

Mysteries arise in all areas of inquiry: professor

By H. Kaji and J. Heirannia

TEHRAN — Professor Eric Thomas Weber believes “mysteries arise in all areas of inquiry.”

He adds, “There are things unexplained at the end of any study. This is just a fact about the finite nature of human knowledge and inquiry.”

Weber, an assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, made these remarks in an interview with the Mehr News Agency.

Following is the text of the interview:

Q: Do you believe that there is a sharp distinction between mystery and problem in philosophy, humanities, and social science?

A: In the broad sense of the term, mysteries arise in all areas of inquiry. What is mysterious is generally something unexplained or kept secret, and often that inspires curiosity. In the first sense, there are things unexplained at the end of any study. This is just a fact about the finite nature of human knowledge and inquiry. I would not make a sharp distinction between mysteries and problems in philosophy, humanities, and social science, though I believe that some things believed to be genuine mysteries are only imagined. In such cases, there is no difference for action between believing one view or another about it. There are also some cases in which the two terms are not used interchangeably. For example, when one solves a mathematical problem, to refer to the problem as having been mysterious may sometimes seem a bit dramatic for the situation. Nevertheless, when a cashier does not know why the cash does not add up right, he or she feels a bit of mystery in trying to reconcile the numbers. So, true mysteries, I would say, tend to be those that are problems not only in the technical sense, but also in the pressing, lived meaning of the word. They also bear some weight in determining

some possible difference that could be made in thinking one way or another about them. The mysterious is something that captures interest. Problems do this too, but “problem” refers to a matter of importance and concern inspiring interest in some cases, but could also refer to matters as exercises to be solved, as in mathematics homework – a “math problem.”

Q: Can these sciences pursue the mysteries, or they should only focus on problems?

A: One way we use the word “mystery” refers to the big questions at the limits of our knowledge. Sometimes these questions are of the sort that are distant from the problems of our everyday lives. One example, for instance, is the question of how exactly Stonehenge was built. Mysteries of these sorts are interesting in their own right, but also may teach us something about mechanisms used long ago that could be utilized today more than they are. It is easy to think that scholars should focus only on immediate, pressing problems, but so much of what people learn is achieved indirectly because of the free inquiry of people into subjects of their greatest interests. Many lessons are learned by accident or on route to something that itself may not appear to be a mundane problem. For instance, when countries sought to compete in the space race, which had both mysteries and real-world problems as its motivation, many technologies were developed on the way. Or, when a scholar studies a subject in the humanities or social sciences, he or she may uncover or create invaluable cultural artifacts that generate products and revenues for industry. The subsequent value of this work is wonderful, but cannot be planned in so many cases.

The bigger problem to which your question points, however, is that some scholars forget to highlight the ultimate value of what they do for others when they conduct their work in the humanities and social sciences. When



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this happens, they sometimes lose sight of part of the social value of what they do. This can be a problem, to be sure, and can lead people to study only abstract matters that have little possible value for society.

The Pragmatist philosophers whom I study would not require that scholars immediately demonstrate the value of what they do. But, they thought about meaning in inquiry in a way that relates to what kinds of possible consequences could arise for life and action if studies should point us in one way or another.

In other words, some mysteries only appear to be problems, but are actually phantoms. They look like problems, but the resolution of answering them sometimes bears no potential difference for how one would think or act with reference to their solution. In such a case, the Pragmatist response is to say that there is no real difference between the answers. William James demonstrated this with an example.

James explained that in his day, people would debate whether a person goes around a squirrel on a tree

when he or she goes around the tree. Squirrels tend not to let you go to their sides and back, always circling, to keep themselves safe. So, one clearly goes around the tree, but does one go around the squirrel? To have an intense debate about this subject might seem like we are talking about a mystery or a real problem for thinking. In fact, the situation is answered if we simply ask what we mean by “going around.” If going around means going to the East, North, West, and South of something, then one has gone around the squirrel.

But, as any boxer knows, to do this is not to get to the side of one’s opponent. Boxers circle, yet rarely get to see each others’ sides. Seeing a side is to gain advantage. So, a boxer may want to get around his or her opponent, but will fail on this first definition.

So, that person may define going around as a matter of being in front, to the side of, then to the back of, and finally to the side of the squirrel or boxing opponent. Once we pick which sense we mean, the apparent problem resolves. I believe that there are many problems that are like this false problem. They sometimes seem to be mysteries, but only because we fail to ask ourselves for what practical possible situation our different points of view on a subject make a difference. When we keep such questions in mind, we direct inquiry to real problems and valuable mysteries. That is where I would make the distinction that your question suggests.

Eric Thomas Weber is assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, USA. He has published in human studies, review of policy research, *Skepsis*, *William James Studies*, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, and *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. He is the author of *Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism* (Continuum, 2010). His second book, *Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy*, will be published in the future.