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Book Review

Reflections on Human Inquiry: Science, Philosophy and Common Life

Nilanjan Bhowmick

We all wonder about the relations between science, philosophy and common life, but the topics present such a wide variety of unconnected thoughts that we despair to have any clear insights. Nirmalanghsu Mukherji's compelling book, *Reflections on Human Inquiry,* brings forth the relations between science, philosophy and common life in ways that are scientifically well-informed, philosophically rich and seamlessly connected to each other. The book has twelve chapters, with the initial chapters (1 to 5) dealing with what is described as the Galilean style and skepticism thereof and the later chapters dealing with the various problems that philosophers deal with regarding the nature of knowledge, belief, consciousness. Then two chapters (11 and 12, respectively) offer reflections on the relation between literature and philosophy and what kind of education is right for our species.

The book has many fundamental insights. To mention just a few: an intelligible space is made for skepticism, some light is thrown on the way the history of philosophy and science are intertwined, remarks are made on the nature and history of Indian philosophy which are surprising and suggestive and a distinction is drawn between the order of things which humans inquire into and the needs of humans.

Nilanjan Bhowmick is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at University of Delhi (Delhi). Email: nilanjan.bhowmick72@gmail.com.

Mukherji argues for a position he calls “Reflective Pluralism” which arises out of the general tenor of his book. While the book makes many an important contribution, both in specific and general areas of inquiry, the view titled “Reflective Pluralism,” while understated in the book, is one of its most important contributions. I will turn to it last. First, I will consider the other aspects of the book.

It should be kept in mind that no review can really do justice to the fullness and intricacy of each of the twelve essays that the book contains. Different readers with divergent philosophical leanings will pick different essays to be the best in the book.

Even though the essays seem diverse, there is a clear unifying theme. Given the fact that humans engage in inquiry, what are the limits of such inquiry? And what does it mean to say that there are certain things that we cannot inquire about in the same manner that we inquire about in science? What place is there for philosophy beside science in the sense-making enterprise that humans engage in? Is there any place at all?

One way of answering these questions is to follow the distinction Mukherji makes between things and needs, drawn in Chapter Six. There is a certain order of things out there in the world. Things are what are partially amenable to what may be described as the Galilean Style of inquiry. The Galilean way is to think of reality as obeying simplicity. Truth is not a mysterious connection between our thoughts and reality but a worked out connection between the theories we construct, keeping the notion of simplicity in mind, and the world out there.

Unfortunately, while the Galilean style of thinking has made major advances (called “science”) there is much that remains in the dark, be it the behavior of a nematode, the consciousness a human being has, the knowledge humans seek, the beauty we perceive or the moral compulsions we feel. Some cases of things that fall out of scientific inquiry may be due to the sheer complexity of the issue involved. A nematode’s turning right or left or for that matter a peacock’s dance may fall into this domain. But Mukherji thinks that the case is quite different regarding standard concepts that philosophers deal with. Mukherji writes,

> Study of concepts like knowledge, belief, meaning, truth, consciousness, etc. are not studies of properties of things such as mental/brain states; these are concepts that humans need and, therefore, construct to carry on with their social and personal selves. If that is the case, then no development in science can overthrow *these* corners of philosophy. (95)

Even if it is argued that eliminative materialism is correct or that there are no such things as beliefs, we will still need the concepts of consciousness and belief because they are needs and not things to be investigated. Mukherji does not mean to say that needs like consciousness or knowledge or belief cannot be investigated. They can be. Mukherji has a long discussion of how the point of the concept of knowledge is its attribution to others (Chapter Eight) and how there is a

distinction between cognition and belief (Chapter Nine). These are informative discussions, but they do not adhere to the Galilean style of inquiry. They are not supposed to. Needs cannot be investigated in the same way things can be, and even in things, the Galilean style has its limits. In a sense we have two different limits to the Galilean style: one, where complexity in nature is encountered, and two, where we are not investigating things at all, but needs.

The quote above might suggest that Mukherji's stance is deflationary across the board. But I think that Mukherji would not much stress on the deflationary aspect of it. Deflationism would be a wrong way of analyzing his claim. It is like a category mistake of sorts. Needs are anything but deflationary. They are vitally important. They are not *ways of* life, as Mukherji stresses. I would hazard to say that these needs make ways of living possible, though they may have little to do with the content of the way we live, that is, the actual culture we adopt. We at least need to attribute beliefs to each other to be tolerant about different beliefs. Tolerance would be part of the actual culture we adopt, whereas attribution of belief would be a need that we have.

Before I move on to the uses he puts some of his analysis of knowledge and belief to, we need to ask whether it is actually true that beliefs, knowledge, meaning and consciousness are needs and not things.

I think Mukherji's case for belief and knowledge as needs are quite compelling. He maintains that a proper analysis of knowledge – say, at least Justified True Belief – is not a report of a mental state that any person is in but is more a condition of our attribution of knowledge to others. This attribution does not report someone else's mental state either. Those who know are not in a different mental state from those who do not know. Mukherji's view is quite similar to Edward Craig's (*Knowledge and the State of Nature*) view, though clearly developed independently. Craig takes attributions of knowledge to fulfill a need, which is to flag reliable or good sources of information. Humans living in a community need to distinguish between those who are better at certain things than others. We need to figure out whom to trust and whom not to on certain issues. One way to do so is to attribute knowledge to others. An interesting off-shoot of Mukherji's intricate discussion of this matter is the way he applies it to why Indian philosophy seemed to have nothing to do with science and why science remained at best in a nascent state in India. The reason, according to Mukherji, lies in the fact that science requires and depends on the notion of attribution of knowledge but Indian philosophy took the Vedas – the fountainhead of whatever is true – as authorless, *apauruṣeya*. It was not a body of knowledge meant for a complex network of attributions and withdrawal of attributions to humans. Indian philosophy also lacked the JTB analysis of knowledge for the same reason.

Such an analysis is meant to apply to attributions of knowledge. One may well contest the historical claim made. Surely, one may wonder, other factors

could have been at play. Surely, the notion of knowledge in some way or other must have been there in the various communities in India. It is after all a need, and not just a spiritual one but a practical one. But Mukherji's reply might be that the all important concept was not really a concept of knowledge at all, but something very different, more like a strong belief in the truth of the Vedas. This inhibited the growth of science. As a historical claim, it is a remarkable one, and should be considered for further discussion, both amongst philosophers and historians.

Since we have just touched on Indian philosophy, there is another view of Indian philosophy that Mukherji argues for which is unusually interesting. It is well known that Indian philosophy declined or rather was not practiced with the same fervor since the 18th century or so. The Indian intelligentsia took a great interest in western philosophical ideas. This is so even today with analytic philosophy taught and read across the nation at fairly technical levels. It is also well known that the Oxford philosopher Michael Dummett held the view that Indian philosophy was blanketed by the onward march of western culture spread through military conquest (14-15). There is something very obvious about Dummett's view. But Mukherji suggests that the view is mistaken. He quite correctly points out that "in the last century Western philosophy found no lasting foothold anywhere else in the non-Western world *other than India"* (88; italics original).

Other places had colonialism and its educational off-shoots, but India seemed to pick up on philosophy like no other place. This requires explanation. Historical explanations involve many causal factors. Mukherji mentions quite a few, but two reasons stand out in his analysis. One, the Indian intelligentsia was quite liberal by nature. Because of the philosophical tradition of debate between various schools of philosophy and a tolerant co-existence of many schools, the intelligentsia was open to new ideas. They were not automatically intolerant by nature. Secondly, the themes in western philosophy were not alien to the Indian tradition. Indian philosophy already contained much analysis of language and perception and monism and pluralism were as much aspects of Indian metaphysics as of western metaphysics. Since, the concerns of both philosophical traditions were very similar, the Indian intelligentsia did not feel that it was studying some alien system. They were studying something that was a continuation of their own tradition.

In itself, this is a startling thesis. But it does explain, at an intellectual level, the interest of some of the brightest intellectuals in India in philosophers like Russell or Kant. On a personal note, I have never seen students in India complain that they are studying something "western" when they study Kant or Husserl. They enjoy it as a legitimate part of human inquiry. Students in India study philosophy as if it is "borderless", to use a phrase introduced by Arindam Chakrabarti. Mukherji clearly has got something right in his analysis. One has to

assume, in his analysis, that liberality of thought, heterodoxy of opinion, is a critical feature of Indian culture. It is not easy to remember that we have been liberal. It requires some study of history and being just plain intelligent and sensitive. But once remembered, Mukherji's views do fall into a natural place. Indian philosophy was not blanketed, but came alive in a new guise in the study of western philosophy. The view sounds controversial, but I think it should be open to further criticism and debate, instead of being *blanketed* by those who practice Indian philosophy and who may blindly think that Dummett was right. Jonardon Ganeri uses the wonderful phrase "conceptual biodiversity" (341-2) to show what a philosophy without borders should mean. Mukherji's idea is that India, with its heterodox culture, has been the home of conceptual biodiversity for long and the popularity of western philosophy in India is a simple example of such conceptual biodiversity that we are so used to.

Now, let's go back to the view of consciousness. Remember, that the claim is that we need the notion of consciousness but consciousness is not a thing or a property of anything. I do not disagree with the idea that we need to see others as conscious agents, responsible for their actions. But I do think that while it is true that there is a gap that one always feels between any physicalist analysis and the actual feel of consciousness, calling it a need does not remove the gap. It appears that consciousness is a part of the order of things, *and* a part of the order of needs, and an analysis in the order of things is required to account for its existence, however hard the task might appear. There is both a need for a description of consciousness and a need for its ascription. Mukherji does have a long and excellent discussion of the hybrid nature of such concepts as meaning and belief and knowledge. By hybrid, he means that they are ascriptive by nature but are also *taken* as descriptive. But the problem with description, so far as consciousness is concerned, is that description is couched in third personal terms and our experience of consciousness at first hand, phenomenal consciousness, is always first personal. Science seems to be up against the problem that it has no vocabulary to handle such first personal experiences. Mukherji's claim is that such a vocabulary is not needed. The need for the concept of consciousness, according to Mukherji, is "essentially normative, with no demand for descriptive truth" (114). We need to recognize each other as persons and establish an ethical order. But one must still explain why we feel such a powerful demand for descriptive truth, while not denying in any way the pull of the normative in any way.

I will turn now to two topics: one, skepticism and the other, reflective pluralism. Mukherji has a much richer and more traditional notion of skepticism in mind than most modern philosophers do. When he speaks of skepticism, he is not thinking of brains in vats and the dreaming argument. He is thinking of the key character of philosophy as a dissenting voice amongst the dominant systems that claim some aspect of truth. This is a refreshing concept of skepticism, one that all of us can recognize and value, though we tend to forget that philosophy is

aligned strongly with such a conception. Mukherji, in Chapter Five, "The Skeptic and the Cognitivist", maintains that as science breaks away from philosophy, at any particular period of time, the skeptic steps in between the philosophical theory and the scientific theory and suggests that the ambitions of science are too high and they need to be lowered to the right level. Such a view is quite interesting, as usually we think of philosophy as giving way to science but no place for continuing skepticism is usually thought of. But Mukherji's idea is that that is too simple a view of what is actually happening. Portions of philosophy do branch off into science, but the skeptic cautions the scientist about the reach of science. A good example may be Noam Chomsky himself who thinks that linguistics is a science, but cautions about the reach of the subject, pointing out that there may be no semantics beyond syntax. He plays the role of both the scientist and the philosophical skeptic. What is interesting about Mukherji's view is the strong conclusion he draws from such an interplay between skepticism and science: "The labels *philosophy* and *science*, therefore, are not of durable interest; what is of interest is the role of the sceptic in restricting the scope of the new science at a level lower than its original expectations" (73).

The activity of figuring out how far the Galilean style stretches in accounting for phenomena that fall under inquiry is the activity that interests us. Here, the skeptical mind has a greater role to play, both in positing limits to science but also in making it possible to do science within its narrow domain of applicability. As an example, one that Mukherji mentions, is the development of linguistic theory within the domain of syntax, and the problems with its extension to semantics. Exciting research in syntax has not been accompanied with equal excitement in semantics. There is an explanatory weight syntax carried that semantics did not. Meaning may just be a normative need we have, not answering to descriptive demands, to borrow Mukherji's words. Mukherji's remarks about the relations between science and philosophy are not without examples from history. One I can think of is that of George Berkeley arguing for a better explanation of mathematical terms like "inifinitesimal" without which much of physics cannot be understood. Berkeley was skeptical of explanations offered, and despaired of an intelligible interpretation. Thus, he was engaging in a skeptical inquiry into the nature of mathematical terms employed in mathematics and physics. Descartes, of course, was skeptical about the mechanical philosophy of his day accounting for the mind. And his skepticism remains to this day, shorn of substance dualism. However, more such examples are needed to make the claim that Mukherji makes historically accurate. It need not be a historical claim entirely, actually. It can also be taken as a normative claim about how the relation between philosophy and science *should* be thought of than how they actually have played out over the centuries.

I had mentioned the distinction between cognition and belief above. We *cognize* whether our house has a door or not. We have a *belief* about whether God

exists or not or whether electrons exist or not. Small beliefs are not really beliefs, because, as Mukherji argues, to ascribe a belief to someone we also need the idea of a disbeliever. Beliefs are open to debate and challenge, not so for what we cognize. We may cavil about the correctness of this distinction, but Mukherji uses it to make space for skepticism. The skeptic does not have to bother about what we cognize (so we can say goodbye to brains in the vat or the dreaming argument). But skepticism has got a role to play in the beliefs we have. It is quite possible to be skeptical about *all* beliefs. This contention of Mukherji sounds reasonable enough and indeed, I think, of the many contributions the book makes, this is a significant one. For, Mukherji wants to highlight skepticism and its role in philosophy and science but he also needs to make intelligible space for it. That is precisely what he has done by securing cognition (where error is rare) and letting beliefs float more freely, thereby making skeptics enter the arena of belief without being ridiculed. It is a pleasing way in which different thoughts he has expressed in various articles join hands together.

Finally, reflective pluralism. What can this mean? Even though the whole book is an argument for reflective pluralism, a separate essay on it was desirable. I take the term to mean the following. The Galilean style of inquiry marches on, trying to account for phenomena. But it faces major hurdles, as the skeptic keeps pointing out, however inarticulately. The domains of inquiry that do not fall under the Galilean style are not, just for that reason, to be relegated outside the purview of reason. They too can be investigated, but the style of investigation changes. When we investigate reflective needs we adopt a different style of enquiry. We need to make space for such enquiry and not bow to the arrogance of science and think that science is everything and the rest is just stamp collection. Science accounts for very little of all that there is around us. The skeptic does not cease to inquire about the rest, but proceeds to inquire using different strategies. The adoption of such different approaches to different domains of inquiry may be described as reflective pluralism. Thus, if human existence and human psychology are to be best understood through literature, then so be it. Mukherji devotes Chapter Eleven, "Literature and Common Life", one of the best essays of the book, to such issues.

In a sense, reflective pluralism also implies a certain tolerance for different aspects of inquiry. It breaks away from the hegemony of science. It makes us realize that there are other ways to not just enquire but also live. For the current ways of life we have adopted are not particularly conducive to long term survival or even short term survival, if climate change predictions are anything to go by. Mukherji reflects in the last essay of the book, "Education for the Species", on the need to learn from the way tribals live in consonance with their environment. We need to understand and appreciate that they know things we do not. But we cannot do that unless we adopt the position of reflective pluralism.

Reflective pluralism is a strike against hegemony, period. If the Indian tradition of thought was liberal and tolerant, then reflective pluralism is a renewed attempt to capture such a tradition again, in a much richer manner, but also a more urgent manner. More needs to be said about it, though, and I hope more is said about it soon, not just by Mukherji but by other philosophers too. The book is well worth reading, but more importantly, it needs to be discussed widely, and for a long time to come.

Nirmalanghsu Mukherji
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