

Philosophy and Its Uses to the Teacher

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Philosophy of Education is gradually losing its prestige in many institutions and the empirical disciplines like psychology and methods are growing in importance instead. Critics of the philosophy of education consider the subject too academic and abstract while pointing out that what is required in this highly technological and scientific world is something practical and down-to-earth. In the face of such criticisms some teacher training institutes have made a course in philosophy of education optional, thus allowing some students to graduate without any background in philosophy. This, of course, is an unfortunate trend. But the reasons for the disillusionment with philosophy in general by modern educators has an interesting history.

THE CAUSE FOR DISILLUSIONMENT

The prevailing skepticism about the value of philosophy of education is a reflection of the general disillusionment with the achievement of philosophy as a whole. Indeed when compared to its traditional ambitious claims the achievements of philosophy are far from being spectacular. The philosopher as the spectator of all existence and lover of knowledge undertook the Herculean task of exploring all forms of enquiry pertaining to the physical as well the metaphysical world. He tried to explore the mystery of the sensible world just as vigorously as he tried to investigate the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, of human freedom and conduct. In effect, the philosopher assumed a triple role of scientist, moralist and religious leader. As prof. O'Connor points out;-

"In the past, both philosophers and their critics made the mistake of assuming that philosophy was a kind of superior science that could be expected to answer difficult and important questions about human life and man's place and prospects in the universe. In particular, philosophers tried to answer questions of the following kinds: Is there a God and, if so, what if anything can we learn by reason about His nature? Do human beings survive their death? Are we free to choose our own courses of action or are human actions events in a causal series over which we can have no control? By what standards are we to judge human actions as right or wrong? How are these standards themselves to be justified?"¹

1. O'Connor D.J. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Routledge, 1957. p. 4.

This ambitious undertaking of the philosopher was never reflected in his accomplishment. The store of philosophical treatises which cover a wide range of subjects do not constitute a body of knowledge which can be publicly verified. As a matter of fact, the history of philosophy is a history of building up and tearing down philosophic systems. A philosopher studies these systems in order for him to be able to tear them down and, if he can, build one of his own. This process of building up and tearing down has been going on for so many centuries. The exercise is rather frustrating particularly to the student who is anxious to acquire a body of knowledge similar to the one supplied by the empirical sciences which he can put to practical use. It becomes even more frustrating to learn that no guide to life can be derived from the study of philosophy.

The discovery of the empirical method of investigation in the sixteenth century was in effect a break-through in man's search for knowledge. It led to the divorce of many forms of investigation which were in the past within the scope of the philosopher; astronomy, physics, biology, chemistry, mathematics, and later, borderline sciences like psychology, sociology established themselves as disciplines in their own right.

The gradual demarcation of logical areas of knowledge with their appropriate methodology of enquiry proved very beneficial to philosophy. The philosopher now had to define more specifically his own area of investigation and seek a methodology which is appropriate to his subject matter. This trend did not affect the view that philosophy was "love of knowledge." However it is one and not the only avenue to knowledge as it was previously thought to be. The philosopher has to be more modest than his predecessors. Even then he was still left with a large number of vital questions that fell neither within the domain of the empirical sciences nor that of mathematics. These include questions regarding the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the relationship between mind and body, the whole area of moral and aesthetic judgement. The objective of the scientist is to discover new facts about the world and laws governing the behaviour of things. He does this by means of observation, experimentation and measurement. This process of investigation is of little consequence in answering the questions of the philosopher. For example, no amount of facts that the scientist supplies about the physical composition of an object will help answer the philosopher's query whether an object exists in reality or whether it is a mental process.

Similarly no amount of data will help determine whether Shakespeare's dramas are great or Leonardo's paintings are beautiful or Christ's teachings are good. In this respect the philosopher is one step removed from the activities of the scientist who is in direct touch with the things he is investigating. The philosopher is in no position to refute the observation of the scientist. But after the scientist has given all his information the philosopher asks questions whose status are of second-order. To give yet another example, it is the historian's concern to establish the fact that Shakespeare is the real author of Hamlet. The philosopher's concern on the other hand is to seek answers as to whether Hamlet is a great piece of drama or

not. Such questions cannot be *proven* to be right or wrong. Philosophers who have been fascinated by the advances of the mathematical and scientific forms of knowledge attempted to apply the scientific and deductive methods in order to resolve philosophical questions. The axiomatic method has been widely used by philosophers since Plato. Under the influence of science, utilitarians like Bentham and Mill tried to apply the scientific method to ethical and moral problems. So did pragmatists like Dewey. All attempts to apply the methods of science and mathematics were met with insurmountable difficulties. The problems of the philosopher proved to be insusceptible to these methods. The realization of this fact led philosophers to seek more effective methods for dealing with philosophical problems.

LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY

Philosophers have recognized for a long time that a great deal of confusion in philosophical discourse arises from improper and confused use of language. Socrates and Plato were aware of the need to clarify as much as possible the concepts they used. Questions like what is virtue, or good, or courage, recur in Plato's dialogues. Unfortunately, analysis and clarification of language remained a peripheral activity of philosophers up until recently. It was due to the efforts of philosophers like Russell, Wittgenstein, Moore, that the analysis, clarification and elucidation of the language used in philosophical discourse became a central concern of philosophers. Language analysis uncovered a great deal of confused and muddled thinking in traditional philosophies. It was found that metaphysical or ethical statements appeared in the same grammatical forms as empirical or analytical statements. Such statements as "The soul is immortal" or "All men are equal", have the grammatical form of empirical statements like "The table is red".

In the case of the latter, not only is there an agreement with the words used but also an accepted means of verifying the statement. Deceived by this grammatical similarity, philosophers in the past attempted to prove in the same manner that a scientist proves that "the table is red", that the "soul is immortal" and that "men are equal". But closer examination of the statement that "the soul is immortal" reveals that despite its grammatical similarity with the statement that "the table is red" it is in fact not an empirical statement. An investigation into the word "soul" provides the key to the problem. If the word "soul" means "the immortal part of man" the sentence would read, "The immortal part of man is immortal." Translated thus, the statement becomes tautological conveying no meaning at all. A great deal of metaphysical statements could be clarified in this manner. Linguistic philosophy points to the important fact that unless the words that are used and the method for verification are established it is never possible to prove or disprove the validity of a statement. When these criteria are absent, as is the case in metaphysical and ethical statements, no verification is possible. Careful analysis of language purges, therefore, philosophical discourse of a great deal of confusion and vagueness. To ensure that the language used is precise, unambiguous, and meaningful and that there is no mistake of logic and assumption, is one of the central functions of linguistic philosophy. As George E. Barton put it:-

"In this type of analysis, we insist that terms be univocal, that inferences be rigorous, that matters of value be sharply separated from matters of fact, that scientific knowledge properly purged is the best knowledge - and all this seems to amount to an insistence on precision which differentiates the emphasis of this type of philosophy from that of other types"²

Some linguistic philosophers prefer to confine themselves to the task of elucidating and clarifying concepts, and strongly resist the traditional temptation of building a system of philosophy or prescribing a way of life. In their view the only help that philosophy can give is, to use Wittgenstein's phrase, "to show the fly out of the fly-bottle". In other words, to dispel the confusion that accompanies philosophical problems. Thus O'Connor simply defines philosophy as "an activity of criticism and clarification." He rightly believes that a philosophical question is never solved as a mathematical or scientific question; it merely "dissolves" by a careful process of clarifying words used and defining the problem in clear and logical language.

OTHER FUNCTIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

Theories like Utilitarianism, Intuitionism, are attempts to prove metaphysical and ethical propositions in the manner that mathematicians and scientists proved their statements. It is now recognized that such efforts are futile. After having reviewed the major theories for the justification of value judgements, O'Connor concludes that "... the problem of how to justify our value judgements is still an unsolved problem of philosophy. To realize this will save us from dogmatism and at the same time encourages us to go on looking for the answer."³ The realization that philosophical problems cannot be proved is of itself an important contribution of linguistic philosophers. In the past many philosophers spent much time and energy trying to prove philosophical propositions believing that such propositions are provable.

Many philosophers do not agree to limit the function of philosophy to mere criticism and elucidation of questions. Waismann strongly protests to such a limitation. He says:

"What, only criticism and no meat? The philosopher a fog-dispeller? If that were all he was capable of I would be sorry for him and leave him to his devices. Fortunately, that is not so..."⁴

2. Barton G.E. "*De Principes Non Disputandum Est; The effects of varying Effects of Varying Types of Philosophic Analysis on Educational Theory*" Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, 1960. p.23
3. O'Connor D.J. *Op.Cit.* p. 71
4. Waismann F. *Contemporary British Philosophy.* H.D. Lewis (Ed), Allen & Unwin, 1956. p. 461

The additional function of philosophy according to Waismann and Prof. Reid is to enable us to see the world in a new perspective and dimension.

"Being now aware of linguistic and other analogies which were misleading him, the philosopher sees things in a strange new light. This emphasis upon "seeing" is of the first importance. (It is a very old idea indeed; some of the most important metaphors of Plato are of light flooding in upon the scene, enabling the philosopher to 'see' things in a different proportion). 'What matters to the philosopher is more like changing his outlook than proving to him some theorem; or more like increasing his insight. Insight cannot be lodged in a theorem, and this is the deeper reason why the deductive method is doomed to fail; insight cannot be demonstrated by proof'.⁵

Although philosophical statements cannot be proved it is possible to give strong reasons for or against a statement. In the process one acquires new insights and gains wider perspective. Giving reasons for something is not the same as proving. We often make ethical or metaphysical statements knowing full well that we cannot prove them. Yet we carry on with our enquiry by trying to give strong, logical, sensible arguments to support our positions.

We try to build a case for the position that we defend just as lawyers do. It is up to the judge or an intelligent and perceptive individual to weigh the arguments advanced for or against a position and make up his mind as to which position is more convincing. It is never possible, for example, to prove that the things that I see around me have an independent existence. But a strong case can be built to convince us that the sense data of a table, for example, that affect my eyes originate from a thing that exists outside me. Similarly a strong case could be built to convince a reasonable person that it is better to be kind, courageous and truthful than to be wicked, cowardly and deceitful. It is for this reason that Waismann draws a similarity in approach between a lawyer and a philosopher. He says:

"He (the lawyer) builds up a case. First, he makes you see all the weaknesses, disadvantages, short-comings of a position; he brings to light inconsistencies in it or points out how unnatural some of the ideas underlying the whole theory are by pushing them to their farthest consequences; and this he does with the stringest weapons in his arsenal, reduction to absurdity and infinite regress. On the other hand, he offers you a new way of looking at things not exposed to those objections. In other words, he submits to you, like a barrister, all the facts of his case, and you are in the position of the judge. You look at them carefully, go into the details, weigh the pros and cons and arrive at a verdict. But in arriving at a verdict you are not following a deductive highway, any more than a judge in the

5. Reid L.A. *Philosophy of Education*, Heinemann, London. 1962 p.11

High Court does. Coming to a decision, though a rational process, is very unlike drawing conclusions from given premisses, just as it is very unlike doing sums. A judge has to judge, we say, implying that he has to use discernment in contrast to applying, machine-like, a set of mechanical rules. There are no computing machines for doing the judge's work nor could there be any—a trival yet significant fact. When the judge reaches a decision this may be, and in fact often is, a rational result, yet not one obtained by deduction; it does not simply follow from such-and-such: What is required is insight, judgement. Now in arriving at a verdict, you are like a judge in this, that you are not carrying out a number of formal logical steps: you have to use discernment, e.g. to descry the pivotal point. Considerations such as these make us see what is already apparent in the use of "rational", that this term has a wider range of application than can be established deductively. To say that an argument can be rational and yet not deductive is not a sort of contradiction as it would inevitably be in the opposite case namely, of saying that a deductive argument need not be rational".⁶

Philosophy, therefore, may be regarded as an activity involving a rational understanding of those questions about the universe including man which are outside the field of investigation of the scientist or mathematician. In his investigation the philosopher will have to be committed to clear and critical thinking free from vagueness and ambiguities.

The road to clear thinking is linguistic analysis. Once he has freed his language from vagueness and logical contradictions, and recognizes that he can never prove a philosophical statement he can then proceed to seek strong and convincing arguments in defence of or against a position. It should be pointed out further than in building a case for or against a point, the findings of the empirical sciences like sociology or psychology could be effectively utilized. There is nothing to prevent a philosopher from making use of the information supplied by the various fields of investigation to help him arrive at a useful decision on an issue.

THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical questions have universal appeal. The questions of the philosopher cut across differences in occupation and interest. It is hardly possible for anyone to escape those questions that men have always been asking. Is the soul immortal? Does God exist? What is the purpose of life? Is the sensible world mere illusion or does it have an independent existence? How should human beings behave in society? What criteria are there to say something is beautiful? When parents wonder how they ought to bring up their children they are posing a deep philosophical question. When politicians ask what type of society they ought to

6. Waismann F. *Op. Cit*, pp. 480-481

create, they are in the domain of philosophy. The educator, more perhaps than anybody else, is daily confronted by philosophical questions. The very word "education" is an ethical concept. In considering what subject matter to include and exclude, or decide on whether to expel a troublesome student or give him a second chance, he is involved in deep philosophical issues. The scientist too often asks second-order questions which he cannot answer by means of collecting facts and experimentation. This is why some of the greatest scientists and mathematicians turn out to be great philosophers also.

The pursuit of philosophy brings no material rewards. In fact some of the greatest philosophers have been individuals of very moderate income and some were very poor. They are often persecuted by their own society. Any establishment is usually suspicious and disdainful of philosophers because of their unorthodox and provocative views, always questioning the accepted assumptions and beliefs. One has only to read the life of Socrates, or Spinoza or Rousseau to verify this observation.

Philosophy, it is said, "is the soul's adventure of the universe." As the mind grapples with questions of philosophy at the same time it liberates itself from the prisonhouse of its daily routines, from the customs and conventions of society, and enters the great universe which it tries to understand. The mind, in a way becomes as grand as the universe itself. In the concluding paragraph of his book on *Problem of philosophy*, Russell says:

"Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good"

It may be stated that the value of philosophy to the individual lies in the contribution it makes towards the enrichment of life. In a way philosophy acts as society's watch-dog by urging not to slumber under the pressure of customs, and convention and archaic beliefs. The fascination of philosophy is not so much in the answers it produces as in the question it raises. As a matter of fact, philosophy does not provide a final answer to any question.

7. Russell B. *Philosophy of Education*, Oxford University Press, London. 1956 p. 161

THE USES OF PHILOSOPHY TO THE EDUCATOR.

Philosophy particularly linguistic philosophy, has special significance to educators. A great deal of muddled-thinking in education is due to the employment of vague concepts and language. Such notions as "education for life" or "education for self-realization" or "democratic education" are so vague that they are often used by different people in different senses. People with different philosophies and ideologies use these concepts but attach different meanings to them. Even educators sharing the same ideology use the same educational concepts to mean different things. Until there is agreement on the meaning of these terms any conversation among individuals is naturally futile.

Already significant strides have been made in clarifying many of the important concepts that are used in education. Even the term "education" itself is so vaguely used that linguistic philosophers have given painstaking effort to clarify its meaning. R. Peters attempts are, for example, most outstanding in this area. Similarly terminologies like "teaching", "training", "instruction", "freedom" "equality", "punishment", "discipline", "authority", etc., constitute the vocabulary of education which needs careful analysis and classification. Even though the meanings that philosophers attach to these concepts may not have universal acceptance, educators can be more careful in their use and guard against vague and nebulous language.

The process of concept elucidation and language clarification is not merely useful in itself but also contributes to a more effective realization of the aims that the educator intends to realize. While it is true that some linguistic philosophers refuse to prescribe an educational objective, yet the activity of concept clarification still contributes to the clarification of educational goals. For example, a teacher may be committed to the goals of producing critical-minded individuals. In the effort to analyse and understand the concepts of "critical-mindedness" he, at the same time, is able to construct an ideal model of a critical-minded person. Similarly with the idea of an "educated person". This type of model construction is of inestimable value to the educator. It helps to have a clear goal in his mind, for which he will be able to produce an evaluative procedure to see if the goal is being realized or not. In this respect philosophy of education renders great service to the teacher.

Education being an ethical concept the problem of justification of values is of intimate concern to the educator. Education, as O'Connor points out, refers to "a set of values or ideals embodied and expressed in the purposes for which knowledge, skills and attitudes are imparted and so directing the amounts and types of training that is given."⁸ Drawing up the curriculum of the school involves consideration of what is worthwhile and what is not worthwhile which itself involves

8. O'Connor D.J. *Op. Cit.*, p.5

justifying one and rejecting another. The question of "aim" in education is intimately tied up with the question of justification of values. The question of freedom, equality, punishment, discipline, authority, etc., which the educator is daily concerned with, involve justification. If it is not philosophy that provides guidance in this area it is not possible to think of any other discipline. It has been pointed out earlier that philosophy does not prove anything but develops a case for or against a proposition. The teacher who wonders whether to expel a pupil for persistent offences or keep him is entangled in a conflict of principles involving on one hand concern for the school's interest and on the other the wellbeing of the individual.

He is not interested improving anything but in deciding in favour of the principle for which better and more convincing reasons could be supplied. If philosophy's task is merely to elucidate concepts its service would be greatly limited. Prof. Corbett like Reid and Waismann does not agree to limit the function of philosophy to mere clarification of language. As he says:

"It is no good raising doubts in people's minds about what they have hitherto implicitly believed if you cannot help them to a new position, and they are not able to live without some articles of faith. The teaching of philosophy, if it is to be more than an arid formality, or to produce more than the odious skill that Decartes describes as the ability to talk on all topics with the appearance of truth, therefore, raises serious moral problems for all those who are involved in it."⁹

He goes on to say:

"...philosophical thinking proves to be that kind of thinking which is concerned to discover and describe, but also to assess and judge, the general claims to validity which are implicit in the intellectual history of the race and in all our daily actions, however simple and obvious these may seem to be."¹⁰

It is assumed that a teacher like any other rational individual would accept propositions for which convincing reasons could be provided in their support. Faced with conflicting principles as in the above case, the teacher would have to consider all possible arguments for or against each principle and decide in favour of the one for which strong reasons could be supplied. To arrive at a more plausible decision, philosophy can be of great assistance to the teacher, or to any one for that matter, in the research for a rationally supported system of values or principles. The educator who is intellectually engaged in this quest is in fact a philosopher.

9. Corbett, J.P. Teaching Philosophy Now in *Philosophical Analysis and Education*. Archimbault R.D. (Ed) Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1965 p. 151.

10. Ibid., p. 143.

Conclusion

The significance of philosophy to the educator is quite clear. The tendency today to downgrade the subject is largely due to failure to grasp the special function it performs. Those who expect philosophy to provide a guide or meaning to human existence are naturally disillusioned. The philosophers of the past were wrong in believing that they were able to do this; they undertook a task which they were incapable of fulfilling. Philosophy today has a humbler but still a very central place in human life. It deals with a domain in human experience that is insusceptible to scientific or mathematical investigations. This domain is very crucial because failure to get acquainted with it renders life very incomplete. Questions of good and bad, of beauty and ugliness, of immortality and God, of knowledge and freedom and similar issues are inescapable questions that man has always sought answers for. In order to pursue these questions the insight of those who have spent a lifetime studying them is needed. That is why the study of the works of the philosophers of the past is useful. The study is undertaken not with the intention of seeking final answers to these questions but rather to get acquaintance with the manner with which the experts in the field have struggled to tackle them. It is then possible to see where they have failed or succeeded. The student would as a result evolve his own philosophical outlook and perspective.

While philosophy has a universal importance some need it more than others. This is true of educators. The educator struggles daily with issues that are philosophical. The concepts and terminologies that abound his vocabulary need to be defined and clarified. They mean so many different things to different people that unless they are clearly defined no meaningful communication is possible. Educators have to decide what knowledge is most worth to their students, and what methods or procedures of transmission are morally acceptable. The day to day decision-making situations of the educator involve deep philosophical questions. The teacher with no philosophical background may be an efficient trainer or instructor but not necessarily a good educator.