

KNOWLEDGE AND THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT : TOWARDS A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The knowledge explosion which is a characteristic phenomenon of the twentieth century has significantly altered our perception and cognition. This explosion, made possible by an unprecedented proliferation of specialised research in the sciences, has changed our cognitive orientation in two distinct ways. In the first place, it has led to a fragmentation and disintegration of knowledge. Secondly, it has restricted the focus of our perception and comprehension to narrow and peripheral areas of study and research. Over-specialisation and reckless empiricism have created a vast schism between reality and our conceptual and perceptual categories which attempt to comprehend it.

The heavy smog of information brought about by the knowledge explosion has enveloped our intellectual horizons to such an extent that we are literally overwhelmed by it. Our perception and understanding of reality is immensely contaminated by this smog, with the result that we only get a blurred vision of reality. Nobel Laureate Alexis Carrel has perceptively noted that inspite of our growing body of information, we do not apprehend man as a whole; we know him as composed of distinct parts. "Each one of us is made up of a procession of phantoms, in the midst of which strides an unknowable reality". (Carrel 1959 : 16). Our social and behavioural sciences abound in concepts, theories and methodologies and yet we find ourselves groping for answers to our basic and vital questions. Do we, for example, have a coherent body of knowledge concerning an agreed image of man ?

CONTEXT OF KNOWLEDGE

The central theme of this paper is that the root cause of this malady lies in the divorce of authentic and meaningful human experience from the context of knowledge. A good deal of our intellectual and academic paraphernalia is characterised by abstraction which hardly corresponds

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to reality and therefore tends to become irrelevant in the context of the human condition. This is essentially a phenomenological standpoint, with a synthetic flavour of William James' characteristic psychology of knowledge and an extension of the sociology of knowledge.

In many significant respects, the emergence of phenomenology was a revolt against the hegemony of scientific reductionism. One of the basic ingredients of the scientific cosmology is the Cartesian dualism which assumes that bodies and minds are independent, individual substances, each existing in its own right, apart from any necessary reference to each other. This view found a forceful expression in the scientific canon of objectivism which holds that there is a natural split between the knower and the known, the subject and the object. The scientific world-view assumed that reality consisted only of the objective world, a world without man. The human observer, therefore, was reduced to be a detached spectator and human consciousness to a *tabula rasa*.

Phenomenology rejects this dualism between the knower and the known, the subject and the object. Man, according to the phenomenological perspective, is an indivisible and knowing subject. This is the celebrated phenomenological principle of intentionality. Knowledge, in the light of this principle, is a mode of man-being-involved-in-the-world. When Edmund Husserl said, "Back to the things themselves" he called for a return to the experiential roots of knowledge. In contrast with scientific reductionism which abstracts from the raw data of human experience and turns it into an object, phenomenological reductionism pleads for a return to our most original experience, a return to the "lived world".

The burden of our argument, therefore, is that scientific, objective knowledge, which is based on the premise of the duality of subject and object, has abstracted reality to such an extent that its umbilical cord with original human experience is almost cut off.

Our social sciences suffer from a kind of accentuated scholasticism. Scholasticism, as is well known, was the dominant philosophy of the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment thinkers derided scholasticism because of its association with sophistry, pedantry and empty rhetoric. What we are trying to say is that the social sciences are increasingly turning away from the existential and experiential base of the human condition. In sociology, for instance, analytical categories like role, system and socialization are abstracted and reified to such an extent that rather than clarifying our understanding of social reality they mystify and confuse it.



William James (1892) was one of the major psychologists to give a comprehensive treatment to the psychology of knowledge which modern psychologists describe as the twin-processes of perception and cognition. All thought, James held, is personal in that it is coloured by the thinker's individual peculiarities, needs, likes and dislikes.

LIMITS OF PERCEPTION

In recent years, Michael Polanyi (1958) has offered a rounded and well-documented formulation of this thesis : that all knowledge is personal, shaped by the values, convictions and passions of the knower. This point of view has been further reinforced by the powerful writings of Thomas Kuhn (1962), Abraham Maslow (1964), Carl Rogers (1961) and Ludwig van Bertalanffy (1960). Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* offered a massive and cogent corroboration of this view by demonstrating that personal and subjective factors and processes operate in the routine functioning of normal science as well as in the paradigm-shattering scientific revolutions.

Maslow, Rogers and Bertalanffy have brought the perspectives of psychology, psychotherapy and biology to bear on this issue, pointing to the fact that knowledge is shaped and coloured by the individual's peculiarities, needs and values. Researches in cognitive psychology have demonstrated this conclusion in the experimental setting (Bruner and Goodman 1947 : 33-44). In particular, experiments in perception have given rise to the concept 'perceptual defence' which states that all perception is mediated through the values and needs of the perceiver (Postman 1953 : 298-306).

On a more general level, human perception is vitiated and distorted by fears and fantasies, mistrust and illusion, which has been aptly described by Erich Fromm (1964) as pathology of perception. There is yet another aspect of perception which is related to what cultural anthropologists and linguists call linguistic preconditioning. Researches in the growing discipline of metalinguistics indicate that the linguistic tools and grammatical systems predispose us to observe and perceive only selected areas of experience and not others.

However, linguistic preconditioning largely operates at the adult level where language becomes a prime mediator of cognition. Researches in psycho-linguistics indicate that in the infants the process of language learning involves primarily a delineation of meaning. These researches



have shown that infants learn their language by first determining, independent of language, the meaning which a speaker intends to convey to them, and by working out the relationship between the meaning and the expression they heard (Macnamara 1972 : 1-13).

The point we initially raised was that perception and cognition—what we referred to as the psychology of knowledge—have their own limitations which are rooted in the individual's values, needs, preferences and so on. This means that the presence of psychological factors and personal problems may distort our perception and understanding of reality. This problem is not confined to laymen; it may vitiate the perception of social scientists as well. This fact has been amply demonstrated in the field of clinical psychology. In the therapeutic process which is characterised by empathic understanding the psychotherapist may project his own personal or unconscious problems on to his patients. This phenomenon has been described in psychoanalytic parlance as counter transference. Thus a therapist with a mother fixation is likely to diagnose the same problem in most of his patients.

This limitation is not confined to unconscious and personal problems alone. Conceptual categories and theoretical schemes may become a kind of fetish to the scientist and lead to a distortion of his perception. Not only that, this malady may plague a whole profession. A most forceful expression of this view has come from the writings of Ronald Laing. Laing (1969 : 296) argues that psychiatric concepts like schizophrenia are a kind of conceptual strait jacket which severely restrict the possibilities both of psychiatrists and patients. He suggests a radical reformulation of the psychiatric orientation. As he has bluntly put it, "We do not need theories so much as the experience that is the source of the theory" (Laing 1976 : 15).

The first and foremost problem concerning knowledge, therefore, is that of limitations in our perception which seriously distort our understanding of reality. We hold that the only way to overcome this limitation is to obtain a measure of detachment and self-transcendence. It is only by transcending the limitations of our individual selves that we can eliminate the pathology of perception and taste the perennial springs of authentic knowledge.

AUTHENTICITY

And that brings us to the question of authenticity as formulated by



Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. Authenticity, in brief, is the act of being true to oneself. When one is honest to one's real feelings perceptions and experiences, even when they happen to clash with those of others, one is leading an authentic existence. Clark Moustakas (1969 : 408-9) refers to this tendency as a flowing presence of honesty. "Genuine development of the self requires honesty of expression, creating meanings from one's own real experiences and taking a definite position consistent with these experiences". Abraham Maslow (1973) has described this sense of authenticity as "the reduction of phoniness towards the zero point". What he means is that the authentic individual does not have to put up a show of being different from what he is, or any show for that matter; he does not have to meet people with shams, pretensions and masks. His self is open like the skies.

Authentic knowledge, therefore, is experientially rooted; it is shorn of facades and defences and it faces reality as it is given.

Our perception and cognition for the most part is mediated through the social definition of reality. Sociology of knowledge, as outlined by Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim in the main, is chiefly concerned with the social definition of reality and the existential determination of thought. It pinpoints the fact that most of the time our perception, understanding and judgement are shaped by the social definition of reality, by the taken-for-granted world of dogmas and rituals.

However, the problem with the social definition of reality is that, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966 : 14-15) point out, it is taken for granted as self-evident reality. It is founded on uncritically held assumptions and as such may conflict with our authentic, experiential definition of reality. What is required, then, is that we rise above the socially constructed world of beliefs and stereotypes and transcend its limitations. In the language of anthropology, the point is to go beyond the limitations of cultural conditioning. Peter Berger (1965 : 171) refers to this act of transcending the social definition of reality as 'ecstasy' which literally means the act of standing outside. It is only by stepping out of the taken-for-granted routines of society, he says, is it possible to confront the human condition without comforting mystifications. To recapitulate, the essential point is to go beyond the psychology and sociology of knowledge, that is to say, beyond the limitations of our individual selves and of the social definition of reality.

We have seen that for the most part our thinking, feeling and behavi-



our are enmeshed in the socially constructed reality and that the power and sway of cultural conditioning is too overwhelming for most of us. Transcending this conditioning and looking at reality from a detached perspective is a mighty task and requires a tremendous amount of courage and conviction. The initial step in this direction could be guided by what Nietzsche beautifully described as the "art of mistrust". A healthy and creative scepticism based on a humanistic premise would be of immense help in debunking the false images and stereotypes of society. Erich Fromm (1970) refers to this kind of scepticism as humanist radicalism. To quote him, "Humanist radicalism is radical questioning guided by insight into the dynamics of man's nature; and by concern for man's growth and full unfolding All this means that humanist radicalism questions every idea and every institution from the stand-point of whether it helps or hinders man's capacity for greater aliveness and joy" Humanist radicalism is an attitude of radical doubt, a critical questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions and routines of society. Critical scepticism and radical doubt lead to a broadening of the intellectual and imaginative horizons; they open up enlightening vistas of thought. As Fromm has put it, "Radical doubt is a process; a process of liberation from idolatrous thinking; a widening of awareness, of imaginative, creative vision of our possibilities and options" (1970 : 9-10).

We began our discussion by pointing out that our social and behavioural sciences have an apparent richness of concepts and theories, but they hardly have a bearing on our experience and behaviour. A major portion of academic and empiricist research seems to be too scholastic and largely irrelevant in the context of current issues and problems. Actually what has happened is that we have tended to reify our conceptual and theoretical corpus, with the result that it has lost correspondence with our experiential context. Ideas tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies if they are taken to be autonomous and independent of their socio-cultural and psychological matrix. Theories and concepts, in other words, have their unanticipated consequence. The famous Thomas theorem on the definition of the situation is no less applicable to the realm of ideas. From a historical perspective, it was Roger Bacon who put forth the idea that knowledge is power. Since the Renaissance this idea has become a major ingredient of the scientific cosmology. A characteristic offshoot of this view was that with increasing knowledge



man would increase his mastery over the forces of nature. It was this view which eventually led to the creation of a technocratic society in the West. This technocratic society is characterised by rationality, calculability and impersonality. The phenomenon of mass society is just another facet of technocracy wherein culture is faceless and individual anonymous. Here standardisation is the pattern and conformity the rule. In such a society the individual is overwhelmed by the massive forces of the social order; he increasingly becomes estranged from society and from himself. Depersonalisation and dehumanisation is the inevitable outcome of the hegemony of technocracy.

Recently, Anton C. Zijderveld (1974) has given a vivid portrait of what he has termed as the abstract society. He points out that the structures of modern society have grown increasingly pluralistic and independent of man. Through an ever-enlarging process of differentiation modern society has acquired a rather autonomous and abstract nature confronting the individual with strong but strange forms of control. Ideas, we said earlier, tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies when they are viewed as autonomous entities. Reification almost always results in fatal consequences. This is precisely what has happened on the Western scene. The scientific world-view which emerged from the study of plants and animals was thoughtlessly extrapolated to the human sphere, without taking into consideration the question of its adequacy in the context of the human condition. The consequences of this reckless leap are steadily coming to the fore.

Besides the nightmare of a nuclear holocaust made probable by the destructive advancements in chemical technology, unbridled economic development is posing as a serious threat to the Western world. Unchecked economic growth and expansion have become a fetish in the West, but it has serious consequences for the ecological balance and the availability of natural resources. Modern historians point out that the biosphere which refers to the entire complex of the surface and atmosphere of the planet earth, is getting exhausted by the technological onslaught. The technosphere which is an alien superstructure on the biosphere is exhausting the latter to such an extent (through the pollution of air and exhaustion of natural resources) that the man-made technosphere may before long become so parasitic that it will exhaust the biosphere altogether (Urban 1971; Time 1973).



NATURE OF MAN

Moreover, man's advancement in subjugating the forces of nature has not been accompanied by an exploration of his potential and promise for a creative and meaningful existence. During a conference on Man and his Future held some years ago, Sir Julian Huxley remarked that man's exploration and control of external nature has far outrun his exploration and control of his own nature. Modern man's preoccupation with the rational and intellectual aspects of life has inevitably resulted in a neglect of the other side of life which is characterised by spontaneity, naturalness, transcendence and self-growth. This exclusive preoccupation with the rational, objective and hedonistic aspects of life has adversely affected the personal and human dimension in contemporary Western society. Dehumanisation is the natural outcome of the view of man nurtured by the contemporary *zeitgeist*.

However, it is refreshing to remind ourselves that man is also a rebel. Max Scheler once characterised man as being able to say no. A distinguishing feature of man is that he can endure physical torture and hardship to a remarkable extent but he cannot put up with the degradation of his worth and self-esteem for long. Of late there has been an anguished cry of protest on the Western scene against the abstract society, against the depersonalisation of man and against the tyranny of technocratic society. This protest, manifested in the rise of a counter culture has taken varied forms. It has ranged all the way from hippie bohemianism to New Left radicalism. A characteristic feature of this dissenting wave, as Theodore Roszak (1965 : 42) has keenly observed, is the disenchantment of youth with the scientific world-view which is the moving spirit behind the functioning of the technocratic society.

Kenneth Keniston (1970 : 21-49) who has made an extensive study of youth culture in the United States has noted that anti-technologism and anti-academicism are among the dominant themes of youth dissent in America. Post-modern youth, according to Keniston, have grave reservations about many aspects of the technocratic society. The depersonalisation of man, commercialism and bureaucratisation seem to be intolerable to these angry young men and women who seek to create new forms of association and action to oppose the technologism of American society. Bigness, impersonality, stratification and hierarchy are rejected as is any involvement with the furtherance of technological values. In



reaction to these values, post-modern youth seeks simplicity, naturalness, personhood and even voluntary poverty.

Moreover, the interest of college students and youth in the philosophy of alienation, existentialism, the theatre of the absurd, oriental mysticism and Zen, psychedelic drugs and communitarian experiments like the hippie communes and love-ins, point to a pervasive disaffiliation with the dominant values of technocratic society. An interesting theme which runs through the various manifestations of youth dissent in American society is the accent on feeling, spontaneity, self-expressiveness and experiential authenticity. Stuart Hall (1971 : 601) has perceptively observed that in the dissenting youth's view, the greatest damage perpetrated by the American way of life is that it has constrained and confined people to a narrow, inauthentic spectrum of feeling and perception.

Similarly, Rollo May (1967 : 154) has noted that "in the devotion to the drugs I hear an anguished cry against our schizoid, depersonalised society". Theodore Roszak (1972 : 62-63) has made a similar observation. Underlying our emphasis on knowledge being rooted in the authentic experiential matrix is an implicit view of its bearing on the human condition. We hold that there is a dialectical relationship between knowledge and human experience. The thesis we have elaborated so far is that knowledge has to be shaped and structured by authentic experience, otherwise it would tend to become irrelevant and meaningless. The other side of the thesis which we intend making more explicit in the concluding part of this paper is that knowledge should have as its goal the unfolding and enrichment of the human potential; it should help man live more fully and creatively. This is essentially a humanistic premise, based on the philosophy of the Enlightenment as interpreted by the eminent philosopher and historian of ideas, Ernst Cassirer (1951).

Recently, Sir Karl Popper (1968 : 294-95) has made a convincing and forceful advocacy of this view, saying that the Enlightenment ideal of self-emancipation through knowledge should permeate our entire intellectual enterprise. Sir Popper points out that this idea is a powerful enemy of fanaticism because it teaches us to free ourselves from the overpowering influence of false or wrong idea. The ideas of self-liberation through knowledge is the idea of one's own spiritual self-emancipation and growth through one's own criticism of ideas and ideologies. It is refreshing to note that this view is increasingly gaining currency in contemporary social science (Fromm 1955; Becker 1968, 1971; Gough 1968; Horowitz 1964).



The current spurt of interest in hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, sociology of the absurd, phenomenological sociology and symbolic interactionism is indicative of a new phase in the human sciences.

In our view, therefore, the science of man should be imbued with this ideal of self-liberation through knowledge. The Enlightenment thinkers whose perspective remains remarkably fresh and inspiring to this day, had a vision of the science of man which would release man from the bondage of everyday reality which imprisons and manipulates him. Emmanuel Mounier, for instance, who stood in the true Enlightenment tradition, believed that the science of man is also a struggle for man, a struggle to help him transcend the constrictions and limitations of his social conditioning. Ernest Becker (1969 : 179) has eloquently put the problem this way: "The science of man is an active, innovative, interventionist science. It is founded on the belief that man must continually modify cherished lifeways to accord with future goals and continuing historical changes".

It seems appropriate to utter a word of caution at this juncture. Our emphasis on experientially rooted knowledge need not distract us from the fact that some amount of abstraction and conceptualisation is essential for the advancement of knowledge. We fully endorse this fact. What needs to be pinpointed is that abstraction should never lose its existential and experiential referent.

To conclude, knowledge, in order to be relevant and humanly meaningful should always be rooted in an authentic experiential matrix and work as a catalyst in enlarging the scope of human freedom by freeing it from the constrictions of the psychology and sociology of knowledge.

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