

Inventing Reality with Representations

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Ancient wisdom has it that whereof you cannot speak, thereof you must be silent. Poets delighted or distressed with the complex web of often incommensurable particularities of real or imagined experiences refuse to be silent and ignore Wittgenstein's dictum that what cannot be said cannot be whistled either. But between silence and poetic whistling there are the noises of the narrative fiction. Although philosophers are quite garrulous about their commitment to their exploration of truth and nothing but the truth, Rorty has assured us that philosophy is one of the varied types of narrative fiction. As if to make matters even more post-modern, philosophically sensitive, learned mathematician, Gian-Carlo Rota highlights the spuriousness of the distinction, if not between truth and lies, at least between truth and invention when he approvingly quotes the following (translation of a) verse of the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado:

the reason people so often lie
is that they lack imagination:
they don't realize that the truth, too, is a
matter of invention.

Those gifted with imagination feel obliged to claim and carry forward the burden of truth. In our times, science and technology has been granted exclusive rights for the manufacture of all truths. And it does churn them out at an alarming rate, sometimes to the discomfiture of even those who invent

them by throwing up issues of ethics, ecology, the very survival of man, etc that seem to transcend the concerns of truth.

Philosophers from Francis Bacon to Foucault have been quick to notice that knowledge engenders power (or to use a more sanguine term, authority) and power enables the generation of knowledge. But what is not often recognized, as Foucault pointed out, is that monopoly of truth claims give rise to forces that seek to resist that monopoly. Such forces in turn invite efforts that aim at their neutralization or appropriation. Western philosophical engagement with the legitimization of the truth claims of science vividly illustrates this dialectic.

The celebrated scientist, Einstein, is believed to have remarked that philosophy the mother of all sciences is disowned by her own daughters. We have already mentioned the eminent philosopher, Richard Rorty's pronouncement that philosophy is one of the varied forms of narrative fiction. There have been other options. Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, summed up his positivist position thus: 'All definite knowledge—so I would contend—belongs to science; all dogma... belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's land... This No Man's land is philosophy.' In point of fact, however, philosophy has been a disputed territory alternately claimed by or forbidden to scientists (and theologians alike). Those whom we

admirably call scientists—before William Whewell in 1840 coined the term 'scientist'—used to describe themselves as natural philosophers. Contrarily, metaphysics which Aristotle called the *prima philosophia* (the first philosophy), was disparagingly dismissed by the 'Vienna circle' as founded on logical errors of analysis. So much so, Professor Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic* declared emphatically, 'The traditional disputes of philosophy are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful... For if there are any questions which science leaves to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery.' In a similar vein, if with a somewhat greater circumspection, Korner has said: 'For the ancient Greeks "philosophy" meant any attempt to solve theoretical problems by theoretical methods... Of the questions about "the greater matters" (e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and the origin of the universe) mentioned by Aristotle, only the last is still partly philosophical, and even here much of what used to be philosophical cosmology has moved into physics, albeit into what is a rather speculative branch of it. Yet many problems which the ancient Greek thinkers regarded as philosophical and which engaged the attention of the thinkers of other ancient civilizations, have remained philosophical problems until today; and some of these are likely to remain so for a long time.' But then,

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in contrast, we have Thomas Storer arguing, 'Briefly the view adopted here is that epistemology (theory of knowledge) is philosophy;...Philosophers have made contributions generally... Philosophy of science (as theoretical methodology of special sciences) and logic are parts of science. And history of philosophy is part of general social science. Epistemology, however, is not a separate science. It is a precursive investigation, preliminary inquiry, that anticipates the current level of scientific discovery and common sense opinion.' Thus, what was once excommunicated, what was left to feed itself on what science leaves to it begins once again to become part of science and even gets totally appropriated. George, in his *Science of Philosophy* makes this appropriation explicit: 'Our object is to try to look at philosophy as if it were a part of science—hence our title—since any subject can also be approached scientifically. Therefore we talk of the science of philosophy as being the study we propose.' He approvingly quotes May Broadbeck, '...But, except (such) "crises" when fundamental clarification is necessary before further progress can be made, the scientist works within his conceptual frame to formulate new truths, and does not philosophize about it.' His only serious reservation to her statement is that it presupposes a distinction between philosophy and science which is not, in the light of the 'gradualism' he advocates, wise! A gradualism which prompted Augustus Comte to declare—about the same time that Whewell coined the term 'scientist'—that the history of humanity may be divided into three stages: a theological, a metaphysical, and a positive (scientific), in the last of which the metaphysical is dissolved by science.

The story of the attempted dissolution of metaphysics by science is the story of Western philosophy beginning with the age of Renaissance, if not earlier, through the epochs of Reformation, Enlightenment, well into the twentieth century. It

is the story of the search and associated contestation for authority that would justify both the engagement in any chosen and pursued activity, and the outcomes (whether they be truth claims, cultural products, consumer gadgets, social or political or religious identities) of that activity. Take, as concerns us here, the hitherto prestigious human activity called philosophical inquiry. As Bartley reminds us, 'The Western Philosophical tradition is authoritarian in its structure, even in its most liberal forms. This structure has been concealed by oversimplified traditional presentations of the rise of modern philosophy as a part of rebellion against authority. In fact modern philosophy is the story of rebellion of one authority against another authority, and the clash between competing authorities. Far from repudiating the appeal to authority as such, modern philosophy has entertained only one alternative to the practice of basing opinions on traditional and perhaps irrational authority, namely that of basing them on rational authority. This may be seen by examining the main questions asked in these philosophies questions like: How do you know? How do you justify your beliefs? With what do you guarantee your opinions?—all beg authoritarian answers—whether those answers be the Bible, the leader, the social class, the nation, the fortune teller, the word of God, the intellect or sense experience. And Western philosophies have long been engaged in getting these supposedly infallible epistemological authorities out of trouble. That we have not so far found such an infallible epistemological authority even for our remarkably successful cognitive endeavour called modern science and technology, only illustrates that the promised dissolution of metaphysics by science remains metaphysical.

Whether we call the legitimization of truth claims of science as philosophy of science or science of philosophy, science cannot but fail in its claim of describing the world as it really is—the doctrine

(the grand narrative) of scientific realism—even as it largely succeeds when it restricts itself to stating useful regularities. For, as Max Planck had observed, 'Now the two sentences: 1) there is a real outer world which exists independently of our act of knowing, and 2) the real outer world is not directly knowable, form together the cardinal hinge on which the whole structure of physical science turns. And yet, there is a certain degree of contradiction between those sentences. This fact discloses the presence of the irrational or mystic element, which adheres to physical sciences as to every other branch of human knowledge. The effect of this is that a science is never in a position completely and exhaustively to solve the problem it has to face. We must accept that as a hard and fast irrefutable fact, this cannot be removed by a theory which restricts the scope at its very start. Therefore, we see that task of science arising before us as an incessant struggle towards a goal which will never be reached, because by its very nature it is unreachable. It is of a metaphysical character, and as such, is always again and again beyond our achievement.' If we approach this insight from a different opening provided by Owen Barfield, we are led to the recognition that phenomena of the world or appearances are necessarily collective representations in as much as they are what are apprehended by us. Collective representations whatever else they may be, for the possibility of their very existence, must have in them an irreducibly non-categorical, pre-categorical, pre-philosophical participatory character. The Galilean doctrine which asserts that a scientific hypothesis (itself a product of a selective cognitive orientation to some chosen domain of enquiry), if it saves appearances, is identical to a truth about the world independently of our existence, empties our collective representations of their participatory character and seeks to impute to them and to the scientific truth an 'out there' existence.

Galilean revolution in science does not consist in providing a solution to the traditional philosophical problem of comprehending the true nature of an object or being of the world as it really is. What Galileo succeeded in doing—at least as far as mechanics is concerned—was to constitute (through speculative analysis of the given objects, their states and relations) residual products which are presumed to exhaust the original objects and thereby can be used to substitute them. Galileo then went on to invent for the residual products a scheme of representation by mathematical symbols possessing the usual properties of identity of quantity, combination and transformation. This efficacious project had a name: *mathesis universalis*. What is really revolutionary about the Galilean project is that it has for the first time made available to man a powerful technique by which he can—through a process of conjuring up of residual products by selective interrogation of given reality, through a rich repertoire of representations and manipulation of symbols and above all through an inexhaustible set of controlled experiments and observations—not only save the appearances but also allow for the residual products an existence of their own and fabricate a new reality that simultaneously goes beyond the initial experience, *ad infinitum*. In this sense, modern technology based on modern science is not a byproduct but the very dynamic of modern scientific activity. If the imaginative invention, so to speak, breathes life into the residual products, it also performs what Hans Jonas had called the primary ontological reduction. The Galilean method, construed as the resolutive-compository method (resolution entailing primary ontological reduction, composition claiming substitutability of the original objects by their reduced products) had been a great success in capturing great many cognizable properties of the world when we as historically situated agents interrogated it the contingent way we happened to

have done. From this it does not follow that such cognizable properties of the world as we have captured are the cognizable properties of the world (if it has any) as it really is. For we do not have the epistemological certitude that the inquiring mind does not, by its very effort, distort or fail to grasp the cognizable properties of the world as it really is. Our cognitive powers (in attempting to secure such cognitive properties of the world as may exist independently of us) cannot claim cognitive transparency. This limitation of our cognitive enterprise called science is reflected in the endemic instability and relativism of the human sciences and in the controversies of quantum mechanical reality. Indeed it is showing up in our contemporary conflicting conceptions of Nature and may be already too late environmental concerns.

Philosophy cannot provide the legitimization criteria for the truth claims of science and science cannot claim that it describes the world as it really is. But both philosophy and science continue to reinvent themselves. Scientific cognition carries this out through its unrelenting interrogation of all that comes under its gaze and its unending invention of residual products and representational relations between them. Philosophy manages to reinvent itself through its characteristic need to steer clear of the scylla of unwarranted belief on the one hand and charybdis of ancient skepticism in its varied forms on the other hand. Philosophy, as Deleuze had noted, strains toward the movement of concepts. But concepts don't move only among other concepts (that would be mere logical understanding) but also among things and within us which bring us new percepts or new ways of seeing or hearing and new affects or new ways of feeling that contribute to philosophy's own non—philosophical understanding. If philosophy, like science with its experiments and observations is open to new percepts and new affects, it, like science, cannot but fail to incorporate

that which is non-cognitive in our world. If our scientific theories in all their complexity can only 'save the appearances' without being necessarily true, our philosophical thinking can only be, in Heideggerian terms, clearing the path that points to the House of Being without ever reaching it. But this situation in no way prevents us from inventing reality if we understand by that term as that which gets revealed to us when we encounter the world in the only way we can and not as something that is antecedent to our encounters.

I may illustrate the above situation with two instances of fictional narration and two of poetic whistling:

1. Mullah Nasruddeen was once seen searching for something. A passerby asked him, 'what are you searching for?' The Mullah said: 'A ring.' Where did you lose it? 'Over there' the Mullah pointed. 'Then, why are you searching here?' Nasruddeen answered: 'Because there is light here.'
2. A Middle-Eastern folk tale: One evening, Khoja looked down into a well, and was startled to find the moon shining up at him. It won't help anyone down there, he thought, and he quickly fetched a hook on a rope. But when he threw it in, the hook snagged on a hidden rock. Khoja pulled and pulled and pulled. Then suddenly it broke loose, and he went right on his back with a thump. From where he lay, however, he could see the moon finally back where it belonged—and he was proud of the good job he had done.
3. Wallace Steve's poem: They said, 'you have a blue guitar, You do not play things as they are' The man replied, 'Things as they are, Are changed on the blue guitar'
4. T.S. Eliot's poem: But how can I explain, how can I explain to you?

You will understand less after I have explained it.

All that I could hope to make you understand is only events; not what has happened.

And people to whom nothing has ever happened

Cannot understand the unimportance of events.

The search for authority, even as it continues to be unsuccessful in securing the sought-after legitimization of knowledge claims, had resulted in two important developments. Firstly, it led to claims of increasingly autonomous, self-legislating, internally constituted authorities in each of the currently prevailing, contingently demarcated spheres of human activities. The philosophical claim that questions concerning the ontology of theoretical entities (like fundamental particles in physics) in a science are matters internal to that enterprise is one such claim. The all too familiar disputes about the 'essential' differences between natural and human sciences provide another example. The declarations of autonomy by the various domains of literature, and arts are too frequent and loud to be missed (dadaism, cubism, surrealism, stream of consciousness, magico-realism).

The second related development arising from the search for legitimate authority has been the increasing differentiations accomplished by biologically embodied human agents endowed with perceptual and cognitive powers in cognizing their historicized selves and lifeworlds. These differentiations are manufactured by converting perceptual differences into cognitive distinctions.

In Western cultures, this cognitive enterprise of drawing ever new distinctions infected through and through with human subjectivity and intentionality, has enabled the formation of two classical genres in fields of meanings or signifieds. On the one hand, there are all those fields of meanings constituting what has been traditionally called the genre in human-

istic culture which strive to conform to the logic of the unity of experience of the meaning-seeking subject. On the other hand, there are all those fields of signifieds that may be conveniently collected under the genre of scientific culture which enforce (the so-called unity of sciences programme) any system of logic that respects the law of identity, the law of contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. Whatever else may be the differences between the two genres, they however, shared two features in common. The first is that for any field of meanings or signifieds there is a language of signifiers and its grammar for forming strings of signifiers that are adequate to the task of embodying the meanings or signifieds of that field. We may call this the doctrine of representationalism. The second shared feature is the posit of a mind-independent real world whose entities serve as referents to the signifiers which, however, are the imaginative creations of the cognizing human mind. This roughly is the thesis of cognitive transparency.

Beginning with the early decades of the last century, validity of both doctrines, however, has become increasingly suspect, in both the humanistic and scientific cultures' productions. The four dimensional space-time geodesics of Relativity, the wave-particles of quantum mechanics, quarks, black-holes, anti-matter, gauge-fields and what have you have rendered superfluous all questions of meanings in their respective fields of scientific endeavour. What mattered most in any field are the operational intricacies if the syntax governing the 'freely chosen' abstract signifiers that no longer need to be connected to the concrete 'signifieds' of the lived world. The drive for self-legislating, autonomous legitimization has at least problematized the issue of representation if it has not altogether dissolved the issue. Likewise, in the humanistic culture, the high-priests of 'high-modernism', 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' and their allies, not to speak of the romantics, feeling

increasingly threatened by and anguished at the fragmentation of meaning seeking subject wrought by the encroachments of modern science and technology, contributed to the problematization of the issue of representation in their characteristically rhetorical manner. Unable to secure any sense of unity of experience of an increasingly fragmented subject in their works, they, whether in the fields of visual arts, music, literature, drama, etc. have gone on exploring the aesthetic effects of fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, random collages, mixed genres, multiply-narrated stories, impressionistic, morally ambiguous and self-conscious literary and artistic products generated by vocabularies and grammars of the new languages they invented. And thus literature and various arts have become, like the sciences, increasingly technical with their own agendas for the production of aesthetic effects of 'high' or 'low' cultural goods. But if man is to be ushered into the portals of post-modernity and is to be seen for what he is a nominal locus or 'site' of truth-effects, philosophy must first be seen as nothing more than a rhetorical engagement. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is philosophy of science which has acted as the usher by arguing for the implausibility of the cognitive transparency thesis.

The long and complex argument drawing on the actual practices of sciences need not detain us. For our purposes it suffices to note that following the detailed investigations of philosophers of science, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others it is no longer possible to ensure the ontological stability of entities in the real world which act as referents to signifiers of the specialized languages of a science. Thus, for example, the answer to the question, what does the signifier 'mass', refer to in the real depends on whether the signifier belongs to the language of the Newtonian mechanics or the language of Einsteinian Relativistic mechanics. Thereby, either

the existence of the referent in the 'real' world is relative to the language which refers to it (and is not independent of it) or the real world has to accommodate all the population of theoretical entities that our imagination can cook up. In either case, reality is problematized and the distinction between a signifier and its referent collapses. With this collapse and the absence of any fixities of the world, philosophy can at its best be only a rhetorical engagement (in the classical non-pejorative sense of the use of language aimed at persuading the other to agreement as contrasted with the polemical use of language).

The wreckage of the semiotic triangle caused by the modernist problematization of representation on the one hand and philosophy of science's problematization of reality on the other hand allow for free play of the signifier vertex of the triangle. The meaning/signified vertex of the triangle and along with it the meaning-seeking subject were banished into the oblivion of arbitrariness by the now 'autonomous' signifier vertex. Similarly, the referent vertex was either declared non-existent or more modestly pronounced to be indistinguishable from the 'free' signifier. Meanings, meaning-seeking subjects and reality are no more than shadows, in Plato's cave (with no one to watch them), cast by the invisible sun of differential play of signifiers. This postmodern incredulity of self-reflexive, self-conscious Western man towards any meta-narrative of absent-presence (read, metaphysics of presence) is sufficient to ensure that the question, 'Can there be shadows without objects?' will not rise.

One supposes that for such momentous gestures of postmodern aesthetic celebration and ascetic quietude in the affluent Western cultures there exist grounds more material than the abstract and abstruse proclamations of the semioticians, Sassurian linguists, structuralists, literary critics, avant-garde artists, aesthetic theorists, philosophers and cultural critics.

The ubiquitous colour television screen and the colour monitor of the personal computer provide one such ground. The images on the screen are simultaneously both referents and signifiers or, perhaps, in the secluded isolation of the cozy bedrooms of Western societies, signifiers are more intimate and real than the distant referents. Moreover, meanings can instantaneously be generated and displayed by the syntactic click of a mouse or the touch of a key on the keyboard or the pressing of a button on a 'remote' that is so close. Speech-actuated systems are being developed in the market-friendly laboratories of the multi-national companies and programmable speech-synthesizer chips which are already mass produced will soon materialize the claim of the post-modernist that it is the language which speaks. The virtual reality is in fact the only reality. All that there is simulacrum and mimesis. That discovery, as one watches the endless succession of images that saturate the senses, is surely an occasion for aesthetic celebration that a modernist whose capacity for incredulity has reached postmodern dimensions cannot deny himself/herself.

The burden of Western history provides another ground. The Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophies from Locke to Bergson, if not earlier, refused to countenance the history of the 'other' whether that other be men of different persuasions in their own societies or non-Western societies with their 'life-worlds' or whether that other be *nature itself* or whether that other be the pre-cognitive 'unrepresentable' (in the sense of that which does not admit of being represented while being the ground of all representations). The continental philosophies of phenomenology with its phenomenological-self and Marxism with its conflictual account of history, but both in their anthropological reading of Hegel, sought to appropriate the history of the 'other' by idolizing the figure of man as the central element in

the historical process. However, the figure of man came to be seen peculiarly impotent to make history in a world in which personal intentions and actions appeared so feeble in comparison with modern age's great social and economic forces and in which the moral passion of Marxism had culminated in the Gulag and the phenomenological search for authentic being had ended in the Auschwitz. Western man's identity and character became increasingly less distinct. The Anglo-Saxon philosophy, in its refusal of the history of the 'other', is increasingly drifting towards the desperate doctrine of physicalism which seeks to reduce human history to natural history thereby denying not only the histories of non-Western men and their societies but also those of Western men and their societies. To claim that human history is the same as natural history is to assert that the distinctively human—the mental, the culturally formed forms of thinking, intending, acting, producing manifested in the life-forms of human societies—can be captured in the purely physicalist vocabulary of an yet to be completed science. On either consideration—the growing uncertainty in one's identity and character and the growing certainty about one's own incredulity about one's own subjectivity and intentionality in the era of assembly lines of computer controlled robotic machines—ascetic quietude towards self-incarceration in the prison-houses of post-modern knowledge in the most highly developed societies of the West is perhaps not such an incredible event.

We are born into a history that is already made for us and die with a history to which we contribute in part. As constituted beings, we may never be able to escape the three great enclosures—philosophical, political and ethical—erected by us, for us and, alas, against us in the flux of history. But as a species capable of thinking in a languaged way, while we must unceasingly construct and deconstruct those ever shifting enclosures even as we cannot escape

them, we may not put in jeopardy that which made that construction and deconstruction possible—thought's responsibility to itself, the ethics of thinking if you will. Thinking must always exhibit openness to difference, as yet unthought thought. But it must also respect what exists beyond the pale of thought.

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Stories Within and Tales Outside: *Mahabharata* Retold

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Stories from the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* remain of perennial interest and have been retold in contemporary times in different ways and from varying perspectives. The oral tales that accumulated into epic dimensions as they travelled through the centuries through narration, performance, interpolations, additions, deletions, assume highly original and unique forms as they challenge the introspective mind of the individual writer in contemporary times. I plan to take up four such works to give an indication of the kind of response that can be evoked when the oral performed tales (part of collective memory) are confronted with the introspective and individual writing self. Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*¹ is a poem that looks at the *Mahabharata* times retrospectively from the point of view of the Nagas even as Janamejaya's *Sarpa Yajna* is being

performed. It is a subaltern reading that inverts the Brahmanical foundations and elitist orientation of the Meta text. It maintains the dramatic speaking voice of a character with a narrative continuity leading to an expected action, a story line. Jaraatkaru speaks to her son Aastika, trying to tell him that he can be the saviour of the Nagas as he is half human. But there is also a hidden narrative where the individual poet communicates with a contemporary reader through the written word read in silence. Contemporary social and political events, innate human tendencies peep through this other story that lies implicit within. Shaoli Mitra's *Nathaboti Anathboth*² in contrast is not a poem to be read in silence. It continues the performative, narrative oral tradition of the *Mahabharata*. But the Suta here is a woman who subverts the essentially male

narrative from the female point of view. She is a female and she sees the events and characters from the mega epic from the point of view of Draupadi. Again we have a text retold from a neglected perspective. Her apparent rustic innocence is a performative and narrative strategy that disguises a very contemporary urban feminist point of view. Next I will look into Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*³, which uses autobiographical narration of the events leading to the great war and its consequences from the intense and introspective perspective of Karna. Sawant's empathy with Karna's character comes out in a narrative that perfectly blends authorial concerns and the demands of fiction in a brilliant subjective portrayal of one of the most tragic characters of the great epic. Finally, I take up Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*⁴ which transfers the epic

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