



The Lopsided Mode of Inquiry in Anthropology: An Identification of its Roots

Dr. Umaira hussain khan *

Assistant Professor Department of Visual Studies University of Karachi 75270 Karachi, Pakistan

Email: drumairahussain@gmail.com

Abstract

Social science has been an attempt to understand man and society in a scientific spirit. It was initially an adaptation of scientific method of inquiry but as it developed, its scope became limited. The discipline such as Anthropology designed and developed to understand that man does not provide with an exhaustive understanding but rather compromises to remain descriptive. The paper examines the mode of inquiry practiced in Anthropology and argues that the method of inquiry practiced in Anthropology is lopsided and has its roots in the philosophical doctrines of Idealism and Empiricism. It maintains that Idealism and Empiricism preferred observable reality as relevant and hence limited the scope of inquiry. With recent scientific advances in human understanding, it is increasingly becoming possible to take into account those aspects of reality which were thought unthinkable due to intangibility. This emerging shift in our understanding particularly about the universe and the working of human mind has made scientists think afresh. The paper suggests a correction by endorsing the use of speculation and reasoning as tools that can go beyond sense perception and limits of observation and can add into the objectives of social sciences.

Keywords: Anthropology; Empiricism; Idealism; Intangibility; Social Science.

1. Introduction

What is wrong with the social sciences? There have been multiple answers to this question from scholars coming from a variety of disciplines and they seem to converge on the method of inquiry practiced in social sciences.

* Corresponding author.

For instance, Roberto Unger, a renowned philosopher and politician pointed out that ‘the fundamental problem with the social sciences today is that they have severed the link between insight into what exists and imagination of what might exist at the next steps—the adjacent possible’[4]. This view certainly refers to the method of inquiry in social sciences and it informs that there is something seriously inadequate about it. The social scientist is not interested in the consequence and causation; he is missing out on the temporal dimension of reality. This negligence has its roots in philosophical doctrines of empiricism and idealism. The following exposition identifies the lopsided mode of inquiry in Anthropology and traces its ideological roots and suggests a possible correction in method.

2. The Problem with the Method

The famous Butterfly effect in the theory of Chaos seems to stand true regarding the history of the modes and methods of inquiry. According to the metaphor, a small disturbance initiated by a gentle movement of butterfly, at one side, can cause a hurricane at the other side of the world by magnifying itself through its unchecked course of amplification. We can notice the butterfly effect in the operation of computer viruses, where a computer virus carrying a message of “copy me” affects the entire information architecture in the hard drive and eventually corrupts all of the data. Similarly, a mistaken philosophical assumption through its unexamined course of usage can act like a computer virus. It acquires a status of fundamental postulate, it envelops a message of “copy me” and becomes a default position of different disciplines of knowledge. With the span of time, it gives rise to an intellectual chaos and absurd conclusions. It digress human beings from their potential to seek the true nature of things and processes at both micro and macro levels, and as its price, can magnify into a situation of conceptual confusion and purposelessness.

In contemporary philosophy, we can see that this tendency has irrational consequences. For example, the moral individualism in existentialist philosophy, which is actually a gateway to anarchy, stresses that one must choose one’s own way without the aid of universal, objective standards. This suggestion is a consequence of a fundamental assumption emerged in empiricism that what is not perceivable is unknowable, which means that there is no scope of knowing an objective criterion of judgment, and thus the only criterion of judgment is subjective. The existentialist believes that we are trapped in existence and ‘everything in and about the world is totally arbitrary. There is no reason why it should be the way it is. There is no reason why we should accept one set of beliefs, or set of values, instead of any other’ [5: 390].

Most of the scholars in academia, in accordance with the modern empirical theory, now hold that our knowledge about reality is limited to the content of sense perception, i.e. experience. In Pragmatism, we find a middle ground between traditional metaphysics and irrationalism; we find a trial and error method for the verification of truth. The certitude of a doctrine depends upon the nature of consequences that it gives rise to, when practically applied. If the consequences are desirable then good enough, if undesirable then try another one. Its trial and error method attributes truth to a theory after its practical application. No one can inform a Nietzsche that your thinking is right or wrong unless it is verified and practically experienced in a Holocaust. Pragmatic method of attributing truth to a notion is a result of a failure, a failure to discover the truth through reason. It denies an objective standard of value and therefore promotes cultural relativism.

This cultural relativism suggested by Pragmatism has been influential in Anthropology. For example, Cultural Anthropologists declare every concept as a socio-cultural construct. This attitude of cultural relativism was inevitable because of a fundamental ignorance about logical criterion of judgment, which is discernable from Nature through the process of reasoning, but according to Empiricism and Kantian Idealism, it falls into the category of the unknowable, and therefore, it remained irrelevant for Anthropology and Pragmatism. The underline task of Cultural Anthropology is to understand different kinds of societies and their cultures to make sense of how people cope with life in today's culturally diverse and complex world. Furthermore, Anthropologists can also help us to learn ways to meet the present day needs of people all over the world and to plan how we might live in the future. I am reminded here an interesting event, 'Albert Einstein is reported to have said to Werner Heisenberg in Copenhagen in 1927 that it was wrong to believe a theory to be built on observations; it was quite the reverse: it is always a theory that determines what we can observe' [1: 175]. To plan how we might live in the future is certainly pragmatic because any planning will need practical verification before it is considered to be the right one. Who knows then how many attempts will end up in failure and how many generations will remain confused and unhappy. The planning of Anthropologists will be based upon subjective criterion because reasoning is prohibited and objective reality is unknowable for both Anthropology and Pragmatism. An objective criterion replaces the word "might" with "should" not as a compulsion but as a logical necessity.

Another school of thought that intersects with Anthropology is Logical Positivism. Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein are known as the founders of the twentieth century philosophical movement of Logical Positivism. It was Wittgenstein's work that proved to be of decisive influence in the rejection of metaphysical doctrines for their meaninglessness and the acceptance of empiricism as logical necessity. Logical Positivism developed a *principle of verification* to find out the factual meaningfulness of a statement. 'Although it can be—indeed has been—formulated in many different ways, the essential idea behind it maintains that a statement has factual meaning if, and only if, it is empirically verifiable' [5: 410]. The ultimate verification of a proposition indeed requires empirical evidence but it does not mean that we cannot go beyond our sense perception and we cannot know the truth before empirical evidence. For example, in General Relativity, when Einstein proposed that space is curved, there was no empirical evidence, neither it was perceivable through senses.

By holding such view that we cannot know anything, which is not perceivable through the five-senses, they assume our capability of knowing and truth seeking, to be limited. This limitation also stands in Anthropology as a default position. Consequently, for an anthropologist theoretical physics, philosophy of metaphysics, Quantum mechanics, and human mind as a non-biological phenomenon are simply, irrelevant.

Anthropology is fashioned in a method that was used in the political agendas of Colonialism. The Pragmatic stance of cultural relativism along with its baggage of empiricist default position seeped into this perspective. It includes Participant Observation in which an anthropologist lives in a specific culture and tries to capture the "Insider View" possessed by the natives of that culture. After and during his stay in a particular culture he piles up descriptive accounts called Ethnographies about the cultural values.

Its descriptive stance of investigation is adequate to the extent we are dealing with natural beauty and

unchangeable circumstances. It is extensive and helpful to the extent to which we are dealing with stagnant art and stagnant cultures but it pathetically breaks down when we are seeking for a positive change in culture, when we are not impressed by cultures, when we are surrounded by misery and unproductive activity, when we are engrained in decadence and need a renaissance. When Karl Marx said, 'Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it [3], he was addressing the descriptive method of philosophy and endorsing the need for a change, he wanted a cure for the miserable condition of the people of his time, he required a consideration of temporal dimension. About anthropologists, Marx would have said, 'Anthropologists have interpreted man in various ways, the point however is to change him.'

Observation is quite important if we use it as Newton used it. He tried to find out that why the apple fell on the ground. If Newton has been an Anthropologist, then instead of discovering the law of gravity, he would have said that apples at a certain time fall on the ground, and that's all.

3. Identification of Roots

The basic function of theories and disciplines of knowledge is, first of all, to acquire knowledge, which inevitably needs a method of inquiry. In philosophy, epistemology is the branch that deals with the scope and validity of knowledge and plays a crucial role in determining the boundaries of inquiry. As a matter of fact, the method of inquiry determines the scope of inquiry but this equation is reversible. As efforts can never be more than the purpose, similarly, a method of inquiry cannot exceed the purpose of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is the potential scope of inquiry.

In German Idealism, the answer of the question, "how things exist in themselves?" is unknowable. Therefore, the purpose of German Idealism does not include an understanding of objective reality, and as far as its scope is concerned, it cannot provide an objective criterion of judgment and therefore leads to irrational subjectivity. In Empiricism, the sense data, which we experience in our minds, falls into the knowable and what is not perceivable through the senses is unknowable. In both cases we find a refutation of theoretical physics that deals with plank scale phenomena such as, curvature of space, quantum fluctuations and Higgs field, which are not observable even with highly sophisticated instruments. In addition, we find philosophical reasoning, unreasonable; the quest for Unified Field Theory, a wild goose chase; Nobel prizes in physics, appreciation of fiction; metaphysics, meaningless; and rationalist philosophy, a struggle to declare the intellect, impotent.

Along with German Idealism, Empiricism is the philosophical basis of modern scientific method and various trends of modern philosophy, including Pragmatism, Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Logical Positivism. It also determines the scope of inquiry in Anthropology that shares its basic agendas with Pragmatism, by limiting it to the description of tangible aspects of reality.

The fundamental doctrine that conditions both Empiricism and Anthropological perspective is certainly, philosophical Idealism. Empiricism itself is a modern version of philosophical idealism. The difference between Empiricism and Idealism is that the former attributes reality to perception and the latter to Idea. The epistemology of Anthropological approach is limited by the central postulate of empiricism that holds perception

(idea/impression) as reality and the unperceivable as unreal or otherwise unknowable.

The method of inquiry that Anthropologists practice is an outcome of empirical theory of knowledge. To understand the anthropological research method and its limitation, it is valuable to analyze; why the empirical theory of knowledge holds this limitation? It is important to find out the roots that characterize its procedure.

Historically, empiricism started as a movement in seventeenth century as an opposition to rationalism. John Locke (1632-1704), Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), and David Hume (1711-1776) were the representatives of empirical theory of knowledge. Rationalists held sense data as inadequate and dubious, and reason as most reliable source to acquire knowledge through the realization of innate ideas, whereas, empiricists denied the existence of innate ideas, minimized the role of reason, and held sense perception and experience as the most reliable source of acquiring knowledge.

Rationalism failed to defend the primacy of reason because it defined reason as a tool to discover innate ideas, which was a mistake. John Locke identified this mistake, where he 'dismissed as silly or nonsensical the rationalist view, which both Plato and Descartes held, that one can possess the innate truths without being aware of them. According to Locke, if we reflect on our experience we will find that our minds, at the outset, are void of all characters, our minds are blank slates' [5: 62].

Locke dismissed the view but he took the function of reason for granted and never attempted to redefine it. However, rationalism proceeded simultaneously through Spinoza and Hegel but Empiricism remained the chief doctrine and an influential mainstream dogma, even for the twentieth century philosophy and contemporary schools of thought.

In Locke's theory of knowledge, we find a distinction between the properties of idea and the properties of the object about which the idea is established. This distinction does not appear as a necessary character of later empiricists but instead we see a tendency of immaterialism and subjective idealism. According to Locke, the properties that belonged to the object are referred as primary qualities such as size, shape, solidity and motion, whereas, secondary qualities are color, taste, smell, coldness and warmth. Locke also maintained that primary qualities force secondary qualities in sense experience and if we could see the world as it actually is, there would be only primary qualities. So, we can see that he is clearly distinguishing objective reality from subjective interpretation; even then, he says in his famous phrase, it is 'a something, I know not what.'

In Berkeley's philosophy, what is perceivable is knowable and what is not perceivable is unknowable. In addition to this Berkeley also denied the existence of external material reality and in his theory of immaterialism, held ideas and things identical.

David Hume led inquiry to a dead end by the denial of external reality and complete skepticism about all notions and assumptions. He denied cause and effect as an objective relationship between processes and proposed that such relationships are subjective constructions and are consequences of psychological habits. According to him:

We cannot justify what we believe. All that we can do is point out why we believe it, what habits and propensities

operate upon us. Fundamentally, our beliefs are irrational. They result not from rational thoughts or processes, but from psychological causes. We can point out that certain sets of beliefs are what we call “normal” or “reasonable” and others are not, but we cannot show that the former are the true ones...The madman may believe the exact opposite because his habits are different or deformed. But we cannot show that the beliefs of the “reasonable” man conform to the nature of things, while those of madman do not [5: 83].

So, one can see the consequences of the butterfly effect. We cannot be certain about Hume’s own doctrine, since he can be a madman, according to his own point of view. Hume made sense information dubious and uncertain as the rationalists contended. In reaction to criticisms, many contemporary empiricists, especially the logical positivists, have defended some of Hume’s negative conclusions. They have pointed out that the limited and probable information gained by our senses, and organized by our habits and propensities, seems to be all that we actually “know,” and all that we need to “know.”

In Immanuel Kant’s Idealism there is a distinction between the idea of a thing and the thing in itself but one cannot know the existence of things in them-selves. However, Kant formulated two categories of knowledge, which he called *a priori* (intuitive) and *a posteriori* (empirical) but it was only a modification of Berkeley’s concept of notions. It did not help out the limitation that he posed on truth seeking.

One can see that in above-mentioned trends of thought, despite of their skeptic tendency, four assumptions are in front of us: 1. External reality does not exist; all that exists are ideas and perceptions, 2. If there is an external reality, it is unknowable and therefore irrelevant, 3. The only source of information is sense perception, 4. Intuition is another source of information in addition to sense perception.

4. The Required Correction

The issue of the existence of external material reality is not in question because with the advances in modern sciences, we know that Andromeda galaxy, supernovas, genes, subatomic particles, and Black holes do not exist as only percepts and ideas. Will Durant argue that ‘the idealist rightly believes that no tree would be green if no eye were there to see it; he wrongly supposes that his perception makes the greenness of the tree, if that were so, his perception would make all things green’ [6: 24].

We can know beyond sense information, in fact, we can know far beyond sense information. We also know that knowing a thing means knowing its properties. Some of the properties are perceivable through our external perceptual capabilities and some are not. For example, while playing chess, we weigh the potential chess moves against the potentially possible positions of the chessboard. We plan war strategy on the basis of information about the war field and the potential possibilities of enemy attack. Sometimes, our plan becomes fool proof. An experienced and clever chess player can plan to defeat a beginner. How one can think about a reality, which has not happened yet? It is neither a part of experience nor of perception. I think that one reason of such craft is the knowledge about the rules of chess but it cannot be the only reason because it is same in the case of opponent. The second reason is that in case of experienced chess player, his capability of weighing a potential move against the resultant potentially possible moves of the opponent and the potential positions of the chessboard is far greater

than his opponent. This experiential advantage and sensitivity about the higher order strategy is monitoring his imagination. The projections that he is making through imagination are ordered projections, ordered to the extent that he can encompass his opponent's imagination or his opponent's strategy. With enough competence difference, he can make the opponent to play in a manner, which is already a part of his own strategy. He can make such positions of the chessboard that he can force his opponent's decision. This example has important implications regarding the role of intellect in drawing logical inferences about the nature of reality.

To draw a logical inference or making a specialized speculation is similar to the projection of higher order strategic patterns in many respects. In the game of chess, an intelligent chess player has an intention to win the game; he knows the power of his chessmen that he can unleash in different situations. In the middle of the game his stock of information is:

- Knowledge about the position of chessboard
- Knowledge about the potential possibilities of chess moves regarding his chess men
- A stock of specialized speculations about the resultant potential possibilities of the chessboard (dependent upon the opponent) after making a chess move

It is in the third area where his experience plays the key role because in this area he is speculating about the outcomes. He is analyzing the possible outcomes by projecting them in his imagination and selecting them by the use of internal perceptual capabilities. According to John Sloboda:

For a chess master, the mental representation of a chess position is not a copy of physical board. It is a more abstract structural description of the meaningful relationships between groups of pieces. Through many years of experience he has acquired automatic perceptual mechanisms, which rapidly pick out frequently occurring strategic patterns from the input. [2: 24]

The usage of internal perceptual capabilities is in drawing logical inferences in the process of intellection. Internal perceptual capabilities provide us projections in the form of intuition and then we scrutinize these projections by the use of our verbal knowledge and intellection. To draw logical inferences means to engage the intellect in a higher order strategic pattern because the already established strategic patterns (philosophical doctrines) are not providing the right answers. We are dealing with the intangible, where we do not have knowledge, we can only speculate. We have the knowledge about the chessmen (the knowledge of things), we know the position of chessboard (the contemporary knowledge about macro processes or situation) and we are speculating about the resultant potential positions of the chessboard (possible relationships between the knowledge of things and the knowledge of situation). We judge our speculations on the basis of their consistency with the verified knowledge. Moreover, we weigh our speculations against the questions that are not well answered and the paradoxes that are not resolved. As the chess player, through his experience of playing chess, acquires automatic perceptual mechanisms that detect strategic patterns, similarly, a thinker in the course of thinking acquires such capabilities that his speculation does not defy discovered laws of Nature. When Einstein proposed that space is curved, he was trying to cast light on the nature of gravity, it was a projection of higher order strategic pattern.

5. Conclusion

The basic premise for social sciences was the application of scientific method as it was practiced in natural sciences. But since the focus shifted from the study of things to study of man and society therefore two important additional areas came into play. One was the micro world of human mind, which due to its intangible nature fell outside the scope of inquiry that Anthropology inherited and the second was the macro evolutionary dynamic of Nature as a process, which involved an understanding of temporal dimension of reality including discoveries in Quantum Physics. Both the macro and micro affect man and society and both are no go areas for anthropology. In the light of modern scientific knowledge, we can understand objective reality and therefore the fundamental methodological position of anthropology coming from pre-scientific era needs to be revised. The present mode of inquiry in social sciences is cut off from the concrete need of man and society which is to be in sync with reality in all space and time. There is a need that social scientists must understand that limits of observation are not limits of inquiry and to understand man and society is not possible without understanding the micro and macro dimensions of reality. A true method of inquiry must be a synthesis of philosophy and natural science in which there should be a possibility to understand the intangible essence of things and the reality that is about to unfold. Unless such method and scope is adopted in social sciences, a meaningful integration of knowledge and our need to know is not possible.

6. Limitation of Study

The study has examined some of the source philosophical positions that limit the scope of anthropological methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, participant-observation, tacit dimension, interviewing, biography and life histories. However, it does not provide a holistic account of various approaches in Anthropology. It is certainly the case that in contemporary thinking and applications of the discipline, there are modifications that question the use of reason limited by the scope of observation. For instance, the study does not take into account positions that are categorized under Philosophical Anthropology.

7. Recommendations

The contemporary approaches in anthropology have shown a renewed interest in the use and application of abstract thinking and rationality going beyond sense perception. These modifications are not due to changes in the source paradigms but are a result of a greater accumulation of scientific knowledge fund that is endorsing rational philosophical positions of the past. These modifications should be analyzed in order to develop a knowledge base that could help revise the philosophical paradigms that has characterized the scope of inquiry in Anthropology.

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