

Philosophy in Schools; a Step towards Creating a Better World

Ms. Richa Sharma

Centre for Philosophy, SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University,
E-mail: mmricha@gmail.com

Abstract—Whenever I go to a social or family gathering, the first question asked is always the same - what are you doing? And when I say I am doing Ph.D in Philosophy, the immediate next question is - what is the scope after the Ph.D? The word 'scope' here acquires an special connotation. It refers to the 'probability of getting a job'. In open-market economies, the utility of any subject is assessed by the fact that how effective a subject is to earn you a big package at the end of the degree. Only that subject is worth studying which can enhance one's employability. However, the objective is to argue that we need to introduce philosophy as a subject to school children which requires us to move beyond the 'scope-based assessment' of the worthiness of the subject taught and learnt. For, the worthiness of philosophy as a subject doesn't lie in its ability to make one employable rather in its very content and the method by which it gets transected. To accomplish the objective of the paper, I shall first highlight the need and desire to introduce philosophy as a subject to school children. In the process, I shall address and clarify the prevalent misconceptions regarding the term 'philosophy', as it has direct bearing upon some of the major objections usually cited against the introduction of philosophy at a school level.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her book "Note for Profit; Why Democracy Needs Humanities" (2012), Martha Nussbaum warns us of a global crisis. She says, "This crisis is not a financial crisis of 2008, it is an internal crisis spreading like a cancer, which is not visible, it is a crisis in education!" This crisis manifests itself through the sense of inferiority towards subjects such as social science and arts. As a result, we are building a society where marketable machines are being produced but there is no encouragement to those abilities and capacities which can be helpful in the development of a 'responsible citizen' and contribute towards building and sustaining a truly democratic society. In other words, we are assessing the subject by its 'scope'- an effect emanating from a cultural shift towards measuring value only in instrumental and monetary terms.[1]

The danger that Nussbaum points to seems almost palpable. The refugee crisis arising from the Syrian crisis or the response of the European countries to it, spread of terrorism, ever growing religious fanaticism, suicide-bombings, collective and personal attacks, the killing of bishops, artists and intellectuals in the country and neighbouring countries,

students unrest in campuses, sense of dejection among the youths, drugs and depression etc— each of these, without any doubt, points to that danger. If economic development is the only solution to every problem, as some of those who give prominence to economic development, then the question arises, why are these complications becoming more frightening even in the financially competent countries? In fact, rapid economic growth may be a helpful factor for a better life but it is not a sufficient factor. This sufficient factor is education; one which helps in restoring the human values, which can create a person who is sensitive, capable to understand, face and negotiate with the complexities of changing society and, most importantly the one who can establish dialogue with *the other*. And, it is inconceivable to imagine a kind of education that helps one to acknowledge, appreciate and respect the differences, without giving an adequate significance to the subjects of social sciences and arts and humanities and from among these subjects, it is philosophy that hold immense possibilities.

Etymologically, the word Philosophy is made up of two words- *Philo* and *Sophos*. *Philo* means love and *sophos* means Wisdom. Thus philosophy means "Love for Wisdom". But if we explore the Sanskrit/Hindi word for philosophy- *Darsana*, we will find that its meaning goes beyond the "Love for Wisdom". *Darsana* is made of 'dris' *dhatu* which means 'to see'. Scholars do not take it as the physical action of seeing but rather it is taken in the sense of seeing the truth, the knowledge of the soul.[2] Basically, the word '*Darsana*' has acquired a meaning which has gone beyond its literal meaning and the same applies to the word 'Philosophy'. Like the word *Darsana*, 'philosophy' as a word has several misconceptions attached to it. People, often, can be seen challenging the very idea that philosophy has anything relevant to say to non-philosophers. They often, in particular, complains that philosophy is an irrelevant "ivory-tower" exercise, useless to any except those interested in logic-chopping for its own sake.

This image of philosophy as a complex subject is the result of the change that started with dualism of Descartes. Despite his person faith in Christianity, the fundamental principle of duality, resulted in the separation of "ethics" and "thought" in

philosophy. As a result of this separation, "thoughts" gradually acquired the prominence in the discussions in higher education and "ethics" almost became obsolete. Foucault believes that it is due the neglect of these aspects in the method of Descartes that of ethics, spirituality, value-oriented subjects could not become part of the modern philosophical disagreement. [3] Some scholars even say that this separation is basically between "knowledge" and "good" and it grew deeper with the growing dominance of science, which was incapable of distinguishing between good and bad. Science gained significance as the basis for economic advancement, administrative efficiency, but it remained value-neutral, thus leaving the society directionless as far as values were concerned.[4] Not only had that, with the increasing emphasis on the 'knowledge' part, philosophy soon become the subject which could only be taught in the academic atmosphere within the universities! As a high-level research topic, 'philosophy proper' became a highly abstract and complex phenomena that only a few could afford to engage with.

Similarly, the 'misconception' attached to *Darsana* have the strings of this misconception associated with the same historical development, which led to the detachment of knowledge and good. The method of philosophy, which developed under the influence of Mathematics, regarded only a particular kind of intellectual activity as 'philosophy proper'. As a result the entire Indian philosophy, which perceived to be driven by the goal of 'salvation' (*Moksa*), never been considered 'philosophy proper'. It fuelled the misconception about philosophy that a person gets attracted towards spirituality by reading it, which brings problems in practical life! But Professor Daya Krishna disagrees with this misconception in a reasonable way. In his article "Three Concepts of Indian Philosophy", he writes that ".....there are very few for whom it (*Moksa*) is a major concern, and even they are concerned with it only in a philosophical manner. The propagandistic statements by classical writers in the course of their works, along with the failure to note that *moksa* may give rise to genuinely philosophical problems as much as anything else, have created the myth that Indian philosophy is intrinsically and inalienably concerned with spiritual liberation, and not with what may be called proper philosophical problems".[5] Matilal writes that "The dispute that lasted in a little over twelve centuries between the Nyāya and the Buddhist over the nature of perception, the critique and criteria of knowledge and the status of the external world is undoubtedly an important chapter in the history of global philosophy".[6] However, these arguments and counter-arguments are taking place well within the periphery of the academia. Therefore, the 'ivory-tower' image of philosophy still holds ground, which, in turn, strengthens the arguments against introducing philosophy as a subject at the school level. Nonetheless, the very nature of philosophy as subject allows us to argue that it should be introduced at the school level.

In the seventies, a movement called "Philosophy for Children" began in Britain under the leadership of Matthew Lipman.

With this, for the first time, a serious discussion started on this issue. Those who believe that philosophy should not be taught at the school level, argued that this subject is very intangible and complex, therefore it is difficult to understand and explain it to the school children. Secondly, they also argued that, through this subject, children's brains can easily be moulded, that they can be indoctrinate. Some also argued that children may become absolutely skeptical![7]

Now that we know the nature of its complexity and its historical factors, we can present solutions to these problems. First, as far as the complexity of the subject is concerned, all the subjects at one level can be complicated for children. But, based on their cognitive abilities and age groups courses are formulated in a such a way that the subject content becomes lucid and easy to understand. In the very first geography class, we do not teach Koppen's classification of climate to the children or we do not explain the difference between subaltern and Cambridge ideology while teaching history. Similarly, for philosophy, we do not necessarily have to teach them the language principles of Wittgenstein, directly at the school level. Moreover, it is not the content but the method that holds the significance of philosophy for the school children. Which requires us to return to the philosophy as way of life; which has direct connect with the common, day-to-day life. The way to do so is to bring back dialogue into the classrooms; by introducing philosophy at the school level. For, "the specificity of the philosophy as a subject is contained in the dialogue. Philosophy is dialogue."[8] This is not to suggest that the other subjects don't/can't be dialogic but its relation with philosophy is such that one can't be conceptualised without the other. Moreover, both as content and method dialogue has been at the core of philosophy as a way of life- to which we, this paper insists, should go back to. Now, the question is how do we do that?

Well, no one will deny that there is a natural aptitude in every child to know everything. They are born with this natural desire to question; questions which prima facie seems simple, but some of them have very deep philosophical implications. Children are curious about everything they see, feel or hear around them. When we are talking about teaching and learning of philosophy at the school level, then our objective is to provide a positive direction to this natural aptitude, to keep it alive. It is not difficult to find kids asking questions which have deep philosophical implications. For example:

- What is time?
- Why are we born?
- Why do we read history?

All these questions, especially the first two have deep philosophical implications. If we do not help children find answers or we defer it by saying that such questions are not to be asked now, then their curiosity will die gradually. This restriction on asking questions results in making of an individual incapable of engaging in dialogue. For, questioning

is the starting point of any dialogue, when it is stopped, there is no dialogue. A general complaint about such questions is that it is not possible to answer. This complaint is not unreasonable, however, the focus should not be on the giving them the answer but to encourage them to question further. Talking about perennial questions related to cosmos, in his 1946 essay *Philosophy for Layman*, Bertrand Russell states that he cannot answer such questions, neither does he believe that anyone else can answer. Nevertheless, he continues: "Human life would be impoverished if they were forgotten, or if definite answers were accepted without adequate evidence." Therefore, what is critical to philosophy is to keep interest in these questions alive, and to scrutinise any answer that might be proposed. Example from Socratic and Upanishadic dialogues reveal to us the way through which one, at the very early age, can learn to question and scrutinise the answers.

Chandogya Upanishad, where we have dialogue between Uddalaka and Svetaketu, is one of the finest illustrations of dialogues with a young kid. As Svetaketu arrives after learning in the ashram, Uddalaka, in order to make him aware of his false pride in being learned, initiates a dialogue.

- Uddalaka asks - : 'Svetaketu, have you ever asked for that instruction by which we hear what cannot be heard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived, by which we know what cannot be known?'
- Svetaketu : Whats the instruction father?
- Uddalaka : 'My dear, as by one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known, the difference being only a name, arising from speech, but the truth being that all is clay' And as, my dear, by one nugget of gold all that is made of gold is known, the difference being only a name, arising from speech, but the truth being that all is gold....
- Uddalaka : In the beginning, dear boy, this was Being alone, one only, without a second. Some say that, in the beginning, this was Non-being alone, one only, without a second. From that Non-being arose Being.
- Svetaketu : 'But how could it be thus, my dear?.....

- Uddalaka, in the similar fashion draws Svetketu to a point where so lucidly he has made him understand the true nature of the reality; the concept which is otherwise very difficult for Child of his age to understand.[9]

The point, here, is to enumerate that dialogue has the potential to keep the quest (in child) alive. Also, through dialogue, very complex and seemingly difficult concepts can be illustrated in manner that they become comprehensible for a child. And this minimalistic training in questioning, in dialogue- can lead to peace. As Russell points out, "Dogmatism is an enemy to peace, and an insuperable barrier to democracy"[10] and our training into philosophy can teach us to see though the "blood thirty nonsense" fed in the name of nationalism and other similar sectarian interests. Therefore, by introducing philosophy in the school, through its method and content, we can hope for a more humane and peaceful world, as it can guide us to question, and scrutinize answers. It can enable us to initiate dialogue with the other, thereby dissuading from being prejudiced and bigots.

REFERENCES:

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/06/bertrand-russell-everyday-value-of-philosophy>
- [2] Chattopadhyay Debiprasad., 1964, *Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction* New Delhi: People's Publishing House.
- [3] Ergas O., Todd S., (2015) *Philosophy East / West: Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/oct/13/why-policy-needs-philosophers-as-much-as-it-needs-science>
- [5] Krishana, D., 2006, *Indian Philosophy: a counter perspective* New Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Matilal, B.K., 1986, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Whalley, M. J., "Unexamined Lives: The Case for Philosophy in Schools" *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Oct., 1987), pp. 260-280
- [8] *ibid.*
- [9] <https://users.drew.edu/~jlenz/br-lay-philosophy.html>
- [10] <https://users.drew.edu/~jlenz/br-lay-philosophy.html>