empirical realities which is neither regarded as 'philosophy-proper' nor one of the natural sciences. On this note, metaphysics has been shown to be a questionable aspect of knowledge for the fact that its statements are 'meaningless and *pseudo* resulting from a violation of the logic of language.

One of such destructive criticisms against metaphysics can be found in David Hume, who calls for the burning of books containing metaphysics with the following assertion:

If we take into our hand any volume of divinity or school of metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No, does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No, commit it then to the flames: for it contains nothing but sophistry and illusion (Hume, 2007:vi).

Going by this assertion, it clearly shows that David Hume as one of the

precursors of logical positivism, is following the pattern of the empiricists who maintain that anything that cannot be empirically verified, sensed and experimented should not be taken as meaningful or as counting as knowledge of any sort. The charge against metaphysics is mainly that its language and propositions are meaningless.

Kant's criticism of metaphysics is quite epistemological in that it involves the fundamental assumption that for metaphysics to be informative about objective facts or truths must follow the sure path of science, particularly of 'natural sciences' and must be found to involve '*synthetic a priori* judgement'. Kant, in his formulation, appears to be of the position that metaphysicians run into problems in their attempt to justify what is ultimately real and by not being scientific. It is on this ground that Kant distinguishes between appearance which he calls *phenomena* and reality which he calls *noumena*. For him, the world of opinion is the *phenomena* world, where everything is in constant change and flux; and the *noumena* world is of the world of essence in form of the Plato world of Forms where knowledge and intelligence can be attained indubitably. It is this distinction that brings about the problem of universals and particulars in Kantian revolutionary metaphysics. It is through this revolutionary metaphysics of Kant that he was able to justifiably validate the contrast and synthesization between rationalism and the science of empiricism. It is based on this as well that Kant was of the view that metaphysics can only increase our knowledge the way science obviously does not until it goes scientific and *synthetic a priori*. Indeed, the dogmatic character of metaphysics was made manifest particularly by the variety of conclusions which metaphysicians had come to in their systems of thought as indicated in the thought of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. The point here is that as the scientists were continually involved in unravelling the nature of reality; they were continuously showing less and less concern about such metaphysical notions as freedom, God and the possibility of moral truth and the absolutes.

In the same vein, along the critique of metaphysics, Moritz Schlick opines that the metaphysicians "seek vain illusion" (1926:117). This assertion was equally echoed by Rudolf Carnap when he opines that:

Our claim that the statements of metaphysics are entirely meaningless, that they do not assert anything... how could it be explained that so many men in all ages and nations among them eminent minds, spend so much energy on metaphysics if the latter consist nothing but mere words, non-sensually juxtaposed (Carnap, 1959:36).

This claim further buttresses the Humean claim that the doctrine of

metaphysics is a futile doctrine aimed at nothing but sophistry and mere illusion.

Beside the foregoing considerations, one of the contemporary critics of metaphysics, Moritz Lazerowitz is one of the few who do not agree with the necessity of metaphysics. He rejects metaphysics in a clear term because metaphysical principles are adjudged to be unknown scientifically. According to him, the subject-matter of metaphysics goes beyond the empirical speculation and scientifically unobservable. According to Lazerowitz, metaphysics differs from science because metaphysics is preoccupied by chronic condition of endless and unresolved debate unlike science (Lazerowitz, 1963:23). In a nutshell, Lazerowitz's position on metaphysics is that metaphysical claims are non-sensical, unscientific, lack factual claims and established linguistic usage; and as well end in irresolvable disputes. This is to say that metaphysical statements in many cases, have no truth-values and end in controversies. Justifying this, Lazerowitz argues that metaphysical propositions by metaphysicians are always inconclusive. He buttresses this further with the claim that metaphysicians' reasoning is always in the form of:

I grant you that things seem to change, but their seeming to change is just an illusion of the senses. In reality, behind the appearance of their changing, they remain the same and unchanged. As a critic of metaphysics, he is of the position that what it is, (Metaphysics) its nature still remains unknown (Lazerowitz, 1963:56).

This is to say that the nature of metaphysics is not only a subject of controversy but its claims cannot be validated using scientific paradigms.

The Problem of Metaphysics

The major problems facing metaphysicians today concern the fundamental nature of reality, the nature underlying material substance and the creative process that gives individual objects their shape and form, qualities or properties. In addition, metaphysics and metaphysical knowledge are arguably believed to be riddled with chronic and unresolved debate unlike science. Besides, certain problems have been of utmost concern in metaphysics. The various attacks on metaphysics have been because of the problems generated by metaphysics as a study. Some of the problems include: the problem of being; the problem of abstract entities; the problem of being and becoming; the problem of causality; mind and body problem; the problem of freedom and determinism; the problem of universals and particulars; the problem of appearance and reality, etc.

The Problem of Being

According to Parmenides, whatever that is in existence is being. To think is to think about something and for this reason, one cannot think or affirm anything that keeps changing or coming to being. To think of change requires one to attempt to do the impossible. *Being* or reality is what it is and not something else. This is a disputable discourse given the Heraclitean and the empiricist position about change.

The Problem of Abstract Entities

The metaphysicians prefer to probe into the nature of abstract entities and into the nature of 'concrete' objects, thus generating a controversial discourse with scientists. While on the one hand, concrete objects can be seen, touched, and felt by the senses with causal relations with the physical laws of nature, abstract entities on the other hand, are immaterial, intangible which are equally metaphysically believed to play a causal role. For instance, God, evil, are causal agents which are the unforeseen forces that cause things to come into being or seize to exist. Just as metaphysicians identify abstract entities invented in our minds as focally fundamental, the reasoning about them conceptually becomes a dispute with the empirical philosophers and difficult if not impossible, to explain the abstract entities in scientific terms.

The Problem of Being and Becoming

The distinction between *being* and *becoming* has bothered metaphysicians from the time of Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle. For Martin Heidegger, being is part of the essential nature of some abstract entities. They are ideas that exist in the immaterial realm of pure information and do not change. Becoming is the essential nature of concrete material objects which are always changing. Change in space and time is a characteristic of all concrete material objects. According to Parmenides, whatever that is in existence is *being* (Stumpf, 1994:16). He opines further that *being* is one, eternal and unchanging. Aristotle in the same vein, buttresses that *being* is God and is pure. The above analogies show that there is variation of conceptions of being ranging from anything in existence to mystical conception of reality which is mysterious, transcendent and regarded as source of all things.

The Problem of Causality

The problem of causality and the various discourses surrounding the notion is another factor for the controversy about metaphysics. It was the problem arising from David Hume's conception of causality and his discourse on it that awakened Immanuel Kant from its 'dogmatic slumber'. Kant in his

Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (1977) called Hume's problem the *Crux metaphysiconum*.

Kant opines:

My objective is to persuade all those who think metaphysics is worth studying, that it is absolutely necessary to pause a moment, and neglecting all that has been done, to propose first the preliminary question, "What such a thing as metaphysics be at all possible? ... Since the essays of Locke and Leibniz, or rather since the origin of metaphysics, so far as we know its history, nothing has ever happened which was more decisive to its fate than the attack made upon it by David Hume... (Kant, 1977:29).

Hume's attack on metaphysics is based on the incontinuity between cause and effect. That is, it is senseless to assume that the unseen cause can cause an effect to happen. He attacks the portending stand of metaphysics which pretends to give birth to this idea of cause and effect. He posits irrefutably that it is perfectly impossible for reason to think *a priori* and by means of concepts a combination involving necessity.

The Problem of Mind and Body

This is another factor sparking the castigation against metaphysics. In ancient philosophy, 'mind and body' formed the basis for classical dualism of the sort of idealism and materialism, and consequently the problem between 'the one' (monism) or 'the many' (pluralism) as well as the distinction between essence and existence *et al.* The 'Mind-body problem' is generally traced to Rene Descartes, who generated the question in modern philosophy of how the immaterial mind (or soul) could influence the material body and supposed place of interaction. Descartes identified the tiny pineal gland as the point of contact between mind and body - a place that is yet to be located by science till date, thus a problem for metaphysics.

The Problem of Freedom and Determinism

The existence of freewill depends on the existence of genuine possibility (that is, some absence of necessity), in the sense of counterfactual situations in the past that were alternative possibilities for action. They allow us to say that we could have done otherwise. The cosmos is conceived as an orderly one in which all significant events are caused and are potentially explicable. There is limit to what human capacity as a being can comprehend since his action and inaction have been pre-determined from essence. Here, the existence of man is bound in the causal factor, 'fate'. Given this, there is little to what man can know or do in the course of his existence in the cosmological world. How can

one explain scientifically the fact that the success or failure of man depends on a metaphysical assertion of fate becomes an issue of conceptual dispute in metaphysics and in the world of science in the contemporary age.

The Problem of Universals

This problem is about the status of things in existence; and as to whether universals exist independently of the individuals (particulars) from whom they are predicated. In other sense, the discourse arising is to see if the discussion about universals are merely convenient ways of talking about and finding the similarities among particular things of which they are radically different from. This problem has led philosophers to raise questions like: do the universals exist? Do they exist in the individuals or only in people's minds or in some separate metaphysical domain? The controversy still remains in the field of metaphysics.

In Defense of Metaphysics

Despite the various attacks on metaphysics, the relevance of metaphysics cannot be over-emphasised. There are so many reasons why metaphysics and the knowledge it propagates are of relevance to human need not minding the arguments that some philosophers have raised against the validity of metaphysical knowledge.

Therefore, it is difficult to over-rule metaphysics as an important aspect of philosophy without bewildering the love for nature and investigation into the ultimate and fundamental essence of human life. To this end, Taylor posits that:

Because machines grinding our days and hours to the merciful end when death imposed the peace we have never been able to find for ourselves. A child easily thinks of himself as something apart, a virtual center of reality about which the whole of nature turns, to whose wants everything rises above the paltry conception of his own being and becomes sensitive to his identity with the whole of reality, which is without beginning or end (Edward & Pap, 1973:770).

Hence, this is the major reason why we cannot do without metaphysics. For this reason, metaphysicians are regarded "as system builders" (Fadahunsi, 2004:159). This is for the fact that the problems in metaphysics, especially the major ones cannot be solved outside a system of thought which metaphysics alone can offer. Metaphysical problems involve such issues as the problem of cause and chance; the problem of destiny and personal identity, etc. These problems are quite transcendental because they are connected with complex issues such as existence of God, witchcraft, *ori* (human destiny), the existence

of man, mystical powers, the absolute force of life and many other speculative issues beyond human empirical conceptualizations. Metaphysics is akin to the analysis which, though transcendently speculative, but at the same time yield objective truths which may not be verifiable by mere observation and empirical injunction. It is for this reason Ade-Ali points to the fact that “metaphysics has the role of probing into the wonders of life by explicating the puzzling issues underlying the universe through *a priori* and *a posteriori* procedures (Ade-Ali, 2012:18).

According to Naletov, “in metaphysical thinking, imagination prevails over observation, thus making metaphysical thought to be so broad beyond the scope of scientific work” (Naletov, 1984:334). While in science, observations are theory-bound according to John Kekes, it should equally be noted that the metaphysicians cannot compete with the scientists in producing information of an empirical nature which is dominated with enlarged awareness of life through a reflection on the implication of our experiences. Metaphysics is relevant to our daily lives as it promotes transcendental thinking. Richard Taylor buttresses this when he opines that, “Metaphysics promises wisdom essential to human life and therefore helps people out of their empty dreams and illusions” (Taylor, 1963).

Besides, metaphysics reinforces philosophical theology and its method. Today, one of the major tenets of preaching tranquillity and development among men in the contemporary time is through religion. Religion, which is metaphysically inclined, reinvigorates, and enforces conformity to stipulated norms and values in our different societies. In this case, there is comportment to religion as a panacea to social control and as compliance to norms and values which in turn brings about social order. The implication of metaphysical reflection in man’s life is that it frees human mind from dogmatism, indoctrination, authoritarianism and prejudice. Metaphysics is against dogmatism and indoctrination which is conceptually out of order in metaphysical disposition. Why is this? This is because, as Akinpelu puts it, indoctrination is an act of making a person accept certain types of belief in a way that shuts out the learner’s ability or freedom to ask questions or raise doubts about it (Akinpelu, 1985). Metaphysics tries to unravel the notion of elementary common sense beliefs which are loaded with dogmatism. Primitive people are deprived of cognitive reflection based on the uncritical assumptions of their custom and doctrines as a standard way of life. By way of illustration, the primitive people would commonly believe that their sickness is as a result of torment from sorcery, failure of crops to angry gods or demons. To them, human sacrifice was necessary to promote victory in war and the fertility of the soil. Consequently, their lives and principles were

rooted in taboos in which the resultant effects were the violation of lives and properties, abomination and social doom for the individual in particular and the society in general. Metaphysics and its study cancels out taboos, opens the critical minds of man for us to see things for ourselves, operates in lines with the universal dictate of our environment and stops us from chewing bitter pills of dogmatism.

Metaphysics is quite illuminating for its high sense of reasoning without which no inquiry into the ultimate reality can be possible at the supra-sensible level. This is because critically examining the ultimate fundamentals of life and the absolute requires a deep meta-philosophical reasoning and argumentation, an attitude which a metaphysician is said to possess. While operating in the realm of pure reason, a metaphysician shows an attitude of dispassionate and rational reflection on ultimate problems. In acquisition of the knowledge of the fundamentals, various philosophers find solace in and subscribe to the metaphysical level.

Be that as it may, any man who has no tincture of metaphysics goes through life imprisoned and in the prejudices derived from common-sense. Indeed, the importance of metaphysics can be seen in the teaching of the essence of moral principles as exemplified by D.F. Pears when he states that:

Metaphysical systems have usually led to new moral insights, for to show that nature of reality was to show the place of man in nature and therefore, his proper duties and purposes, it aims to show the way to his salvation, the kind of knowledge that would set him free from his ordinary interest and preoccupation (Fadahunsi, 2004).

Hence, if man is to live aright, he must choose to examine his life philosophically and metaphysically as there is always a need for one to adequately and philosophically examine his life given the metaphysics of morals as stated by the Socratic dictum that “unexamined life is not worth living” (Miller, 1993:11).

By and large, it should be a great concern to us that one of the major tasks of metaphysics is that it asks questions about most things that people have hitherto taken for granted - such as the existence of the soul, of God and the question of what reality is composed of. Metaphysicians try to provide solutions to these questions even though the answers have not been satisfactory in many cases.

In the light of this, metaphysics is essential to human life in the sense that it promises wisdom and gets rid of empty dreams and illusions. It provides an avenue for exercising reasoning about the ultimate principle of life. Indeed, metaphysics, is fundamentally a quest for transcendental

knowledge, the knowledge for the true nature of man and the knowledge for the realization of the cognitive issues that can hardly be conceptualized by empirically based disciplines.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered so far, the conceptual nature of metaphysics, the concept of metaphysical knowledge as well as various attacks and castigations against metaphysics from the point of view of the logical positivists, some analytic philosophers and empirically inclined scholars in the field of philosophy. It is on this note, we conclude that metaphysics, a cognitive and also a significantly conceptual aspect of philosophy, is essentially relevant to our daily life and in the contemporary time in that it does not only promote transcendental reasoning on the ultimate nature of life but also forms the basis upon which the validation and justification of matters of knowledge that cannot be resolved empirically and scientifically are justified.

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