

The Philosophy
of
Suresh Chandra

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Paradox of Method: Suresh Chandra on Social Scientific Research

KOSHY THARAKAN

The reason why we think that interpretation is restricted to either inevitable distortion or literal reproduction is that we want the meaning of a man's works to be wholly positive and by rights susceptible to an inventory which sets forth what is and is not in those works. But this is to be deceived about works and thought.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Signs*

The point that Merleau-Ponty raises here is quite significant to my discussion of Suresh Chandra's views regarding social scientific research. My paper is based on a Presidential Address delivered by Suresh Chandra at the Indian Philosophical Congress held in Jadavpur quite some time ago. What he said then need not be the whole of his 'thought' on this topic. Some of the points that I raise might have already been taken care of by Suresh Chandra and even if it is not so, what I discuss here is still part of his thought and works in the sense in which Merleau-Ponty understands the work of a thinker. In another important sense, all that I discuss below is also a part of Suresh Chandra's thought and works because he himself was one of my teachers in Hyderabad who trained me to think philosophically.

In order to understand the paradox of social science research as pointed out by Suresh Chandra, we may recall that scientific investigations consist in methodical inquiries. It is the adherence to 'method' that makes any inquiry scientific in the sense of being objective and the results thus attained as valid for all those who undertake the inquiry. Thus if the method is the route to scientific knowledge, our investigations with regard to social reality to be 'scientific' cannot but stick to proper methodology. As Suresh Chandra rightly notes, there are two types of methods that are widely used in social science research, namely 'Positivistic' and 'Normative'. According to him, it is '... these methods which are responsible for the paradoxical situation of social science.'¹ The positivists construe social science as fundamentally similar to natural science. Thus the positivist standpoint represents what is known as 'methodological monism'. The rationale for such a unity of method thesis consists in the conviction that the social world originates from and is continuous with the natural world and as such it has nothing to do with normative or ideological interpretation.² As against the positivists, the proponents of normative interpretation consider only such interpretations as legitimate for social sciences. They may very well concede a positivistic methodology for natural sciences but nevertheless argue for a different methodology for the study of social reality. Their rationale for holding such a 'methodological dualism' consists in their belief that the two worlds are not continuous with each other. Rather the social world is a construction and as such it involves ideological and normative elements. There is another strand of 'interpretivism' that upholds the unity of method. According to it any inquiry is interpretive as there is nothing like pure description. Since all observations are theory-laden, even our

observations of the natural world also have an interpretive bearing.

Suresh Chandra points out that the advocates of normative interpretation would even go to the extent of saying that a positivist social science, say history, is no 'history' if it merely replicates historical 'facts'. He uses an analogy from the domain of art to explain the interpretivists' standpoint. Thus he draws our attention to the debate between the advocates of 'Realism' in painting and the practitioners of 'Cubism'. According to the latter, it is only cubism, only abstract art is art. Their argument is that only in the case of abstract art is the mind of man made to think. In a realist painting, the job is better done by a camera and consequently the artist is redundant. In other words, the practitioners of abstract art construe art as a specialized 'discipline', as an academic pursuit. It needs an expert to judge the beauty of an abstract painting. Thus, with abstract painting, art is liberated from the hands of the common man. Similarly, the interpretivists argue that history done in the photographic fashion is no history. History is no science if it merely copies the events. Here the assumption is that 'science' is an abstraction and as such it cannot remain at the level of 'pure descriptions'. The concept of positivist science is based on the concept of pure description, something that does not involve any interpretation. But such a concept of 'science' is a myth. Thus Suresh Chandra feels the need to lift history from the stage of pure descriptions. History done in the positivist mode is history cast in the photographic mould. To have the academic status, history must give up its photographic character. It must acquire the normative and ideological character, if it aspires to be a science.

Now, the issue as I understand it concerns the question: can there be at any stage a photographic history, one that

needs to be lifted from pure descriptions? It seems to be an impossible stage. Unlike the ideological conviction of cubists regarding the prestige of art as something to do with its belonging to an academic discipline, a status it acquires by virtue of abstractions and interpretations, the interpretivists do have an epistemological point to negate the plausibility of positivist science. The interpretivists would argue that there could be no 'photographs' of social or historical events simply because there is nothing to be photographed. The social world is a construction. It is this assertion of the interpretivists that generates what Suresh Chandra identifies as the Second Paradox of social science research. The paradox consists in '... the kind of opposition that an ideological interpreter gives to the positivistic interpretation of science.'³ As Suresh Chandra notes, according to the ideological interpreter there can be no such thing as a positivistic science. All science is ideological; there is no objective 'reality' and therefore no 'final court of appeal'. Even in art, the artist by using his hands and eyes distorts reality. He paints reality as *he* sees it and not reality as it is. But then what is the paradox involved here? There will not be any paradox of the kind Suresh Chandra refers to if the interpretivist claims that there is nothing like reality as it is, all that there is are our viewpoints. It is our viewpoints that make reality. It is not that Suresh Chandra fails to recognize this. He very well notes this when he makes the following remark about the interpretivist stance: 'Not only that none of us *as a matter of fact* are in contact with the naked reality, but none of us could ever be in such a contact. The naked reality is a mirage; all reality is dressed up. Not only this, the dresses constitute the whole of reality.'⁴ Nevertheless, Suresh Chandra sees a paradox here. But the paradox arises only because he believes there are some 'facts' out there, some 'truths' to be

known independent of our viewpoints.⁵ In other words, the paradox that he alludes to is an epistemic paradox of knowability. The knowability paradox arises from accepting that some truths are not knowable and that any truth is knowable.⁶ If there is reality as it is and all that we can capture by way of our epistemic practices is reality as we see it, then there indeed is a paradox. Suresh Chandra seems to subscribe to this.

Suresh Chandra claims that '... the occurrence of a historical event and so also of its being photographed are essential conditions for a genuine scientific history to be written.'⁷ According to him, the photographs do have a function, as it is the datum on which the historians work. The historian in explaining an event needs to capture the event first by way of a photograph and only if such a photograph is available can he proceed to 'explain' it. Thus Suresh Chandra argues that the positivistic account of history cannot be rejected as useless. Rather it is the foundation of all kinds of historical interpretations to be given. Here Suresh Chandra seems to dilute his original characterization of positivistic science. Earlier he talked about the positivistic science as based on the concept of 'pure description' and denounced it as a myth or in any case it was a myth for the interpretivists. So when he now talks about the necessity of positivistic account, as it is the foundation for any interpretation, it does not necessarily follow that such a foundation is devoid of any interpretation. Rather the datum, the event that needs to be explained is already the result of some interpretations. Thus the photograph is not a pure description devoid of any interpretations. The very fact that the historian chooses to capture the photograph of a particular segment of historical reality rather than some other segment betrays his interpretive preferences. I think this is what we primarily mean when we say that all

observations are theory-laden and there is nothing like pure descriptions. But then this is not just a peculiarity of social scientific research. All our inquiries are carried out within this interpretive net. Once this is granted, the issue is the possibility of further interpretations of the very same photographic datum. Obviously such possibilities rest on the availability of the photograph in the first place. This I think is what Suresh Chandra means when he asserts the necessity of positivistic account. Nevertheless he envisages further interpretations of such data in the course of historical research. According to him, histories 'written in the positivistic fashion are nothing but files of the photograph.' Thus he says: '... the economic interpretation of history is not the photographic account of history, yet without the photographic account of history the economic interpretation of history would have been impossible.'⁸ My problem here is our difficulty to visualize any account of history as a photographic account. Take for example the recent controversy over an NCERT textbook. It characterizes the events that took place in Russia in the year AD 1917 as a 'coup'. Earlier accounts of the same event describe it as a 'Revolution'. The ideological interpretations are evident in the very labeling of the event. Either you may call it a coup or a revolution or any other description you deem to be apt according to your ideological stance. But it seems impossible to characterize the event devoid of any labeling. Even a chronicle has to baptize the event and baptism of any sort is normative at some level. This does not mean that only the name exists and no 'event' at all, yet without the name we cannot refer to the event. Then where is the scope for a positivistic account of history?

It may be that what Suresh Chandra calls a 'positivistic' account of history is one that faithfully captures the events as they were understood by the historical spectators themselves.

In other words the events that took place in Russia in the year AD 1917 are understood or described by the people who 'witnessed' the events. I say 'witnessed' because I hope it would do justice to the positivistic ideal of 'objectivity' thereby eliminating the subjective colourings of the participants who either acted in a manner of favouring the occurrence of the event or in a manner of preventing it from taking place. But even this prescription seems to be impossible according to Gadamer. For Gadamer interpretation is not a matter of reconstruction *à la* Dilthey. Rather it is mediation. In order to understand the past, we mediate the past meaning into our situatedness. That is, our historicity is an integral part of our understanding. It is historicity, even though it involves presuppositions and prejudices that open the past for us. The metaphor of 'fusion of horizons' captures this aspect of understanding. For him, genuine understanding is a fusion of horizons in which the subject and object of knowing are fused together such that knowing the other is knowing oneself. It is this element of 'prejudice' in our understanding that marks Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics from traditional hermeneutics. Thus it seems that the task of writing history in the positivistic manner is never realizable in the actual process of history writing.

The impossibility of a positivistic account thus undercuts the second paradox that Suresh Chandra identifies with historical research. Nevertheless, a shade of this paradox may seem to remain in other social scientific inquiries, particularly in sociology and social anthropology. Recall that the second paradox that Suresh Chandra talks about arises only if we accept the notion of reality as it is over and above our perspectives or interpretations. Such a view is held explicitly by some interpretivists and implicitly by positivists with regard to the relevance of an agent's motives or intentions in

understanding his or her actions. Sociologists of Weberian legacy consider grasping the agent's point of view as necessary for our understanding of action. Here the assumption is that there is some 'fact of the matter' with regard to the agent's point of view that needs to be captured. Now, if it is argued that it is not possible to capture the agent's intentions or motives, as these are not amenable to objective sensory perception, the paradox resurfaces. Of course positivists skirt this paradox in social science research by arguing the irrelevance of such mental states for our understanding of social reality. For them what is important in understanding social reality are the objective consequences of action rather than subjective intentions or motives. Thus after all there seems to be a paradox of the type Suresh Chandra identifies with social science research carried out in the Weberian fashion.⁹

The ideal of recapturing what the agents 'have in mind' as the goal of social scientific understanding operates with what Quine calls the 'museum myth' view of meaning. According to the museum myth, meanings are determined by the speaker's intention. It conceives language as providing the 'labels' for meanings, which are mental entities. Quine's naturalism is a strong indictment of this myth of the museum. It rejects the very conception of capturing the agent's intentions, as there is no such determinate 'fact of the matter'. In other words, Quine proposes the 'indeterminacy of meaning' and the impossibility of translating the intentions of the agent, as there is always underdetermination of meaning by experience. Consequently there can be no objective basis that determines the meaning of action, let alone recapturing the agent's intended meaning. For Quine, reference cannot be secured merely by recognizing a thing. The rationale behind this is Quine's thesis of 'inscrutability of reference' and the philosophical lesson that Quine wants to convey through these

problems of reference is primarily the thesis of 'ontological relativity'. The adoption of such a framework is arbitrary, chosen by convention and it is erroneous to think that we can get to the 'roots of reference' in an absolutist manner. Thus the hope to find the uniquely correct meaning or the attempt to capture the agent's intended meaning is like the search after the Holy Grail.

Thus the second paradox that Suresh Chandra talks about does not really arise, given that the social world is a construction by the agents by bestowing meaning on their acts and there is nothing like a uniquely correct meaning to which the agents have a privileged access. Thus only the first paradox remains. It seems to me that Suresh Chandra himself ultimately recognizes only this paradox as even though he mentions these two paradoxes, the Presidential address he delivered was titled 'The Paradox of Social Science Research', thereby negating a plurality of paradox. The paradox as Suresh Chandra characterizes it consists in the impossibility of avoiding different competing ideologies. Since what is 'unwritten' is open to a multiplicity of readings, different interpretations vie with each other for legitimacy and we have no 'final court of appeal' to settle it one way or other. It is important to note here that even this paradox does not arise if one claims that what is called social science is hardly a science. Science by its very nature is objective in the sense of being possible to arrive at intersubjective agreement. So the paradox consists in claiming scientific status to social inquiries. Nevertheless, this way of avoiding the paradox is forestalled by Suresh Chandra. He considers such a move as an academic absurdity and says it is no defense of an ideological interpretation.¹⁰ It is so because, as Suresh Chandra points out, the *scientific* status of history consists in its ability to 'acquire the normative and ideological character' and such a

normative dimension is the aspect of transcending the positivist ideal of 'photographic history'. It is absurd to conceive the very same normative and ideological dimensions that ascribe the scientific status to history while jettisoning the scientific status of history. This absurdity may be the real paradox of social science research.

If it is argued that the kind of interpretation that is central to doing 'science' is not the same as the kind of interpretation that besets social scientific understanding, then even this paradox does not arise. In fact, Charles Taylor provides such an argument.¹¹ What makes us think that there is no distinction between the two kinds of interpretation is our blind allegiance to the new kind of 'interpretivism' that argues for the unity of method. According to Taylor, this new call for the 'unity of science' based on hermeneutics is not in tune with reality. He is in agreement with the post-positivist philosophers of science in holding that the logical positivist's understanding of science is unacceptable as it failed to assign any place for interpretation. Nevertheless, Taylor is of the opinion that such an interpretative element within the practice of 'science' is different from the kind of understanding that is central to social sciences. Taylor points out that our scientific understanding arises as a refinement of our ordinary understanding. This ordinary understanding or 'pre-understanding' is prior to any theoretical stance and cannot be exhaustively formulated. Rather, our formulation of how to deal with things or theorization makes sense to us because of this background knowledge or pre-understanding. When we say that science or for that matter any inquiry is interpretive, it is this ordinary understanding that we refer to. Interpretation that is central to social sciences is much more than this kind of understanding. It is not just the kind of understanding that is required for an implicit grasp of things. Rather it is the

kind of understanding that one needs in order to grasp the 'desirability characterizations'. These desirability characterizations are descriptions that lie beyond the limits of natural sciences. Natural sciences are characterized by the requirements of 'absoluteness'. Natural sciences, as Taylor points out, seek an account of the world independent of the meanings it has for human beings.

Thus, I would say that even this paradox does not really obtain as the interpretative dimension that inscribes our inquiry as scientific is not the same as that which generates a multiplicity of interpretations vying with each other. Such possibilities of different interpretations only underscore the 'essential contestability' of social sciences. Nevertheless such possibilities of interpretation do not rule out intersubjective agreement. Also, some interpretations may fare better than some other interpretations when we take the whole of the socio-historical world into account. Thus one may argue that the events of AD 1917 as they happened in Russia are better interpreted as a 'Revolution' in the context of struggle as envisaged in Marxian political theory. This line of argument, of course, presumes that the events are the outcome of certain political ideology. The moving force of such ideologies may in turn rest on the existence of certain other socio-historical reality. Thus, though the social world, including the historical world, is a construction, an ideological one at that, as Suresh Chandra rightly points out, the whole of social reality cannot be treated as mere 'constructs'. It has got some 'thingly' reality that enables such constructions. Sometimes this 'thingliness' of the socio-historical world constricts our interpretations. For example, the strong archaeological evidence that may obtain in the course of our historical investigations will rule out certain hitherto accepted interpretations as no more valid. In other words, the 'photographic

data' as Suresh Chandra may call it, plays a crucial role in our interpretations. Here, it may be pointed out that the argument for a 'methodological dualism' based on the discontinuity of the social world from the natural world is mistaken. As has been pointed out above, there are occasions when the natural world provides the material basis or the 'thingliness' of the social world. To that extent the methods of natural sciences do have a role to play in our investigations pertaining to the social world. Where the positivists got it wrong was their refusal to accept this 'thingliness' as already interpreted.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Chandra, Suresh: 'The Paradox of Social Science Research', Presidential address for 'Logic and Scientific Method', Indian Philosophical Congress, 61st Session, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, October 1986, p. 1.
2. Suresh Chandra equates normative with ideological. But such identification need not obtain always. The positivist norm of 'objectivity' is one that attempts to eschew any ideology. Also, one may claim the possibility of an ideology that is non-normative. Thus, a scientific world-view as adopted by some naturalists tries to explain away the normative aspects of epistemic concepts such as 'justification' and 'rationality' by invoking a scientific ideology.
3. Chandra, Suresh: *op. cit.*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. In Suresh Chandra's discussion on Pradhan's interpretation of Wittgenstein his belief regarding the notion of 'reality as it is' can be seen explicitly. See in this connection Suresh Chandra: 'Seeing and Seeing As: Pradhan and Panneerselvam' in *JICPR*, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1995, pp. 111-23.
6. See Jonathan L. Kvanvig: 'Epistemic Paradoxes' in *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 656.

7. Chandra, Suresh: 'The Paradox of Social Science Research', p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
9. Nagel criticizes Weber's *verstehen* thesis by stating that none of the psychological states that we impute to the agents may in reality be theirs and even if our ascription is correct their manifest behaviour interpreted in terms of these psychological states would not be intelligible in the light of our own experiences. See in this regard Ernest Nagel: 'Problems of Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences' in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: A Reader*, (Ed.) Maurice Natanson, New York, Random House, 1963, p. 203.
10. Chandra, Suresh: 'The Paradox of Social Science Research', p. 7.
11. Taylor, Charles: 'Understanding in Human Sciences', in *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 34, September 1980.