

## BOOK REVIEW

**Book Title:** *Against Hume's Metaphysical Nihilism: In Defence of Metaphysics*  
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### Introduction

This work *Against Hume's Metaphysical Nihilism: In Defence of Metaphysics*, is a work that tries to bring down metaphysics to philosophers and non-philosophers alike by simplifying the seemingly abstruse field of study. Metaphysics is that one branch of philosophy that puts people off by the range of subjects it covers. However, questions of metaphysics usually come up every day of our lives. What Ndubisi does with this work is to point out the inevitability of metaphysics, while at the same time trying to defend it from its harshest critic, David Hume.

### The Object of Metaphysics

To people who are not very familiar with philosophy, metaphysics may sound arcane and otherworldly, but questions of metaphysics comes up in our everyday encounters. It was Andronicus of Rhodes while editing the works of Aristotle who first coined the name to classify those works of Aristotle that came beyond physics as Metaphysics, that is, after physics. Meta- in Greek simple translates as after/beyond; thus, the object of metaphysics is being, being in all its forms. Accordingly, Omoeregbe articulates:

While other disciplines study one aspect of being or the other, metaphysics studies Being as being in all its ramifications. This explains why there is a metaphysical element in every discipline – philosophy of science, philosophy of law, philosophy of history, philosophy of education, philosophy of language, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of the social science, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of religion, philosophy of politics, and so no. what philosophy studies in all the disciplines is the metaphysical element underlying

them(OMOREGBE 1996, 134)

Metaphysics is “the foundation of every discipline since its central focus is being”<sup>2</sup>(NDUBISI 2023, 105). The kind of questions that metaphysics tries to answer includes: questions about life, death, human suffering, evil, life-after-death, God. Other metaphysical issues include: substance and accidents, change and permanence, soul, unity and diversity. Philosophy without metaphysics is impossible because of the many vital issues it tackles. According to Ozumba, “philosophy without metaphysics is a corpse and any eulogy to philosophy that has been divested of metaphysics is like a requiem hymn that is sung to the corpse of the dead” (OZUMBA 2001, 46). So it makes sense that Ndubisi argues that “from the beginning of Western Philosophy until 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was observed that the most important part of philosophy was metaphysics; other parts were subordinate to it” (NDUBISI 2023, 1).

It should be noted that due to the nature of metaphysics, attacks on it are usually as a result of the perceived meaninglessness of philosophical words and concepts. Consider the meaning of the following “Metaphysicians had argued that pure reason can give us knowledge independent of experience” (NDUBISI, 2023, 3). Let us now examine the matters arising from that statement:

1. What does “pure reason can give us knowledge independent of experience” mean?
2. Would it mean exactly the same thing to any two other metaphysicians?

Consider also this other statement that looks rather straightforward: “senses do deceive us and as such, should not be regarded as sources of knowledge”. What kind of information have we gotten from that statement? Can we trust that it has given us knowledge?

Kant who ultimately serves as the mediator between the two most famous opposing positions in the history of philosophy namely rationalism and empiricism softened Hume's attack on metaphysics. Kant did not take such an extreme position as Hume about the possibility of metaphysics. He admits that: 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 could have been more decisive to its fate than the attack made upon it by

David Hume. (KANT 1950, 5)

He however maintains that all metaphysical reasoning by the singular fact of speculating about things beyond experience was bound to fail. He made an important distinction however in what should be the right approach to metaphysics. For Kant, metaphysics as a natural disposition is possible, but metaphysics as a science is not. His reason was that metaphysics as science tries to go beyond the categories of human understanding. Accordingly, Omeregbe articulates Kant's sentiments as follows: “speculative metaphysics can never provide man with any genuine knowledge because it deals with realities that are not objects of sense perception and to which, consequently, the categories of human understanding cannot be validly applied” (KANT 1991, 98). Kant's position about metaphysics is that we view the world with sets of imposed lenses which colours how we ultimately perceive the world. Consequently, what we perceive of the world is really not what things are, that according to Kant is not possible. What we perceive of the world is the world as they appear to us through our imposed lenses. These lenses could be the lenses of our initial biases, lenses of our faith and religion and so on.

### **Hume's Onslaught Against Metaphysics**

David Hume arguably has the sharpest intellect of all the philosophers that came through the British aisle who criticized metaphysics. Hume belongs to the age of philosophy that coincided with the rise of modern science. This singular fact shaped the overarching goal of most, if not all philosophies of this period; the goal, to bring some kind of precision and simplicity to philosophy, a project that modern science had just recently achieved with Newton. This objective influenced how Hume took on all his philosophical enterprises. It is also part of the reason why he thinks that Metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with non-physical and empirical ideas and concepts should be “tossed into fire”. In section I of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume says of metaphysics, it is “not properly a science” (HUME 1789, 2000, 11). The reason it is not properly science is that metaphysics seeks to “penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding” (HUME 1789 2000, 11). His sentiment towards metaphysics is not inconsistent with his other attacks on other fields like religion, ethics or even science. To understand Hume, it would be important to understand they were two major opposing views of philosophy: the rationalist and the empiricist, in which the previous fellow British philosophers took pride in being recognized as

empiricists. Rationalism at this time was almost looked at as dogmatism. Being the third in line of a tradition of British empiricism, he was always going to attack metaphysics at all cost since it was not rooted in experience. Hume said that if we take in our hands, any work on divinity or metaphysics, we should first ask ourselves; “does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion”(HUME 1789, 2000, 304). He maintains that there were only two avenues for knowledge: mathematics and science. His consistent effort to maintain and stick to empiricism to a logical conclusion, inadvertently led him to skepticism.

To appreciate what Hume did *to* and *for* philosophy, let's look at this famous Immanuel Kant's quote from the *Prolegomena* (KANT 1783, 2004, 10). Kant had confessed about Hume's skepticism, that it “was the very thing that many years ago interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy” (KANT 1783 2004, 10)<sup>12</sup>. How did Hume manage to interrupt Kant's dogmatic slumber? This was Kant admitting that it was Hume that helped him to challenge his own assumptions, which with time had become calcified, dogmatic.

T. Z. Lavine, describes Hume as “the most mercilessly destructive of all the British empiricists.” (LAVINE 1984, 147) She adds, “he took delight in demolishing the claims of philosophy, shocking the defenders of religion and undermining the validity of scientific laws and the enlightenment belief in progress” (LAVINE 1984 in NDUBISI, IX). Hume took a sledge hammer, and attempted to destroy from the root, not just metaphysics in particular, but everything from the idea of God and religion, philosophy, truth and knowledge, science and scientific progress etc. His philosophy was a wrecking ball which swung in many directions, smashing anything and everything in front of it. This aligns with Ndubisi's point, which was that Hume “argues against all metaphysical realities such as substance, God, causality, personal identity, etc” (NDUBISI 2023, IX). We cannot deny the fact that as much as Hume's position sounded ridiculous it was a position that used every tool available to philosophy consistently, trying to ignore what could be referred to as common sense.

Another important point was that the stage was set for Hume to carry on his

thoughts to the conclusion he ultimately reached. Hume was deeply impressed with the achievements of science under Isaac Newton. He acknowledges that some thinkers before him made some efforts in rejecting the rationalism which in Hume's opinion had become too dogmatic, however he conceded that, “none had made a systematic attempt to work out an empirical science of man, and none had found any general principles by which the subject could be unified as mechanics had been unified by Newton's Law on Motion” (HUME 1789, 2000, 24), this task he would attempt to achieve, for Hume, “anything outside empirical experience is not an object of human knowledge” (NDUBISI 2023, 104).

### **Against Hume's Metaphysical Nihilism**

The objective of this work is to defend metaphysics from the “inimical onslaught of anti-metaphysicians” (NDUBISI 2023, IX). The target for Ndubisi, is to argue against Hume's metaphysical nihilism, while at the same time pointing out the benefits of metaphysics to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. The target for the author was to attempt to answer some of the following questions:

1. Is metaphysics actually nonsensical as claimed by Hume and other anti-metaphysicians?
2. Can we say that metaphysics is mere sophistry and illusion since it makes claims beyond the sense experience?
3. Is there any way metaphysics can be rescued from the harsh attacks of its critics? (NDUBISI 2023, 4)

He gave a very robust answer to the first two questions. How did he do that? He went to great lengths to make the point that metaphysics is “the foundation of every discipline since its central focus is being,” (NDUBISI 2023, 105) he even went further to argue that it is “the most important part of philosophy ... other parts were subordinate to it” (NDUBISI 2023, 1). He also makes this great point that “human beings have irresistible tendency towards metaphysics” (NDUBISI 2023, 103), a point that is supported by man's quest to always seek that which is beyond him. Aristotle calls metaphysics 'the first philosophy'; this was to capture the significant place of metaphysics in the whole of philosophy and beyond. There is clearly more to the world than we can observe and grasp with our senses. There is the physical world that we observe and there is also the world that we cannot fully grasp, what Kant calls the 'noumena'. So clearly Ndubisi fully captures the essence of metaphysics in asserting that “to comprehend the universe we must go beyond the empirical” (NDUBISI 2023, 102). As humans we would always be confronted

with questions about our existence, about life and death, about what happens after death, about God and evil. Arriving at the correct conclusion about these questions is another thing all together, but these questions would always confront us.

On the question of how metaphysics could be rescued from the harsh critics that attack it, Ndubisi, like other defenders of metaphysics before him, would always come face to face with those who would attack metaphysics for a whole lot of other reasons, but also on its substance. The reason is not unconnected with the kind of argument that this author, as a matter of fact, employed rather too many times. The author for example employs God argument at whims, introducing God in the middle of an argument which consequently resolves the issue. Employing this kind of technique can at best be described as religion masquerading as metaphysics, and at worst trying to “penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding” (NDUBISI 2023, 11). Some examples of such arguments that the author employs includes this one: “since mystics all over the world agree that God exists, then God must exist” (cf NDUBISI 2023, 93). The issue with this kind of agreement is that mystics all of the world do not all agree that God exist. Oriental mystics particularly do not. But even if they do, that would not necessarily mean that, that would be proof for God's existence. Their line of work as mystics does not give them authority to prove that God exists, but even if for the sake of convenience, we believe them, it would no longer be within the scope of either metaphysics or philosophy. Their field would be more of revealed truth and religion and not philosophy and metaphysics.

A similar argument was employed by the author to prove that miracles do happen. Consider the following:

Premise 1: God created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and governs natural laws

Premise 2: If God governs natural laws, God can suspend natural law.

Premise 3: Miracle is a suspension of natural law

Conclusion: Therefore, if God exists, he can perform miracles (NDUBISI 2023, 89)

It is true if God exists, he can perform miracles. This premise is not necessarily a proven fact. If God exists, then God can create the universe, but then how would you know that God exists; how could you prove that *He* exists. Employing for example, the arguments from design and magnifying it *ad infinitum* to say that

there must be a creator for every creation does not necessarily prove the existence of God especially if the idea of God here is a good God. The premise that God created the universe ex nihilo is at best a manufactured premise that cannot be backed up by any other truth in philosophy. A basic premise in philosophy, say: “All men are mortal”, is gotten from experience, by constantly observing that men are mortal, even without observing all men. All men, until now exhibits the qualities of mortality (dying), such that, even though we cannot be around to observe and confirm that all men are mortal, our observations hints that the first premise is not outlandish and cannot be tossed out for being self-contradictory. But the premise, “God created the universe ex nihilo”, is loaded with unobservable and improvable facts. What does God as an idea mean? Would it mean the same to all those who profess to a God? Does “created out of nothing” make philosophical sense; is it even logical? Would it be accepted in circles of people who are non-religious as being logical?

The author's defense of metaphysics was so fervent, as is seen in this next criticism of Hume. According to him, “if Hume were to be true to his being, he would have valued metaphysics as the higher source of human knowledge” (Ndubisi 2023, 106). Aside the apparent *Ad hominem* here, if there is anything that most philosophers can agree on, it is the fact that Hume was a very consistent empiricist. This was actually what led him to skepticism. He was true to his being, an empiricist to the core, such that it would have been illogical for him to not have 'destroyed metaphysics'. It would have been foul play if he hadn't tried.

### **Conclusion**

Hume's attempt at destroying metaphysics was as a result of him being true to character. The question of whether he was successful is another story. Hume could not have destroyed metaphysics because there are ideas and notion, we encounter everyday that can never be experienced empirically. Experience has shown that appearance is different from reality. However, we have to admit that the lenses through which we view the world are always bound to colour our knowledge of the world. Hume's lenses were the lenses of an aggressive empiricist seeking precision in philosophy. Ndubuisi's is the lenses of a defender of metaphysics.

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