

INTRODUCTION

ASCERTAINING CERTAINTY: SELF AND COSMOS

This special issue takes as its theme the problematic “Ascertaining Certainty: Self and Cosmos”. It does so, in a way explicitly indebted to Krishnachandra Bhattacharayya, by thinking through and of the passage and ground within and between kinds of certitude that cannot but be forms of ascertaining. While aiding in thinking through, the organization of the disciplines of Philosophy and the Human sciences, this problematic simultaneously signals the difficulty involved in making knowledge claims that are both univocal and differentiated across such faculties.

And so, one cannot but ask, how the nature of knowledge-claiming is to be understood across the academic spectrum and in what is articulated in their relations. That there is no singular or self-evident way of meaningfully relating forms of certainty and necessity across subjects and methods forces one to examine questions regarding subject and method. Hegel had argued in his *Phenomenology* that reflection is that which makes the true a *result* while simultaneously never able to abstract itself or merely hover over that which comes to be so qualified; this speaks to the impossibility of distinguishing *a priori* — in authoritarian frozenness — the suppleness of internal and external, proof and proposition, subject and method. The ascertainment of certainty requires thinking through self as the certainty of that which cannot be denied and cosmos as that by which certainty is ascertained: the two enjoying a relation without parts. Self — rather than indexing a particular psychic receptacle or apparatus — might be taken as that unity and unifying aspect which orients an assertion in language and/or the world. While cosmos invokes in its etymological sense of “order or arrangement” that speaks of a universality which many philosophical traditions and ways of living have found necessary to postulate so as to salvage — not subsume — the particular from evanescent evanescence. One has etymological sanction for such crossings because “certainty” is in its origins as much “surety and pledge” as it is “determined and fixed”.

Any knowledge claim will have to confront the paralyzing potential of the “hermeneutic circle”; but one may wish to recall that its original Platonic formulation – that is of conceptual and not historical interest – had to do with recollection and the nature of the self and soul. The successful repression of this problem in all its guises allows for the neat division within the social sciences between structure, and time and change. This division is without ratio in so far as neither the nature of time nor structure are themselves simultaneously probed. History and Philosophy, unlike sociology and political science, retain the delicate joining of subject and method, urging in their very existence and every day use, the impossibility of treating subject as indifferent to the method to which it is subject. The nature of time certainly does not appear to be sufficiently known so as to make grand divisions between that of the contemporary and the past – axiomatic for disciplinary organization – and this will have equally significant implications for thinking the human subject subject to such disciplining. Simultaneously, predicates which characterize words and terms such as society or history or philosophy – bringing into being subjects such as Indian History or German Philosophy – need to be rigorously reflected upon. This point is no doubt commonplace, except that in an ironic turn of the tide, it is not uncommon to witness the greatest critiques of the very nature of the political appropriation of culture and vice versa – whether in racism, nationalism or fascism – themselves rehabilitating sans reflection forms of cultural determination with unceasing insistence. And so with little probing into words and categories such as self, the human subject, society or belief, that have existential dimensions proportionate to their philosophical iterations, these are merely asserted to be unique to their fundamental determinant which is culture; whatever shape this arbitrarily takes on, civilizational, national or regional.

A rigorous working through of such words and terms cannot afford to either 1) merely find a ‘native’ equivalent thereby abdicating work on the subject word at hand or 2) outright rejection which is the other side of a mere empty assertion without justifying or working through that which is asserted. The difficult attempt of analytically carrying through one subject is falsely resolved by the mere adding of a predicate without realizing that the latter too is subject to simultaneous working-through i.e. for instance, the problem of ‘modernity’ or ‘politics’ or ‘Indian’ is not to be solved by resort to an ‘Indian modernity’ or ‘Indian politics’.

Such strategies are effective distraction and ultimate complicity

– rather than effective antidote – to the collusion of Philosophy and the human sciences that have aimed at trapping the world history in the world of phantom norms. This undeniable fact of the ‘discrete charm’ — and open violence — of the Western cannon lies not but in itself but in its employment by the sly stratagem long ago detected by Marx: of proclaiming history only to insist that it is over, thereby disguising the making of the world in its image as naturalistic inevitability; paradox no more than droplets on a lotus leaf. The inflation of history so as to distinguish, only to then immediately repress the possibility of succumbing to history, is the prize contradiction that any politics of culture hankers for. Yet this misstep is even less graceful when haranguing or rejecting self induced phantoms of dominant frameworks in forsaking universality through self-inflicted petrification. For universality rather than a thing-content to be resisted – resistance would prove that it never was in the first place – might be taken as felt horizon. From here might it not be possible to work with terms and words as the undeniable felt problems at hand — brimming in life lived as much as words spoken whether philosophy grief possession politics or silence — in their itinerant reflection as much as chronic expression. These matters – partaking across diverse traditions and life-worlds – might be understood as forms of resonance and rhythm not amenable to be analyzed as objects with histories (of discrete parts arbitrarily summed) or identifiable culture (qualities repressing the rationale of qualifying).

If philosophy probes the nature of language, words and forms of necessity and freedom in being and non-being, and their multiplying vertiginous implications, how can this not touch, let along inflect the human sciences? Equally can the latter ever afford to cease asking of philosophy if it can ever transcend the question as to whether it is not indeed an essentially human endeavour? Are death and dying, the pained and deprived, and the modes whereby they are experienced describable in the neutralizing language of the calculable so as to be evaluatively cooked (up) in the hospice of balance sheets, statistical trajectories, and minimal thresholds? How do familiar words and categories such as philosophy, grief and possession, or politics, silence and acting bear witness to rites of passage within, between and among the concatenation, if not catachresis, of certainties? Does this not have implications in the practice of the human sciences and Philosophy? Might not one meaningfully and rigorously examine and follow through the implications and expressions of such familiar ideas that enliven,

traverse and formulate – without just assuming *a priori* – the distinction and distinction-making between the ‘natural’ and the ‘moral’? Do not the interplay and movement of self and cosmos, passage and ground cleave across cultures(s)? Or are they hostage to culture – and therefore available for documentation – rather than a freely rigorous thought across and within cultures faithful as much to the certainty of feeling as to its ascertainment in thought. For thought will indeed be hostage – and may even suffer from a Stockholm syndrome – to culture if the latter is unthinkingly taken as final authority; abandoned by the time of reflection it is left as arrested idol.

The above was some of the muddled thinking that went into the concept note circulated for this special issue of *Studies in Humanities and the Social Sciences*. My colleagues have kindly contributed, in ways very much their own, and done justice, rendered amplitude, to issues that were initially, all too inadequately broached.