



Review of Nirmalangshu Mukherji, *Reflections on human inquiry: science, philosophy, and common life*

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This is an engaging volume, gathering together some valuable essays and articles by the eminent Indian philosopher, Nirmalangshu Mukherji. Working primarily within Anglo American philosophy of the late twentieth century, but also bringing to bear insights from recent Indian traditions, the author notes in his Introduction that these essays aim at discussing issues that arise ‘when one thinks about the idea of being human’, and concern ‘the forms and limits of human inquiry from a variety of directions’ (p. 1). These, of course, are matters of interest to not just professional philosophers, and the subtitle of the book, ‘science, philosophy, and common life’, reminds us of Mukherji’s wish to address a broad audience of intellectuals.

For much of his philosophical career, Mukherji writes that he has focused on issues concerning ‘the human linguistic mind’. Mukherji reminds readers that he studied physics before turning to philosophy, and so many of the essays, written over the past two decades, reveal an interest, on the one hand, in having ‘a theoretical understanding’ of mind but, on the other, having ‘little interest in metatheory’ (p. 5). It is no surprise, then, that his work has been particularly inspired by that of Noam Chomsky, and this influence is evident throughout this collection, with references to Chomsky in virtually every chapter. Mukherji’s distinctive approach in this volume, however, is, he writes, to use scepticism ‘to progressively expand the notion of human enquiry’—what he calls ‘reflective pluralism’ (p. 5).

Nine of the book’s twelve chapters were previously published over the past two decades and were written primarily for scholarly audiences, though they have been

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recast here to fit better with one another. And while each of the essays frequently begins with a technical question in academic philosophy, Mukherji then seeks to bring that issue into contact with lived experience. He successively discusses human reality and realism, science and the mind, theories and shifting disciplinary and linguistic domains, science and scepticism, philosophical issues of consciousness, knowledge, belief and interpretation, but also ‘social’ questions, such as human needs, the place of the intellectual elites, indigenous knowledges, contemporary education, and the place of literature and the common life. Though not expressly intended as a ‘summa’ of issues in contemporary English-language philosophy of science, it serves usefully as an introduction to a number of major philosophical debates of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While the author professes a sceptical view, it is far from a pyrrhonic scepticism, for, at the same time, his inquiry professes to be interested in ‘saving the appearances’ (p. 171), and drawing our attention to other, more traditional ways of knowing.

All will profit from reading through this collection, written in a style that is neither didactic nor overly technical. That being said, the book sometimes seems to be a product of its time, and one wonders whether a broader historical scan might have provided the author with additional insights that could increase the volume’s bearing on ‘common life’.

By way of illustration, consider the particularly interesting chapter on ‘Beliefs and Believers’. The chapter begins with a discussion of ‘what beliefs mean’ (p. 133), and Mukherji starts with a review of the debate about beliefs as mental states and as being or expressing propositional attitudes—i.e. states that ascribe a content to one’s belief. Mukherji rejects the view that beliefs are mental states, asserting that a belief is ‘not ... a mentalistic concept’ (p. 135). But what is it?

If one looks at most of the examples that the author uses, beliefs are what H.H. Price called ‘beliefs that (such and such is the case)’. While Mukherji does not refer to Price here, he does, at moments, note that there are other kinds of belief, ‘beliefs in’ (presumably in the Pricean sense of ‘trust or faith in someone or something’). But, having noted this distinction, Mukherji leaves the concept of ‘belief in’ unexplored, saying that the contents of both in some cases converge (but does it exhaustively?), and focuses on the ‘beliefs that’ that are putatively part of one’s ‘beliefs in’ (see pp. 144, 146). Similarly, while he notes the locution, in English, that someone is ‘a believer’ usually refers to a believer in the divine or a god, and that ‘big beliefs’ (such as belief in ‘the ultimate goodness of humanity’ [p. 149] or ‘scientific beliefs’ [p. 148]) differ from ‘small beliefs’ (such as beliefs about the quality of one’s footwear), he does not go far into what ‘big beliefs’ such as ‘the ultimate goodness of humanity’ or ‘the existence of an objective reality’ could mean. Seeing such beliefs as ‘always held with a disbeliever in view’ (pp. 149–150), while an intriguing hypothesis, still does not seem to address what such ‘big beliefs’ might mean. Germane here also is Mukherji’s view that, to be a believer, one understands the belief (p. 146)—for this seems to not always be the case, particularly, but not exclusively, concerning big beliefs bearing on normative or religious matters; think of the notion of *fides quaerens intellectum*, where one has a belief or beliefs that one presumably does not entirely understand. Though Mukherji says very little about

religious beliefs, it would be interesting to see how Mukherji's account of belief could address those who might claim belief in an apophatic God.

On these points and others, Mukherji might have benefitted not only by looking at Price but also at Wittgensteinians such as D.Z. Phillips (who might speak of belief as reflecting a 'form of life' and, hence, not particularly propositional), or at, though much more remotely, Thomas Aquinas (who saw religious belief or faith as an intellectual virtue—and, hence, again, not primarily or exhaustively propositional). I think that, despite the controversy concerning the notion of 'belief in', were Mukherji to have pursued this matter more than he does, he would have been closer to concerns of 'common life' than the much narrower discussion of belief as 'what is not cognizing', or as a mental state or propositional attitude—a discussion that is perhaps rather rarified and that Mukherji himself finds too narrow.

Of course, Mukherji does not intend this chapter, or any of the chapters, as offering a final word on the debate but, rather, seems to see his work as an invitation to further discussion—that he has set out, in part, his considered view, but that even this is subject to his own mild but systematic scepticism and 'reflective pluralism'. In this, we see a reflection of the Chomsky that Mukherji so greatly admires—as one who engages in technical debate, but who does not want to be overconfident about what he concludes, and has, close to heart, the interests of common life.

Mukherji's volume is very rich, bringing together a number of issues in recent/late twentieth century philosophy, without being overwhelming. This short volume shows the author's remarkable ability to bring together his reflections on a range of topics in a way that summarizes some of his life's study to this point, but that also leaves open lines of investigation for future research. Well written, this is an enjoyable book to read, that seeks to bring philosophical debate to a broad audience.

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