CHAPTER- IV
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COMPARISON

In this chapter, we propose to compare John Locke’s causal theory of perception and A.J. Ayer’s phenomenalism. Locke is the founder of British empiricism and Ayer also belongs to this tradition. So the common element between both of them is that they both are empiricists. Locke is a classical empiricist whereas Ayer claims to be a linguistic empiricist. In fact Ayer continues the same tradition of British empiricism which was started by Locke. But both have different reasons to adopt empiricism. Locke adopts empiricism in order to inquire into the origin, limits and extent of knowledge whereas for Ayer it is to avoid metaphysics.

Ayer is the product of British empiricism which was started by Locke and carried forward by Berkeley and Hume. Since Ayer’s philosophy is a further continuation of Lockean system, on certain points they share almost similar views although on certain points they have differences. We would like to emphasize here that when we draw similarities, we do not mean exactly that there are clear cut parallels. Though both are empiricist philosophers, yet, their treatment of philosophical issues have been in different manner. While Locke talks in
terms of a definite ontological philosophical framework, Ayer does not take any ontological stand explicitly.

John Locke is a trend setting philosopher of classical British empiricism, who opposed rationalism and advocated empiricism. He is the first philosopher who tried to investigate into the origin, limits and extent of knowledge. Not only this, he tried to validate the scientific and technological knowledge. This he did by accepting the material substance along with its primary qualities. The acceptance of causal theory of perception, i.e. our ideas are caused by external material reality, is a prerequisite for paving the way for the scientific and technological development.

Descartes, in his dualism maintains that mind and matter are two fundamental realities but being a rationalist he says that it is easier to know the mind than matter. Locke accepts this mind body dualism of Descartes but holds that interaction between these two is possible. But in the acquisition of knowledge Descartes doubts the testimony of senses and holds that they often deceive us, therefore, they should not be trusted. According to him we can never attain certainty through sense perception because in it the mind gets conjoined with the body. So, he accepts the
testimony of reason in the acquisition of knowledge and propounds the
theory of innate ideas. Locke criticizes Descartes' notion of innate idea
and accepts sense-experience as the valid source of knowledge. Thus
unlike Descartes, who is a rationalist, Locke is an empiricist. Locke says
that through experience we can know only our own ideas i.e. simple ideas
and not the external material objects. Thus Locke makes a distinction
between the internal and external- the ideas in the mind being internal and
the material objects being external. Here Locke accepts the dualism of the
mind and body as stated by Descartes.

A.J. Ayer belongs to the school of logical positivism and
propounded phenomenalism, i.e. ultimate reality can be translated into
meaningful sentences without residue. Phenomenalism, in its factual
version maintains that a physical object is no more than a set of actual and
possible sense-data. And according to the linguistic version of
phenomenalism, all statements about material things are translatable into
statements about actual and possible sense-data. Unlike Locke for whom
philosophy is an inquiry into the origin, extent and limits of knowledge,
Ayer believes that the sole function of philosophy is to clarify our thoughts
in science; that it's role is confined to the analysis of the language only.
Here it may be noted that though Ayer claims that he is concerned with
linguistic analysis only, yet, he takes for granted the mental side of
Cartesian dualism which is a continuation of the philosophies of Berkeley and Hume. The point is that whereas Locke assigns a separate independent status to material substance, Ayer, by denying material substance confines all reality to sense-data.

So, here Ayer has complete disagreement with Locke regarding the function of philosophy. Locke is a realist. He is concerned with the real problem of perception but Ayer claims to consider these questions as linguistic one. One of the reasons behind this difference is the difference in their views regarding the nature and aim of philosophy. While for Locke the role of philosophy is to inquire into the origin, extent and limits of knowledge, for Ayer the sole subject matter of philosophy is clarification of thoughts in science and daily language. He presupposes "The problem of giving an actual rule for translating sentences about a material thing into sentences about sense-contents, which may be called the problem of the reduction of material things to sense-contents, is the main philosophical part of the traditional problem of perception".¹ In fact, the chief object of Ayer's phenomenalism, in identifying philosophy with analysis, is to dismiss the aspects related to objective material world. The main aim of this analysis is to distort the whole picture of reality by merely concentrating on the logic of language as if language is a ready-made thing.

If all that a philosopher can do is the logical analysis of concepts of everyday language and science then what kind of knowledge do we acquire about the objective material reality? Thus Ayer's phenomenalism leads us away from the path of knowledge to the path of empty arguments about world or concepts.

Ayer considers Locke not as a metaphysician but as an analyst. He writes: "Locke is generally regarded as being one who ... puts forward a philosophy of common sense. But he does not ... attempt to give an a priori justification of our common-sense beliefs. Rather does he appear to have seen that it was not his business as a philosopher to affirm or deny the validity of any empirical propositions, but only to analyse them.... and so devotes himself to the purely analytic tasks of defining knowledge, and classifying propositions, and displaying the nature of material things."²

Another point of similarity between these two philosophers is that both of them do not accept explicitly that they are adopting Cartesian dualism. But as we have tried to prove in respective chapters Locke takes for granted both sides of Cartesian dualism and this acceptance of Cartesian dualism as well as empiricism leads to various contradictions in his
philosophy. But Ayer, unlike Locke, accepts only the mental side on the line of Berkeley and Hume.

Locke in his empiricism is concerned with the real empirical question whereas Ayer says that these are just linguistic questions. Ayer claims to avoid metaphysics whereas Locke does not say so. For Locke, philosophy is concerned with reality, i.e. the origin, extent and limits of knowledge etc. whereas Ayer claims that its aim is analysis of the language, clarification of thought, to clear concepts in our daily language and science. For Locke, it is concerned with the ontology and epistemology but Ayer says it is not concerned with ontology at all. In previous chapters we have attempted to show that he is equally concerned with ontology and epistemology. Though he claims that he is not concerned with it, that it is not the subject matter of philosophy at all, we in our exposition have tried to prove that actually what he does is, is ontology and epistemology.

Locke's causal theory of perception supports an independent existence of the objective material reality. He is greatly influenced by the scientific temper of his time. The period of Locke needed scientific research and development in order to strengthen and consolidate the newly emerged social reality i.e. capitalism, which emerged victorious by defeating feudalism. Hence it was necessary to create an interest in the material world to safeguard the new system. This needed an ideological
support and Locke, being an ideologue of the capitalists, did so by assigning an independent status to matter. But at the same time he had to maintain the superiority of this class and this he did so by giving superiority to mind over matter. Hence, because of the acceptance of Cartesian dualism as well as empiricism, matter remained for him unknown and unknowable.

Whereas Locke assigns a separate objective existence to material things, Ayer takes a subjective idealist stand on the line of Hume. Because Locke is a classical empiricist and Ayer a linguistic empiricist, Locke in his causal theory of perception accepts matter whereas Ayer’s phenomenalism does not accept matter at all. But when asked about the nature of this body of the material world, Locke says that it is unknown and unknowable. This position results in contradiction. On the one hand he maintains that ideas are caused by the material objects and on the other hand he holds that material objects are unknown and unknowable. To say that it has primary qualities is to say that it is known and knowable. On the other hand—Ayer, rejects it by saying as ‘Locke’s discredited assumption of the existence of material substratum’. Denying the material substance he says that all the material things can be reduced in sense-contents without residue. Locke says that what we are immediately aware of is idea only and not the things

3 Ibid., p. 126.
themselves. Material substance can not be known. Similarity Ayer says that we can have only sense-contents, not the material things. So, here they share a close relationship though both adopt, in our view, more or less the same philosophical position, of course with certain differences.

Locke, in his causal theory of perception, because of the acceptance of the Cartesian dualism, accepts the substantial nature of mind and matter. Though Locke is also a dualist like Descartes but there is a difference. Whereas Descartes accepts that knowledge of the external world is possible through clear and distinct ideas, Locke described the substance as ‘I know not’.

But Ayer, who is influenced by Berkeley and Hume, accepts only the mental side of Cartesian dualism. Berkeley, in order to explain the continued existence of material things when no one is perceiving them, brings God. In Ayer’s phenomenalism possible sense-data perform the same function. Ayer takes for granted the concept of ‘idea’ or ‘impression’ of Hume as ‘sense-content’ or ‘sense-data’ and in his linguistic framework calls them as linguistic tools or linguistic alternatives.

Whereas Locke accepts the existence of matter, though unknown and unknowable, for Ayer “not only the metaphysical assertions but even statements about the existence of material substance are considered
meaningless. This is so because he accepts the pluralistic, subjective-idealistic ontology and epistemology.\textsuperscript{4} Because Ayer "accepts analysis as the only method of philosophy. According to the above epistemology and ontology only sense-data can exist. Thus, in the context of the verification principle of meaning, only the statements about the sense-data can be verified and are meaningful."\textsuperscript{5} The result is denial of material substance.

Another common point between both of them is the use of term 'idea' and 'sense-content'. Locke says that what we are immediately aware of in perception are ideas. Ayer also adopts the word idea but replaces it in his use by 'the neutral word sense-content' which according to him refers 'to the immediate data not merely of outer but also of introspective sensation'.\textsuperscript{6} Similarly Ayer also says that sense data-are the only reality which we are aware of in perception. Locke's use of the term 'idea' is very confusing. He sometimes speaks of our ideas of sensible qualities while at other times the sensible qualities are spoken of as ideas. The idea for him is at once the apprehension of a content and the content apprehended. Further, he uses the term idea not only for sense-data but also for concepts and universal ideas. Idea, for Locke, is 'the object of understanding'.

\textsuperscript{4} Gupta Suman, ‘Interpretation of the Relation of Language, Meaning, Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology in Linguistic Philosophy- An Appraisal’ in 'Structures of Signification', School of Languages, JNU, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 113.

constituting the 'materials of knowledge. At the same time he equates idea with perception saying 'having ideas and perception is the same thing'. Ideas are, for him, incapable of change as well as confusion. In the course of our exposition of Locke's philosophy, we have already shown that this careless use of the term 'idea' does not serve the cause of clarity. According to Ayer, sense-data are not part of a material thing but are the objects of which we are directly aware in perception. In the final analysis, he concludes that: "it is the character of our perception that makes it necessary for us to say that what we are directly experiencing is not a material thing but a sense-datum." Thus in the light of this statement we can deduce that, if only the sense-data are the objects of sense experience, then we can not see through the sense-data to material reality which lies beyond them. Then it results in the denial of material reality as such. Locke also says that through experience we can know only our own ideas i.e. simple ideas and not the external material objects. In this connection Suman Gupta opines: "Locke maintains that the mind through sense experience can not know the external material objects themselves. It can only know its own ideas which are produced in the mind through the actions of the external material objects." 

There is another point of confrontation between Locke and Ayer and that is Locke's division of qualities into primary and secondary. Ayer does not accept this division and on the line of Berkeley criticizes Locke's distinction by saying "there is no such distinction, as Berkeley realized."  

Locke in his causal theory of perception discusses perception in terms of minds, ideas (sense-data), and material objects but Ayer in his phenomenalism maintains that a physical object is no more than a set of actual and possible sense-data. But a close examination of Ayer's philosophy shows that it "is a continuation of the empiricist movement started by Locke in the seventeenth century and carried on by Berkeley and Hume."  

For Ayer "The ultimate constituent of reality are not material objects but sense-data. Matter for him is only a logical construction and the aim of philosophical activity is to reduce it to sense-contents or sense-data."  

In Ayer's phenomenalism one can verify only the 'abstract' objects of sensations. These 'objects of sensations' are 'sense contents' or 'sense data'. Ayer holds that these sense data are 'neutral'. Thus he claims to hold a 'neutral monist' position. But irrespective of his claims, he is not a

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neutral monist but a subjective philosopher. As for as Locke is concerned, he can be called a realist. B.. in fact Ayer's philosophy "is a continuation of the empiricist movement started by Locke in the seventeenth century and carried on by Berkeley and Hume." They both deny the objective material reality, which is causally interconnected and interdependent. This attitude does not serve the purpose of transforming the world through the practical activities of man. And ultimately, this does not serve the purpose of advancement towards scientific and technological developments as well. Though Locke supported the scientific temper, Ayer's phenomenalism is highly unscientific.

In our opinion, philosophy is a world outlook with it's own specific content and form, a world outlook which offers practical grounds for its principles and conclusions. "A genuine philosophy, through the most general concepts and categories of cognition, is concerned with understanding the natural and social reality with a view to bring about, through cooperative practical activity, a better world for man to live in." But Ayer is far from unanimous on this point. He believes that there is no integral philosophical system and that a philosopher creates his own system. Ayer's main contention, in introducing 'analysis' as a method of

philosophy, is to prevent philosopher from trespassing into science and metaphysics and to make philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge.