

THE STATE OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOME SUGGESTIONS

In what countries of the world is Philosophy as an academic discipline flourishing to-day? We do not think an honest reply to this question will include India among such countries. India had a tremendous philosophic past, but to-day academic philosophy is a peculiar mixture of contrived scholarship, empty rhetoric and more or less unsuccessful attempts at entering into the philosophical debate in Europe, England and America. Perhaps this isn't peculiar to Philosophy, but is a much more general phenomenon. And there must be all kinds of reasons — historical, sociological, economic — why this should be so. A study of these reasons would not only be fascinating by itself, but it would also form a necessary preliminary to any sound rethinking on the mode and content of University teaching in this country. What we wish to do, however, in this short paper is *not* to go into these reasons, but to spell out some of the elements which to our mind constitute a vigorous tradition of philosophical thinking.

One constituent of such a tradition in any culture is the quality of its relation to its own recent and remote past. We can describe this only by saying rather vaguely that this relationship is one of a creative understanding of the past, in relation to problems which seem to be most pressing at present. By creative understanding we mean, perhaps among other things an understanding which, on the one hand is able to resist an overbearing (sometimes mechanical) presence of the past, and, on the other hand, sees the past not as something dead and finished, but as something which must contain insights into problems which have peculiarly arisen in the history of that culture. We can illustrate this by referring to the practice of philosophy today in some of the Western countries. Much of contemporary British and American philosophy has been ridiculed as sophistical, pedestrian, unconcerned with the "real" problems of life. Some of this criticism is justified, but much of it is born of

misunderstanding, and maybe, prejudice. One needs only to visit a University like Oxford or Cambridge to see the seriousness and sincerity with which philosophical problems are pursued, a seriousness and sincerity which can spring only from a deep concern for life. And a substantial part of British philosophy consists in attempts to gain fresh insights into the great western tradition of philosophy. These attempts are inspired by problems which have cropped up in course of the philosophical debate of our own times. A striking feature of any serious philosophical conversation about, say, Plato, Aristotle or Kant in a University like Cambridge or Oxford is that these philosophers would be talked about as though they were alive to-day, and contributing to the solution of philosophical problems of our own times. The result is a lively — one might say — spontaneous sense of belonging to a great tradition and furthering that tradition. We also had a tremendous tradition of philosophical thinking in this country, but what we lack — it seems to us — is this spontaneous sense of belonging to it and furthering it.

Another element of a vigorous tradition of philosophical thought seems to us to be the existence in the main stream of academic life, of a sufficient number of individuals who are engaged in a corporate discussion of crucial problems. This, of course, requires an ability which seems rare in our country to take one another seriously and a capacity to level as well as bear criticism with a deep sense of responsibility. Journals of course are a natural medium for such discussions. But for one reason or another, philosophical journals in this country have not done well. May we make a suggestion? The suggestion might sound elitist but when we are concerned with improving the level of philosophical thought in our country some form of elitism is unavoidable. Nor is elitism, understood in what we take to be its correct meaning, incompatible with democratic values. In any case, the suggestion is that we make a deliberate and determined effort to get together, in a select number of Universities, say, two or three, — people with recognizable talent for

vigorous and resolute pursuit of philosophical problems. We do not think we lack such people in this country. They are, however, scattered all over the country with enormous geographical distance separating them. The mere fact of being together and working together will be a source of inspiration and enhance their sense of responsibility to their own individual intellectual pursuits. The suggestion will naturally bring in memories of the ill-fated centres for advanced study in philosophy. But unfortunately these centres were not conceived with adequate clarity and imagination, and, we hope, by now we know the mistakes made and are ready to learn from them. If our suggestion is successfully implemented then the problem of a good philosophical journal will, in all probability solve itself; for the interchange of ideas within the group of philosophers, should naturally lead to the emergence of such a journal. And once there is an on-going high level philosophical debate in the country, we shall no longer be faced with problems such as the U.G.C. and the Universities are facing to-day e.g. the problem of changing syllabi to make them "relevant" or that of "modernizing" the degree courses. To our mind no amount of changes of syllabi and modernization can make any substantial difference unless these could draw upon and are actually based on a serious and on-going contemporary concern with problems.

But what problems, one might ask. We have to say three things about the choice of problems: Firstly, to a great extent the choice of problems in philosophy as well as in other academic disciplines is a matter of fashions. Somebody writes what is thought to be a good book on a particular problem, and thereby gives a particular direction or slant to subsequent debate in the discipline. I think, this is something unavoidable. Secondly, philosophical problems from the very nature of the case, have a certain degree of generality and universality. This is because philosophy is concerned in a very large measure, with the general structure of human thought. And that there is such a

general structure cannot, we think, be doubted. There are certainly variations within this structure; but they are variations and not total differences. But — and this is our third point — if philosophical problems are general in this way, what about philosophy being relevant to our times and to our society? This is generally supposed to be the most important question facing the practitioners of philosophy in this country. While we do not doubt its importance, we find the question extremely difficult to answer. Part of the difficulty, of course, springs from the difficulty of the notion of relevance itself. What is it for an intellectual discipline to be relevant to its time and society, or — what is perhaps the same question — what is it for a *problem* to be relevant? The answer generally given is that given the state of our society there are pressing problems of reorganization and re-orientation of society which it is the responsibility of all academic disciplines to make a concerted effort to solve. And these are the relevant problems. But agreement here implies a more general agreement in fundamental social, political and moral assumptions. And philosophy here is in a peculiar position, because part of the traditional task of philosophy is to expose and spell out these fundamental assumptions and to engage in a discussion of them. But this is where perhaps we have our answer. Philosophy does not engage itself in the actual solution of practical social problems, nor does it attempt a first order description or explanation of social phenomena. But what it can do — and must do — in the context of the intellectual life of our country to-day is to discuss with great care and responsibility the theoretical frameworks involved in all such description, explanation or solution. As a result of such discussion it might conceivably discover that these theoretical frameworks distort rather than enlighten — that the hold which they have on our, say, social scientists is ultimately harmful to both our spiritual and social life. To be able to come responsibly to this conclusion would be to do something which would be of radical relevance to all our contemporary problems. We need not of course necessarily

come to this conclusion. But its possibility cannot be denied and this raises a problem which, if anything, is the relevant problem for philosophy in this country.

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