FACTS, FRAMES, AND RESEARCH:
FUNDAMENTALS CONCERNING THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE HUMANITIES

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the precise nature of the relation between the phenomenon under study and the theoretical framework employed for the purpose (‘facts and frames’), and, in a thought experiment, the possibility of knowledge-generation without and beyond theory. With reference to fundamental epistemological issues – the characteristics of the knowing subject and the object to be known, delimitation of study, the purpose and nature of knowledge in the humanities, and the role of ideology – it subjects to scrutiny the discursive tendencies of the postmodern age with regard to knowledge. While the need for theory is related to the need for concepts, which partially solve certain epistemic difficulties, mechanical application of theoretical concepts ad infinitum involves evasion of the hermeneutic possibilities offered by the objects of study. In the context of literary research, it explores the philosophical possibility of an intrinsic criticism, which is posited as an alternative to the extrinsic ‘application’ of theory to texts.

KEYWORDS: delimitation, cognition, event, pragma, epistêmê, paradigm, referent, framework, will to reality, cognitive ease

0. INTRODUCTION

The encounter between the knowing subject and the object known, or to be known, has been the chief concern, and one of the perennial fascinations, of epistemology. René Descartes, with whom modern philosophy is widely believed to have emerged, viewed it as a detached and disinterested relation between an autonomous subject and the object which is out there in the world. Martin Heidegger, in Being and time, contested the Cartesian ideas of the subject and its epistemic endeavours. To Heidegger, knowledge and interpretation are ontologically grounded in prior structures of understanding, which he called Vorstruktur (translated into English as ‘fore-structure’). These structures are a function
of “being-in-the-world,” of the Dasein’s having projected himself there (Dasein literally means ‘being there’). In other words, the “totality of involvements” (Ormiston and Schrift 121) in the world underlies knowledge and interpretation (Auslegung). The mode of knowing is part of the way of being. The modern idea of the unavoidable ‘interest-edness’ (bias, if you like) of knowledge and understanding flows from Heidegger’s fundamental ontology¹. We may use this ontological foundation of knowledge as the point of departure for our discussion.

There is no ground zero for approaching knowledge. The knowing subject is conditioned prior to the encounter with the object of knowledge. This is no inherent epistemic disability but one of the conditions to be factored in, in understanding the dynamics of knowledge. In fact, the (meta-) knowledge of epistemic structures has been a liberating development in the history of ideas. For instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of “epistemic violence” (280) in the essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” is premised on the idea that the norms of discourse among the First World intellectuals render it difficult to understand the cultural subtleties of practices and problems in the so-called Third World. Knowledge in the humanities, as opposed to that of ‘hard science,’ is known for its broader subjective and cultural bases. Understanding this helps in two ways. First, it enables the philosopher of knowledge to be on guard against epistemic outrages of the sort articulated by Spivak. Second, it gives him access to modalities of diligent reasoning which generates ‘valid’ knowledge. My experience with research in the humanities, across several disciplines, teaches me that often epistemic structures have fastidiously emphasized the criteria of knowledge which rule out what is unacceptable rather than spell out possibilities. We have known how to ‘filter out’; now we have to work out the modalities of how to ‘let in.’ For example, literary studies mostly employ an ‘analogous’ mode of reasoning, not a

¹Remember Friedrich Nietzsche’s oft-quoted, but mostly misunderstood statement “There are no facts, only interpretations.” Nietzsche’s point was that apparently neutral and rational concepts such as truth and morality were originally matters of political expediency, ruses contrived to serve the interests of particular groups. For instance, in On the Genealogy of Morals he showed how Judeo-Christian ennoblement of values of meekness, humility, poverty, suffering, and piety was a sublimated expression of slaves’ ressentiment (often translated as ‘resentment’) against, and ideological revenge upon, their masters. That is why Nietzsche calls for a ‘revaluation’ of all values.
cause-and-effect one. Awareness of the fundamental calculi of critical reasoning opens up heretofore unexplored possibilities of literary research. In the course of deconstructing the procedures of knowledge, we shall also understand the function of theory therein.

1. DELIMITING THE OBJECT OF STUDY

The ‘perspectival’ conditioning of the subject is not the only factor which problematizes the epistemic endeavour. Characteristics innate to the object render even preliminary attempts at knowledge a process which is complex but worthy of understanding. The object is multidimensional. One cannot perceive or understand all the aspects of the object, at least all at once. Change of metaphor – facet, dimension, part, side, or feature – does not help here (Language is fundamentally metaphorical, and even while dealing with non-physical entities is compelled to rely on the physicality of the physical world for its metaphorical extensions of reference). Quotidian experience teaches us that one cannot apprehend all the dimensions of a physical object. Probably, there is such a thing as what Immanuel Kant called the Ding an sich (the thing in itself), but the access to it can only be mediated. Our perceptual apparatus has its limitations. But our cognitive apparatus, aspiring though it may be, with a broader field to grapple with, is even more limited. This is so not only because cognition is conditioned and ‘biased’ as discussed earlier but also because thoughts, beyond our calculations, interact and create links, even remote ones, which bear on the understanding of the object under consideration. Our discussion here, particularly when it takes up cognition, operates in an area which is beyond Kantian “categories,” which are more about the ‘basic’ processes of perception and understanding. Selectivity vis-à-vis the features of the object is one of

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2 Theoretically, it is possible sequentially though not simultaneously.

3 Kant’s twelve categories are divided into four sets of three: (1) of quantity: unity, plurality, and totality; (2) of quality: reality, negation, and limitation; (3) of relation: substance-and-accident, cause-and-effect, and reciprocity; (4) of modality: possibility, existence, and necessity (qtd. in Russell 708).
the organizing principles of cognition, analogous to the principles of perception.4

The epistemology of an intangible entity is more intricate. Let me give an example from history – that of ‘an event.’ What we call an event might consist of several constitutive micro-events. When we name historical events (or movements), we name them as macro-events comprising several related events, which can be categorized under one label (e.g. the Renaissance, World War II, Counterculture). It may be argued that there is no such entity as an event and the event is merely an analytical category. This is said primarily because an event is ‘inextricable.’ What is designated as an ‘event’ emanates in one or many of the predecessor-events and might extend indistinguishably into the following ones. Alignments of causes and effects never end, and links proliferate both temporally and spatially. Further, an event is a composite entity in another sense – it consists of occurrences, persons, things, and states of affairs. The reality of the event lies in its endless entanglements, and includes the motives and intentions of the actants, the experience and response of those who are acted upon, and the significant discourses which are part of the build-up to the putative event or event-series. As opposed to the popular theory which claims the discursive construction of an event, Alain Badiou, in his book *Being and event*, has propounded the thesis, of paradigmatic significance, that “[t]he structure of situations does not, in itself, deliver any truths. . . . A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths ‘the event.’” (xii).

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4 The Gestalt principles of perception include the figure-ground relationship (humans focus either on the figure or on the background against which the figure rests), the law of *prägnanz* (humans tend to interpret ambiguous or complex images as simple and complete), uniform connectedness (elements with uniform visual features are perceived as related than those with disparate characteristics), closure (humans tend to look for a single, recognizable pattern), proximity (elements placed close to one another are perceived to be more related than those placed apart), and similarity (similar things are perceived to be more related than dissimilar things).
2. PRAGMA AND EPISTÊMÊ

If we survey the knowledge generated in the history of humankind, we may discern that most of it stemmed from a pragmatic imperative. The Greek word *pragmatikos* means “fit for business or action” (from *pragma*, meaning ‘deed’ or ‘action’). The purpose for which knowledge is created, or to which it is appropriated, often determines the production of knowledge itself. It is the constant plaint of academics that pure or basic research receives less funding than that received by applied research. Those in the humanities amend Seneca and claim: *Non scholae, sed vitae discimus* (We study not for the school, but for life). The ‘purposiveness’ of knowledge inadvertently also solves in part the epistemic limitations discussed in the previous section – particularly, the challenge of delimiting the object of study. The knower need not reckon with all the aspects of the object under consideration, but only those which are significant to ‘the purpose’ at hand. Again, an example from historiography should be in order here. Postmodern philosophers of history claim that history is always written from the perspective of the present, and serves its ideological purposes. Hayden White in his *Metahistory* sets out to demonstrate that historical narratives are neither simple representations of a sequence of events nor the revelation of a design inherent in them. Instead, he analyzes historical narratives as shaped by the imposition on events of cultural patterns similar to narratological concepts, such as plot and character-type.

We know that the ‘battles for the past’ are critical because they have a bearing on the ideological struggles of the present. The realization concerning the purposiveness of the past is also at the root of much historical revisionism, such as the argument that the Allies exaggerated Nazi atrocities in order to gain a moral legitimacy for their own ‘efforts’ in World War II. It was possible for apologists of the Nazi regime to dilute the exact nature of the Holocaust, maintaining that the event was better labelled as atrocity of war than as genocide. But such quirky retrospective possibilities carry less credence vis-à-vis an extreme experience such as the Final Solution (*die Endlösung*). This is because

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5 In the *Nichomachean ethics* Aristotle made a distinction among *epistêmê* (theoretical knowledge), *technê* (craft) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom and ethics).
representations cannot entirely overlook the intensity of the experience or its non-negotiable quality. The experience resists narrative, and even conceptual, subsumption. Recognition of this non-negotiable character also enables fixing of responsibility. However, contemporary philosophy of history seems to have found the enterprise of the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke – to reconstruct history as it actually happened (wie es eigentlich gewesen war) – not only impossible but also undesirable. The postmodern theory of knowledge increasingly emphasizes the ideas of narrative and discourse. Truth is relative to the discourse which enunciates ‘truth-claims.’ Ideas, theories and propositions are tested on the basis of their narrative and rhetorical efficacy. Nevertheless, as extreme experiences demonstrate, narrativization also raises the uncanny apprehension ‘How desirable is compromising the referent?’ I believe the humanities are capable of a greater ‘will to reality’ than envisaged by the discursiveness of knowledge, and the ‘cognitive ease’ it offers, lest we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Had knowledge not been purposive in character, there would not have been a discursive struggle over what got recognized as legitimate knowledge. As is well known today, changes in the domain of knowledge witnessed over the years are not merely due to the temporal character of knowledge-advances – the progressive result of explorations, discoveries, theorizations, and what Thomas Kuhn calls “paradigm shifts.” Historically, the legitimacy of knowledge depended more on power and ideology than on intrinsic worth. Foucault’s use of the term épistème denotes historically specific norms of discourse which determine what can be accepted as valid knowledge. Terry Eagleton’s counter-ideological narrative of the rise of literary studies as a discipline foregrounds the need to understand the class- and racial basis of the apparently neutral definitions of literature: “The criteria of what counted as literature . . . were frankly ideological: writing which embodied the values and ‘tastes’ of a particular social class qualified as literature, whereas a street ballad, a popular romance and perhaps even the drama did not” (p.15). Today, every discipline has become a contested terrain because of the political character of knowledge. As a result of historical-ideological scrutiny, disciplines have also become self-conscious. That knowledge has an
ideological basis and political purpose is also the *raison d’être* of ideological criticism, a variety of what Paul Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (p.6). Nevertheless, a political critique of the text is not the only legitimate critical enterprise though apprehensions regarding ideological naïveté makes such popular reductionism a seductive option.

3. THE NEED FOR CONCEPTS AND THE NEED FOR THEORY

As in the case of the historical referent, the object of knowledge is not fully known, and hence the need for a framework by way of an epistemic tool. The elusive character of the object somehow makes it an ‘inert’ phenomenon, as it were, to the knowing subject. This ‘character-lessness’ of the object is antithetical to the traditional idea that the meaning of the object is innate to it, is part of its essence, and hence unalterable. That facts, despite their apparently non-negotiable quality, can be inert to the knower, and needs at least a perspective to give them meaning, is the basis of the contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel’s famous statement ‘Facts need frames.’ Frameworks awaken the dormant aspects of a phenomenon to the knower. They are also capable of imparting a substitutive character different from the original elusive character of the object, as in the case of a historical event. A genocide, for example, may reappear under a new framework as atrocity of war. The possibility of meaning-alteration through imposition of alien frames is the apprehension behind the objection to all kinds of frameworks, including theoretical ones, wherever non-negotiable realities are at stake.

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6 Hermeneutics of suspicion is a mode of interpretation which aims to reveal disguised meanings: “This type of hermeneutics is animated by . . . a skepticism towards the given, and it is characterized by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real” (6). Ricoeur contrasts this kind of hermeneutics with the “hermeneutics of faith,” concerned with the “restoration” of meanings.

7 Nagel’s book is interestingly entitled *The View from Nowhere*. Pertinently, there is no view from nowhere. Every view is obtained from a perspective. Every interpretation is made from a particular point of view. One may suspend one’s ‘interests’ while reflecting on a phenomenon or object in a temporarily detached mode of interaction, though.
Concepts draw our attention to the dormant or unnoticed aspects of the object. They are like arc lights lit on previously dark areas. Choosing to study an object or a phenomenon using a certain concept or set of concepts is like looking at an object from a particular point of view. The need for theory arises from the need for concepts. We need concepts to understand and deal with the world. The richer our repertoire of concepts, the more meaningful the world is for us. An example more concrete than one which illustrates Kant’s “categories” would be appropriate here. If one does not have the concept of hands-free phones, walking on an urban street, one might conclude that there are a lot of people who spend time talking to themselves! In the absence of theoretical concepts, the object of study remains an amorphous and elusive entity. For example, unless we have the concepts and insights from queer theory, we may not be looking for the ambivalent aspects of sexuality in a character who would otherwise be categorized either as male or female. An extreme form of postmodern discursiveness maintains that it is the framework which constitutes the object itself.

Etymologically, the English word “theory” is derived from the Greek verb theorein, which means ‘to speculate, or to contemplate.’ Latin specere also means ‘to look,’ from which we have the English words ‘spectator’ and ‘speculate.’ In ancient Greek, as in classical Latin, the words originally did not have their metaphorical, extended meanings, but simply meant ‘to look.’ We see what we look for in a text. We need to know what we have to look for. The text, like the world, demands concepts and categories not only to understand it but also to decide what we want to understand. In this sense, a framework is indispensable to the task of interpreting a text. But every concept is a potential framework, with the capacity to coalesce with related concepts to form a full-fledged theoretical framework. A theoretical framework is a conceptual system. And textual ‘invitation’ to concepts is direct in some cases. In other words, some concepts and frameworks are more appropriate than others to the interpretation of textual data. Literary criticism is invocation of a concept or set of concepts in relation to a text.
4. HOMO THEORETICUS

As we know, across disciplines, a theory is a system of generalized explanations, used as a framework to understand a phenomenon. In the sciences, a theory also serves the function of predicting and controlling the phenomenon. In literary studies, theories help understand and interpret a text, an author, a genre, or an epoch. But the critical world is vertically split between fanatical theorists and theory-haters. Sceptics claim that the advent of theory, at least in its post-1960s avatar, has led to a superficial jugglery of theoretical terms (the subaltern, construct, performativity, liminality, and so on) at the expense of texts (the objects of study) themselves. Theory itself has become a self-perpetuating rhetorical system, which aspires to engage larger issues pertaining to the word and the world. Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and postcolonial theories, to name a few, have proven themselves to be convincing narratives featuring the human subject, the operative logic of the world, and even the nature of language. In other words, theory itself has become an ongoing narrative, and ‘doing theory’ an academic enterprise in itself. Frames have outgrown their initial purpose!

If one reads a cross-section of secondary materials on any author, three-fourths of them are likely to claim one of the following, or versions thereof: i) Meaning is indeterminate (the theoretical insight of deconstruction); ii) Literary texts are not neutral or transcendent entities but inevitably entangled in discourses of race, class, and gender (from schools of ideological criticism); and iii) Some concept or the other is a cultural construct (from constructivism). A thesis which does not say one of these is prone to being dismissed as ‘humanistic.’ My purpose here is not to question the validity of these approaches, but to understand the implications of using theory itself. For example, what are the implications of deconstruction for literary research? Let us take J. Hillis Miller’s clarification: “Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself” (p.341). If we go by Miller’s clarification, we know the finding in advance. What is singular about a particular deconstructive enterprise is the demonstration. The thrill lies in the process of discovering or revealing the ways in which the text has dismantled itself.
More often than not, literary research begins with certain *a priori* assumptions, and the final product becomes a mere application of the theoretical assumptions to a few more texts. Then what is singular about each work is the evidence culled from the text to prove the *a priori* thesis. To discover what lies beyond theory, we have to ascertain the exact nature of the relation between the theoretical framework and the object of study (the text/the author/the genre/the epoch). If a theory is a set of concepts enabling explanation of the phenomenon under study (here, a text), do we have something like intrinsic concepts, that is, concepts that emerge from within the text? Are there models and paradigms which are innate to the text? Although from a relativistic point of view it is fashionable to concede that there is no intrinsic criticism as such, texts can throw up ways of dealing with them. This is because concepts are neither within nor without texts. Concepts emerge from experience, but an endeavour to ‘locate’ them would be a belated Platonic wild-goose chase – a conundrum past its age of interest.

5. CONCLUSION

In theory-based (or, theory-bred) research, one begins with ten assumptions borrowed from a particular paradigm and looks for textual evidence to prove these assumptions. Put otherwise, it is an exercise in ‘matching’ between the theory which is ‘applied’ and the text in question. One fails, or does not dare, to come up with an eleventh finding. Replication of theoretical assumptions with regard to more and more texts might not be plagiarism, but if it is research, it is a passive exercise of intellect, it is repetitive – it is a formula. Theory is an aid to research, not a substitute for it. As a matter of fact, the contemporary sterility in literary research is a direct consequence of the mechanical application of readymade theoretical concepts to more and more texts *ad infinitum*. In sum, it is the result of the failure to move from received frames to textual facts, a failure in creatively utilizing the hermeneutic possibilities of texts. It is also a sign of critical indolence which prevents scholars from pursuing *actual* research. Let me conclude with an anecdote. A teacher of mine once asked me: “Why do you think Indians are so fond of theory?” Wary of an instantaneous cultural critique, and so as not to
hazard an academic brand of essentialism, I remained silent. He continued: “Because they can’t grapple with detail.” We may disagree with the generalization. But we cannot evade its implications for the production of knowledge across the humanities.

REFERENCES


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