Bridging Models of Inquiry: The Scholastic and the Reflexive

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Let me here, in this my third submission, take up the first of the two questions that I had isolated for the purpose of the 'Rethinking interdisciplinarity: bridging the rift' workshop held at NIT, Silchar (18-19 May 2016). My second submission had taken on the other question, while pushing forward on the theme of coming to terms with the life sciences and biomedicine from the point of view of a renewed social scientific mode of reflection and inquiry. The cross-disciplinary nature of that foray was fairly self-evident, although I did not take on more fully the methodological ground of the design of inquiry question that structured the submission. In this present undertaking, however, I take on board in some detail aspects of this ground, albeit suitably modified and abstracted to cover the question of 'bridging the rift' between inquiries (whether humanistic or otherwise). What I have just rendered in parenthesis here will soon be clarified; although it must be noted that the idea of a 'rift' that needs bridging lays claim, at once, also to the possibility of renovation and repair.

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1. The 'two cultures' and beyond

Allow me to take as a point of departure the famous - or, rather, infamous - debate fostered by the British scientist and writer C.P. Snow way back in the late 1950s in the context of British academia in particular (see Snow [1959] 1993). The debate related to the 'two cultures' idea, with the programmatic thrust of Snow's presentation being to articulate the gulf of understanding that separated science from the humanities in the modern university and in society generally (as well as to insist that literary intellectuals could learn much from their scientific counterparts). Without doubt, the bridging effort that underscored Snow was not without its perplexities and problems, and I have no intentions here to be evaluating the debate. Rather, in a transmutation of the 'two cultures' idea, I take it that the idea also names a phenomenon which has to do with contradictory dispositions internal to academic disciplines, *whether humanistic or otherwise*. [Note, the caveat 'whether humanistic or otherwise', which I think is important. Lest it seem, in the course of the presentation, that we are grafting (or extrapolating) a pronounced social science vocabulary across realms of inquiry, one could do with the reminder that the role of the humanities in contemporary life is a continuation and transformation of their role since their invention by the Renaissance humanists of 16th and 17th century Europe. This role had to do with increasing the possibilities of, and deepening the contexts for, judgment. Indeed, far from diminishing, the demand for judgments of various kinds, including an estimation of what is 'human' in humanity, is all the more pressing and constant in this period of astonishing interventions in biology and in nature more broadly.]

More emphatically, my formulations here are meant precisely to come to terms with these 'dispositions' – styles of thought and practice *within* given modalities of inquiry, if you will – so that in getting a measure of what the design of inquiries can consist in across disciplines, our effort will be to transcend the two cultures division (as a division *between* academic disciplines) that C.P. Snow was inadvertently legitimating and/or endorsing. In short: my point is that while science and humanistic study (literature, in particular) may have figured as the terms of the controversy in the 'two cultures' debate, they did not represent its final stakes; indeed, that the stakes in the 'two cultures' division have had to do ultimately with the design of inquiries both within and across disciplinary domains. For the purposes of my reflection here, I isolate two

dispositions – what I characterise broadly as 'scholastic' and 'reflexive' – as central to the design of inquiries (whether humanistic or otherwise). Our effort here will be to mediate between these two dispositions in an effort to bridge divides within and across disciplines.

2. The 'scholastic' and the 'reflexive'

Having transmuted the 'two cultures' idea to identify a phenomenon that has to do with contradictory dispositions *internal* to the practice of inquiry (whether humanistic and otherwise), let us now try to come to terms with what this can entail for our methodological question about the design of inquiry. Broadly, and somewhat schematically, it has to do with two contending styles of thought and practice *within* given modalities of inquiry, what I shall refer to as a 'scholastic' model as opposed to a more 'reflexive' model of analysis. I must hasten to clarify that the 'scholastic' disposition is not exactly a problem in my scheme of representation, to the extent that it identifies and names equally a tendency internal to science and against which (or in terms of which) the 'reflexive' orientation (also internal to science) is articulated. [The expression 'scholastic disposition' is adapted from Pierre Bourdieu, who (borrowing from the ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin) speaks of the 'scholastic point of view' and identifies it broadly with the 'academic vision' (see Bourdieu 1990). The latter is, of course, quite critical of this standpoint, pointing out that what all scholars "whose profession it is to think and/or speak about the world have the most chance of overlooking are the social presuppositions that are inscribed in the scholastic point of view" (Bourdieu 1990: 381). We share no such presumptions about the 'scholastic', although Bourdieu does have a point worth considering. In our scheme, Bourdieu's disclaimers about the 'scholastic' would translate into the 'reflexive' disposition that we also see as internal to the practice of inquiry; although for Bourdieu's own reflections on 'scientific reflexivity', see his 2000 and 2003.]

To reiterate: the 'scholastic' and the 'reflexive' constitute distinct (albeit not quite mutually exclusive) dispositions within and across disciplines, humanistic and otherwise. I must hasten to clarify that such a mode of usage (or deployment) also renders problematic all claims to a 'phronetic' social science, which has found currency in recent times. [For the latter, see Bent Flyvbjerg (2001 and 2005/06), some of whose claims we shall revisit in course.] Quite unlike the latter though, which juxtaposes the reflexive (or phronetic) *against* what is forwarded as the 'scientistic', our claims about such dispositions internal to inquiry are not premised on their mutually exclusivity. The idea of 'scientism' can raise other questions about all modalities of inquiry as well, but we shall have to defer the terms of that engagement here. Having thus clarified our ground, let me unravel the broad terms of the scholastic and the reflexive dispositions.

Arguably, the 'scholastic' has to do with an interest in a form of knowledge which (following more classical orientations) we may characterize as '*techne*' (roughly, the need to *know how* to do things, and which essentially has to do with getting things done) and '*episteme*' (which broadly has to do with understanding or 'pure theory', in the sense of wanting to *know why* things are done). In modular terms, the disposition also often translates into the requirement that all knowledge must be useful in practice, so that even as critique (or criticism) may be constructive and/or reparative, it (critique/criticism) is ultimately threatening or undermining of all claims of/for knowledge. The scholastic disposition, besides, also finds its epistemic rationale in conceiving inquiries across disciplinary domains as an attempt to formulate and/or discover the theories and laws which govern life and action in multiple locales, and can accordingly often (though not inevitably) translate into 'causal' explanations of and technocratic solutions to human affairs and problems.

Now, of course, 'techne' and 'episteme' as governing impulses defining the scholastic can conflict with each other, resulting in competing and contesting goals of inquiry and debate. The

question thus becomes what are we seeking when we engage with, or even critique, 'techne' from the perspective of 'episteme'; and, alternatively, approach 'episteme' from the standpoint of 'techne'. The style of thought and practice emerging from this intersecting field of questions is what may be framed as a more 'reflexive' disposition as much internal to the design of inquiry as the scholastic disposition represented above. Arguably, and again somewhat schematically, the 'reflexive' model has to do with bridging the gap between 'techne' and 'episteme', so that in the disposition internal to this modality of inquiry the principal task is to clarify meanings and values, as a basis for reflection and inquiry across disciplinary domains. [In what follows, we shall both introduce and problematize a recent attempt to formulate in exclusive terms the conditions and dimensions of this 'reflexive' model.]

In fact, the social theorist we called attention to earlier, namely, Bent Flyvbjerg is concerned primarily to foreground the reflexive model, investing it with stakes that impinge on constituting social scientific inquiry as a domain distinct from the natural sciences. In fact, as part of this partitioning of the spaces of inquiry and opening up to the dimension of the 'human' – indeed that the way human phenomena are modelled as 'social' consists in the way they (namely, human phenomena) 'answer back' to the theorist or practitioner (unlike most natural phenomena) - Flyvbjerg has argued that a crucial aspect of the social sciences has to do with opening up to the relevant context of human action, which in human beings' is their everyday background skills in deciding what counts as the relevant objects and events (whose regularities, incidentally, the scholastic model tries to explain and/or predict) [see Flyvbjerg 2001: esp. Chs. 3-4]. Consequently, for the latter, the reflexive orientation is constitutive and primary for the design of inquiry within social science. As he states (and I shall quote at some length): "Context is not simply the singularity of each setting (as in a laboratory), nor the distinctive historical and social paths taken to produce such a setting, even if both may be important to understanding specific social phenomena. Ultimately, the human skills that determine the social context are based on judgments that cannot be understood in terms of concrete features and rules. Therefore a 'hard' theory of context in the social sciences is seemingly impossible. But if context decides what counts as relevant objects and events, and if the social context cannot be formalised in terms of features and rules, then social theory cannot be complete and predictive in the manner of much natural science theory, which does not have the problem of self-interpretive objects of study" (Flyvbjerg 2005/06: 39). [I shall return to this question of 'self-interpretive objects of study' in my next lecture/submission. But kindly note what follows.]

Such an exclusive foregrounding of the reflexive model, to be sure, is problematic. It is ultimately reductive of the world of 'science', being perforce ordered to render the same as distinct and separate from the human sciences as a whole. I shall engage this ground of the key 'difference' between the natural and human sciences in our next submission. My point here, more forcefully, is that it is very presumptuous to take for granted that the normal state of affairs in the 'sciences', where 'techne' and 'episteme' are held to rule, is settled and certain and/or that research aims and outputs are precisely meant to eliminate 'uncertainty' in the world of science. In reality, as works in the history and philosophy of science testify, the state of affairs in the sciences is hardly so settled or definite, and no amount of new research will completely eliminate uncertainty (see, generally, Klemke, Holliger and Rudge 1998). Indeed, as earlier questions are answered, new questions appear, so that uncertainty far from constituting a problem for science is a catalyst, a challenge, for the latter [see Weinberg (2001) for perspective on this]. Of course, one may ask as to why many are not open to accepting and accommodating uncertainty as marking the domain of the sciences? And poignantly perhaps, by way of an answer, one could hold that (as epitomized, say, by Snow's 'two cultures' thesis generally) there is a lack of understanding of science generally. All the same, there is certainly more to the 'two cultures' idea, as the cultural historian Stefan Collini has indicated in his extensive introduction placing C.P. Snow's 'Two Cultures' in historical perspective (see Collini 1993).

3. Disclaimers and intersections

But let us return to the scholastic and the reflexive. Pointedly, the problem consists in arraigning against the scholastic as opposed to the reflexive, when actually (as we are implying through their juxtaposition) the imperative is to transcend this binary: to attend as much to 'techne' as to 'episteme' (which, as part of the 'scholastic' disposition structuring inquiry, cannot be avoided), while at the same time (in the context of the 'reflexive' orientation) admitting of their intersection and, accordingly, attempting to bridge the gap between 'techne' and 'episteme'. The reflexive disposition cannot but work off the scholastic orientation, bridging the divide between 'techne' and 'episteme' that the latter can entail.

One is not, of course, averse to the possibility that the scholastic disposition can affect the very thinking process which it enables, engendering specific errors and misrepresentations (although, on my register, that would constitute 'scientism', as much a bane of all modalities of inquiry, whether humanistic or otherwise). In fact, the social theorist Bourdieu, as part of his attempts to renounce 'scholasticism' – or, 'scientism' on our register – alludes to this in his work (see Bourdieu 1990 and 2000). While conceding that the 'scholastic point of view' rests necessarily on its freedom from the necessities of the world of practice – a 'liberty' which can be the fundamental precondition for any theoretical reflection – it can yet engender misrepresentations and misrecognitions; and, Bourdieu's 'reflexive sociology' is precisely meant to unravel these fallacies of the former (namely, 'scholasticism'). Clearly, Bourdieu's point about the effects of a scholastic habit of thinking is tied to his near-sociological prognosis about its mode of existence (that is to say, the condition of the scholastic habit's acquisition and implementation). But our contention is a different one: that the scholastic disposition can be an almost necessary condition for the production of reflexive knowledge, so that the essential point of intersection between the scholastic and the reflexive must be the fount of all inquiry, humanistic or otherwise.

Indeed, following the logic of Bourdieu, we can argue that reflexivity itself is a general habit of thought with a history (in the sense of being constituted in particular scholarly fields). [In fact, Bourdieu describes his own identification and historicization of the 'scholastic point of view' as an example of 'scientific reflexivity' (see Bourdieu 2000: esp. 119-21, and 2003), whereas it seems particularly noteworthy for our purposes here that his claims for 'scientific reflexivity' incorporate elements of the 'scholastic' disposition that he deprecates. Thus, in our scheme, as we disclosed early on in the second section, Bourdieu's disclaimers about the 'scholastic' would translate into the 'reflexive' disposition that we also see as internal to the practice of inquiry.] The scholastic and the reflexive, in their twinning and intersectionality, thus obtain as central to the design of all inquiry, whether humanistic or otherwise.

4. Pushing frontiers

It should be evident that the terms 'scholastic' and 'reflexive' come with a specific baggage; and one is not, in postulating their mediation, challenging the idea, central to the humanities and social sciences, that they are ultimately about 'meanings' (in terms of interests, desires and values that human beings possess and/or express) and about power. What we are complicating is the basis of such inquiries, while rendering the reflexive thrust as not necessarily inimical to (or conflicting with) the ways of 'techne' and 'episteme' and their intersection. As a thinking practitioner of the craft of scientific inquiry, one is exercised by a tendency to see 'interpretation' as a condition of *any* (or all) judgment about disciplines and their defining problems (or problematics). It is the generality of this thesis about interpretation which makes it very suspect. Needless to say, I do not want to criticize this or that theory of interpretation, so much as to raise a doubt about the tendency to theorize 'judgment' as interpretation *tout court*. My aim, in a sense through a transmuting of the 'two cultures' idea, has been identify a phenomenon that has to do with contradictory dispositions *internal* to the practice of inquiry (whether humanistic and otherwise),

and in the process come to terms with what their intertwining can entail for our methodological question about the design of inquiry. I guess one is also, in the midst of this methodological question, in a position to highlight the temptation that leads us to give 'interpretation' a foundational role in judgment about the very content and status of all knowledge.

Perhaps there is another way of expressing the problem to which our recounting of the spaces of the scholastic and the reflexive is drawing attention. Indeed, as I indicated in my first brief submission to the blog, I had pointedly asked whether a purely disciplinary capacity (that is to say, grounding in one's own discipline) could envisage alternative perspectives which by definition a disciplinary capacity cannot occupy, and urged that we must examine more intently what this would yield about both the genealogy of disciplines and their epistemology, and, not the least, the question of the contextualization that could be productive of inquiry. My small book, *Recontextualizing Disciplines: Three Lectures on Method* (Hegde 2014) explores in greater detail aspects of this possibility.

This present submission, I believe, takes the challenge of that exploration forward, yielding through the axiomatics of the scholastic and the reflexive an attention upon alternative ways of bridging the rift within and between disciplines, as well as pushing the frontiers of disciplinarity.

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