TOWARDS A MORE RELEVANT PHILOSOPHY*

It is often asked : 'What, if any, is the *relevance* of philosophy ?' But the other part of the question arising out of the relational character of the predicate 'relevance' is seldom posed in clear and precise terms. Is it, very generally, man and human society which one intends to relate to philosophy through a relevance relation ? Or, is it a particular human society, such as our modern Indian society, which one has in mind ? In either case, the vast complexity of the question of relevance is indicated by the very complexity of the concepts of philosophy, man and society.

At the very outset, therefore, it is quite relevant to ask : What kind of a problem is the problem of a relevant philosophy ? Strictly speaking, it is not a typical philosophical problem which a philosopher could attempt to solve within some philosophical tradition or other. Indeed, it is difficult to be clear about the nature of the present problem without a certain minimal clarity and consensus about : (a) the nature of philosophical problems on the one hand, and (b) the nature of those complex human problem-situations and problem-solving activities to which the relevance of philosophy is, presumably, in question on the other.[1] As regards the issue of the nature of a philosophical problem, it is again not a typical philosophical issue, not an issue *in* philosophy. For to talk *about* the nature of philosophy and its problems is strictly speaking not to philosophize or solve urgent philosophical problems; just as to talk about science is not to do science or solve a scientific problem. My intention here, however, is not to draw very sharp distinctions but to indicate a much wider scope and importance of this problem than is usually recognized. It is equally of crucial importance in the present context to be as clear as possible about the kinds of human problem-situations to which the relevance of philosophy seems in question.

In section I below, I shall mainly argue that, contrary to popular opinion, philosophy as a relatively autonomous enterprise possesses an unquestionable universal relevance to man in relation to his social and physical reality. Subsequently in section II, I

shall consider what I propose to call the problem of philosophy's ever increasing relevance to the peculiar as well as common problems of particular individual human societies of the world.

I. Dimensions of Human Interaction : Philosophizing by raising and seeking to solve certain kinds of problems is surely, like doing science, a kind of meaningful social activity. Precise nature of this kind of activity, its institutional patterns and its relation to other kinds of human problem-solving activity is perhaps a matter of detailed, careful and patient sociological inquiry and hence beyond my attempt. However, doubts about its actual/ possible universal social relevance often arise out of a common misunderstanding of the nature of human knowledge, science and philosophy. Thus, philosophy is often condemned as irrelevant to man in relation to his physical and social reality on the ground that its discussions are always inconclusive, that its problems admit of no definitive/final solutions and that, on the contrary, it abounds with multitudes of conflicting philosophical theories. To be brief, this kind of scepticism is ultimately traceable to the popular dogma of human knowledge as involving final, immutable solutions of theoretical and conceptual problems, in the form of established 'truth', which philosophy, unlike science, allegedly fails to offer. A fundamental misunderstanding of man in relation to his physical and social world occurs here. To deal with this misunderstanding and the resulting scepticism, it can be argued that man is essentially a problem-solving rational animal whose problems admit of no definitive/final solutions. Any attempted solution of a given set of problems inevitably gives rise to further unforeseen and unintended problems and so on endlessly. Man without problems would cease to be man. Likewise, philosophy and science without problems would cease to be of any human interest whatever. A close study of human problem-solving activity would show philosophy to be just one important and inseparable dimension of this activity.

But, it might be argued, as is often done, that what makes the whole enterprise of philosophy irrelevant to man and society is the highly *abstract* character of its problems and their attempted solutions. And that what adds to this irrelevance of philosophy is the usual method of teaching it in the universities by exposing the student just to the abstract works of the great philosophers,

to a whole new 'world of astonishingly subtle and vast *abstractions*', with the student left wondering as to its relevance to the problems of the day-to-day life.

It is, no doubt, true that the doubt about the relevance of philosophy is partly traceable to a genuine dissatisfaction with the usual method of teaching of philosophy in the universities. It seems essential to this method of teaching to treat philosophy as an *autonomous* system of houses of cards, each demolishing its rival and being raised over it. The result is obvious—a complete distortion of our view of the nature and value of philosophical systems of different historical periods or of the same historical period. In actual truth, however, every philosophical system arises, not in a *vacuum*, nor even in a completely autonomous manner, but as a response to a given problem-situation Every historical period in the cultural evolution of man can be identified in terms of its overall framework of cultural and/ or human values and traditions, its problem-situations at various levels of cultural organization and their attempted solutions.[3] It is therefore necessary that the teaching of philosophy in the universities should, among other things, enable the student to develop his perception and understanding of the contemporary problem-situations arising out of science and other areas of human experience as well as those problem-situations of the past to which different philosophical systems correspond as attempted solutions.

The charge against philosophy that its problems and theories are highly abstract beyond the grasp of the common man remains to be considered. I shall argue that this charge is partly correct but it involves a misunderstanding to think that, therefore, philosophy is irrelevant. There is a conceptual dimension to human problem-solving activity. This dimension is only partly explicit in the form of the *language* which itself enters as one of the many variables of human interaction at various levels. Philosophical problems are rooted in this conceptual dimension of human interaction. Thus philosophers have always tried to solve philosophical problems by a process of elucidation and interpretation of such abstract and complex concepts as knowledge, reality, language, freedom, value and so on. These philo-

sophical interpretations involve invariably a great deal of conceptual analyses—analyses of complex abstract concepts. In our own time, there is greater emphasis on detailed and precise philosophical analyses of concepts making as much use of the logical techniques as possible. It is interesting to note the contemporary relevance of such analyses. The need for such analyses arises directly out of the contemporary problem-situations in and around the sciences on the one hand and out of a growing recognition of the value of *language* as a variable of all human interaction on the other. These problem-situations have different kinds of characteristic complexity which the growth of human knowledge has inevitably brought with it. Although the current tradition of logical analysis has its own importance and value, philosophy neither begins nor ends with logical analysis, pure and simple. Like science, it begins with identification and interpretation of its problems. And in this it is always subject to possible error.

Viewed very broadly, central problems of philosophy are problems of interpretative analysis of such highly complex and abstract concepts as knowledge, reality, language, value and freedom. Tools and results of such analysis can be fruitfully extended to the specific philosophical problems arising directly out of science, language and other fields of human experience. But it is wrong, though tempting, to think that there are *exclusive* sources of these central philosophical problems either in *science* alone or in *language* alone.[3] What, then, is the source of relevance of these central concepts ? Well, all these concepts do in one form or another operate in those processes of human interaction which make the physical and the social world *possible* for man. One's knowledge and use of one particular kind of language rather than another, one's knowledge and understanding of the surrounding social and physical reality, one's sense of freedom, one's commitment to one set of values rather than another, and so on, all constitute an important set of involved variables of interaction between man and man on the one hand and between man and the physical world on the other. To regard each of the concepts of language, reality, knowledge, value and freedom as a set of involved variables of human interaction is to draw attention to the important fact that one's understanding of language, one's knowledge and understanding of reality, one's

sense of freedom and values, are all subject to change according to our changing concepts and interpretations from time to time. It is true in a sense, to borrow Peter Winch's words, that, 'the concepts we have settle for us the form of experience we have of the world...when these concepts change, our concept of the world has changed too'.[4]

Philosophy may be regarded as an abstract enterprise that disentangles, analyses and interprets what might be called the *invariant properties* of the involved variables of human inter-action alluded to above. It is in this capacity that it teaches us that any problem-solving situation of interaction involving human beings is a far more complex situation of multivariable interac-tion than one ordinarily imagines or thinks it to be. Thus philosophy goes into the most fundamental though complex problem : How is human interaction possible ? The distinguish-ing mark of philosophy and its universal human interest are therefore to be found in its perennial concern with those unquanti-fiable, pervasive variables of human interaction which no other specialized field of inquiry can take care of. Philosophy in this sense possesses an unquestionable universal relevance to man in relation to his physical and social reality.

II. Problems of a changing society. It remains to ask : what would it be like for philosophy to be of an ever-increasing relevance to each of the modern societies of the present-day world ? That each society must answer this question for itself according to its peculiar problem-situations would seem to be an obvious answer.

Any serious attempt to question the day-to-day relevance of an intellectual enterprise like philosophy to the problems of a changing society must be based upon a proper identification and interpretation of the important areas of *mismatch* between the two. But even before this is done it is necessary to identify and articulate the overall institutional and cultural value-frame-work within which a given society seeks its own developmental path. This shows that the problem of determining societal identity in terms of a projected institutional structure and its overall value-framework is *prior* to the problem of making an enterprise like philosophy ever more relevant to the peculiar

problems of a changing society. Obviously, then, one of the ways in which philosophy can ensure its own increasing relevance to the problems of a given society is by addressing itself to the problems of identity and growth of that society.[5]

Every human society grows by producing its own institutions of social, economic and political organization within a broader framework of cultural/human values and traditions. In this process of societal growth, its own institutions tend more and more to assume objective, autonomous and *abstract* character, with the relation between the individual and society undergoing radical change in *unintended* ways. This is especially true of every modern industrial society with heavy dependence on science and technology. Thus the frightening *abstract* character of modern society is a common experience in the highly industrial and technological societies of the west.[6] Under the impact of an increasing modernization a similar phenomenon of the same magnitude in our own society should not be surprising. For it is characteristic of all social action, individual or collective, to bring about, over and above its intended consequences, unintended and undesirable consequences too. This underlying unending process of unintended consequences accompanying the intended consequences of all social action always poses fresh problems of planned social reconstruction of a given society.

The role of a philosopher in a society faced with perennial problems of its planned reconstruction cannot be under-estimated. Part of human suffering being always man-made, often this suffering takes the much subtler form of alienation imposed on the individual by the highly abstract and structurally complex institutions of his own society. If the philosopher fails to actively participate and contribute his share in the task of planned reconstruction of the institutions of the society he lives in, it must be because he himself is a victim of subtle forces of alienation at work. This is precisely the kind of situation in which an Indian philosopher presently finds himself. Even as a part and parcel of Indian society, he lives in a paradoxical aloofness of a sort which is so much characteristic, at least until recently, of the exclusive social class of the Indian untouchables who could not *interact* with the rest of the society and its institutions. Our problem in the modern Indian context therefore is not whether

philosophy has any relevance but how to make it more relevant to our developing society. Perhaps one of the several ways to make a beginning in that direction would be to give more importance to philosophy and science in our whole educational system than these have at present.

The problem of a philosopher's participation in the task of nation-building or social reconstruction is at least partly an academic one of how far he can use the tools of his analyses and interpretation to bring about an interaction between philosophy and the specialized disciplines devoted to the study of day-to-day social, economic and political trends in a society. Such trends require philosophical diagnosis and interpretation with a view to draw their consequences for the overall cultural/human value-framework within which a society seeks its constant growth. The cultural value-framework is, no doubt, a relatively stable framework of orientation as well as self-regulation of a society's own developmental process. The very identity of a society at a given time of its development depends on its framework of cultural/human values and the traditions and institutions these values have given rise to. Any radical change in this framework and its accompanying institutions or traditions will alter the societal identity too.

To conclude, modern society everywhere poses fresh problems of the nature of the individual's relationship to his society. These problems are intimately connected with the problem of societal identity — a problem which assumes a universal significance in the present-day pluralistic world of different human societies with their respective political, social and economic organizations. This world is faced with not only many common problems of economic and political nature, but also the problem of the very survival of man as a species given the self-annihilating potential of its technology of warfare. The two problems of the survival of man and the survival of a pluralistic world as known to us at present merge into each other to become a single problem. Once this is seen clearly, it becomes easier to recognize the imperative necessity for each nation or society to *understand* its own identity more and more closely and objectively with a view to contribute to the preservation of the pluralistic world of human society as the most valuable phenomenon on Earth. Only a world in which its own

pluralism is not only clearly reflected but also universally recognized as a global human value can stand a guarantee against the annihilation of man by man. This recognition is more likely to come about through a relentless philosophical interpretation and understanding of universal human values as well as of each individual societal identity than in any other way.

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NOTES

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1. In his "Relevance of Philosophy : An Analysis ", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. IV, No. 4, July 1977, pp. 643-649, V. K. Bharadwaja says (P. 645; see also p. 643) : " I must enquire 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 ". As is clear from this passage, Bharadwaja's entire exercise in the dictionary and ordinary analysis (which he wrongly calls ' formal analysis ' — see page 643) of ' relevance ', ' philosophy ' etc., is based on his patently absurd and misleading assumption that, in the context of any question about the relevance of philosophy, the predicate ' relevance ' *relates* a set of non-substantive questions (such as the questions of the ordinary meaning of ' philosophy ' and ' relevance ') *with* a set of substantive questions (such as the question about that *society* to which philosophy is supposed to be relevant) such that one could, like Bharadwaja, deal with the former quite independently of the latter.

2. cf. G. L. Pandit, " From Traditional Monism to Traditional Pluralism : A Characterization ", *Anviksiki* vol. V., Nos. 1 and 2, Jan. and April 1972, p. 51.

3. The extreme view that all genuine problems are scientific problems and that there are no genuine philosophical problems is the typical Wittgensteinian view. This view must be rejected for various reasons. One of these, in my view, would be that it merely dogmatically assumes, but does not demonstrate or show, that science and scientific problems are always philosophically neutral. The less extreme views, also rejected here, that there are no "pure" philosophical problems, no central philosophical problems and that all genuine philosophical problems are rooted exclusively either in science or in language have been advocated by Karl Popper and analytic philosophers respectively.

4. P. Winch : *The Idea of a Social Science*, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, p. 15.

5. Any particular kind of institution in a society is founded upon a system of rules and objectives which are conceived in terms of certain concepts/ideas of fundamental importance to that society or institution. It is by addressing itself to these underlying concepts/ideas that philosophy can constantly *inform* a given society and its overall institutional structure through a process of interpretation and criticism. For example, the legal system and institutions of a given society are structured and supposed to function according to a certain system of rules/laws conceived in terms of certain fundamental sets of concepts that are generally taken for granted as *unquestionable*, at least over a certain period of time. Thus, any system of criminal law, for example, must *assume* certain concepts/ideas of 'evidence,' 'circumstantial evidence,' 'conclusive evidence', 'unambiguous evidence' etc., as of crucial importance to it. Obviously, philosophers as epistemologists are pre-eminently competent to deal with such underlying concepts, to analyse, interpret and criticize them. This shows that those in India who complain that even *central* philosophical problems and techniques as they are being pursued in the West are really born of the Western 'soil' and that therefore there is "need to develop a theory and a method of philosophy born of reflection upon what we have on our own soil" in order to make philosophy "socially relevant

and responsive to the national needs" — (see V. K.
Bharadwaja, *Ibid*, p. 649) — are merely camplaining of a
lack of their perception of the constantly changing scene
of the philosophical problems of a changing society like
our own.

6.   A. C. Zijderveld (*Abstract Society*, Allen Lane : The Penguin
      Press, 1972, p. 49) defines the concept of abstract society
      as applied to modern society thus : "Modern Society is,
      in the experience and consciousness of man, very concrete
      as to its coercive forces of control, but it evaporates into
      an awareness of loss of meaning, reality, and freedom when
      modern man tries to keep this coercion under control and
      to evade the sense of absurdity and inauthenticity." Besides
      its abstract character, modern industrial society, in contrast
      to pre-industrial society, is also characterized by its
      pluralism in the sense that, in the words of Zijderveld, it
      " exhibits a social structure which consists of many rather
      autonomous and relatively isolated institutional sectors,
      each of them imposing on the individual a set of roles as
      well as norms and values." — see A. C. Zijderveld :
      " Rationality and Irrationality in Pluralistic Society,"
      Social Research, vol. 37, No. 1, Spring 1970, p. 23 footnote.