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# Chapter 1
# Introduction to Reflective Pluralism

## 1.1 Introduction to Reflective Pluralism

Human beings are endowed with cognitive agency. Our grasp of the world, and of ourselves, is not merely a reflexive response to external stimuli, but also a reflective product of human inquiry, often structured in imagination. What are the forms of inquiry available to humans to lead a significant life? How are these forms related to each other? The 12 exploratory chapters of varying length collected in this volume examine forms and limits of human inquiry from a variety of directions.

Most of these directions emanate from classical philosophical investigations on human knowledge. Since the nature of human inquiry is the general theme, it is unsurprising that the chapters cover a wide range of familiar philosophical topics: the nature of reality, scientific realism; concepts of truth, knowledge, belief, consciousness; character of mind, language, grammar, meaning; literature and philosophy; the nature of music, religious discourse; knowledge and human destiny, and others. Although I have called them 'chapters', it is not unreasonable to view the volume as a collection of essays.

These pieces were written in a discontinuous fashion over a number of years for very different occasions and audiences, and at varying, often conflicting, reflective moments. Strictly speaking, their spatial assembly here does not really amount to a sustained fully articulated monograph; significant silences insulate the individual write-ups from each other. Given the range and complexity of the listed topics, I do not think there could be a single substantive monograph that covers them all. In any case, I am not concerned here either with history of philosophy or with philosophical anthropology, even though I end up doing these things on occasion to set the scene. My intention is not to report on the current state of these topics. They are discussed because they necessarily infiltrate the mind when you think about the idea of being human.

Yet this is not just a compilation of assorted papers to mark the end of a career. If a metaphor is needed to cover the collation, one could say, in celebrated terms, that

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they form a 'family' as their resemblances 'criss-cross and overlap'. I think it is better to view the pieces as forming a group of proximate islands in the same stretch of the sea; the image of an island seems appropriate because each chapter stands on its own without directly depending on the others. However, I have used the method of cross-reference frequently to aid the memory, sharpen a point, or to construct a bridge. I will try to describe the composite picture shortly.

Individually, too, the pieces are more like free-flowing essays than formally structured papers meant for disciplinary journals. I am aware that centuries of the most extensive reflection and scholarship across many fields of inquiry have nourished each of the topics listed above. Especially in the last century almost all of these topics have attained formidable technical character. Apart from developing theoretical vocabulary of their own, philosophers have explored these issues with insights from mathematical logic, theoretical linguistics, computer science, cognitive psychology, neuroscience and theoretical physics. As a result, it is now expected that these otherwise large and elusive issues are discussed in terms of the latest technical proposal; fair enough, that is how academic papers are written.

The pieces assembled here generally do not follow that trajectory. Although they do cover familiar philosophical topics like knowledge, truth, realism, belief, meaning, interpretation and the like, which are often discussed in professional platforms, these topics carry much value beyond the closely guarded canons of the academia. After all, as the legend goes, many of these topics started their career on ancient streets or under banyan trees; arguably, unlike other branches of inquiry, they retain the memory of those plebeian assemblies. These chapters attempt to convey a sense of relaxed conversation in a disarming voice to reach audiences outside professional meetings of philosophers. As a result, they sometimes ignore, or even disobey, the formal tone and attire of academic discourse.

However, these are not 'popular' pieces by any means. After a life in professional philosophy, often guided by inputs from the adjacent sciences, it is by now intellectually impossible to entirely avoid the formal tone and at least some of the demanding literature that informs it. In that slightly uncertain sense, these are reflective efforts that are seeking a zone of comfort somewhere between technical journals and literary supplements, but never aiming for a talk-show. As a result, in many cases, they start out with the usual preparations of the professional philosopher, but they seldom stay on course to the end; in a variety of ways, the discussion moves away from familiar abstract channels to more direct arenas of common life. It is not for me to judge whether the effort had been successful, but I hope they do convey some sense of honesty of purpose because, in most cases, the discourse was not deliberately designed.

### *1.1.1 From a Sceptical Point of View*

So, what explains the diffused character of these chapters? I think the answer lies in the way in which my own intellectual interests unfolded. Having made a decision to

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shift, early in my career, from the beautiful abstractions of mathematical physics to the more existential concerns of philosophy, I settled down to a range of exciting new developments in analytic philosophy in the post-Wittgensteinian era. The work of fine philosophers like John Austin, Peter Strawson, Willard Quine, Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett, and other stalwarts of late twentieth-century analytic philosophy, promised a healthy mix of rigorous, often formal, inquiry with what Hilary Putnam called 'the whole hurly-burly of human actions' (cited in Nussbaum 2016). Philosophers such as Strawson (1992) and others have often suggested that philosophy attempts to produce a systematic account of the general conceptual apparatus of which our daily practices display a tacit and unconscious mastery.

But the subtle, abstract and yet unifying framework of physics lingered in the mind. This led to a variety of dissatisfaction with analytic philosophy, especially in the study of language. We need to step back a little to see why. In the first half of the twentieth century, great philosophers like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Alfred Ayer and others took what Rorty (1967) called the *linguistic turn*. Tracing it to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Coffa (1991) called this mode of doing philosophy the *semantic tradition*. Within this broad tradition, each of the authors cited in the preceding paragraph—Austin, Quine, etc.—belonged primarily to the broad discipline of philosophy of language. The study of language thus formed a central part of the analytic effort. As with most students of analytic philosophy in those days, I was attracted to the study of language both for the intricate formal character of human language, and its ubiquitous role in human life.

Linguistic philosophy promised a rigorous, scientific approach of its own on classical philosophical topics such as realism, knowledge, belief, even consciousness. For example, Quine (1953) argued that for something to exist it has to be the value of a bound variable in a true theory; Wittgenstein (1953) suggested that to understand consciousness is to understand the meaning of the first-person sentence *I am in pain*; Russell (1919) held that beliefs such as <Ramanuj is wise> are propositional attitudes. I will have much more to say on these things in the chapters that follow.

Since linguistic philosophy proposed to examine classical issues by viewing them as 'semantic' problems—that is, in terms of the structure and function of language—it is reasonable to expect that this philosophy will also furnish a formally satisfying account of language itself from which the solution to philosophical problems maybe rigorously derived. However, linguistic philosophy lacked a genuinely theoretical understanding of the immense richness of human language. This is what a mind initially trained in physics sorely missed. This philosophy did make formal proposals occasionally, such as Russell's famous theory of descriptions (Russell 1905), to address philosophical problems. But the formal tools were borrowed from the discipline of symbolic logic which is not only a poor substitute for human language; its character is parasitic on human language.

In any case, even with the tools of formal logic, human language resisted any grand formal theory for addressing philosophical problems, as Strawson (1950)

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pointed out in his stringent criticism of Russell's theory of descriptions: ordinary language, Strawson declared, has no logic. 'Ordinary language' philosophers thus focused on detailed, taxonomic properties of language in the style of a botanist, as Austin (1962) suggested, rather than that of a physicist. The study of language fostered what Strawson (1971) called a *Homeric struggle* between 'formal-semantic' and 'communication-intention' theorists of language. My impression is that the scene in analytic philosophy hasn't improved since even if no one openly makes claims for either 'ideal language' or 'ordinary language'. At that stage, it was too early for me to admire the value of this uncertainty in philosophical inquiry.

While analytic philosophy was going through this apparent absence of direction, interesting developments took place elsewhere. I expressed my disenchantment with the state of linguistic philosophy in my doctoral thesis, and turned to linguistics and cognitive science to see if there was a 'physics' of human language and mind. Two related developments promised what I was looking for: exciting proposals in theoretical linguistics by Noam Chomsky, and the formulation of a computational theory of mind by Alan Turing. Both strands of research, and much else besides, had become established academic pursuits by the time I completed my doctoral thesis. As I continued with my exploration of the new science of the mind, certain interesting ideas and results did appear on the table in due course which I put together in some papers and monographs culminating in *The Primacy of Grammar* (2010). That form of work continues elsewhere.

However, throughout my engagement with the new science of the mind, I was beginning to realize that the ideas that interested me there covered very restricted and abstract domains of human cognition such that the intellectual salience of much of the rest of the new science could be questioned. For example, the formal resources of linguistic theory no doubt explained some intriguing facts about how sound is connected to what may be called the *internal significance* of a structure, called *Logical Form* (LF) in the technical literature. However, it is also clear that the theory does not have either the resources or the desire to explain what may ordinarily be viewed as the meaning of a sentence.

Where does the rest of the meaning come from to enrich human cognition? Needless to say, ever more sophisticated investigations on the nature of human language are under way to expand the scope of linguistic theory and to address the doubts just raised (Hinzen and Sheehan 2013). Yet, as argued in *The Primacy of Grammar*, it is not evident if any significant notion of theory applies beyond grammatical investigations. As far as genuinely scientific studies on language go, there is grammatical theory stuck at LF, and there is philately.

Given the predominance of language in human cognitive architecture, the restriction just sketched seems to be the case for much cognitive investigation as well where language is intimately involved: in the study of concepts and reasoning, for example. For the rest of the cognitive studies detached from language, the scene seems to be worse since there is no sign of 'physics' at all; it is mostly just fancy organization of behavioural data. Thus there is much room for wide-ranging scepticism about the scope of the cognitive sciences. The Homeric struggle seemed to extend far beyond language; it threatened to cover the architecture of human

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cognition itself. It seemed that not only that the botanist plays a crucial role in human inquiry; there are also areas of deep human concern to which even the botanist does not have access. Yet humans tread those areas with impressive cognitive confidence as they lead their common lives.

There seems to be three options in hand with respect to how we respond to the sceptic. First, one could keep digging at the vast phenomenon of human cognition with whatever scientific tool is in hand; this is what cognitive scientists and philosophers are doing in any case. Some of my own continuing work falls under this option, as noted; we may ask, for instance, if language and music share the same grammatical structure. Second, one could embrace wholesale scepticism about science, refuse to make any formal-theoretical move, and turn philosophical problems into 'literary' activities: call it *post-structuralism*. Third, one uses scepticism as a strategy to progressively expand the notion of human inquiry; in other words, by showing the limitations of one form of inquiry one draws attention to the significance of some other forms. In effect, we may view alternative forms of inquiry as reinforcing—rather than negating—each other: call it, if you like, *reflective pluralism*.

I don't think that the chapters that follow mark any definite choice between these broad options, for reasons—including moral and political ones—that emerge as we proceed. Basically, the inclination is to leave things as they are. However, it will not be implausible to detect sympathy for the first and the third options, and an attempt to come to terms with their 'incommensurability'. There is also a tendency to ignore the second option largely because holding it along with the other two options precipitates flat inconsistency; hence, I have ignored the vast literature—Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and others—that propagates the second option. Moreover, the second option grants salience to just one form of inquiry, namely, the literary one; after spending a life in analytic philosophy and in admiration of physics, one develops a visceral discomfort with any proclamation that fails to uphold their value. But the association with the formal does not prevent me to shift to the literary mode whenever needed.

In any case, I lack the enthusiasm to *argue* these choices here because I have very little interest in metatheory. I rather prefer Wittgenstein's idea of simply *describing* the modes of human inquiry—'forms of life,' as he would say—as they shore up when we look for them within the vicinity of our own agency. In any case, notwithstanding the option one recommends, there is the need to furnish something of a perspective for the phenomenon that humans have reflective resources to lead cognitively meaningful lives. What are those resources? Is there an account of human cognitive agency as a whole?

These chapters started emerging one after another as a variety of very specific questions about the form and limits of human inquiry began to form in mind. For example, at one point in human history it was thought that modern science, especially theoretical physics, is the paradigm of human inquiry. Where does this form of inquiry significantly apply? Are there limits on its claims of truth and objectivity? How much of the vast canvas of human experience does it cover? Where do

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other forms of inquiry, such as philosophy, literature, religion, and the arts, attain their salience?

With the emergence of scientific study of the human mind itself, these critical questions have taken a more intriguing form, as noted. Can human inquiry investigate its own nature? Can the scientific theory of language explain the richness of human expression? Can a science of the mind account for human experience? These probing questions on the scientific enterprise are usually addressed from the outside, as it were, by humanists, philosophers of science, sociologists of knowledge and critical theorists. In these chapters, they are examined from the inside by a philosopher whose primary academic work concerns the study of the human linguistic mind. In that sense, the sceptical inquiry turns on itself.

### *1.1.2 The Chapters*

Each chapter in this volume is accompanied by a substantial abstract that lays out the theme of the chapter. What I plan to do now is to give some idea of the family of concerns that link these chapters in a variety of ways. As noted, the starting point of this exercise is the idea of science. When we face the entirety of human inquiry in its kaleidoscopic state, we need some categories to describe the spectacle. The idea of science seems to offer that handle. Modern science represented a very classical conception of human knowledge as an objective quest for the real properties of the world. With its grand mathematical architectonic, physics was able to develop tools of investigation that unearthed deeply hidden features of the universe. But its highly esoteric form of discourse and extremely theory-internal conception of the world makes physics unavailable to the general cognitive agent, including the physicist outside his specialist forum. With the advent of modern science then it looks as if humans engage in two basic forms of inquiry: let us call them *scientific* and *cultural*, respectively. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the labels themselves are of less value than details about the underlying forms.

In the scientific mode, human inquiry claims knowledge of reality: the knowledge constitutes the truth-claims of science, and the reality constitutes the joints of nature so postulated. The discourse is assumed to be absolute and objective. The truth-claim no doubt is a human action, but the truth—such as the Earth is round—is independent of any agent, community, tradition, textual and social context; in other words, truth lays bare the world as it is. It is commonly believed that the scientific conception of the world is *objective* in the sense that it does not have a (preferred) point of view; Nagel (1986) called it the *view from nowhere*.

In contrast, much of our lives includes a *subjective* point of view, the point of view of the human agent; these may be thought of as *views from somewhere*. As Nagel (1986) and Davidson (1991) pointed out, the two views need to be reconciled in order for us to lead a meaningful life including social and political lives. Nagel then goes on to show how the reconciliation is to be achieved to address a range of classical philosophical problems, such as the mind–body problem. Speaking

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roughly, the distinction between *view from nowhere* and *view from somewhere* is one way of formulating the distinction between the scientific and the cultural.

My interests are markedly different from the suggested distinction. I think there is another distinction between the scientific and the cultural which is related to, but not sufficiently captured by, the subjective–objective distinction. As noted, both the subjective and the objective perspectives are needed to reach human thought and action (Davidson explicitly adds the inter-subjective perspective to the other two); human thought is the result of a *reconciliation* of these things in any case. I think a scientific-cultural distinction arises even after such reconciliation is reached. The first two chapters in this volume discuss the issue.

The starting point is the conception of knowledge. In Chap. 2 ('Human Reality'), I show how the concepts of knowledge, truth and reality are intimately related; if a conception of mind-independent reality is unavailable, so are the concepts of knowledge and truth. The problem is that human knowledge and, therefore, the conception of reality are necessarily products of how humans are designed; if humans were designed, say, as bats, the conception of the world would have been very different. So, if the notion of objectivity is understood in terms of a mind-independent reality, then that notion appears to be problematic, if not downright incoherent. There is much room for scepticism then regarding realist claims. *Within* the design, though, it is striking that the human mind can sometimes detect formal/mathematical regularity in the external world. The phenomenon is poorly understood but its shining existence cannot be denied. Perhaps it is possible to recover some version of the notions of knowledge, truth and reality around this phenomenon. I discuss the possibility with more constructive details in Chap. 3.

However, the formal mode of inquiry is rarely available in the vast stretch of human cognitive life. This suggests a broad distinction between forms of inquiry regarding the presence and absence of the formal mode, which amounts roughly to the distinction between the scientific and the cultural. It could be that the world and the knowledge of it are reached in very different reflective terms between the two forms of inquiry. In that sense the world lost in our analytic pursuit may be regained in our poetic form of inquiry in which the world is grasped by immersing ourselves in it. The elusive world, which we are unable to discover except in rare cases by looking at it from the outside, is cheerfully embraced as a lived world from the inside.

Chapter 3 ('Science and the Mind') focuses on the historical fact that the scientific mode is a great human achievement, but it works in very restricted domains of simple systems. That's the price we pay for our penchant for objectivity. Genuine scientific understanding is reached primarily through the formal mode—the Galilean style—which is available only for very simple systems. The chapter points out that the arts also sometimes search for formal/minimalist conception of aspects of the world, but the method of search is distinct, resulting in a vastly different form of inquiry. It is reasonable to expect then that a genuine science of the mind is also likely to be restricted only to those aspects of the mind where the formal mode is available. Human language is perhaps the most promising example of such an aspect of the mind. There are serious limits to the inquiry even there, as the next two chapters suggest.

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Chapter 4 ('Theories and Shifting Domains') examines the sense in which scientific theories in the formal mode identify a stretch of the world. The contemporary discipline of linguistic theory is an interesting example to study in this context because of its recentness; we are able to study its entire history in a stretch to see whether the reality of human language has come into sharper focus as the theory progressed. After a brief exposition of the basic joints of the theory, it turns out that even within its short history the object of the theory has become increasingly theory laden for Chomsky (1991) to remark that perhaps there is no such thing as language.

Chapter 5 ('The Sceptic and the Cognitivist') adds another dimension to the scepticism just raised. This chapter joins issue with recent claims from the cognitive sciences that the ancient discipline of philosophy is beginning to lose its relevance for understanding human cognition. We focus again on the new discipline of linguistic theory, which is perhaps the most promising programme in the cognitive sciences. As the work of philosophers of language mentioned earlier highlighted, the basic classical interest in the study of language has been that humans have the astonishing ability to talk about the world: the *semantic* ability. As hinted earlier, the theoretical resources of linguistic theory seems to fall far short of the philosophical interest.

Having secured something like a zone of autonomy for the philosophical form of inquiry in Chap. 5, Chap. 6 ('From Things to Needs') attempts to develop the idea of autonomy by focusing on the general form of classical Indian philosophy. It may be justly complained that, unlike Western philosophy, this philosophy has lost its relevance because it never interacted with the vast edifice of European science. This conclusion will follow only under the assumption that scientific knowledge overrules or replaces philosophical inquiry. A quick look at the origin and form of Indian philosophy suggests that its goals might not have been to discover properties of the world at all. A salient goal for philosophical inquiry, distinct from the sciences, could be to formulate conditions of human reflective *needs* for cognitive agents to lead rational lives. The study of needs seems to be fundamental to philosophical inquiry since its presence can be located even in classical Western philosophy when it is shorn of its 'scientific' goals. Interestingly, the study of the mind—the contentious domain under consideration—offers some promising evidence on this issue. In this light, each of the concepts of consciousness, knowledge and belief may be understood very differently from their alleged 'mentalistic' features discussed in the received literature.

Chapters 7–9 ('Yearning for Consciousness', 'Ascription of Knowledge', 'Beliefs and Believers') cover the alternative perspective. The chapters exploit the general distinction between *description* and *ascription*. While the goal of descriptions is to examine properties of objects, ascriptions suggest devices of personal evaluation. Each chapter thus consists of two distinct sections. In the first section, we show that the current state of philosophical inquiry on these concepts is at best uncertain; there appear to be fundamental conceptual darkness around them. However, each concept turns out to be salient when we think of them as

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recommending different evaluative attitudes towards persons and communities to enable us to get a grip on our interpersonal lives.

The idea of placing much of philosophical inquiry into the cultural mode raises the issue of whether the notion of the cultural, as distinct from the scientific, is a coherent unified category. One way of examining the issue is to locate some invariant notion of interpretation governing each of the putative cultural objects. A somewhat detailed 'anthropological' study pursued in Chap. 10 ('Varieties of Interpretation') across rituals, poetry, painting and music suggests that even the notion of interpretation radically varies as the objects vary. So, for example, we cannot say without equivocation that cultural objects have a distinctive aspect in that they admit of both singular and plural interpretations.

The perspectives that govern interpretations come in a variety of forms: plurality of traditions, bounds of space and time, eras and epochs, textuality and interpretations, multiplicity of languages, gestalt properties, and simply differences of irreconcilable opinion, often assuming the form of class war. None of these are seen in science, say, in theoretical physics. No doubt, there are scientific disputes, but that is a different matter altogether. Beyond this general observation of open-ended plurality, human inquiry is too diffused an undertaking to lend itself to definite categories.

Yet we can locate on examination that there are tangible distinctions between forms of inquiry, even if they blend into one another to mask their identity. For example, we could make some sense of the distinction between the scientific and the philosophical modes as above even if philosophical inquiry sometimes takes a scientific form up to a point. Similarly, there is a perceived sense of affinity between philosophy and literature as an impressive body of 'converging' literature testifies. Focusing on the non-converging literature, Chap. 11 ('Literature and Common Life') takes up one of the leading issues for this collection of chapters: where does common life get its enrichment from in the general absence of scientific reflection? The answer projected in this chapter appeals to the notion of a *text*. An author's view from somewhere enshrined in a text—Platonic or Shakespearean—enables the cognitive agent to expand her horizons and transcend her locality.

Given the variety, richness, and autonomy of forms of human inquiry, it is difficult—perhaps even morally questionable—to prioritize a specific form of knowledge. In any case, as we saw, even what is taken to be the pinnacle of human inquiry, namely, formal science, has only limited role in human life. In this essentially pluralistic conception of human knowledge, Chap. 12 ('Education for the Species') raises the issue of the value of this edifice of human knowledge. Sketching the grim scenario for the survival of the human species, it is argued that much of the damage can be traced to the adoption of highly prioritized knowledge-systems ensuing from elite high cultures. In contrast, the marginalized knowledge-systems of the indigenous people across the world offer a salient perspective for saving the planet. The salience of indigenous knowledge entails a large-scale rejection of elite knowledge-systems. If scepticism is viewed as a state of mind that rejects dominating knowledge-systems, humans need to adopt probably the most extreme form of scepticism, if the species is to survive.

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