**Connecting the East and the West towards a Grand Theory**

**Abstract**

Back in Ancient India, Shankaracharya postulated a philosophy which is now known as *Advaita*. According to Advaita philosophy, the ‘*jivãtma*’ (individual soul) and ‘*Brahmãtma*’ (universal soul) are one and the same and these are the only ‘real’ things that exist. Everything else is an illusion. To challenge this almost unshakeable viewpoint, I bring to the fore a book authored by a Nobel Laureate. In 1935, Alexis Carrel’s revolutionary book entitled “Man the Unknown” was published. Though controversial in terms of its content, it delineates the unexplored aspects of the human being – the understanding of mental processes and consciousness, which he claims humans have not mastered. Throughout the book, Carrel suggests that there is something that is unknown in the homo sapiens and hence he titles his work “Man the Unknown.” Based on this, I argue that both the esoteric East and the pragmatic West have not uncovered something “hidden” –the unknown factor/element. Substantial evidence exists for this contention in the scientific community. For example, questions such as among identical twins diagnosed with depression, why does one medication cure depression for one twin and have no effect on the other twin? Ceteris paribus, why does therapy work for one client but not for another client with the same disorder? These questions do not have clear, crystallized answers. Perhaps, if such a thing like an unknown element exists, it would pave the way for the postulation of the Grand Theory of the behavioural sciences.

The East and the West have much in common, despite having adhered to two essentially different vantage points. Ancient India and its wisdom have inspired Western philosophers. The pragmatism and scientific temper of the West have influenced Oriental scientists. While Indian thinking has historically been more or less spiritual and mystical in nature, western thinking is characterized by scientific, logical, rational, materialistic and individualistic approaches. Indian philosophy looks inward whereas Western philosophy looks outward. Indian logic is mostly a logic of cognitions rather than of abstract propositions—a logic not sundered and clearly separate from psychology and epistemology.

In this age of “*Mãya*” or Illusion, one is not able to perceive the real reality, or so it appears. No scholar has hit upon the nail and found the Archimedean point (a hypothetical vantage point which enables the observer to perceive a subject of inquiry in totality). Each philosopher brings with him/her a new truth, offering novel perspectives about the nature of reality. What is truth? Is it multifaceted or one-dimensional? Can there be any number of truths, all true to their respective paradigms? Or is there just one thing which is the Ultimate Truth?

Both Western philosophers and Indian philosophers have come a long way in theorizing the nature of existence, and both Western and Indian scientists have discovered a vast number of solutions to problems in science. Yet, several problems and aberrations persist in society, be it philosophical, psychological, psychophysiological, sociological, medical or metaphysical.

All said, is real progress possible in philosophy? Does it even occur? David Chalmers (2015) divides inquiry into philosophical progress in the domain of metaphilosophy into three main questions.

The Existence Question: is there progress in philosophy?

The Comparison Question: is there as much progress in philosophy as in science?

The Explanation Question: why isn't there more progress in philosophy?

These questions are highly debatable, as they stand. With regard to the Existence Question, it is highly subjective, and since knowledge is infinitely vast, progress is always relative. We cannot quantitatively state or compare whether there is more progress in philosophy or in science. A thoughtful answer to the Explanation Question is that I believe it is owing to the Unknown.

In the behavioural sciences too, there exist several heated debates. Since philosophy forms an inevitable layer in all fields of knowledge, it cannot be avoided in the debates. There are debates which generally garner extreme views because many of them are based upon deep-seated individual, cultural, and moral values and the extent of openness the individual has regarding certain aspects of life, the world and existence. Some pressing debates are as follows:

1. **Mind-Body Problem**

The mind-body problem is one of the most central problems to psychology. It is a debatable topic for psychologists and philosophers alike. Whether the mind is part of the body or the body part of the mind is a major debate. Evidence suggests that the mind is superior to the body, as seen in psychosomatic disorders, where it is because of mental tension that the disorders are caused. In 2018, Lauri Nummenmaa conducted research which led to the finding that bodily sensations give rise to conscious feelings.

1. **Nature vs. Nurture**

Nature is that which is inherited and nurture refers to all the environmental influences after conception.

In his new book, titled “Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are” (2018) which is perhaps going to re-create fierce controversy, psychologist Robert Plomin puts forth the argument that genes shape our personalities more than the environment. Pavlov’s conditioning and Watson’s behaviorism highlight the role of the environment whereas Noam Chomsky and Howard Gardner lay importance on innate abilities. However, nature and nurture cannot function without each other. Nature and nurture together mould behaviour, as many modern psychologists believe.

1. **Reductionism vs. Holism**

Reductionism is the contention that human behavior can be explained by breaking it down into smaller components. Reductionists believe that the best way to understand why we behave the way we do is to examine the simplest components that constitute our systems, and use the simplest explanations to understand how they work. In psychology, the term is most appropriately applicable to biological explanations (e.g. genetics, neurotransmitters, hormones) of complex human behaviors like aggression, schizophrenia, etc.

Holism refers to approaches that emphasize the whole rather than the constituent parts. In other words, it goes to say that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.

1. **Idiographic vs. Nomothetic Approaches**

The term “idiographic” is derived from the Greek word “idios” meaning “own” or “private”. Psychologists interested in this approach wish to discover what makes each of us unique and idiosyncratic.

The term “nomothetic” comes from the Greek word “nomos” meaning “law”. Psychologists who subscribe to this approach are concerned with studying what similarities are found in humans. Such psychologists are interested in establishing laws or generalizations.

It is unknown as to why these differences exist in humans and how exactly they differ in their differences.

1. **Free Will vs. Determinism**

The free will/determinism debate revolves around the extent to which our behaviour is the result of forces over which we have no control or whether people are able to decide for themselves whether to act or behave in a certain way. The determinist approach says that behavior is determined and hence predictable. Free will contends that humans are free to choose their behavior. In other words human beings are self-determined. This brings us back to the Indian notion of ‘karma’ or destiny based on the good deeds or bad deeds a person committed. In Indian philosophy, it is believed that the karma gets carried forward into the successive lives or ‘*janmãs*’ of the doer.

1. **Consciousness of Consciousness: Do animals know others have minds? Do children?**

Consciousness of consciousness, or whether animals and children (who are conscious) know that others have minds is a perplexing and fascinating question at the same time. Panpsychism, or the doctrine that everything material, however small, has an element of individual consciousness would obviously contend that animals and children have consciousness but it cannot answer the question as to whether animals and children know that others have minds.

1. **From Crisis to Wellness–but was it the Therapy?**

The authenticity of therapy is now at stake. People in crisis situations who undergo therapy eventually recover but was it due to the therapy that they underwent? How sure can we be? In a world where shrinks and psychiatrists have become so essential, how can we undermine their skills and abilities to be able to bring about wellness?

1. **Customized Treatment and use of a Combination of Therapies**

The use of a combination of therapies to treat clients and using customized treatment methods for clients is one of the trending things in psychology. Some clients need a combination of therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy, rational emotive behaviour therapy along with Jacobson’s Progressive Muscular Relaxation Technique, for instance. Hence the therapist resorts to using a combination of therapies because he/she believes that it is more beneficial than sticking to one single type of therapy. It is still not known why certain therapies work only for certain individuals.

1. **Astrology and the Barnum Effect/Forer Effect**

Astrology, a field of interest which is very widely seen in India, may be a case of “stock spiel” – a technique which builds on the observation that each of us is in some ways like no one else and in other ways just like everyone. Barnum statements such as, “You seem to hold grudged against people who treated you badly,” or “You seem to be interested in someone” are used by astrologers. Yet, there are cases of accurate predictions and mind-reading cases prevalent all over the world. Also, scientifically, the mid-brain activation gives rise to this supernatural ability. Many meditators seem to have acquired this quality. But what is it that makes a rare number of people capable of foretelling the future?

In 2015, Gerald M. Rosen researched Barnum effect and concluded that it highlights the importance of taking base rates into account when considering the incremental validity of psychological tests like Myers-Briggs Type Indicator from which personality descriptors are derived.

1. **Parapsychology and paranormal phenomenon - are they grounded in reality?**

Parapsychology literally means “beyond psychology.” Although mainstream scientists identify it as pseudoscience, paranormal phenomena are indeed grounded in reality. Not all cases can be scientifically tested and replicated but there are many cases like the one described in the book “Many Masters, Many Lives: The true story of a prominent psychiatrist, his young patient and the past-life therapy that changed both their lives” by Dr. Brian Weiss, the children who remember their past lives featured in Reader’s Digest in 2015 and so on.

1. **Is Psychotherapy an unaware act of Spiritual Journey?**

The new way of looking at the effectiveness of psychotherapy is to perceive it as a spiritual journey. Although the client may not be aware of the spiritual nature of the journey, it serves to heal the person spiritually. It is an enriching inner journey, letting the client travel inner spaces and times, traumatic times and difficult times.

In view of the above debates in the behavioural sciences, I suggest that there is an element of inherent ambivalence in many of them in the sense that it does not hold true for all persons and in all situations. It is akin to saying that for Person A, one plus one equals 3 and for Person B, one plus one equals 3.5 and occasionally for Person C, one plus one equals two. Here, I surmise that there are two questions that need to be asked: Why and How. To elucidate with an example, why does one type of medication work successfully in eradicating a psychiatric disorder in a select few and how? What are the underlying mechanisms? Why and how come does the same medication not work for the client’s identical twin? What is this attributable to? Is it just the chance factor or is it something beyond the sciences?

To address these issues is the need of the hour. Towards this end, let’s attempt to arrive at the point of convergence of philosophy and science.

The East with its esotericism and the West with its scientific pragmatism have not uncovered something hidden – an unknown element, an unknown factor. In mathematics, two plus two equals four. In chemistry, one knows that water contains two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen. In the behavioural sciences, two plus two is seldom four. In these disciplines, one does not have a Grand Theory, like the Grand Unified Theory of Mathematics. I bring to the fore this problem in the behavioural sciences, by combining together examples that reflect an interdisciplinary approach. According to Advaita, ‘*ãtman’* is the same as the highest metaphysical Reality. In other words, according to Sri Shankarachaya, the propounder of Advaita philosophy, the ‘*jivãtma*’ and the ‘*Brahmãtma*’ are one and the same. What I propose in this paper is that perhaps humankind is still lurking in the dark, in the sense that there is something major which has not yet been discovered. Sounds bizarre? What I mean to say is that apart from the mind/consciousness, the body and the soul, there is another element in the Homo sapiens, which is yet to be unraveled. I argue that many psychophysiological and metaphysical problems might be solved if one finds this missing element. Drawing from Nobel Laureate Alexis Carrel’s groundbreaking book “Man the Unknown”, I argue that this element is mysteriously hidden, and intangible. If I am absolutely wrong and this is just the chance factor at play or coincidences, and this element does not exist, then ‘n’ equals infinity, which implies that there could be infinite number of possibilities and that my intuition was trife, accounting for methodic doubt in the philosophical proposition.

Researching on the elements in Homo sapiens namely the brain-body, consciousness and the soul have not been yielding answers to the world’s big human challenges. Hence, there must be a “fourth element”, basing this presumption on Alexis Carrel’s seminal book “Man, the Unknown.” Unless this element is discovered, the human race will remain unknown, shrouded in mystery. This stems from a systematic philosophy viewpoint, in its attempt to formulate the ultimate constituents of reality, like Plato, Descartes and Aristotle from the West for example, and Madhwacharya, Shankaracharya and Ramanujacharya from the East.

To know the nature of this “fourth element”, as mentioned earlier, a serious earnestness in the study of the fourth force in Psychology (Maslow, 1968)–Transpersonal Psychology becomes essential because it has the potential to swap the fuzzy into unfuzzy and facilitates the expansion of the frontiers of consciousness. Nikola Tesla pertinently remarked with prudence, as follows: “The day science begins to study non-physical phenomena, it will make more progress in one decade than in all the previous centuries of its existence.” Tesla’s implicit allusion was possibly made with reference to extrasensory perception, paranormal and transpersonal phenomena, dismissed as hokum by the great Sigmund Freud and the Freudians. The primary characteristic of these phenomena is the fact that they are all inaccessible for replication, they are of course intangible, and some such experiences do not have equivalents in any language, that is, they are currently explainable but indescribable and transcend linguistic boundaries. It is especially also true with individuals’ qualia. Phenomena such as self-transcendence, déjà vu, oceanic feeling/ feeling of oneness with the universe, among others are dismissed by skeptical critics as signs of psychiatric or medical conditions. Others ascribe to such phenomena a purely mechanistic explanation. As a doctoral scholar specializing in Transpersonal Psychology, I strongly opine that these phenomena are beyond psychophysiological explanations and that they facilitate the expansion of the boundaries of conscious experience. Such transpersonal phenomena need to be studied meticulously, and their corresponding psychophysiological correlates are yet to be investigated thoroughly by researchers, because it is an extremely challenging avenue nevertheless with tremendous research potential.

Journals such as Neuroquantology, although criticized for the kind of manuscripts they publish, must not be scoffed at. They may seem revolutionary in the eyes of believers and at best pseudoscience in the eyes of critics. A popular science theory called Athene’s theory posits that God is in the neurons. I find this reductionist and to refute this, I contend thus: God is beyond neural functioning. God is in the transpersonal. When the ego is surpassed, one finds an intangible space: the transpersonal space.

From what I gather after devouring Carrel’s book, “Man the Unknwon”, it is that human beings have not yet found that unknown element. Why do some therapeutic techniques work only for select individuals? Is there an element working for or against humans? Are we missing something rudimental due to our mental rut and perceptual limitations? Is it transpersonal change blindness? Whatever it is, it is unknown. And if this vital element is discovered, it may well carry the answers and provide lucidity to the psychological underpinnings of history. When this element is discovered and explored, the human race will learn whether this element is the final frontier that humans were looking for, or if this is the first mountain top, with another valley leading to yet another mountain.

If one wishes to unravel the “God phenomenon”, one must learn to embrace the transpersonal experiences. Our task is to learn, to become God-like through knowledge…By knowledge we approach God and then we can rest (Weiss, 1988). I firmly believe that one must be mindful of those idiosyncratic transpersonal experiences in our qualia, to attain a higher state of consciousness and arrive at the inception stage of understanding God, the biggest mystery of the universe and of existence itself. Close attention must be paid to ethereal and hitherto unfamiliar states of consciousness. As the great poet Rumi said: “There is a voice that doesn’t use words. Listen.”

A Grand Theory of the Behavioural Sciences can find its inception perhaps in unravelling the “God phenomenon” – connecting the postulates of Sri Shankaracharya and Alexis Carrel, and by extensively and deeply researching transpersonal experiences. This way, we can find a true Archimedean point–a god’s-eye view–of the world and of ourselves.

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