Philosophy and Education

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Abstract

The conventional wisdom is that philosophy is too abstract to have any bearing on practice and is, therefore, dispensable in school education. It is this conception of philosophy that has brought about the apathy or the division that we have been seeing between philosophy and the majority of the general public. There certainly is some truth in this, especially with regard to philosophical matters that have little or nothing to do with what really matters to people, i.e. questions such as the existence of possible worlds. But philosophy does not only aim to respond to intellectual curiosity and quench this intellectual thirst that we have for knowledge or rational certainty. This, however intrinsically valuable in itself, is not the sole summum bonum of philosophy. Philosophy also aims to edify our minds, i.e. ethics. It aims to show us what the right way is or what actions are right, what justified and what not, what to believe and what not. Philosophy aims to discourage gullibility or credulity, which I think is a product or by-product of uncritical curriculum at any level of education in academia, especially in schools, for people at this age are more impressionable to dogmas and more vulnerable to end up credulous if subjected to uncritical curriculum in their early education, especially in pious societies or societies in which there is not much rational autonomy. Philosophy aims to instil a spirit in us that favors reason over authority, and rational beliefs over dogmas. It is because of this that I shall be, in this paper, arguing that the basics of philosophy should be taught at appropriate levels of education, ranging from primary to high schools.

Key words: Philosophy, Education, Curriculum, Critical thinking and credulity.

Education consists in the teaching of something, some rule or principle, whether it be scientific, social, abstract or practical, and to have an education is to have acquired some relevant belief, knowledge or skill from an educator or from your own experiences, using your own faculties, or merely from reading or studying something yourself. There is some evidence that Socrates was illiterate. He did not go to school. That is, he had no educators, yet he turned out to be one of the most educated of all humanity. He himself educated himself, using his own faculties, starting from commonsense to reach some of the most non-commonsensical conclusions: "*True knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing*" (2004, p. 57). Thus, education takes either a monitored or a non-

monitored route – monitored education being, normally, a combination of both. It is our moral responsibility, as educators, to ensure that we direct education not merely in the way of responding to the need for teachers or employees for the market, but producing independent thinkers critical, creative and analytic in their thoughts. It is this that education should aim for, and it is this that is the essence of philosophy. Philosophy, argues Barry Stroud, is "reflection on very general aspects of the world, and especially those aspects that involve or impinge on the lives of human beings" (2001, p.5). That is, he takes philosophy to be "an activity, not a set of doctrines or truths at all" (2001, p. 33). Echoing Stroud's position, Allen Wood too argues that philosophy "is a self-reflective activity" (2001, p. 98). Thus, philosophy, as normally referred to in the philosophical literature, is an armchair business that, argues Stroud, depends "on undying curiosity, and the pursuit of limitless enquiry. It arises out of a wish, or an attempt, to grasp the world as it is" (2001, p. 31-2). So, it is this intellectual thirst for knowledge or certainty that provokes philosophical thinking, but what characterizes it as philosophical thinking is its appeal to *reason*, as explained below. It is this that demarcates the realm of philosophy from theology, as demonstrated by Bertrand Russell:

> Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All *definite* knowledge – so I should contend – belongs to science; all *dogma* … belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy (1996, p. 1).

Even though philosophy appeals to reason in its inquiries and often engages in thought experiments in its explanations, it is not a science itself, for it does not deal with empirical evidence, which is what characterizes a discipline as a science. But by virtue of having its roots in thinking, there is no scientific discipline that does not touch the essence of philosophy. So, in a sense, every science is a philosophy in itself. In fact, any discipline of study that deals with thinking has a philosophy, a way of thinking. All education, by virtue of being an education of some sort, promotes some thinking of some sort, but not all education promotes critical thinking. But this is the sort of thinking which education is supposed to encourage, and this is the sort of thinking that promotes innovative thinking. It is important that we keep education under regular check, and adapt it to suit or respond to the increasing sophistication of today's generations. Education makes an invaluable difference in practice and thought. The more critical the education we offer, the more positive the difference we make in the lives of our learners. More importantly, poor education hinders or slows down a country's pace of progress in moving towards a civil society. There normally is either a despotic regime or a bad education system in countries where there is no civil society. In order to produce creative or critical thinkers, education should aim to promote a scientific or a philosophical way of thinking where learning is normally inquiry-based. In order to ensure that this is the case, education should be designed in a way to encourage learners to think for themselves, consulting their own

reason or faculties rather than tradition, or authority in matters about which verifiable evidence is beyond the reach of human knowledge. That is, it should not aim to indoctrinate.

It is, however, acceptable to take the validity of a claim for granted on the basis of good authority. An idea that works is an idea that serves some purpose, and it is working ideas that often constitute grand initiatives. An education that leaves the mind free to judge or think for itself is one that contributes most to problem-solving, whether it be practical or theoretical. It is, therefore, important that education, at all levels, aims to promote thinking. And a thinking curriculum is, as argued by the distinguished American educational philosopher John Dewey, the only way to ensure good education: "The sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking" (2011, p. 173-4). That is, it is only through creating conditions, such as ethical dilemmas, which provoke thinking that we can make genuine improvement in the methods of instruction or learning, and I believe that people should be introduced to thinking strategies or proper methods of thinking at an early age. I believe that education should be designed in a way to develop reasoning capacities, to teach people to think for themselves, to encourage them to consult their reason in their thoughts, to avoid dogmas and respect differences of opinion; and I believe that this should transpire at an early age through a curriculum that encourages thinking. Hegel is one of the proponents of having a curriculum that promotes independent thinking at an early age. He argues that "Education to independence demands that young people should be accustomed early to consult their own sense of propriety and their own reason" (2013, p. 35). And the best way to get children accustomed to consult their own reason in their thoughts is to expose them to the kind of questions or situations that make them think for themselves, and this is best achieved through philosophical questions, as argued by Philip Cam, the Australian educational philosopher:

> *If we are serious about teaching children to think, then we need to be serious about structuring the curriculum around thinking. This requires us to pay attention to the general thinking strategies and broad conceptual understandings that find a natural home in philosophy. By looking to the concepts and procedures of philosophy, we can help to integrate the curriculum and at the same time make children more effective participants in the process of learning*[2].

Historically, we have used three ways to develop thinking strategies in children, and each of these three ways provides a framework for their understanding of the world or how things work. In almost all schools, there are modules that take a scientific world view, and these scientific subjects take an irreplaceable position in our early-year education. They teach children about invaluable things, such as the structure of the universe, the moon, the solar system, the laws of nature, planet earth and other planets. No serious academic takes problem with the teaching of the sciences in

[2] Available at: http://www.philosophyinschoolsnsw.com.au/index.php?page=philosophy-for-a-thinking-curriculum.

schools. But most of them disagree as to whether philosophy or theology should be used to teach children how to think or to teach them the morals we want them to learn. The question is not whether it is better to use philosophy or theology to develop reasoning capacities in children or teaching them what right or wrong is. I do not think any reasonable academic would disagree that philosophy can do a better job in this respect, for this is what the essence of philosophy is. The question is which one is, religiously, culturally or politically, safer to apply on children. Presumably, most religious groups or even some states or political entities think of the philosophy option in schools as a threat to the survival of their respective religion or to their political system, and this is understandable.

The problem, if it is a problem at all, with introducing philosophy into school curriculum is that its logic, its way of thinking is contagious. It affects all elements of thinking, no matter the object of the thinking. It cannot be incorporated in school curriculum without, directly or indirectly, undermining religious faiths. So, even if the philosophy class that we might use as an alternative to the existing theology class is designed in a way not to involve arguments about the existence of deities, it is still more likely that it would disintegrate or undermine children's belief in their respective deities. This is normally the outcome or by-product of philosophical thinking. But if we want education to aim at critical thinking, and if we believe that this is what we should develop in children at an early age, then this is what we should take as the end of education not the survival of a tradition of thought. It is a moral imperative, as educators, to exploit children's impressionability for good, developing their reasoning capacities early on, teaching them the tools through which they can make sound judgments or reasonable conclusions, and teaching them about what right or wrong is. The problem with the scripture classes that we currently have in schools is, due to their primary or, in some schools, sole focus on one religious faith, that there is a danger of developing a sense of intolerance or indoctrination in children. Credulity, however important an attribute it is for children of an early age, is another problem that scripture classes lead to. Religious education normally requires learners to accept or believe without question, an attribute that prevents critical or creative thinking. I think we should offer a philosophy class as an option for students who do not want to take scripture classes, and refine the existing scripture classes, making them focus on multi-faith teachings, rather than focus on one particular faith. Multi-faith classes will help develop a sense of tolerance in children towards other faiths.

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