

UNIVERSALITY OF METHOD IN PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

1. It is generally argued that since all philosophical traditions in the world grapple with the same fundamental problems of, for instance, reality, knowledge, existence etc., one cannot and should not attempt at a cultural compartmentalisation of philosophy into Indian or Western or Chinese etc. It is thus said that philosophy is universalistic, i.e., beyond the influence of cultural boundaries. It is further held by some thinkers that philosophy is universal in the same sense in which science is universal,—after all, there cannot be Indian or European or Chinese science. We will investigate the following issues here : Can philosophy be universalistic ? Can it be universalistic in the same sense in which, say, natural science is universalistic ? Can there be different methodologies of philosophical observation ?

In what follows, we argue that philosophy is not and cannot be universal in the same sense in which science is universal. We further argue that Western philosophy is a distinct example of individualistic philosophy—where what matters more is the manner in which an individual philosopher ‘observes’ his experience—and with its present methodologies of observation it can never become universalistic. However, Indian philosophy, contrarily, is an example of a universalistic philosophy but universalistic in quite a different, and, rather, *novel* sense.

2. What are the criteria of universality ?

Well, firstly, there should be a universal *object of inquiry*. That is an object which is not characterised by social, cultural, or geographical boundaries. By object I mean that which can be *named*. It could be the name of a *class*. It may turn out to be an illusion, a mere spuriousness, but it could ‘*turn out*’ only after the inquiry is complete and then only can we deny its being an object. Science *is that* which has a universal object of inquiry. In natural science the object of inquiry is Nature or Matter. Social and life science inquire about social and animate objects respectively. Philosophy also has an object of inquiry, or, rather, *objects of inquiry*. These could be said to be Reality, Nature, Matter, Knowledge, Truth etc. There is a distinction between the methods which science and philosophy employ for their inquiry about the

objects. Firstly, science accepts the principle of necessity of some assumptions at some stage but philosophy tends not to assume anything. For instance, science would assume the ontology of the object of inquiry or it would assume a definite duality between the object of inquiry and the inquirer. However, philosophy would, and must, question *all* assumptions. Secondly, science has a definite, strict method of observation. In science, the objects can be experimented upon although they may not necessarily be confinable to laboratory conditions (e.g. astronomical objects). However, in philosophy there is no rigid criterion of observation. One could 'observe' one's own experiences; one could experiment upon one's own experiences. One could observe natural phenomena as one *likes* to observe them, or, rather, as one's perception permits him to do and arrive at *one's own* conclusions. Thus, another general criterion of universality is that there must be a universal methodology of inquiry such as in science. This universal methodology could, however, be possible only when the object is transcultural. Methodology, generally speaking, can have two aspects : methodology of logicising (or theorising) and methodology of observation. By methodology of logicising we mean that in saying what one wants to say certain logical rules must be followed and *all* logical fallacies must be avoided. In logicising, one *hypothesises* about the nature of object or any of its phenomena. This hypothesising does involve *intuition* and *speculation* but these work only in so far as one is searching for a *novelty* in arranging the facts, in patterning them—, in "seeing" facts in a novel way. Logicisation involves deducing implications from a given set of facts—given perhaps by experimentation—and a given set of *relations* between these facts—the laws. This is dependent on experience and/or on *given level* of logicisation. This can be called the "principle of logical consistency". There is the "principle of intersubjective interpretation" which relates to experimentation in science. By experimentation we mean that the implications of the hypothesis are carefully and *systematically* experienced. *Precise* experience with the help of instruments is called experimentation. Generally, there is a limit to which precision can be achieved with the help of instruments and thus *precision* is carefully defined in science. Experimentation is nothing but more refined experience of novel facts which have been deduced by the hypothesis from facts already given by *earlier* experience.

Therefore this aspect of methodology must necessarily remain tied down to experience and what was hypothesised must be "confirmed" by *new* experience. Further, this experience is generally treated as *reliable* or *valid* only when it is *repetition invariant* and *subject invariant*. That is, whatever number of times a particular experience is repeated—with the help of instruments, laboratory conditions etc., it must give *almost* the same data; and whoever does it, it must remain invariant. I say *almost the same* because all minor fluctuations and variations are ignored and this aspect is very important.

3. How do life science and social science try to meet these general criteria of universality? We will not go into a detailed discussion of this issue here since it may take us beyond our main concern. However, a brief discussion will not be out of place. In life science, the object of inquiry is animate object, i.e., the object possessing *life* which is characterised by reproduction, adaptation etc. A tree, for example, is not a natural object—in any case, not in the sense in which, say, a stone is. Trees possess life since they grow, become old, suffer from diseases, die, reproduce etc. All the aspects of animate objects which concern life science are universalistic, free from cultural specificities.

In social science, the object of inquiry is the social object and its central characteristics perhaps are possession of *voluntary action* and *living in groups*. *Active man in society* is a social object. There can be a sociology of animals, birds, bees and ants from this standpoint. I am sure development of such a sociology can benefit us human beings a great deal. Social science concerns itself with *value-possessing* social object since the voluntary action of this social object already presupposes the possession of a *value*. Voluntary action is *guided* by values that the social object seeks. But values are generally considered to be *cultural*. Does it mean, then, that social science is not universalistic? Or, that there can be universal values which guide the action of social object? From this standpoint, a truly universal social science would be only that which inquires about *action-possessing* social objects *all* of which are guided by the *same* universal values. In such a social science further details of the process of seeking of these values by individuals as well as variations around these universal values

would be merely corollaries. This issue, however, still remains unresolved and in fact it is a paradox which is central to modern social science.

4. Can philosophy be universalistic in the same sense in which science is universalistic? Take western philosophy as a case for consideration. It has universal objects of inquiry. In its methodology of logicising it strictly adheres to the Principle of Logical Consistency. But, obviously, it completely violates the principle of intersubjective interpretation. And, amazingly, this violation of a single principle seems to turn it into an individualistic philosophy. Let us see how. The *universal* objects of western philosophical inquiry are not within the ambit of reliable experience, i.e., they are neither repetition invariant nor subject invariant. In western philosophy each philosopher has *his own unique* experience to tell about the objects of inquiry. In fact, we should put forward a much stronger thesis: that this experience *must necessarily be unique*, the one with a stamp of individuality which is not merely a novel rearrangement of facts as in science. Western philosophical logicisation does not conform to any invariant experience. Every philosopher must have his own story to tell *about* the objects of inquiry. Experience is purely at an intimately private level and facts are arranged purely according to the individual likings and tastes, if not whims, and these need not conform to any universal experiential test so long as they satisfy the principle of logical consistency. Everybody "sees" the object in his own way. It all depends on how an individual philosopher experiences the object of inquiry and how he likes to arrange the facts. In fact, this seems to me to be the central feature of western philosophy and it can be called the 'doctrine of unique experience'.

It can be said: all experiences, in the last analysis, are individual experiences, whether in science or in philosophy. Experiences are essentially private and whether they tally with those of others is purely hypothetical. One can agree with the universality of object of inquiry but this does not necessitate the acceptance of universality of experience. This argument would, however, emphasise the individuality of experience which could only be a position taken by some representative of western philosophy—thus, it would restrengthen the individualistic character

of western philosophy. We should avoid the issue of whether experience could be universalistic or it must necessarily be individualistic because this is not central to our main theme.

On the other hand, it could be said that the criterion of universality of object itself is purely a *nominal* criterion since we cannot presumably ascribe any ontological status to any such object. Thus, Reality, Truth etc. are only *names* that are universal and one cannot say whether any such concrete object of experience exists. But we hold that even these names, when uttered and their meanings understood, should generate *similar*, or, to some degree *same*, experiences (just as in sciences) if the criterion of universality is to be satisfied. If it be said that they cannot, then, again, individualistic feature would be reinforced. One could put forward even a third argument, which ultimately seems to lead to scepticism. That all experiments in science after all derive their validity from *agreement* between various experiencers. If some experiencers *decide to disagree* about some *observed data*, then they could do so and thus, again, the reliability of experiment would depend on individuals that decide to or decide not to agree. This issue seems very profound in science and brings in *ethical* and *moral* problems—problems of *intellectual honesty*. This, again, seems to reinforce a kind of individualistic feature—but this time not only in philosophy but also in science. It seems to me that neither western philosophy nor western science as it is, can overcome this problem—this has to be accepted as a basic assumption. But we will discover, in the following section, how this problem is tackled—and very ingeniously—in Indian philosophy.

5. Does Indian philosophy meet the criteria of universality of science ? What is its methodology ?

Just as *matter* is the universal object of inquiry of science, *brahman*, or *ātman*, or *puruṣa*, or *citi*, is the universal object of inquiry in Indian philosophy. Unlike science, Indian philosophy does not begin with any ontological commitment. But this object of inquiry has to be “seen” (*darśana*) by the “seer” (*dārśanika*), i.e., whether it really is ? How can this object be “seen” or “experienced” ? What *methods* should be adopted ? In their attempts to answer these questions, Indian philosophers seem to have devised many methods of “experiencing” the object of inquiry. One of them is Sāṃkhya-Yoga method and I shall try

to delineate it here. Before that it should be noted that almost all these known methods of "experiencing" agree with the principle of logical consistency and their method of logicisation is generally the same as that of western philosophy. The main difference lies in this "method of experimentation" or in having systematic experience of the possible object of inquiry, which seems to make this philosophy not only universalistic in its own way but also the one which overcomes the limitations of present day western science.

In this method one begins at the level of experience. It is essentially *an* experience confined to the individual experiencer when he adopts a definite posture (*āsana*) and observes (*dhyāna*). The multiple experiences at different levels, that the individual experiencer has, can be recorded independently as *data*. Now, these data are said to be subject invariant. That is, if another individual adopts roughly the same posture and observes in roughly the same manner, he would obtain roughly the same data. Again, these data are also repetition invariant, i.e., the *same* individual may again and again obtain them. In other words, data repeat themselves in individual experiences and their turning out to be the same in all independently taken records, confirms that implications hypothesised are *valid*. Thus, the principle of intersubjective interpretation is satisfied although in a different way. This difference arises because the object of inquiry is not situated "outside" the experiencer but it is *the same object inside each observer*. Then and only then could it be subject invariant and repetition invariant. We can depict this situation as follows (Fig. 1 & 2).

We can describe this situation by stating that in science the object of inquiry lies outside the boundary line of the universe of observation whereas in Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy the object of inquiry lies inside this boundary line. In science, not only the object but also the instrument and the data lie outside this boundary line whereas in Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy only data do so. This situation can, again, be depicted as follows (Fig. 3).

boundary line of the universe of observation

universe

object of inquiry in S-Y philosophy

object of inquiry in science

This method of Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy gives us a new concept of science and the one that employs such a method of observation we shall henceforth call *new science*. The central feature of the method in this new science is that all the observers independently “observe” the object of inquiry and compare the data so obtained. Thus, universal experiential knowledge of the individual experimenter is to be called new science. This new science assures that there should be no two views as to the nature of the object. Almost all philosophical methods of India arrive at more or less the same result. And in spite of deep roots of science in western philosophy, the western philosophers have always felt puzzled at this similarity of results obtained by Indian philosophers !

There is another aspect of Indian philosophy which reinforces its universalistic feature by going beyond experience. Indian philosophical observation begins with experience of the individual but gradually *eliminates this experience*. Thus, it is said that one must advance from *vṛttiviśeṣaṇa* to *vṛttinirodha*; from *vijñāna* to *jñāna*. It is held that experience becomes possible due to the existence of this boundary line of the universe of observation. However, continued observation of the object of inquiry, more precise and persistent observation, leads to the *breaking* of this boundary. This is the essence of *transcendence*. This transcendence makes data futile which are only of the level of experience. This transcendence constitutes the mystical aspect of Indian philosophy. It is held that reality (*puruṣa* or *citi*), knowledge (*jñāna*) and truth (*satya*) become one here. They are found to be the same ontologically. This, incidentally, delineates the difference between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*, the former being ontologically *the same* as the object of inquiry whereas in the latter the boundary-line separates the object and the experience.

6. We have argued above that Sāṅkhya-Yoga in particular and Indian philosophy in general *is* universalistic but not in the same sense and way in which present day science is generally held to be universalistic. This universalistic feature of Indian philosophy seems to be the one that overcomes the problem of intellectual honesty in present day science by the transition from *vijñāna* to *jñāna* when the observer (or seer) finds the universal objects of inquiry—such as consciousness, knowledge, truth—

as one and the same. At this stage he reaches a point where category of disagreement and agreement does not seem to apply; in other words, he seems to have no *choice*,—whether he should agree or not. In a sense the boundary line that separates one observer from another seems to break down and *all observers* seem to know *what the other is observing*.

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Figures 1, 2 and 3 on the following pages.

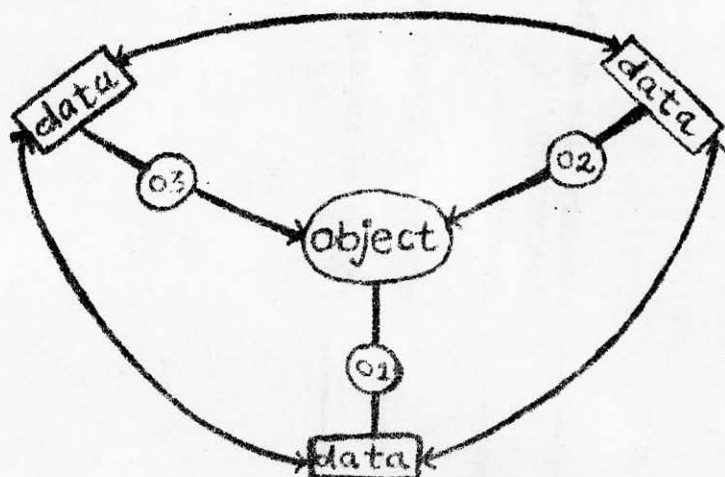


Fig.1. Observation in physics

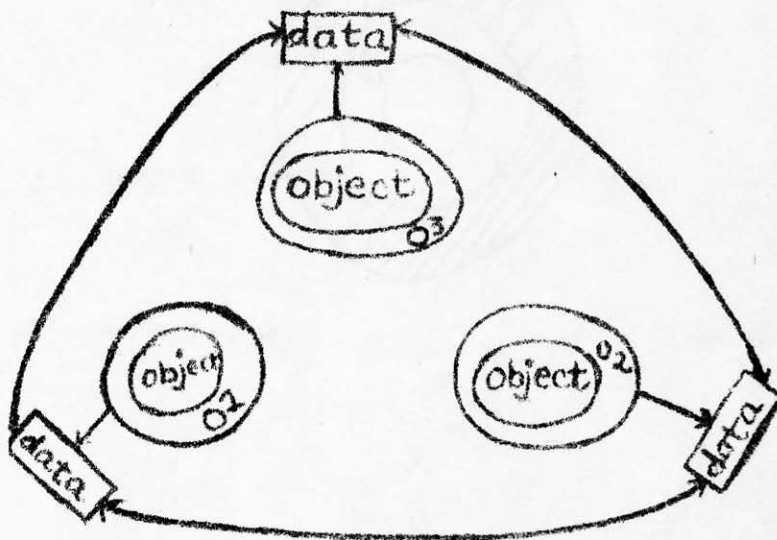
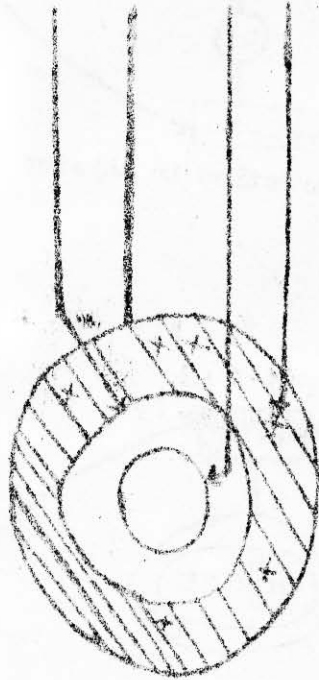


Fig.2. Observation in Samkhya
Yoga philosophy



boundary line of the universe
observation

universe

object of inquiry in S-Y phil

object of inquiry in science