

LINGUISTIC SOLIPSISM: A DEFENSE

This paper aims at a defense of linguistic solipsism against the physicalists' endeavour of refuting it. In this paper we shall embody the arguments which the physicalists developed while repudiating linguistic solipsism, and shall try to show how their attempt fails to reach its goal.

The physicalists, explicating mind-body problem in terms of physics, claim to discard the possibility of metaphysics. They promise to bring what we call mental level to the level of physics. Their enterprise is to translate the sentences of all sciences into the language of physics and to establish the unity of sciences. The reason for choosing physical language to express everything is that the language of physics is 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal'. It is the basic language of all sciences, that is a universal language comprehending the content of all other scientific languages and contains quantitative characteristics. Rudolf Carnap, a staunch champion of physicalism, states,

The physical language... consists of sentences that give in their simplest form a quantitative description of definite space-time-place (e.g. 'At such an such space-time-point the tempeature is so and so many degrees')¹.

So in order to make language 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal' lignuistic expressions in most cases, are made in terms of quantity rather than quality. The physicalists, therefore, think that the language of physics alone is appropriate for communication of our views and ideas. Dr. Neurath, a physicalist, says,

'Every sentence of any branch of any scientific language is equipollent to some sentence of the physical language, and therefore be translated into the physical language without changing its content.'²

This is what Neurath proposed to call physicalism.

Rudolf Carnap in an article entitled "Psychology in Physical Language" holds the view that sentences about the psychological states of person are translatable into the language of physics. He states,

.....every sentence of psychology may be formulated in physical language... all sentences of psychology describe physical occurrences, namely, the physical behaviour of humans and others animals. This is a sub-thesis of the general thesis of physicalism to the effect that physical language is a universal language, that is, a language into which every sentence may be translated.³

So for Carnap, psychological sentences which describe physical occurrences, behaviour of humans or animals or state of one's own mind are translatable into the physical language. The physicalists attempt thus, to translate the sentences of all sciences into that of physics. which they claim to be 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal'. The thinkers who advocate physicalism are Carnap, Neurath and Hempel, etc.

On the contrary, solipsism regards that only 'I' and my experience exist'. According to that doctrine I cannot transcend my experience. In other words, it is a doctrine which advocates existing world as an object or content of individual consciousness. It denies the independent existence of reality. For solipsists the immediate object of our sense experience is mind dependent (ideas, impressions, or sense-data). Solipsists, thus, maintain that only 'I' exist, or the self is the whole of reality, because the claim of existence is grounded in experience which is essentially immediate and perceived by an individual and is private to him. So the existence of the 'sky', the 'air', the 'earth', 'colour', 'shapes' etc., are the invention of the individual mind. Hence existential knowledge originates in the inner cognitive states of the individual.

In a similar strain linguistic solipsism regards that my sense-data belong to me and the sense-data of others belong to them. Therefore the language which I use to express my sense experience is meaningful only to me whereas, the language which others use is meaningful to them alone, because the language which we use to express the kind of knowledge derived from direct sense experience is personal. For instance, after having seen the leaf of a tree I say

that 'the leaf is green', and another person who also perceived it would say that 'it is green'. But the two utterances are not identical because when I say that 'the leaf is green', I express only my sense experience whereas the other person who also utters that 'the leaf is green' expresses his own sense experience. So there is a difference in the above two expressions, which consists in the fact that whereas I understand well the meaning of the language that I express, the other one cannot understand the meaning of the language that I use. This is what is called linguistic solipsism.

The physicalists attempt to overcome this solipsistic problem. According to them, for example, when I say 'today is very cold', and another person says, 'it is not at all cold', and a third person says, 'it is neither cold nor hot', it is very capricious from the experiences that one can hardly arrive at the consensus in our linguistic expression of the weather. So the attempt of the physicalists is to remove the above difficulties in our linguistic expression. In such cases, using the physical language they will say that 'today's temperature is 20 degree celcius or 25 degree celcius' etc. a statement which is equally acceptable to all. It is because of the fact that physical language is 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal'. Now let us spell out what is meant by 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal' character of physics. Regarding the meaning of the word 'intersensual', we may first observe that it refers to the knowledge of various sense organs and that its validity can be proved by our sense experience. To articulate its meaning in more clear terms, we may quote Joergensen,

That physical language is intersensual means that its sentences can be tested by means of various senses, because actually there is no physical function that can be co-ordinated solely with qualitative characteristic from single sphere of sense.⁴

Our next query concerns itself with the problem of the meaning of the term 'intersubjectivity' in physicalism. That the language of physics is 'intersubjective' means it can be examined by various subjects and in this way we are able to establish a meaning for all. To quote Victor Kraft,

That physical language is intersubjective means, from the formal point of view, it must constitute a common system of sign and rules, and

from the semantic point of view, a given sign must have the same meaning for any language user.⁵

And thirdly, the language of physics is 'universal' means that every scientifically acceptable sentence, whether they originate from our everyday language or from a branch of science, can be translated into the language of physics. Victor Kraft spells out further,

Physical language must be univocal, i.e., any sentence, any language must be tested into it; it must constitute a conceptual system in which any state of affairs whatsoever can be expressed.⁶

In the light of above discussion, the physicalists are of the view that all meaningful statements can be translated into the language of physics which is 'universal' and, thus, able to comprehend the content of all other sciences because in the example 'today is very cold', it is clear that the temperature of a particular day which may appear too hot or too cold to different persons having different sensations. That is to say that sensation of hot or cold are not same to all. In such cases, the physicalists point out that the temperature of particular time is 20 degree celcius or 25 degree celcius. It is to be noted that this quantitative measurement of temperature in terms of celcius will definitely seem to be more accurate and authentic than its qualitative measurement that is, 'it is very hot or cold'. In the same manner, when we say that, 'this bag is heavy', the physicalists will say that 'the weight of this bag is 40 kg., 50 kg.' etc. And again when we say 'this room is rectangular', the physicalists would say that the room is 15 feet in length and 10 feet in breadth.

In all the cases above, according to physicalists the language becomes 'universal' and in every case it puts stress on quantitative measurement rather than the qualitative one. Thus they hold the view that it is not at all difficult to translate the ordinary language of sciences into the language of physics. It is to be noted here that things or material objects are usually described by articulating its primary or secondary qualities. The discussion so far made does not, however, pose any problem in respect of the primary qualities of an object or a thing, but it will definitely face a problem in respect of the secondary qualities of an object or a thing. When we explain an object or a thing in terms of its secondary qualities, say, 'this

is green', what do the physicalists say? How do they measure the greenness of an object or a thing? The physicalists measure the greenness of an object or a thing in terms of its wave length. For example, when we say, 'this is green', the physicalists will say its wave length varies from 4912° to 5750° A' and accordingly yellow from 57500° to 5850° A', orange from 5850° to 6470° A, and so on. Due to the development of science and techenology, the physicalists assert that different colours can be separated from one another by a machine. On the basis of differentiation of colour a machine is able to distinguish between different grades of letters. This gradation depends on the wave length of the colour. The colour of a first class stamp and that of a second class stamp is different. Man may be wrong in such gradation, but the machine may not. Likewise the physicalists express words through frequency.

Now the question is how the physicalists would measure the feeling and sensation of a man. In this respect, the physicalists have also made an effort to measure our different feelings and sensations. For example, when we say that 'so and so is happy' the physicalists would say that his physical condition is such that we can call him happy. Again if it is said that 'so and so is afraid' the physicalists would say that his physical condition is such that we can call him 'afraid', that is to say that his physical condition is characterised by the acceleration of breathing and pulsation, by the tendency to certain violent behaviour and so on.

Thus we see that according to the physicalists, like the primary qualities, the secondary qualities are also transformable into the language of physics and that the language of physics is 'intersensual', 'intersubjective' and 'universal'. Hence the physicalists turn all sciences into physics. Various sciences, in their view, are nothing but different branches of a unified system of knowledge. Physicalism, therefore, is an attempt at a unity of science.

From the foregoing discussion it is apparent* that physicalists claim to rectify the defect of linguistic solipsism. The question is, how far they have succeeded in their endeavour. Apparently it seems to us that the physicalists have been able to provide a scientific basis to the philosophical interpretation and there is no inconsistency or incompatibility in it. For example, 'today's temperature is 25 degree

celcius' or 'this bag weighs 40 kg.' etc. is linguistically quite unambiguous and clear. Thus they conclude that they have been able to remove the unclarity inherrent in linguistic solipsism.

But a careful look into the matter discussed above reveals that physicalism could not achieve its professed claim. That is to say they could not overcome the difficulties of linguistic solipsism. It has already been pointed out that the physicalists are the language of physics in order to remove the discrepancies that the inherent in our statement of facts 'today's temperature is 20 degree celcius' or 'the bag weights 40 kg.' etc. But the meaning of the statements cited above varies from person to person, because objects appear different to different observers or to the same observer at different times under different conditions. For example a weight 40 kg. appears be heavier to a boy of ten years than it does to a man of twenty years. Thus despite the physicalists' effort, linguistic solipsism is irrefutable.

Again, we have seen that the physicalists' claim that like primary qualities, the secondary qualities are also translatable into the language of physics. In fact both qualities do not exist in the external object rather they exist in the apprehending mind. So when we express greenness in terms of its wave length or sound in terms of its frequency, these vary from person to person and even the primary qualities of an object change by the alternation of perceiver or his physical position and every bit of these qualities are observer-dependent.

Wittgenstein in '*Tractatus*' spells out in defense of solipsism that

....What solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself. That the world is my world, shows itself in the fact the limit of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world.³

In a similar vein, Wittgenstein in '*Philosophical Investigations*', while explicating private language, is of the view that the language which a particular person employs refers only to his own experiences. He states,

"The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language".⁸

Wittgenstein further states that "the language which describes my inner experience and that only I myself can understand".⁹ Therefore, the language that refers to the experience of a speaker is not understood by any one other than the speaker. Thus individual experiences cannot be expressed in physical language. Moreover, their attempt of translating psychological condition namely, feeling, emotion, etc., in terms of physics is not valid either, because all statements concerning mental states are not translatable into physical language. There may be some statements which are translatable, but, are not exclusive enough to explain and interpret all statements about our thoughts, feeling, emotions and even sensations. Ayer's statement, in this context, seems to be admissible and satisfactory. He says:

There are any number of statements about people's thoughts and sensations and feelings which appear to be logically independent of any statement about their bodily condition or behaviour.¹⁰

So all statements of psychology cannot be translated into the language of physics. What is more important is that the state of mind is so transitory and fleeting that it changes within a second. Consequently the attempt of translating such state of mind is ridiculous.

From our above analysis it is explicit that objectivity of knowledge remains an unsolved problem in solipsism. The solipsist cannot justify the existence of physical reality in terms of its quantitative and qualitative changes and causal relationship just as it is problematic for the physicalists to justify individual potentiality, creativity and competence. Similarly for the solipsists it is problematic to justify the objectivity of human experience.

In conclusion, we may point out that notwithstanding physicalist's strenuous effort to get rid of linguistic solipsism, it is irrefutable. They fail to account for the privacy or subjectivity of mental phenomena. Moreover, it is not an easy task to express all our utterances into the language of physics.

In fact, in the discourse of philosophical pursuit, besides

physicalists many attempts have been made to refute solipsism. But it is irrefutable. If we accept this the problem arises regarding the objectivity of knowledge and knowledge becomes subjective and relative, How do we counter this situation if we cannot deny the objectivity of knowledge?

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