

THE CONCEPT OF METAPHILOSOPHY

The Word 'metaphilosophy' was coined by Morris Lazero-witz. Understood in a general way, 'metaphilosophy' means, philosophy of philosophy, that is to say, the body of sentences embodying philosophical reflection on the various problems about philosophy itself, e. g., 'What is philosophy?' 'What is the method of philosophy?', 'Do philosophical sentences have truth-values?', and so on. Metaphilosophy in this wide sense, that is as a concern with philosophy in general, had originated, in some form, one may say, in Pythagoras, who is said to have coined the word 'philosophy'. Subsequently, it was made a stable part of philosophy by Plato and, much later, by a number of modern philosophers, especially, Descartes, Kant, Hume and others. However, thanks to the acutely self-conscious twentieth century philosophers, it now forms, as everybody knows, a large and significant part of philosophy.

Lazerowitz has no particular objection against applying the word 'metaphilosophy' to describe this branch of philosophical enquiry. But in his own actual use and philosophical practice, the word 'metaphilosophy' assumes a narrow sense. It is intended to designate only a limited field of philosophical investigation. In his *The Language of Philosophy*, he describes it as a new field of

... investigation of philosophical utterances with the special aim of reaching a satisfactory understanding of what in their nature, permits intractable disagreements which invariably attach to them.¹

During discussions also, he maintains the same position when he says, "Metaphilosophy is just the investigation of philosophical problems with the aim of describing what there is about them that makes them irresolvable." ²

Thus, metaphilosophy, as defined by Lazerowitz, may well be said to be a characteristic part or variant of the metaphilosophy in the wider sense; and Lazerowitz, as we have said, has no particular objection to this description of his own metaphilosophy ³, even though, he prefers to confine the application of the name "metaphilosophy" to his restricted area of enquiry.

We have no serious objection to Lazerowitz's characteristic use of the name 'metaphilosophy'. But we sense one danger in it. The enquiry instituted by Lazerowitz and named 'metaphilosophy' is designed to explain one notorious and apparently disturbing peculiarity of philosophical utterances. But philosophical utterances may have more peculiarities which are equally notorious and have an equal claim to an explanation. Cannot the body of sentences containing such explanation, one may ask, make a claim to the name 'metaphilosophy'? Will it not amount to following a double standard to deny the name to it?

Anyway the question arises: Is metaphilosophy in general and, for that matter, Lazerowitz's metaphilosophy which is a characteristic variant of it, a part of philosophy? We know of philosophers who are inclined to liken philosophy too closely to science, and for that matter, metaphilosophy to metascience. For such philosophers, metaphilosophy will not normally count as a part of philosophy at all, just as metascience does not count as a part of science.

But the position which tends to go so far as to expel metaphilosophy from the domain of philosophy, need not, we think,

be taken too seriously. Philosophy may indeed resemble science, even very closely. Yet it would seem to go too far to suppose that the same resemblance holds also between metascience and metaphilosophy, and to argue, on that basis, that since metascience is not science, metaphilosophy, likewise, is not philosophy. For, the relation that holds between metaphilosophy and philosophy differs in certain fundamental ways from that which holds between metascience and science. Metascience is not in actuality claimed to be a science, and for that, there is a good reason. The reason is primarily that metascientific problems, e. g., 'What is science?', 'What is the method of science?', etc. do not respond to the same method of approach as questions of science, e. g., 'How does mercury react to heat?', 'What are the effects of carbon monoxide on the human organism?', etc. Our ways of finding answers to the latter are observation, experiment and the like, but these do not apply to the former.

The picture, on the other hand, is totally different when we look at the relation that holds between metaphilosophy and philosophy. Our methods of dealing with problems is the same in both cases. Take for example, the philosophical questions, 'What is the nature of ultimate reality?', 'Do Universals exist?', and compare them with the metaphilosophical questions, e. g., 'What is philosophy?', 'What is the method of philosophy?' The way philosophers deal with the latter is not different from the way they deal with the former, and philosophers are not aware of any alternative way which might prove more suitable for metaphilosophical problems.

Interestingly, however, one thing may be noted at this point. To his students, Lazerowitz is never known to be one among those philosophers who are prone to liken philosophy to science or even place science and philosophy in the same category.

...philosophy is not a demonstrative science and ... we cannot expect from it what we expect from a demonstrative science.⁴

... the philosophical theories, unlike those of the natural sciences and mathematics, are not open to proof or disproof.⁵

Also,

... a moment's reflection will tend to throw doubt on the comfortable idea that philosophy is a kind of science.⁶

Yet, at certain place he sounds like someone subscribing to the position that metaphilosophy is not philosophy, at least not necessarily. He says :

... It seems plainly possible to make statements about philosophy (metaphilosophical statements)⁷ which are not themselves philosophical statements.⁸

But on what is this grounded ? The only sighted ground, as far as we can see, is obtained introspectively in Humean style. It is, in Lazerowitz's own words,

... to speak for myself, I sometimes mention philosophical problems without finding philosophical thoughts accompanying them.⁹

An introspective or inductive ground has a characteristic weakness of its own, which we need not elaborate. No philosophical proposition, by its very nature, is amenable to factual or inductive corroboration. But this is not our main objection against Lazerowitz on this particular point. What we would especially like to call attention to, is a feeling we have that Lazerowitz in an unguarded moment lost sight of the distinction that exists between *mentioning* philosophy and *talking about*

philosophy (producing a metaphilosophical statement). The former is not a philosophical activity. And no one perhaps will say that it is. But talking about philosophy is doing philosophy. It is producing, fundamentally, the same kind of sentences in which philosophy consists. As a matter of fact, this is one recognised singularity which distinguishes philosophy from other disciplines, in that when we talk about science or art we do not necessarily produce science or art.

So we have good reason to look upon metaphilosophy as philosophy. But the question arises : In what precise way is it so ? Is it a part of philosophy in the sense in which such branches of philosophy as, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc. are ? We seem to have genuine difficulties in thinking of metaphilosophy that way. Metaphilosophy, even though a part of philosophy, cannot be assigned the same kind of status or position as metaphysics, epistemology, etc. On the other hand, there is a significant difference between them. The difference in fact goes so far as to make them philosophies of a different kind.

Let us illustrate this point.

No two things, say *A* and *B* can be assigned to the same class, say, *C*, if their logical relations to *C* are different. This follows from the fact that every two members of a particular class stand in the same logical relation to the class as a whole. (For, otherwise, the class-name could not have been applicable to both in the same sense.)¹⁰

Now, one could have indeed maintained that metaphilosophy is philosophy of a kind with metaphysics or epistemology, if it were the case that the metaphilosophical problems and the problems of metaphysics, epistemology, etc., could be said to stand in the same relation to the class of philosophical problems to

which the latter belong. But this does not in fact turn out to be the case.

Take for example, the metaphysical question, 'What is the nature of ultimate reality?' Needless to say, it presupposes besides itself, such other questions as 'Is there anything to be called ultimate reality?', 'Is it knowable?', and so on, together with relevant answers to them. But never will it or any other such question presuppose the entire class of questions of its kind together with their answers. And this holds also good of every other particular philosophical question, whether metaphysical, or epistemological, or ethical, etc.

And, it is precisely in this important respect that metaphilosophy as a branch of philosophy differs from metaphysics, epistemology, etc.,. Take the metaphilosophical question 'What is philosophy?' Obviously, it presupposes philosophy, and in doing so it naturally presupposes the *entire* range of what constitutes philosophy, i.e., the *entire* range of philosophical questions together with their possible answers. Needless to say, the range includes all metaphysical, epistemological questions etc. and also metaphilosophical questions.

Thus, it is not correct to suppose that metaphilosophy is not philosophy at all. Nor is it correct to think that it is philosophy along with metaphysics, epistemology, etc. But how, then, may we, place metaphilosophy or Lezarowitz's characteristic version of it in the map of philosophy? The most appropriate way, according to us, is to conceive it, as a philosophical activity of the second order, as distinguished, from metaphysics, epistemology, and the like which may well be called philosophical activity of the first order.¹¹ So, in being a kind of metaphilosophy, Lezarowitz's metaphilosophy may be called a species of second order philosophy.

In introducing such notions as first order, second order to characterise philosophy, we would appear to be introducing a hierarchy in philosophy which may never end. For, someone who investigates the nature of metaphilosophy will produce a third order philosophy and the process will go on endlessly.

This notion of an endless hierarchy appears repellant to some. But what is there to be frightened of? It follows naturally and inevitably from the nature of man as incurably self-conscious. Besides, it also accords with the nature of knowledge as endless.

Lazerowitz, however, as far as we know, has not said anything which can be understood as an acceptance of our characterisation of metaphilosophy. But that is because of the unfortunate fact that the philosopher, so remarkably conscious of the first order philosophy, has not carried forward his self-consciousness a step further to reflect on his own metaphilosophisings, that is to say, to be sufficiently inquisitive about what it is that he is doing or how to characterise it. Lazerowitz's metaphilosophy covers a lot; contrarily, his philosophy of metaphilosophy covers little.

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NOTES

1. P. 1; also 'Metaphilosophy', *Critica*, Vol. 5. No. 5, Mexico (1971) p. 3
2. Tape recorded discussion.
3. *Vide* his letter to M. Chakravarty.
4. *Vide* his *Philosophy and Illusion*, (George Allen and Unwin, London 1968) p. 82
5. *Vide* his *The Structure of Metaphysics*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955), p. 25
6. 'The Fly Bottle : Wittgenstein and Bowsma', *Reports on Philosophy*, 5, (1981) p. 34
7. Portion within parenthesis ours.
8. 'On Talking About Philosophy', *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 8, Nos. 2 & 3, (1977) p. 253
9. *Ibid.*, p. 254
10. Cf. M. Chakravarty, *Metaphilosophical and Model Philosophical Questions*, Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, Viswa Bharati, West Bengal, India, 1972, pp., 11-2
11. *Ibid.*, See pp. 17-20 (For elaboration)