

## Comparative Anthropology and Action Sciences

### An Essay on Knowing to Act and Acting to Know

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#### *Introduction*

Should action sciences exist, it is obvious what they would have to study; the nature of human action, the kind of knowledge that actions generate, the process of learning to perform different types of action and so forth. Comparative anthropology, as a discipline, studies and contrasts, where such contrasts are possible, the different ways in which human beings organize their lives, think about and experience both themselves and world around them. A culture is a form of life and, as such, it is a way of going about the world. One would therefore expect to find a deep and intimate relation between action sciences on the one hand, and studies of culture on the other. A perusal of literature, however, shows the fact of the matter to be different.

Different in which way? It is not necessary to speak here about the attempt of anthropologists to relate both their theoretical and ethnographic work to theories of action; many anthropologists and few anthropological quasi-schools have felt and continue to feel the need to integrate theories of human action in their approaches to the study of society. The same, it would appear, cannot be said of action theories. As a rough way of establishing the interest that action theorists show in this matter, let us notice the kind of themes they take up for investigation; the relation between action and intention, between actions and events; the nature and properties of efficient and inefficient action, the rational and irrational action etc. A great deal of familiarity with the literature in this tradition is not required to observe that neither anthropological theories nor ethnographic studies play any role in their discussion.

Why is this so? Here is one possible answer: the problems that are taken up for scrutiny are invariant across cultures and, [end page 77] consequently, there is not much that anthropology can contribute to this enquiry. This stance is implicitly assumed by most; perhaps, if called for, they would also defend it explicitly. There is, however, a second way of looking at this issue; the themes that action theorists address themselves to are the deep and ground intuitions of one specific culture, viz. The West. To the members of this culture, it is obvious that human action, by virtue of being human, exhibits some typical, species-specific properties such as being intentional, goal directed, rational or whatever else that you may want to attribute. Not only is it natural speak about human action in these terms, but to look at it any other way would be so deeply counterintuitive that it does not appear plausible. In so far as most western anthropologists share this basic intuition, there is not much in their field work that could contribute to the discussion. After all, they too are framed within the descriptive possibilities open to this culture.

While both these answers shed some light on why action theories are indifferent to anthropology, the second carries a rather disturbing implication: It suggests that what the action theories study are not so much *human* actions (in their species typical generality) as a culture-specific mode of acting. And that there are other modes of acting and other ways of going about the world which may not exhibit any/most of the properties that human action are supposed to have. Consequently, if action sciences are to exist as 'sciences' at all, it is advisable that they *look* at the way other cultures *act* and at other forms of life.

In this paper, I want to examine whether the second answer could turn out to be both intelligible and sensible. (I shall leave the question of its truth aside.) I shall do so by very briefly looking into a notion that pertains to the domain of action theory viz., action-knowledge. I will suggest that the notion of action-knowledge within the western tradition, by and large, has come to mean knowledge about actions. My claim will be that this is not what action-knowledge is. In such a case, we need to understand why action-knowledge has come to mean what it means. Lending credibility to this claim requires that we develop a more adequate notion

of action-knowledge. Both purposes could be fulfilled, I shall suggest, by looking into the practices across cultures. In the following pages, I shall endeavor to lend some plausibility to these suggestions by looking specifically into one culture, viz., India.

To provide a degree of intelligibility to these claims is the aim; detailed arguments and elaborate defences are as much outside my ken as they are beyond the province of this essay. [end page 78]

### *The structure of the paper*

This paper has six sections. In the first, I introduce the problem that, more or less, forms the thread that runs throughout: Why is there an absence of theoretical treatises *about* social practices in a culture like India, when it has got what is manifestly the most complex form of social organization that human history has ever known? This question is not answered directly, but functions as the background within which other issues are raised. In the second section, I suggest that learning is related to culture and examine one of the elements, viz., the experience of order, which plays an important role in the kind of learning process that a culture develops. In the next two sections I outline a notion of learning and claim that as a mode of learning it is specific, if not unique, to Indian culture. The properties of such a learning process, which creates action-knowledge, are examined in the third section. While at it, some empirical hypotheses are generated to show the heuristic potential of this approach. In the two parts that comprise the fourth section, I take up the problem of comparison: How culture specific is the notion of action-knowledge? I examine one domain that belongs to the realm of human action, viz., the ethical in the first part. In the second, I compare the notion of action-knowledge with the most familiar notions of knowing how and knowing that. The problems that arise as a result of such a contrast function as the theme of reflection in the last section.

As a part of an unconcluded project I am working on, this article merely expresses some working hypotheses that appear rather productive. As a project, it has the ambition of wanting to formulate the intuitions of one culture within the language of an other. As an article, its aim is not to convince but to persuade. Could it be, I want to ask, that we may fruitfully look at the issues in a way we are not accustomed to? What would it be like; I want you to ask yourselves by the end of this article, if cultures could learn to really look at each other?

### *1. Raising a problem: knowledge and social life*

To any one who has some first hand knowledge of India, the conjunction of the following three phenomena must appear both extraordinary and striking: *Firstly*, its social organization (viz., the so-called caste system) exhibits enormous complexity, manifests some kind of an order and touches every walk of life. It is a social organization under whose scope falls not only the [end page 79] mundane and minutiae, but also the deeper and the lofty. And yet, no Indian could tell you much about the 'principles' of this system, leave alone the dynamics of its reproduction. Theories *about* this social organization, one that has had a history of more than two thousand years, are not to be found *within* the Indian tradition. Of course, many treatises about the 'caste system' have been authored by Indian intellectuals during this century. My point is that theorizing about the 'caste system' is neither indigenous to the tradition nor inherited from it, but a learned and acquired mode of treating the subject. *Secondly*, each of the 'caste' groups in India *appears* to have an enormous repertoire of "do's" and "don'ts". Again, were you to dip into the literature of the Indian tradition expecting to find complex reasonings and justifications to support any *one* set from this variegated, hardly overlapping sets of 'injunctions', you are likely to draw a blank. That is, individuals perform a great variety of moral actions and there appears to exist many action alternatives without a correlated corpus of justificatory literature. *Thirdly*, neither the social institutions nor the moral practices are founded upon centralized authorities: be they religious, moral or political. In other words, absence of knowledge about practices is not supplanted by the presence of authorities whose cogitations could make debates and arguments superfluous.

What, you may wonder, is problematic about the coexistence of these three phenomena in any one society? The answer would be evident, if we were to indulge in a comparison. Contrast the situation sketched above with that of the West regarding some similar domain, say, that of the ethical. Consider, for example, the total *number* of moral principles (or 'injunctions') in the West with the *amount* of literature produced about them. These injunctions, each of which is formulated and defended as a general principle, do not (probably) number more than twenty. But the literature *about* them stretches to infinity. With respect to India, it would be difficult to

make any such claim; it is not clear whether the 'injunctions' are general principles or not; one does not know how many injunctions exist and, as I said, there is hardly any justificatory literature.

What are we to make of this? Here are two possible responses from among many:

(a) Because Indians have no comparable moral theories (comparable, that is, to those of the West) they really have no notion of 'good' and 'bad'. Therefore, they are immoral. Not many would say it in quite this fashion, even though many still think so. This does not merit an answer.

(b) They are arrested at a primitive stage of moral development, **[end page 80]** even if they have stumbled upon some fundamental moral principles. This is a self-defeating response: if a culture has 'stumbled' upon such principles and every individual from each generation over thousands of years continues to stumble upon it, moral practice does not require to be supported by ethical theories. By the same token, the existence of theoretical treatises about moral practices in a culture is hardly indicative of its maturity.

It is only by leaving such or similar responses aside that we are better able to formulate the issue that a culture like India raises. Let us do so by looking at some facts. The Indian caste appears to have survived (in whatever form, and through whatever mechanisms) many fundamental upheavals: through challenges posed by internal movements (like Buddhism etc.) to externally imposed economico-political reorganizations (Islamic invasion, British colonialism and subsequent integration into a world capitalist system). That is to say, 'caste system' *appears to have adapted itself* to changing environments over the course of the centuries. This is a statement that one could make without having to prejudge the 'desirability' or otherwise of such an organization.

Clearly, the minimum that is required for such an adaptive social organization is that some kind of knowledge present in society and that it be available to its members. Knowledge must be present, because the actions that reproduce a way of living are knowledgeable actions and cannot be either random or purely explanatory ones. Furthermore, because these actions enable a social organization to adapt itself, they will have to be *informed* actions. And because what is adaptive over thousands of generations is one and the same organization, which is a creation of infinitely many actions of indefinitely many individuals, each member of such a form of life must have access to this knowledge. Otherwise, there would be no continuity between generations and hence no culture either. Given that Indian society has some such thing called culture and some kind of a history, the question must now be fairly obvious: If knowledge *about* these practices is not what there is, what other kind of knowledge is it? How is such knowledge transmitted through the generations? How do individuals learn it? How does this enable *them to sustain a very complex* form of social interaction?

These questions have rarely been raised in the literature, be they philosophical, sociological or anthropological. Most of the studies about the Indian 'caste system', for example, have *assumed* the presence of some or other 'principles' underlying and **[end page 81]** supporting the 'system'. These studies have also excavated and brought to light many such principles: from non-egalitarian principles through hygienic principles (albeit in a metaphysical form); from transactional rules through rules of coalition formation to the very propensity of human beings to maximize fitness through extended nepotism, etc. This is not the place to discuss the veracity of any of these studies. And yet, I mention these attempts because it is relevant for the concerns of this paper to ask why this approach has been the dominant one at all. That is, why is it *assumed* that knowledge about human practices is the best way to *understand* human ways of going about the world? In this paper, I begin to answer this question as well, by trying to link notions of knowledge and ways of knowledge acquisition to the nature of cultures. Thus, a philosophical quest, viz., that of clarifying some conception of knowledge begins and ends as a project in comparative anthropology.

## 2. Culture, learning and paradigms of order

Is it plausible to accept the idea that the way the members of a group learn is intimately connected to the culture of that group? In this part, I shall provide a brief positive answer by looking at one element that plays an important role in linking the mode of learning to the culture of a group.

As human beings, we are socialized within the framework of groups. In its broadest sense, 'socialization' refers to the process of living with others. Who these 'others' are, and what it means to 'live with them' are things that a human organism *learns* when it gets socialized. That is, *socializing process* involves transmitting this

knowledge, which is practical in nature. The customs, lores and traditions of human groups not only preserve this knowledge but are also the mechanisms of its transmission. What a learning process is, when viewed from the point of view of the organism that is being socialized, is a teaching process from the *point of view* of those responsible for socializing that organism. The teachers, thus, draw upon the resources of the culture to which they belong.

Consequently, the methods of teaching an organism will teach only to the extent they dovetail with the process of learning. Because we, as human beings, are not genetically determined to learn in any one particular way, it could be safely held that the teaching processes give *form* to the way an organism learns about environment. That is, the way one learns is non-trivially dependent upon one's culture. We may, therefore, **[end page 82]** accept the idea that not only the *what* but also *how* of learning is connected to the culture of an organism's group. All of the above claims appear extremely reasonable. As we shall soon see, it also appears possible to generate a culture-specific notion of learning, which is able to shed light on a diverse set of phenomena that are characteristic to a culture.

Several elements are of direct relevance to the way a culture teaches, and to the way its members learn: the experience of "self" and "others"; the experience of "body" and "space"; etc. Unable as I am to discuss any of these, I shall restrict myself to just one element from the set, viz., the experience of *order*.

If construed rather broadly, learning can be seen as the way an organism makes its environment habitable i.e., it is an activity of making habitat. The fashion in which this takes place, however, depends on the *experience* the organism has of the environment that has to be made habitable. One of the fundamental differences between cultures is the manner of structuring this experience and that, I suggest, take place through the mediation of some or other paradigm or root model of order. Let me explain.

Almost all cultures inculcate and preserve a sense and feeling of order within their members. It is almost as if each generation teaches the following truth to the next generation: cultural systems are not the 'intended' results of the actions of its members. Both the order in one's culture and the order that the cosmos is share the property of *not* being and planned products of the actions of its members. The awareness that actions of its members are necessary to maintain the cultural order and that actions, *somehow*, can either sustain or disrupt these orders is also present in most cultures.

However, what distinguishes one culture from another is, among other things, the *way* this sense and feeling of order is preserved. Quite obviously, some way of preserving a sense of order can continue to preserve only to the extent it ceaselessly *structures* the very experience of order itself. That is to say, 'preserving the sense of order' and 'structuring the experience of order' are both descriptions of the same process but from two different points of view; *each generation preserves its experience of order by structuring* the experience of the next. A way of preserving a sense of order can structure an experience of order, it appears to me, if it itself models or represents or explicates that very order whose experience it is supposed to structure. In other words, that which structures the experience of Cosmos as an order must itself, in some way or another, exhibit or express the order of the Cosmos. I call such a **[end page 83]** prototype of order, the primary root model of order. What distinguishes cultures from one another, under this construal, would be the nature of their paradigms of order.

My suggestion is that 'religion' has been the paradigm of order for the western culture. According to the account given above, it would mean that 'religion' both structures the experience of the universe and is itself an instance of that order. Now, whatever 'religion' might be, it is without doubt true (If, that is, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are what religions are) that it is explanatory. That means to say, the structure and the strategy of religious explanations both structures and sustains an experience of order that that universe is. Because the finer and subtler points about the nature of religious explanations are not relevant for this paper, let me crudely outline the three basic *phases* which culminate in the sense of order that I consider typical for, if not unique to, the West.

There is the first phase, I suppose, of a 'pre-religious' experience of the world. In this phase, there is an experiencing of the constancy and regularity of the universe. The second phase *denies* this experience of order and draws the attention to the *chaos* the world actually is. In the third phase, there is a discovery of a "deeper"

and “underlying” order beneath the chaos of the phenomenal world. What happens in this process is that the first experience, the naive experience of order, is totally bracketed away, leaving behind only the chaos that the phenomena experience is supposed to be until the deeper order is discovered. The obviousness and the all pervasiveness of this attitude is expressed in the way child development was conceived until recently, and in the way the emergence of ‘mythical’ and ‘magical’ thinking is accounted for. A child’s world, it was surmised, is a “bloomin’, buzzin’ confusion” until it learns to conceptualize, categorize and speak. And we are told that our ancestors attempted to find ‘explanations’ for natural phenomena because they were confronted by a chaotic world i.e. by the occurrence of ‘random’ events. Even the arguments for the existence of God took the form of “arguments from *design*” in the hands of the medieval naturalists and theologians. The fundamental attitude, in other words, is that if there are no “laws” or “principles” underlying an experiential world, such a world will have to be a chaotic and unordered world.

Consider now another culture, where such or similar paradigms of order do not exist. To its members the above suggestion would appear strange: neither ‘chaos’ nor ‘deeper laws’ are experiential units to this culture. The universe *is* experienced *as* an order: neither a creator nor His design requires to be invoked [end page 84] as the ‘reason’ for this order. Explanations may try to say *what* the order consists of; but the truth or otherwise of these explanations are irrelevant to the fact that the universe is an order. That is to say, the world does not embody or express an order (or anything else): to speak of the world, to experience it, is to experience order. For this to be true, it would require that such a culture have a root or primary model of order which is not explanatory in nature. Nevertheless, it must be ordered and that order must be visible on the ‘surface’. The truth or falsity of the many different ‘explanations’ (‘interpretations’ would, perhaps, be a better word in this context) must be irrelevant to answering the question whether such a root model is an order. That is to say, in such a culture, the root or primary model of order must be pre-linguistic (or non-linguistic) in nature. A set of actions, with a beginning and an end (neither of which need be an absolute), following each other contiguously in time would constitute such an order. India is one such culture, I want to claim, and its paradigm of order is not religion but something else. Call it, for the sake of convenience, Ritual.

Under this construal, Religion and Ritual are two fundamental paradigms of order or two fundamental ways of structuring the experience of the universe. This does not require that the other mode (ritual for one, religion for the other) is absent in either of the two cultures: they exist, but as subordinate moments and hence as almost unrecognizable counterparts. A religious ritual is as different from Ritual as ritualistic religions are from Religion. We shall have an opportunity to relive this problem again, but in another form later.

Given this, the problem that occupies the intellectual energies of one culture is: given that the universe is an order, how to perform actions that better fit the order? In another, it takes a different form: What is the nature of the order such that one may perform the action that require to be performed? How, asks one culture, to perform actions and continue to improve them such that the order does not disintegrate? In another, the order is not ‘visible’: it is a “design”; a “law” that lies hidden beneath. Knowledge of this order would allow one to decide about the right action that requires to be performed in indefinitely many contexts. These two paradigms of order, that distinguish these two cultures, shed some light on the way the *problem of action* is treated: to know one has to act in one culture; to act one has to know in another.

My suggestion is that these paradigms of order, in their turn, enable the emergence of culturally dominant modes of learning. In a culture like India, this leads to a learning process whose [end page 85] main focus it is to develop the *ability* of performing and improving actions. The knowledge that the members of such a culture have is what I shall call *action-knowledge*. In the next two sections, I shall go a bit deeper both into the kind of knowledge that action-knowledge is and into the nature of learning process required to acquire such a knowledge. Contrast and comparison with the West will be attempted subsequently.

### 3. *Action-Knowledge and exemplary learning*

The proposal that I shall outline in the rest of this paper is the following: Action-Knowledge (or Practical Knowledge) is a species of knowledge that is distinct from theoretical knowledge. The process of acquiring this knowledge involves mimetic learning i.e., learning through exemplars. Exemplars are different from examples and, therefore, the process of learning through exemplars is not the same as learning through examples i.e., It is not some kind of inductive learning. Action-Knowledge, on this account, is not knowledge about actions;

neither is it the same as acquiring some skill or the other. In the next section, I shall look at the properties of practical knowledge and the consequences that follow when proposed as a culture specific mode of learning.

### 3.1 Stories as models

One of the characteristic properties of Indian society, something which strikes everyone with more than a vague acquaintance of this culture, appears to be its incredible variety and stock of stories. Inundated with stories, its people appear to relish the act of telling stories: there are stories for every situation; all 'reasons' and 'explanations' require stories and their presence is as ubiquitous as the very air itself. Clearly, if a child is constantly exposed to stories at all levels of social interaction, they end up playing an important role in the very process of socializing itself. So, whatever be the roles that stories play, it is reasonable to assert that they are vital ingredients in the process of learning to live with the others. That is, in such B culture, stories would have to function as *units* of a learning process.

By virtue of which property can stories play the role that I suggest they do? I am rather hesitant to ascribe any internal or intrinsic properties to stories that enable them to be units of learning. I do not think that it makes a great deal of sense to [end page 86] speak of units of learning outside a specific learning process. However, given a specific kind of learning process stories could be its units because they do have some properties. For the moment, two such merit our attention.

Firstly, stories are a way of representing the world. Cognitively speaking, they are models of the world in a broad sense of the term. As models, they portray, stand for or represent some small part of the world. Let us briefly see how they do it.

Take, for instance, a group performing some ritual or the other, say, a rain ritual. When asked about the significance of their actions, one gets to hear a story. Such a story depicts a set of events which includes the performing of the rain ritual in conjunction with some other events. Now it is not the case that *causal efficacy* is attributed to the performance of such a ritual. That is, the members of the group do not believe that their singing and chanting in some specified fashion and the pouring of ghee into the fire altar *cause* the rains to come. They are not *justifying* this belief by telling a story. What then are they doing?

Because stories are models of a situation, as models they are neither true nor false; it is only in models that statements come out as true or false. When the group performs such a ritual and no rains come, all that can be said about the story is that it is not a model for such a situation. If, on the other hand, we look at the way the members of the group experience the situation, then quite a lot could be explicated. When the ritual is performed and the rains do not come, the group experiences this situation as "something having gone wrong somewhere". When the rains do come, it is experienced as "everything is as it should be". What are these experiences signalling?

Recollect, if you will, the suggestion I made earlier about experiencing the world as an order. The truth or falsity of the explanations about the nature of the order, I said, is irrelevant to the experience that the world is an order. There is a question embedded in that suggestion that can be answered now: In any such culture (including the Indian culture that I am talking about), at any moment of time, hypotheses float around which purport to explain the order of the universe: some or other-account of the *pattern* that one's culture and the cosmos exhibit, and some explanation of the role of individual actions with respect to sustaining or disrupting that order. Many such explanations have come and gone: Why does the sense of order not follow suit?

This is best answered, if we ask *how* such cultures manage to sustain this feeling in the absence of knowledge about the [end page 87] pattern. What mechanisms preserve the sense of order without requiring the presence of knowledge about the order, which the culture and cosmos exhibit? One such mechanism admirably suited for the job is the stories and legends that a culture possesses.

Stories preserve patterns without saying what these patterns are. They depict partial aspects of an order without specifying what the order consists of. Performing the ritual, the coming of rains, etc., is a sequence of events described in a story without specifying a relation between them. The experience of "something having gone wrong somewhere" and that of "everything is as it should be" are expressions of disturbance/appropriateness accordingly as whether the story is not/is a model of the situation. Stories do not

*explain* anything because they do not model relations (causal or otherwise) between events. In very simple terms, they just model a set of affairs.

What I have so far said about the stories allows me to propose the following idea: the ‘representational’ aspect of stories is what makes them *continuous* with other ‘representational’ products known to us like philosophy, scientific theories, etc. But, of course, there are also differences between them: whereas theories claim to explain, stories make no such claim. Theories may justify some belief that you have, stories do not. Nevertheless, stories are pedagogical instruments in so far as they have the ‘representational’ (or cognitive) property. Therefore, I will now make a mild claim, which I hope to strengthen later on in this article, that stories embody some *kind* of ‘knowledge’. Or, slightly differently, they are *units* of learning.

What kind of knowledge is it that these stories embody? And in which kind of a learning process are they its units? In order to begin answering this question, I need to look at the second property of the stories as well.

### 3.2 Stories as exemplars

Apart from exhibiting a cognitive property, stories possess a practical one too. By describing a way of going about the world, they are a way of going about the world. They are models in a practical sense i.e. they can be *emulated*. Stories are pedagogical instruments *par excellence* because of this additional property. But how can stories teach us to do anything? How can they be instructive, i.e. instruct us to do anything at all? How can a description of a way of going about in the world be itself a way of going about in the world? [end page 88]

As stories, they do not come with any explicit morals attached: they do not, for example, say that “the moral of this story is...” They are not structured as manuals for practical action either: ‘do X in order to achieve Y’. If they can teach, then it is because of the way learning *occurs* in India. Consequently, the question becomes: What kind of a learning activity is required, if stories are how one learns? My answer is that it is *mimetic learning*. As stories, they are a set of propositions. What they depict are actions. Between these actions and those of one's own, what obtains is a practical relation of mimesis. Only as such can stories function as *instructions for actions*.

Stories combine this double function: they are ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ at the same time. They are not straightforward instructions; nor are they only representational. They entertain too: but not the way the “The Little Red Riding Hood” does. Understanding and imitation fall together: to understand is to imitate and to imitate is to understand. Stories are oblique instructions disguised as representations depicting actions. *One learns while one is not aware that one is learning*. Mimesis is a sub-intentional learning.

In the previous section, I suggested that methods of teaching will teach only to the extent they dovetail with the processes of learning. Though not a controversial suggestion by itself, it must be clear what it implies: Stories can be used to teach if, and only if, the process of learning is such that its units are exemplars. Consequently, in a culture where mimetic learning is not a dominant mode, there the stories do not play the same role. They may entertain, take your fancy, capture your imagination; but instruct, they cannot. Stories, in such a culture, become a *genre* of literature and, mostly, remain at that level. Narration would be different from instruction.

If, on the other hand, narration is to become coextensive with instruction, either the narrative or the narrator must carry instructional authority. Neither the stories nor the story tellers carry this label on their sleeves. It is not even the case that stories about Gods or respected figures (say a Buddha or a Shankara) are sufficient to lend instructional authority to the narrative. That is to say, stories are not *emulated* because they portray action executed by either divine or human authorities. (This is both a factual statement about India and a consequence that flows from the suggestion that mimesis is a sub-intentional learning.) What, then, lends instructional authority to the stories? This is the same as asking what makes stories into units of a learning process. I have partially answered this question already. [end page 89]

But, there is a more intriguing point lurking in the background: *instructional authorities need not be coextensive with religious, moral, political or divine authorities*. That is to say, learning through mimesis, looked at from the point of view of the learning subject, involves the activity of ‘constructing’ the authority of the “other”. This must be an active process because the “other” does not carry identifying marks on its forehead. This has several interesting consequences as a result, not all of which are of equal importance to this paper. Let me, therefore, restrict myself to just identifying two.

If the process of going about the world involves the activity of constructing instructional authorities; and if it is the case that there is no *necessity*, say, that religious or political authorities, by virtue of their position, are also instructional authorities, the consequence is obvious: their *ability* to give form to your learning activities is very much reduced. Or, put in broad and historical terms, where mimesis obtains, there neither 'religion' nor 'politics' would have a dominating and decisive impact on ways of going about the world. The converse would also hold true: the 'foundation' for forms of interaction between members of such a society would have to be fairly independent of both the 'religious' and 'political authorities'. Sociologists have often puzzled over the fact that in India, 'religion', 'commerce', 'politics' and 'education' did not fuse, for any length of time, into one centralized authority. I suggest to you that the way learning process occurs in India might well begin to shed light on this issue.

The second point that I want to make regards the *public* or social process of mimesis. Both the process of learning and the knowledge that is acquired presuppose social interaction, instead of arguing for it in the abstract, let me illustrate by referring to, say, the moral domain once again. To be moral, in the West, is to follow some or other moral principle. The relation is between an individual, isolated subject and some injunction or the other. *How* the community in which such an individual finds himself is? Is a question of no moral significance to his moral behavior? By contrast, in a culture dominated by mimesis (like India) the relation is *between* individuals (be they the really existing community or the fictitious individuals portrayed in the stories). A moral individual, in other words, presupposes a moral community. Reformulated in different terms, the general point is this: Because mimetic learning has a public dimension, *epistemic* problems will have to refer to the *community* of learning subjects. [end page 90]

#### 4. Learning through exemplars: properties and consequences

Mimetic learning, to briefly summarize, is learning through exemplars. Exemplars, as units of such a learning process, have a representational property and can be emulated. My claim is that the dominant mode of learning in India is mimetic or exemplary learning.

There is a kind of circularity in what is said, if you take it as a definition: mimesis is exemplary learning and exemplars are units of mimetic learning. To avoid this circularity entirely, more requires to be said both about exemplars and mimesis than I could possibly say now. However, it is possible to minimize the circularity in two, ways: Firstly, take what I have said so far not as a definition, but as an *attempt* at explication; secondly, by speaking a bit more about both exemplars and mimesis, I shall suggest that it is possible to understand them in relative independence. Quite apart from that, something else requires to be done: the claim that this way of learning is a dominant mode of learning in India has not yet shown to be the case. I shall try to do that as well. However, the intention is not so much to convince you of the truth of that claim as to make it appear plausible. That will be done by drawing out some consequences that follow from such a claim.

##### 4.1. Properties of action-knowledge

Let me begin by exploring the properties of action-knowledge. Because I want to talk about this at a rather general level, let me take an example some or the other variant of which will be familiar to you.

Suppose that you are a social worker, working, say, amongst immigrant children from the neighborhood. You have undertaken many activities to integrate them better into the neighborhood social life and, for the moment, you are at a loss about how to proceed further. That is, you do not know what to do next. While wrestling with the despair arising out of the desire to do something 'new' and not being able to know what it is that yet should do, you meet an old friend of yours. In the process of conversation, he casually mentions about some activity that an acquaintance of his undertook in, say, an old people's home. As soon as you hear about it, you suddenly know what your next action would be with the immigrant children. And, in all probability, your action is totally different from the activity that took place in the old people's home. What exactly happened here? [end page 91]



I would like to suggest that the activity performed at the old people's home functioned as an *exemplar* for you: that is, it functioned as a generative action. This, in the first place, is what an exemplar is: it creates new, original actions. If you are willing to accept this suggestion, I should now like to elaborate further on this point.

There are two ways in which you could understand the statement made above. You could say that the linguistic description of the action gave you a new idea about the action that you can execute. But, there is also a second way of construing the statement, which is what I am proposing. I am *not* saying that the activity performed at the old people's home gave you an idea of another action that you could perform in your situation. No. You must read me literally: that person's *action* generated a new action; you are now able to perform a new action, something that you could not do before. While you may be able to describe the activity, which you intend to perform, this description/conception of the action is *parasitic* upon the ability to execute it. *In exactly the same way someone's idea/thought/theory can create/generate new idea/thought/theory in your head*, someone's action, as an exemplar, creates a new action. You may complain that this is spooky. Fair enough. But, I put to you, it is no more spooky than the 'fact' that ideas can give birth to new ideas. Actions give birth to new and original actions in the way ideas create novel ideas.

You have now, in other words, acquired action-knowledge. That is, when described from your point of view, your *ability* to produce a new action now is what it means to speak of you having acquired action-knowledge. In this case, the exemplar happened to be a *linguistic description* of someone's action. Quite obviously, it need not be so in all cases. You may see someone doing something, and that enables you to execute a new action as well. In both cases, the learning process is the same: learning through an exemplar or *mimetic learning*. As a consequence, it must be clear that *mimesis*, as a learning process, is creative and dynamic.

Consider, now, the second property of action-knowledge. In our case, the exemplar happened to be a very specific action undertaken by, a very specific individual in a very specific context. And yet, it was able to create in you, another specific individual in a totally different context, the ability to execute an entirely different action. All exemplars are always *context bound*. But, they are generative in totally *different contexts*. Or, put even more clearly, *it is precisely the context dependence of an action that makes it fertile in different contexts*. **[end page 92]**

Our general intuition regarding the nature of guidelines or decision principles is that the more general, abstract and context independent they are, the more useful and true they are. In fact, this is a demand that we make upon all knowledge-claims: a moral principle, a legal statute is acceptable if and only if it enables you to choose and execute the right action in all/most contexts. For that to happen, a moral principle requires to be context free. However, for action-knowledge it appears to go the other way: Inter-contextual applicability is directly proportional to contextual embeddedness and inversely to context insensitivity and generality.

Consider, now, the third property of action-knowledge. Even though you knew what it is that you wanted to achieve, the knowledge of this goal, together with the knowledge about your present state, did not help you in producing a new action. Also, your learning through the exemplar occurred when you *were not aware* that you were learning. Even though each of these two points enables me to argue the point independently, their conjunction gives it a greater force: *your ability to execute a new action is indifferent to the presence or absence of goals*. Or action-knowledge is not *goal dependent*.

One of the basic beliefs in the Western tradition is that human action is goal oriented action, and that this constitutes an *intrinsic* property of human actions. If I am right, just the opposite is true: intrinsically, *human action is goal-less*. This does not, quite obviously, prevent you from finding a goal for an action when you have action-knowledge. But mimesis, as a sub-intentional learning that involves the ability to execute actions, does not require the presence of goals. Practical activity, practical knowledge - as species of knowledge - is not intentional and it is not goal-directed.

Consider the fourth and final property of action-knowledge. Here, I will be brief because to argue the case would require bringing in other considerations extraneous to the paper. The situation you were in was one where you did not *know* what to do. It is not as though you had difficulty in choosing between the alternatives that were open to you. It is not even the case, I would like to suggest, that you *chose* between the action that you can now execute and those action-alternatives that existed previously. Rather, acquiring the ability of executing a new action *was* the same as knowing what to do.

In slightly more general terms, what I am driving at is this. Within the western tradition, the dominant approach is to treat epistemic problems in decision-theoretic terms or as decision problems. I believe that this is not the case with respect to **[end page 93]** practical knowledge: epistemic problems regarding action-knowledge are not decision problems, but *learning* problems. Problems of social interaction and social organization, under this construal, are problems of learning.

By saying this, I do not deny that it is possible to describe them as decision problems. (Why it is possible to do so is a theme I reflect upon in the last section.). Besides, I am aware, that social sciences are increasingly turning towards game theory and choice theories in their attempts to understand social interactions.

#### 4.2. Action-Knowledge and cultural specificity: some hypotheses

Let me now turn my attention to outlining some empirical hypotheses that seem to follow if we accept the idea that mimesis is a way of learning characteristic to India. In fact I believe that it is typical of the Asian culture and not restricted to India alone. Consequently, here and there I talk of Asia and India as if these two terms are interchangeable, which they are in the context of speaking about learning processes.

1. If socialization involves mimesis and families are the primary units of socializing a human infant, the success of the socialization process depends very much on what the family exactly *models*. That is, an individual can be taught to “live with others” if, and only if, the family stands for or represents the significant details of the social environment. The family, in its important details, must be *continuous* with the moral community at large. And, I submit, it does.

Not only this. In a peculiar way, this sheds light upon the “sternness” or “harshness” considered typical of both family life and teaching situations in India. One is being prepared for life when one is brought up as an offspring and a pupil. The parents and the teachers, between them, prepare the child to act morally when it goes out as an adult to meet the world at large. That can only be done if the child, during its maturational phases, faces a wide variety of situations and sees the way in which the ‘others’ are *going* to construe its actions. Parents and teachers must, in the full sense of the word, stand for and represent the rest of the community. Consequently, one’s family is also one’s sternest and harshest critic. If one passes this test, the belief is that one can pass any other test. Hence the descriptions of an ideal father or teacher: “harder than the diamond, softer than a flower”.

The family as a “moral arena” as Indian culture sees it, and family as a “Heaven in a Heartless World” (as Lasch titles his **[end page 94]** book on the family) cannot be sharper. In Western families one is to experience love, one learns to be oneself. The socializing or the educative role of the family is secondary, it is derivative. Its primary task is to “protect” the child from the “cruel world out there”. If it prepares the child to face up to the cold and indifferent world, it does so by providing that “love and understanding” which gives the child the courage to “go and get” what it wants. Family is one’s only oasis in the desert of social life.

2. Mimesis, though not a blind imitative learning, entails a *reproduction* of existing actions i.e. it essentially *conserves*. A culture dominated by mimetic learning must, perforce, exhibit a very strong pull towards conservatism. Indian culture is essentially conservative. Tradition, the past etc., must weigh heavily on all those who are members of such a culture. Again, I submit that it does.
3. The other side of the same phenomenon is what happens when such a culture meets with that of the West. There is a partial *exchange* of authorities, not their disappearance. The tendency is towards an imitation of these new authorities. Whether we look at the shallow ‘westernization’ of the youth, the clarion call of the intellectuals to follow the West, or even at the fact that the Japanese have earned the label, often used pejoratively, of being “very good imitators” - the phenomenon is the same. We imitate the West not because there is some iron law of capitalism that compels us, willy-nilly, to be like them, but because it is our way of learning.
4. Learning through mimesis requires that one develops the ability to *discriminate* finely. One has to sort out, so to speak, situations and actions in such a way that one distinguishes between ‘to emulate in this situation’ from ‘to emulate in that situation’. Not all aspects of an event or action should be

emulated. In other words, one grows to be a member of such a culture by acquiring a finely tuned set of 'discriminating criteria'.

How is this acquired? Again, the answer cannot be other than to say by mimesis. However, events and actions must lose their clarity and simplicity when multiple and often incompatible models are said to model the same situation. They must become complex and essentially ambiguous. Indeed, I claim, they do. *One* expression of this situation is the extraordinary productivity of Indian culture with respect to "religions".

5. In the previous section, I pointed out that instructional authority is not coextensive with religious, moral or political authorities. Here, I will simply state some things explicitly, which [end page 95] were said there implicitly. Nothing about the learning process prevents that they be the same; the point is that it is not required.

The first thing to notice is that if there exists a learning process one of whose moments requires constructing an authority, this orientation is bound to spread into or spill over into other spheres. That is, the very idea of what it means to be an authority will begin to get affected. Consequently, what it means to speak of 'political authorities', 'rule of law' or even 'religious authorities' in a culture like India is anything but clear. To appreciate the force of this difference, take a look at the history of the West: each challenge to the authority (be it clerical, biblical, political or juridical) has precipitated a deep crisis in the culture. Challenges of similar nature, of which there have been many, have hardly rippled the fabric of social life in India.

There is a second point, about which I can afford to be briefer. Mimesis is a way of learning to live with others and go about the world. The nature of this learning process severs any intrinsic relationship between instructional authorities and political or religious authorities. If the Indian 'caste system' is the 'result' of such a learning process, it follows that it rests on neither 'religion' nor 'politics'. Not just that. It must be an organization that resists any centralization of 'political' and 'religious' power where the latter, by virtue of such centralization, could begin, to function as an instructional authority. (I say it 'must be', because it could not have survived for so long if it had tied itself to any one 'religious' or political authority.) What its implications are, I will leave it to you to reflect about.

6. Consider another implication of my suggestion. I am informed by people active in the area that some philosophers of mathematics are beginning to turn their attention to the processes of constructing a proof in order to say what it is for something to be a proof. They believe that the notion of 'proof' is somehow related to, or requires ineluctable reference to, the *activity* of constructing a proof. Consider now another fact: Immigrant Asians in Europe and America turn out to be better in such disciplines as Mathematics and Engineering than any other ethnic minority. This difference between Asians on the one hand, and other groups (including the native white population) is statistically significant enough to engage the attention of psychologists, pedagogists, etc., and to initiate research into this question in a concentrated way. *Suppose* that there is some truth to the proposal made by some philosophers of mathematics. In such a case, the fact I drew your attention to appears to [end page 96] follow as a *consequence* of the notion of learning through mimesis: A culture whose dominant mode of learning develops action-knowledge in its members, 'predisposes' the latter to become proficient in domains involving action-knowledge. When members of such a culture take to mathematics or engineering, the number of those who become mathematicians or engineers will have to be significantly higher when compared to members from another culture. *Prima facie*, it appears to me, such is the case.
7. Consider, finally, another kind of issue that emerges if we relate what is said about action-knowledge with the suggestion I made about order and learning.

If the 'action' of action-knowledge is neither intentional nor goal directed, the problem of action could hardly be one of relation between 'intending: and acting' However, if the perception of order is such that it is not possible for it to be there without underlying 'laws' or 'principles', then it is obvious that action (*typically* human action, that is) could not be without a conception guiding it. Action becomes nothing but applied conception; practice nothing but applied theory, and

technology nothing but applied science. However, this view is one culture's way of looking at the issue. It is in this sense that I said in the introduction that action theories, when they talk about action, are not so much talking about the nature of *human* action as much about one culture-specific -notion.

In what I have said above, there is a problem that requires to be made explicit. If action (the *typically* human action) does not rest upon conceptions; if it is not an execution of an idea, what could be said about the results of such an action? By the same token, and extending it further, it could be asked, Could an ordered *phenomenal world exist without being law-governed?* The answer will have to be yes, but requiring of some qualification.

Were we to think of the Natural world, the positive answer provided above appears quite incomprehensible. The natural world is ordered precisely because it is law governed. What would a negation of this statement amount to? Frankly speaking, I doubt whether one could put it in words at all. I do believe that the natural world is law-governed and an ordered phenomenal world without laws is simply incomprehensible. We could not survive in such a world.

The matter, however, takes on a different light when the 'world' in question happens to be the *social world*. A social world is the creation of human actions, the knowledge of creating it is action-knowledge and this action is *not* an execution of [end page 97] conceptions. Incredibly complex forms of social organization can exist, continue to adapt and expand themselves *without* being governed by any 'laws'. That is, there is no *prima facie* reason why it is not possible. Not just that. If you are willing to assent (however tentatively) to what I have said so far, it might appear that it is the *nature* of social organizations that they are based upon no laws or principles. A social organization is accumulated practical knowledge. To seek to understand a social organization by looking for its 'laws' (or the 'principles' upon which it is based) might be as absurd as the denial of the law-governed nature of the Natural world. It must be obvious where I am driving at: Indian caste system is based on no principle. This is *obvious* to an Indian, but quite incomprehensible to 'indologists'. The way of creating a social world is different from the way of understanding a natural world.

These are but a few of the consequences that follow from the notion of mimetic learning. As I said in the beginning, these consequences do not 'prove' my claim. But, they ought at least make my suggestion appear plausible.

Let me summarize what I have said so far: Action-knowledge is *not* a knowledge about actions, but the ability to execute new actions. Action-knowledge is acquired through mimesis, which is a process of learning through exemplars. Actions generate actions - *not* ideas about actions - in exactly the same way ideas generate ideas. Action and action-knowledge require total contextual embeddedness and are intrinsically goal-less.

A culture like India must now begin to appear in a different light: inundated with exemplars, it must be dominated by mimetic learning. Spheres such as morality, law, social organization, human interaction etc., belong to that of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is cumulative perhaps to a greater degree than knowledge in the theoretical sphere. And the form of social organization, the so-called 'caste system', is one such cumulative result. And that is why; no Indian could tell you what its "principles" are. Yet, it reproduces itself because there is knowledge available - action-knowledge - to reproduce it. Its ability to 'adapt' itself to changing environments is merely the ability of human beings to execute actions in different environments. Several intriguing results flow-from this (re)description of the Indian "caste system", but exploring them is beyond the province of this paper. [end page 98]

##### 5. *Knowing how, knowing that and action-knowledge: a contrast*

How much of what I have said so far is unique to Indian (Asian) Culture? Is there no mimetic learning in the West? Or is mimesis merely a variant of a learning process that is really not culture specific? The answers to these questions are complex. In what follows, I merely try to take the first step in exploring them.

At first sight, it would appear that mimesis is omnipresent in the West as well. Children learn through imitation; an adult learns to eat with chopsticks or learns to dance through imitative actions; an academic imitates his more 'successful' colleagues by trying to publish as many articles as he possibly can etc. The list, it seems, is quite huge.

Not quite. Instead of arguing for the details, let me show what I take to be the case in two ways. You would be willing to accept, I suppose, the suggestion that the moral domain is a domain of human actions. Let us, therefore, look briefly at the presence or absence of exemplars in this domain for the West. After having done this, let us see what the relationship is between action-knowledge on the one hand, and the forms of knowledge theorized about in the West on the other.

### 5.1. Action-Knowledge and moral action

If stories about individuals have to function as exemplars, as I have said before, either the narrative or the narrator must embody instructional authority. At first sight, it would appear that such moral authorities do exist within the Western culture: some saints; perhaps the figure of Jesus Christ himself; priests; or figures like Martin Luther King or even someone like Gandhi. These people call them moral 'ideals', seem to play the same role as those played by the exemplars: one is inspired by their lives, one takes them as an ideal to emulate, one is exhorted to follow in their foot steps etc.

On the other hand, it is also the case in the West that moral learning i.e., acquisition of practical knowledge is conceived to consist of two steps:

- (a) making some set of moral principles one's own; followed by
- (b) an attempt to apply them as, consistently as possible.

The first phase alone involves what could reasonably called a learning process: in the process of maturation from childhood to adulthood, one learns these principles. Once this phase is traversed, the rest of one's life consists of successes and failures in the application of these principles.

The link between these two, between the existence of **[end page 99]** instructional authorities and the notion of moral knowledge as a knowledge of principles, is quite clear: these moral ideals embody some or other set of principles. Consequently, if none of the above figures embody the moral principles that some individual happens to subscribe, these ideals cease having any instructional authority. Further, it is not even necessary that there be embodiments of moral principles at all: acceptance of moral principles is not parasitic upon the existence of ideals.

Nevertheless, let us look at those to whom such or similar figures are worth emulating. (Because, it is only with respect to these kind of people that we could speak of mimesis in the field of the ethical.) What could they emulate? Either they could follow what these moral ideals have said, or emulate what they did. To do the former is the same as accepting some principle as your own: the only difference, in this case, is that either its foundation or its legitimacy derives from the person in question. Let us look at the latter possibility. *What does emulation mean here? It means a simple, mechanical and blind imitation of these ideals.* Each of these ideal figures, as individuals, were born into and confronted situations and events that are totally different from that of those who want to emulate them. Not only that. As embodiments of 'principles', they are indifferent to contexts. Consequently, these 'ideals' are exemplars only in this sense: either one reproduces their lives and their actions, which is impossible (not quite, think of the early Christian martyrs), or one accepts the impossibility of such a reproduction. These two possibilities are preserved in the moral talk of the West thus: One "ought" to be moral, but one never "is", or that the "ought" is different from "is"; and that these individuals are (somehow) *exceptional* figures. That means to say, moral "ideals" have instructional authority only in the sense that they embody or represent the longing and desire to be moral. More, they are not. As exceptional individuals, they are other than and different from the ordinary mortals who *strive* to be like them (i.e. be moral persons themselves). But, they represent a goal that is worthy, but quite unreachable. If they are relevant to daily practices, it is only in a negative way: daily practices 'ought' to be other than what they, in fact, are. What one does not learn from such 'ideals' is how to reach that goal i.e. these ideals do not help *improve* daily practices.

If we look at the stories in India, on the other hand, they are tales about real or fictitious figures performing actions- in-contexts. Stories of kings, long lost life styles and of actions ages ago are used as though they have something to say to us in today's world. That they do say something makes it obvious [end page 100] that whatever might be required, it could not be blind emulation. These stories *enable* you to execute the action in your situation without there being any kind of similarity between these two contexts.

The point of this contrast is the following: morally exemplary figures (in the West) are not *exemplars* in the sense in which I am using the term. An exemplar is a unit of learning and moral 'ideals' of the West are *never* that. There is a disturbing consequence to this thought: in the field of morality, the West does not have the process of learning that I call mimesis, i.e., because there are no exemplars, there is no possibility of learning through exemplars. If moral knowledge *is* practical knowledge (not knowledge about 'principles' that *allegedly* guide actions), and practical knowledge requires exemplary learning, the conclusion is as obvious as it will be unpalatable: *the voluminous literature about moral activity* in the West *hides* an abysmal poverty in moral life. Those millions of treatises, tracts and articles that exist are not expressions of the sophistication or the advance made by the West in its quest for the moral order, but expressions of *unease* and *absence*: absence of morality and the concomitant unease.

Is this consequence true? I do not think that the issue is one of veracity or otherwise of the claim. I, for one, do not personally like descriptions of other cultures that make them out to be 'immoral' or 'non-moral'. There is a more substantial problem at hand: Why does the moral domain of one culture when described from within the culture of another appear 'immoral' or 'non-moral'? Unfortunately, I cannot take up this problem here.

Be as it may, it is time to look at the issue of the presence of mimesis in the West from a more general point of view.

## 5.2. Skill and action-knowledge

Consider the following example, original to Ryle, about a skilled mountaineer stuck on a mountain. At a loss to *negotiate* the obstacle that is in front of him, he observes a monkey performing some sequence of actions. That inspires him to explore new strategies; new ways of circumventing the problem, the result of this strategizing is a successful climb.

A Rylean would see this 'improvisation' as a part of being a skilled mountaineer. Consequently, the suggestion about learning through exemplars appears assimilable within the Rylean 'knowing how' and 'knowing that'. That is to say, what I have called as a process of learning through exemplars may be conceptualized as a process of acquiring the skill to identify an exemplar. As a [end page 101] result, the notion of skill could be reintroduced at a meta-level in such a way that knowing how to identify an exemplar and knowing how to use it on the one hand, and knowing that something is an exemplar emerge as the two primary divisions within the sketch that I have provided. An added temptation or philosophical incentive for indulging in such an exercise would be that some of the counterintuitive properties may be dispensed with by pleading ignorance: because we are not quite clear how human beings acquire the various skills that they do acquire, until such time as we are clear, there is no need to postulate a new species of knowledge with queer properties.

Action-knowledge, as an ability to produce new actions, could not possibly be a skill because any skilled action has a history of execution with respect to the organism in question. The characteristic property of action-knowledge is precisely that the action) which can be executed, is novel and original. Even though this appears a decisive argument, it could be easily met thus: what it means to speak of a skilled chess player, a skilled surgeon or a skilled driver is precisely their *ability* to improvise in new situations and come up with new actions. After all, skill is not an execution of drilled actions, even if some kind of drill is required to acquire some skill.

However, it appears to me, that the new action that a skilled practitioner can execute arises by a combination of actions, which he had already executed. That is to say, it is like generating a new word out of an existing repertoire of words. Secondly, even more importantly, the skill that one has in combining familiar actions to produce new actions is not *sufficient*, in at least some circumstances, to improvise. A skilled mountaineer stuck on the mountain absently watching a monkey move from place to place is able to do something as a result of taking the actions of the monkey as an exemplar. Prior to *this learning episode*, there was an action that he could not generate out of the repertoire of actions he had. If he could have, he would have not

been stuck in the first place. To be sure, he needed his skills in order to learn what he learned from the monkey's movement: you and I watching the same monkey's action would not be *able* to what the skilled mountaineer did. But, this is no problem: what we can learn depends to a very great extent upon what we have already learned. That one and the same kind of learning process can occur both within the framework of exercising a skilled activity and elsewhere (that does not involve an exercise of skill) suggest very strongly that learning through exemplars cannot be seen as a skill to identify and use an exemplar. **[end page 102]**

There is a third reason, purely linguistic in nature, that suggests that mimetic learning cannot be identified with 'knowing how'. In the statement "skill to learn through exemplars", the word 'skill' can be replaced by the word 'learning' without any obvious loss of meaning. This suggests that 'skill' is coextensive with 'learning'. However, the same substitution does not work elsewhere as far as I can see: "He is a skilled tennis player", "He is a skilled surgeon", "He is a skilled problem solver" etc., would lose some of their intended meaning if 'learning' replaced 'skill' everywhere. Consequently, we could not be using 'skill' with the connotations usually attached to it, when we say "the skill to learn through exemplars". Fourthly and *finally*, the 'knowing how' in its normal usage picks out a cluster of actions that are related to each other. To do so with respect to 'learning through exemplars', it appears to me, would not come easily and with the same degree of familiarity.

Even though these are some of the reasons for wanting to distinguish between a learning process that is indifferent to *what* is learned and a skill that is not so, none of them, as I see the situation, are decisive. With suitable modifications, it is possible to absorb action-knowledge into the relatively more familiar 'knowing how'.

Why, you may wonder, is it important? The answer would become obvious when we look into the way action-knowledge could be absorbed into 'propositional knowledge'.

### 5.3. Action-knowledge and knowing that

Is there any reason to limit the process of mimetic learning to the domain of actions and social interactions? No reason apart from an arbitrary fiat comes to my mind. Besides, if learning through exemplars is indifferent to *what* is learned, there is no good reason to say that it is limited to practical actions only.

Consider a surgeon who intends to use radiation therapy on his patient in order to destroy a tumor. Though a concentrated high dose is required, to use it would be fatal to the patient. While at a loss as to what to do, he hears of an army general who conquered a fortress by sending in his army in several very small units and have them converge upon the fortress from different directions. The result of this hearing enables our surgeon to execute a new action: he now radiates the tumor away by sending in several mild doses and have them converge upon the tumor in different directions.

There is a reason why I choose this story: it is one of the examples used to study the role *analogies* and metaphors in **[end page 103]** human problem evolving processes. I do not want to go into the details of the arguments, but the claim of the cognitive scientists working in this domain is that analogies and metaphors play a role in discovering a solution in the way the story of the general inspired a possible solution to the doctor's dilemma. In other words, what I would have called an 'exemplar' is what they call an 'analogy'.

If exemplars are nothing but 'analogies' or 'metaphors', both the process of 'mimetic learning' and the notion of 'action-knowledge' can be dispensed with. With that also go the so-called counterintuitive consequences. We could safely suggest that the 'stories', for example, give you an idea about the action that you could perform; 'learning through exemplars' is really the more familiar process of solving problems using analogies etc.

How can this challenge be met? Firstly, the point of analogies and metaphors, in so far as they are a part of the learning process, is this: learning is learning through examples. Examples are illustrations, or instances, of some general principle or the other. To learn through examples is to discover the general principles that are instanced. Analogies and metaphors, as a consequence, turn out to be "good" examples, i.e., they are a subset of examples. It appears to me that this exactly is what exemplars are *not*: *they are not examples* because they do not instantiate anything.

Secondly, such a process of learning is what we call inductive learning, i.e., a process that induces general principles from a set of particular instances. The kind of knowledge gleaned is the knowledge of general 'laws' and, as such, pertains to the domain of 'theoretical' knowledge. However, it appears to me that one does induce any principle while learning through mimesis. And the kind of knowledge that one acquires is an ability to perform or execute some kind of an action. It is because of this that I would like to look at action-knowledge as a distinct species of knowledge.

Neither of the two arguments are decisive, much less convincing. It appears to me that it is possible to assimilate the notion of learning through exemplars into some or other variant of analogical problem solving.

However, if such an assimilation of mimesis into either 'skills' or 'knowledge' were to occur, the following appears to happen: you could not shed light on, say, 'caste system' (or any other fact) of a culture by speaking of either 'skills' or 'analogies'. In other words, the explanatory potential of the heuristic would be lost if such assimilations were to occur.

The problem must be obvious by now: Action-Knowledge and [end page 104] the idea of mimetic learning, which have some counterintuitive consequences, are proposed as culture specific modes of learning. When seen in this light, they appear to be productive because they are able to shed some light on phenomena which otherwise appear puzzling. However, as a mode of learning it appears capable of extension to areas other than practical learning. Not just that: any refusal to do so appears arbitrary. However, when this extension takes place, it merely appears as a mild variant which can be absorbed by other notions of learning. These other notions of learning, however, are unable to shed much light precisely about those phenomena which mimetic learning was able to illuminate. How should this be addressed?

#### 6. *Comparative anthropology as a philosophical quest*

In the first section, I suggested that the paradigms of order differ between cultures: Religion for one, Ritual for the other. There I hinted that each knows of the other paradigms of order as well: religious rituals and ritualistic religions. But a religious ritual is and is not ritual; a ritualistic religion is and is not a Religion. This division has now reproduced itself in the dominant modes of learning: mimesis is and is not inductive learning; it is and it is not a skill; it is present and is not present in the West.

I am not going to plead 'dialectics' in order to understand the situation. There is, I believe, a more substantial issue at stake.

In so far as learning is a process of creating a habitat, several kinds of activities are involved: the ability to build and sustain social interactions, the ability to think about Nature and society etc. Each cultural group, it appears to me, develops one of these kinds of activities into a dominant mode. Other kinds and ways of learning continue to exist and develop: but they do so *within* the dominant framework, as modified by it and in a subordinate mode. This is, of course, obvious: even if mimesis is the process of developing action-knowledge, a culture dominated by it requires theoretical knowledge. However, the mode of theoretical learning emerges within the overarching frame of practical learning. The other way, for another culture, goes as well.

Consequently, the issue of extending one mode of learning to encompass other modes is actual not because of the propensity of the theoreticians to raise it: Rather, it is an actual extension that a culture has already accomplished. That is to say, cultures have developed other modes of learning apart from the dominant mode of learning but within the latter: subordinated to it or [end page 105] modified by it. Formulated differently: A culturally dominant mode of learning extends and adapts itself to other areas of learning. However, as we have seen, such *extensions* are not *productive*. Mimetic learning does not appear to tell us much about theoretical learning; theoretical knowledge has even less to say about practical knowledge. This state of affairs mirrors the historical development that has actually taken place: A culture like India that had 'specialized' in developing action-knowledge did not give us the Natural sciences. By the same token, the culture that did develop the natural sciences exhibits abysmal poverty in social, practical and moral life.

When we therefore ask questions about the *existence* of different kinds of learning in other cultures, we will have to answer in the affirmative: Yes, for example, mimesis exists in the West as well. But its relation to the dominant mode of learning in India is akin to some kind of family resemblance', these two are not the same;



they are not identical learning processes. Consequently, the second answer: if mimesis refers to the way learning occurs in India and to the domains it includes, then mimesis is absent in the West. Mimesis is and *is not* present in the West.

In the first section, I linked modes of learning to the experience of order. In this paper, I speak of the Indian and Western cultures. There are, however, other cultures and civilizations: the African, the American-Indian - to mention just two. *How do they experience order? What kinds of learning processes have they developed as their dominant modes of learning?* To really and seriously begin asking *questions* about human learning, leave alone developing a theory about it, we need to have culture-specific answers to issues that we cannot even formulate properly today. Before we could say what 'knowledge' is, we need to know how cultures survived, and what they have learned.

Such studies, undertaken by members of different cultures against the background of their cultures, have hardly started to emerge. Instead, what we do have are some 'universal theories' which are neither universal much less theories - that merely legislate universal scope to one culture-specific conceptions. In the same way a religion does not become a universal religion because it calls itself "Catholic", a dominant mode of learning does not become the way of learning simply because it is called 'scientific'. To debate today whether 'theoretical' knowledge is more basic than action-knowledge or whether the former is parasitic upon the latter is to indulge in a senseless struggle. However, given the kind of dominance that the West enjoys and the tragic manner in which it has acquired this dominance, the **[end page 106]** questions set by its intellectuals have become the questions of inquiry: the problem of action is the relation between 'intending and acting', between 'mental states and actions' and so forth. These are not the problems of action or action-knowledge, but those that arise when you attempt to treat a dominant mode of learning as a subordinate one.

In this article, I have taken a very hesitant first step in executing a project that I believe is necessary. As a first step, it is unbalanced and uncoordinated. However, the tentativeness of the first step is not an indication of the weakness of the project of learning to walk; instead, it is a prelude to tread firmly. In the same way, I hope that you will not *prejudge* the kind of project I am pleading for by the merits (or their absence) of this paper. As we well know, experience, here as elsewhere, will bring the requisite skills.

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