

## An Analysis of rejection of metaphysics in Buddhism and logical positivism

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The way of the philosophy was uninterruptedly continued on the metaphysical characters since Greek period to modern western period. Specially, it based on the metaphysical statements and synthetic prior propositions. The philosophy was combination of such metaphysical propositions. Until the end of 19th century the philosophers devoted their lives to study the ultimate reality of life, freedom, liberation etc<sup>1</sup> but first two decades of 20th century, teachings of eminent philosophers, Bertrand Russell's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's were influenced to develop group of philosophers in Vienna and Berlin. Those philosophers established the Vienna Circle and introduced doctrine known as "Logical Positivism", and also named it as "logical empiricism" and "neo positivism". Logical positivists used formal logic to emphasize an empirical account of our knowledge of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the logical positivists were to show that the genuine knowledge is comprised in logic, mathematics and natural science and also they introduced their doctrine oppose to all metaphysics, specially oppose to the ontology and synthetic a prior propositions. The rejection of

metaphysics not as wrong but as having no meaning . Other hand they rejected metaphysics as no merely wrongful or even false but as literally non sensical.<sup>3</sup>

Moritz Schlick (1882-1936) Rudolf Carnap (born 1891), Otto Neurath (born 1882), Herbert Feigl (born 1902), Friedrich Waisman (born 1896), Kurt Goedel (born 1906) are some philosophers who contributed to establish the Vienna Circle and logical positivism. The eminent philosopher A.J Ayer (born 1910) introduced the logical positivism to England in his famous book Language, Truth and Logic.

In this letter, it is expected to comparatively study the logical positivism and it's relation to the Buddhism. Although these two teaching were not entirely similar to each other, some principle teachings of both teachings seems to be based on same methods. Before discussing the similarities of both teachings it is essential to have knowledge on logical positivism, its principles and methods. The rejection of metaphysics and method of verification is most importance teachings in positivism

### Rejection of metaphysics

The logical positivists rejected all metaphysical statements and propositions, specially ontology and synthetic prior propositions. To know about the notions on rejection of metaphysics it is much essential to read the book "Rejection Metaphysics" (1935) written by Rudolf Carnap.<sup>4</sup> The rejection of metaphysics was disruption to existence of theological religions, since, the logical positivists completely excluded reliability of theology and cosmology. The rejection of theology and metaphysical

concepts on cosmology is very much close to the Buddhist rejection of divine creation (*Issaranimmanavada*).

According to the logical positivists there is conceptual nature of metaphysics. Such as Plato's "Theory of Forms", Aristotle's teaching of "The Unmoved Movers", the concept of God that were explained by medieval philosophers seem to be have no empirical content.<sup>5</sup> Though they rejected these concepts they never said that they are unwarranted or even false but they said that such statements are literally non sensical. Other hand they said that the factual essences of some of these propositions have been excluded by adding meaningless propositions. Therefore they emphasized importance of use of factual statements when philosophers use the language to explain some philosophical methods. Thus, the positivists said, the philosophical language should be empirical and also to protect the empirical nature of philosophy it should be closed with the scientific methods. The positivists emphasized that there is no way to verify the pronouncements of metaphysics. Such as statements likes "The absolute is perfect". "An unperceivable substance underlines the qualities given in sense experience", "Causes are not merely conjoined with their effect but produce them". These sentences look like assertion of fact but by the criteria of meaning are seem to have no empirical content. They are therefore only pseudo propositions. It is not true that the absolute is perfect, but it is not false either, no assertion has empirical content.

The existence of transcendent God has been excluded by positivists. The eminent philosopher Kant accepted moral experience (empiricism), therefore he seem to be believe the existence of God.<sup>7</sup> But A.J Ayer has explained

non empirical nature of existence of God as follows "As it is believed in religions that the soul exist only living things, hence, it is impossible to believe the existence of creator or transcendent God."<sup>8</sup> Because the existence of the God cannot be experienced from sense organs. Other hand there is no factual reliability of existence of God.

The philosophers of Vienna Circle did not completely exclude the propositions of ethics and aesthetics .But Slick emphasized that statements can be considered as value judgment but not as judgments about facts. The positivists believed that though it is impossible to get empirical knowledge from propositions of ethics and aesthetics there is a value of such statements.<sup>9</sup>

### The Method of Verification

The positivists adopted the principle of verification. According to this principle meaningful statement must be either analytical or capable of being verified by experience. Their verification based on science and mathematics. For the positivists genuine knowledge is comprised with science and mathematics. According to Comte and March the proposition made by science and mathematics even though without empirical content, are meaningful .These statements they held are analytic and they do not assert anything other than the consequence of the convention we have adopted governing the use of mathematical symbols.

For the positivists, statements which give us genuine knowledge are two types as empirical statements and analytical statements and also known as a posteriori synthetic and a priori analytic. A.J Ayer explained these two

types of propositions as empirical hypotheses and tautologies.<sup>10</sup>

The meaning of a proposition is the method of verification. The method of verifying can understand through the following example. "The cat is on the mat". This statement can verify looking at the mat and seeing the cat thereupon, to know this, and to know the meaning of the proposition is one and same. If it is possible to know how to verify the proposition one can know it's meaning and if it is possible to know it's meaning, one can know how to verify it.

The verification is pivotal teaching of positivists which means that "the meaning of factual statement is the method of its verification". According to A.J Ayer the verification supply us ample and reliable criterion to find out whether the sentence is genuine or not.<sup>11</sup> The verifiability has been divided into two parts as,

1. Practical verifiability
2. Theoretical verifiability.

To explain the practical verifiability Kalansuriya has used following example.

"There is a tank in Kandy"

This statement is much easy to verify by anyone. If someone have empirical observations of Kandy tank, it is possible to verify this factual statement.<sup>12</sup>

The theoretical verifiability would be possible to understand through the following example

"There are beings other planets of the universe".

To verify this statement there is no ample observations, scientific equipments and technology. But it will be possible to verify in future with the development of science and technology. Therefore the possibility of verification is non contradict.<sup>13</sup>

There are another two methods of verification as,

1. Direct verifiability
2. Indirect verifiability

To explain direct and indirect verifiability Kalansuriya has used following example.

"There is an airport in Katunayaka"

This is an observation statement. If you are Sri Lankan you can easily observe it, having gone to Katunayaka. According to A.J.Ayer this is direct verification. But the person who do not know (foreign) about Sri Lanka and Katunayala airport verify the above statement in order to the following method. He can verify the reliability of this statement from Sri Lankan embassy or department of aviation etc. This is the indirect verification.<sup>14</sup>

The positivists of Vienna Circle were scientists and mathematicians. Therefore the pivotal aim of positivists were to rejection of metaphysical religious systems, Plato's and Hegel's idealism etc. and also to prove the reliability of science and mathematics. The language of science is consisted with verifiable content and based on perception as well as observations. The statements and words which do not have verifiable content were rejected by science. Such as tree, man, animal, sun and moon are belonging to scientific language. But the words soul, God, liberation,

suffering, Brahman and absolute ego are excluded from scientific language.<sup>15</sup>

### The Rejection of metaphysics and verification in Buddhism

The Buddhism is leading philosophy which based on it's teaching in empirical contents. Buddha has been rejected to accept things which are impossible to experience by sense organs. In *Devatasanyutta* explain that once, a God, asked from the Buddha on origination of world. Buddha replied, the world has been originated from the sense organs.<sup>16</sup>

This explanation emphasizes that the entire Buddhist teaching is based on empirical content. Specially, it should be mentioned here that "world" means factual world, not a conceptual world which is impossible to verify through the empirical observations. The way of Buddhist verification seems to be similar to principle of logical positivism .But Buddhist teaching of verification is quite different. Buddhism has analytical way on verification. *Madupindika sutta* explains the empirical nature of Buddhist verification. Here the Buddha has explained that "contact of eye and form origins the conscious on form."<sup>17</sup> This method of verification is much reliable. It can be understood that logical positivists have been clearly explained their methods and principles of verification. Nevertheless the process of the sense organs at the stage of verification did not explain as Buddha did.

According to the *Kamagunasutta* Buddha explained gaining of knowledge about world through the sense organs.<sup>18</sup> Here the Buddha clearly mentioned that

verification that is based on eye,ear,nose,tough and body and also emphasized that genuine knowledge should be gain through the sense organs.

Buddha has rejected the metaphysics, specially metaphysical teachings of cosmology and theology. Brahmanic teaching was highly influenced in Indian society when the Buddha was born. All the methods and principles of Brahmins teaching based on divine creation (*Issaranimmanavada*). It was difficult task to remove the idea of divine creation from Indian society. However the Buddha emphasized invalidity and non factuality of divine creation. Brahmins accepted that everything of world have been created by transcendent God .But Buddha pointed out the meaninglessness of concept of divine creation.

### Ten Unanswered Questions

The man believes that there is answer for every question. On that comment he tries to find out the answer for every question without considering the nature of the question. Nevertheless there are some questions still do not resolve due to they are apart from our empirical knowledge. These questions are known by philosopher as metaphysics .In Buddhism there are such kind of question known as "Avyakata" <sup>19</sup> (*Avykruta-Sanskrit*) *Culamalunkyasutta* it is known as "Tapaniya" as well as "Avyakata" <sup>20</sup>

There are four types of methods that Buddha used to answer the questions (*Cattarimani bhikkhave panhovyakaranati*).<sup>21</sup> The commentary of *Anguttaranikaya*, *Milindapanha* and *Abhidhamma kosha* explain these four kind of methods . They are,

1. *Ekansavyakarana*-Question which owned to be explained categorically.
2. *Vibhajjavyakarana*-Question which owned to be explained analytically.
3. *Patipuccavyakarana*-Question which owned to be replied with a counter question.
4. *Tapaniya*-Question that should be set aside.

The Buddha answered the questions that posed by various persons (which are possible to answer) using above first three methods (01,02,03). Questions which answered by the Buddha were based on empirical content as well as analytical methods or is capable of being verified by experience. Therefore the Buddha's answers can be considered as empirical statements and analytical statements or as a posteriori synthetic and a priori analytic that used by logical positivists. A.JAyer explained it as empirical hypotheses and tautologies.<sup>22</sup> The last one (04), *Tapaniya* is the method used by the Buddha to keep silent when posed a question by someone, due to these questions do not have empirical content or these questions known as metaphysical questions. These types of question can be considered as Non – comprehensive statements that rejected by logical positivists as metaphysics. What are the questions set aside by Buddha? *Vaccagottasanyutta Mahanidana sutta*, *Brahmajalasutta*, *Mahalisutta* and *Pottapadasutta* give us evident to find out these questions. They are,

1. *Sassatoloko*-Is the world eternal?
2. *Assatoloko*- Is the world non eternal?
3. *Antavaloko*-Is the world finite?

4. *Anantavaloko*-Is the world infinite?
5. *Tanjivan tam sariram*-The soul is identical with the body.
6. *Annancajivan annamsariram*-The soul is different from the body.
7. *Hotitathagatoparammaranam*-Does tathagata exist after death?
8. *Na hotitathagatoparammaranam*-Does tathagata not exist after death?
9. *Hoti ca na hoti ca tathagatoparammaranam*-Does the tathagata both exist and not exist after death?
10. *Neva hoti ca na hoti ca tathagatoparammaranam*-Neither tathagata exist nor tathagata does not exist after death.

Questions themselves imply that there is metaphysical nature that no possible sense experience can resolve them. The rational metaphysicians of time of the Buddha took definitive positions regarding these questions and enthusiastically debated them with rational and metaphysical argument.<sup>23</sup> K.N Jayathilake pointed out that Buddha had more than one reason for refusing to answer them and believes that the Buddha's refusal to answer them was grounded on reason similar to those that logical positivists to reject metaphysical questions as meaningless.<sup>24</sup> The reason why these questions cannot be answered is that they are logically meaningless and empirically non sensical. K.N. Jayathilake pointed out that the simile used by the Buddha in *Aggivaccagotta sutta* emphasized the reason for not answering four questions raised about the destiny of Tathagata after death.

“A fire produced by supply for fuel, such dry grass and sticks continues burn as long as all the fuel is consumed. If, after fire goes out due to consumption all the fuel, one were to ask which direction the fire went. The Buddha says that the question itself is meaningless.”<sup>25</sup> K.N. Jayatilake shows in his book “Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge” that the simile used by the Buddha to explain destiny of Tathagata after death is similar to simile used by Wittgenstein who had a strong influence on the logical positivists theory of meaning. He says thus,

“Thus it can come about that we aren’t able to rid ourselves of implication of our symbolism, which seems to admit of a question like “where does the flame of the a candle go to when it blown out, where does the light go to”<sup>26</sup>.

The Buddha like logical positivists considered some questions as inappropriate, because they are meaningless. Such questions are suggested by the grammar of the language. But give a distorted picture of the nature of reality.<sup>27</sup> The Buddha’s rejection of metaphysical notion of an enduring ‘I’ within the factors of personality was at least parley based on the reason that such a notion of an ‘I’ is due to being misled by the grammar of our language. On similar consideration the logical positivists argued against the certain theories of ethics which suggested that “Goodness” is a non natural property. Although the Buddha agree with the rejection of metaphysics of logical positivists, do not seem to be agree with the rejection of ethical statements by logical positivists. Like the logical positivists the Buddha distinguished answerable questions and unanswerable questions.

## Conclusion

Thus, there can be seen close relationship between logical positivism and Buddhism with regarding the rejection of metaphysics. Specially statements like “The absolute is perfect” as meaningless. They are grammatically well-form. But there is no empirical content. The Buddha to seem to has adopted similar notion regarding the limit of the meaningful use of language in *Sabbasutta* of *sanyuttanikaya* the Buddha posed the question “what is everything” and gave reply that “everything consist of six sense, their respective data, visible forms, sounds, taste etc. This is followed by the remark that if anyone were to speak about anything beyond there, the consequence will be the mere utterance of empty worlds devoid of meaning because it goes beyond all sense experience”<sup>28</sup> This notior. is similar to theory of meaning of logical positivists. However Buddhism does not agree with the rejection of ethical statements of logical positivists because Buddhist teaching based on moral content. Logical positivists reject extra-sensory perception (*Abhinna*), kamma, rebirth and liberation (*Nibbana*). But Buddhism does not agree with it because Buddha and His followers have been practically proved the reliability and empirical nature of it. Nibbana realized by the Buddha could be possible to realize his followers. Because the way of realize the Nibbana have empirical content and everybody can experience it through sense organs if it is practically followed

The logical positivism is latest philosophical school of Western world developed under the logic, mathematics and natural science but Buddhism much older than the

positivism. Nevertheless, with the development of science and technology the reliability and practicability of Buddhism is come out.

### End notes

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2. Carnap P. R., Logical Structure of the World, 1928, From Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.
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4. Twentieth Century philosophy, The Analytic Tradition, Morris Weitz, free press New York, 1966.
5. Kalansuriya A. D. P., Batahira Vishleshi Darshanaya, 2008, P 102.
6. Ibid, P 102.
7. Ibid, P 129.
8. Ayer, A.J., Language Truth and Logic, Victor Gollancz, London, chapter I 1936
9. Delfgaauw, B, Twentieth Century philosophy p,150
10. Ayer, A.J., Language Truth and Logic, Victor Gollancz, London, chapter 1.
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Kalansuriya A. D. P., Batahira Vishleshi Darshanaya, 2008, P 112.
14. Ibid, P 113.
15. Ibid, P 118
16. *Kisma loke samuppanno, kismim kubbatu santavan*  
*Kissa loke upadaya kismim loke vibajjati*  
*Jhasu loke samuppanno, jhasu kubbatu santavan*  
*Jhannan eva upadaya, jhasu loke vibajjati*

17. *cakkunca, paticca, rupeca uppajjati cakkhu vinnanam*
18. *Yenakho auso lokassmin loka sanni hoti*  
*Lokamani ayan uccati ariyassa vinaye ,*  
*Loko tenaca auso lokassmin loka sanni hoti,*  
*Lokamani cakkuna kho auso lokasmin loka sanni hoti,*  
*Lokamani sotena.....ghanena...jivhaya...kayena..... manena.....*  
*-loka kamagunasutta, S iv, 95*
19. Acela kassapa sutta-S ii 18 and culamalunkya sutta, M, i, 426
20. Culamalunkya sutta M, i, 42
21. Atthi bhikkhave panho ekansa vyakaraniyo, atthi bhikkhave panho patipucca vyakaraniyo, atthi Bhikkhave panho tapaniyo, atthi bhikkhave panho vibajjavyakaraniyoti, A, ii, 46
22. Ayer, A.J., Language Truth and Logic, Victor Gollancz, London, chapter 1
23. Logical Positivism-Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Pemasiri, P.D-P, 331
24. Jayatilaka K.N., Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge p, 88.
25. Aggivaccagotta sutta M, ii p487
26. Blue and Brown Books, Basil Blackwell, oxford, 1964, p108
27. Logical Positivism - Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Pemasiri, P.D-P 331
28. Sabba sutta, vol, iv p15.

