

RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY: AN ANALYSIS

1. During the past couple of decades or so I have often heard almost every Indian philosopher speaking of making philosophy relevant to the age and conditions of society. One has only to look at the UGC reports, Proceedings of the various Seminars and Symposia organised in the country and the informal discussions held on innumerable occasions to get the feel of how the Indian community of philosophers and non-philosophers think about the issue. It is possible to ask many questions about relevance of philosophy, for example, whether philosophy is, can be, or ought to be, relevant to society. If an answer to the question is in the affirmative a further question is raised: In what ways can it be said to be relevant? and if the answer is in the negative, the question falls dead. This kind of question about relevance of philosophy, to my mind, is a substantive question. But, I want to discuss here a formal question, a question of conceptual analysis about the issue, namely, What is meant by the expression "relevance of philosophy"? To my mind, unless a certain reasonable level of clarity is achieved about the meaning of this expression I do not think the substantive question about the matter can be discussed meaningfully, and with direction and clarity. It is likely that my analysis of the formal aspect may lead me on to say something by way of an answer to the substantive question also; or it may suggest in a direct or an indirect manner the direction in which an answer to the substantive question may be sought or found. But, that would be a different matter. For my focus I have chosen to analyse only the formal aspect of the issue.

2. It is natural that one is inclined to take necessary and available precautions against the tyranny of language, especially when the words employed come from the vocabulary of everyday use. One precaution that is available to me is that I stick to the dictionary meaning of words. This would assure me that in so far as the ordinary usage of words is concerned I won't be led astray. The *SOED* records

the established use of the word "relevant" as follows: (1) bearing upon, connected with, pertinent to, the matter in hand; (2) legally pertinent or sufficient; and (3) remedial or relieving. One typical usage of the word is illustrated by the sentence viz., "Many things in a controversy might seem *relevant* if we knew to what they were intended to refer" (Jowett). The *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* notes that 'relevant' implies a traceable, significant, local connection. Besides the dictionary usage, the word has sometimes been used in the sense of 'modernising', as for example in the phrase "to make the philosophy courses relevant" is intended to mean "to modernise the philosophy courses" in the light of the recent developments in the field. However, I do not think that when the issue of making philosophy relevant is considered the word is intended to be used in this sense. This sense of "relevant" is reflected in the discussions that we sometimes have in the Committees of Courses and the Faculty Meetings.

3. Nor does it seem to me that the talk of the relevance of philosophy is concerned with the sense of "relevant" as legally pertinent or sufficient. In this sense, "relevant" is used as affording evidence which tends to prove or disprove a certain theory or statement. This usage of "relevant" occurs in the legal practice where on the strength of relevant testimony a given case is decided one or the other way. Besides, this sense of "relevant" could be said to be pertinent to our issue if at all there were good reasons to suppose that there are facts of philosophy which could be discovered, collected, organised, and cited as evidence in support of the truth or falsity of certain substantive philosophical theses. And this too would be acceptable only if philosophy could be regarded as a branch of knowledge. There are philosophers, however, (and this, to my mind, is a matter of accepting or rejecting a point of view,) who regard philosophy anything but a branch of knowledge. Compare in this context what Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus*:

Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them. (4.111)

Or, when Moore reflecting on the nature of philosophy in his *Lectures on Philosophy* added:

everybody would agree with Wittgenstein 4.1122 that Darwin's Theory of the Origin of Species including man has nothing more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis of Natural Science: & that whatever it may have to do with it, it's not the business of philosophy to discuss whether it's true or not. (p. 10)

It seems to me, then, that the only sense of "relevant" which is pertinent to the analysis of the concept of 'relevance of philosophy' is the sense of the word in which it is used to mean having a bearing upon, being connected with, or pertinent to, the matter in hand. So, in the course of my discussion, I would employ the word in this sense only whenever I speak of the relevance of philosophy.

4. I am afraid, I am still far from being clear on the subject. I must enquire also into the question as to *what* after all is being said to be relevant. To what that is relevant is a different, and as I said earlier, a substantive question into which I venture not to enter.

What is being asked is whether philosophy is, can be, or ought to be, relevant to the age and conditions of society, whether philosophy is responsive to the present challenges, or whether it can be said to deal with these challenges responsibly. I am sure, there has already been noticed a certain level of ambiguity and vagueness in the use of the expression "philosophy" in the preceding sentence. How can philosophy ever be said to be *responsive* to the present challenges? How can it ever be said to deal with the challenges *responsibly*? For, "responsive to" and "responsibly" are not the expressions that go well with "philosophy", unless of course one is using the expression "philosophy" metaphorically as intentionally synonymous with the expression "philosopher". For after all it is the individual, the philosopher who, if at all, can ever be said to be responsive to whatever challenges there are or might be. Again, the adverbs like "responsibly", "irresponsibly", or "indifferently" are correctly used to qualify someone's

actions or his manner of doing them; but to be sure they do not go well with "philosophy" which in its Greek sense is intended to be used as synonymous with love of wisdom and not with the doing of some action.

5. What then after all is meant by "philosophy" when a question about the relevance of philosophy is asked? It seems to me that the expression "philosophy" ought to be so used that it makes a discussion on the question of the relevance of philosophy reasonably illuminating. To be sure, philosophy as such is not informative enough. It is often the case that by the use of the expression "philosophy" what we really intend to mean is either a philosophy of life, or a world-view, or the study of philosophy, or the teaching of philosophy, or philosophical practice or a theory of philosophy. I do not claim that the alternatives indicated are either exclusive or exhaustive. But, faced with the ambiguity and vagueness of the variety of the uses of the word "philosophy" one is inclined to say—at least in moments of despair or disillusionment—that philosophy is nothing but history of philosophy, or that there are different philosophies belonging to different disciplines, such as the philosophy of history, of linguistics, of logic, of physics, of mathematics, or of whatever science or discipline that you will, but that there is no philosophy as such. One who thinks on these lines may claim that the philosopher's job is only to concern himself with the general questions that are or can be raised about and the implications of the specific sciences and disciplines. On this view, the philosopher's job would also include, particularly in the case of those studies which aspire to be raised to the respectable status of 'science', to construct, propose, or offer analyses of concepts and statements occurring in the discipline in a manner in which they become amenable to the application of the scientific methods and techniques. The thinkers who associated themselves with the *International Encyclopaedia of the Unified Science* present a paradigm of making philosophy in this sense relevant to the age and conditions of society. The philosophers of the period harnessed their thinking and committed themselves to the methodology which served

best the interests of the realization of the ideal of a society in which what dominated was the cultural outlook of science and technology. They conceived the philosopher's job not in the manner of "a body of doctrine but an activity" (*Tractatus*. 4.112). "Without philosophy", they held, "thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries" (*Ibid.*, 4.112).

6. A look at the history of philosophy shows that there has not been only one conception of philosophy, only one meaning of the expression "philosophy", but that relevant (in the sense of relative) to the cultural setting of a society there have been different conceptions of philosophy and that "philosophy" acquired a new meaning or usage dependent upon what that setting was and how the philosophers as individuals responded to their situational stimuli. The conceptions of philosophy of the ancient Indians before Pāṇini and those developed by the Greeks around the sixth century B.C. and the Europeans between the two World-Wars are pretty good examples of the relevance of philosophy to their societies in their different and changing spatio-temporal and cultural conditions. These considerations warrant me to say that the expression "a theory of philosophy" is not at all as odd as at first blush it might appear to be and also that it is perfectly reasonable to ask the question whether a certain concept, conception, or theory or philosophy is or is not relevant to the age and conditions of society.

Not only is it sensible to ask whether a theory of philosophy is or is not relevant to the age and conditions of a given society, but it must also be said that the teaching and the study of philosophy, or the method and the practice of philosophy, in their form and function, are necessarily consistent with the theory of philosophy pertaining to a particular period of a given society. When this is not the case, philosophy tends to become otiose and socially irrelevant. This may occur on account of several factors — economic, political, social, cultural, or what you will. The two major movements in the history of Western philosophy — the logico-analytical and the existentialistic — are the

two notable illustrations of how philosophy in both form and function was made to serve the scientific, technological, and the existential socio-cultural conditions of the times. The logico-analytical movement developed in response to the challenges thrown in by the growth in science and technology, while the existentialistic movement was the result of making philosophy reflect upon the existential conditions of the human individual who found himself inwardly split-up and self-alienated.

7. Philosophy is not a mere intellectual exercise; and from what I have said above it follows that a question about the relevance of philosophy is a perfectly askable question, and that logically or factually there is nothing to prevent philosophy from being relevant to the age and conditions of society. I wish to submit here that philosophy can be made relevant only by and through the individual who does philosophy. It is the philosopher in his capacity as an individual member of his society that he makes philosophy or whatever he does relevant to the needs and challenges in his society. To my mind, he is able to perform this function only if he is committed to serve his society, is sensitive to the needs it has, and responds to the challenges with a deep sense of responsibility. But if he remains blind or indifferent to the challenges presented to him, whatever else he may be surely he is not a philosopher who is alive and responsive and is doing his job as a responsible member of his society.

8. I wish to close this paper with a personal note. We who call ourselves philosophers in this country are in a peculiar position. Most of us who live in cities and are educated in the Western style seem to have become rootless: We do not speak the language in which our ancient thinkers expressed themselves; we seem to be cut off from our cultural bonds, and we evaluate ourselves in all seriousness by the Western standards irrespective of their relevance or adequacy. We do not know where we belong. We do not know whether to take a Wittgenstein or a Śaṅkara as our philosophical models. We look either to the hoary past or to what is being done or undone in Oxford, Cambridge,

or Harvard; and we do not care to have a look at what is happening in and around us in our own country. Nor do we care for or even respect what our own fellow-philosophers are doing in the field. In our philosophical writings, a third rate Western philosopher is cited as an authority with a rare sense of awe and respect; while a first rate Indian philosopher who is earnestly engaged in serious philosophizing is shown the worst form of insult — by ignoring him altogether. It seems to me that we are split up within ourselves as individuals and have developed a certain level of alienation from our own soil. We are confused and obsessed with making philosophy socially relevant and responsive to the national needs without clearly seeing as to how this can be done. We are groping in the dark and fondly hope to get hold of some handy technology desirably to be imported from the UK or the Continent or the USA or, if possible, from the USSR so that we could employ it as a magic wand for making philosophy socially relevant. How is all this possible? To my mind, what we really need is to develop a theory and a method of philosophy born of reflection upon what we have on our own soil. It is then only that the philosophy in the country will find itself socially relevant and responsive to the national needs.

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NOTES

1. The Teaching of Philosophy: A UNESCO enquiry, 1953.
2. Philosophy in Indian Universities: A UGC Report, 1966.
3. The Indian Philosophical Congress Proceedings: Simla Session, 1973.
4. Akhil Bharatiya Darshan Parishad Proceedings: Ranchi Session, 1975.
5. The U.P. Darshan Parishad Proceedings: Mussoorie Session, 1975.