

## **THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATION AND THE PRACTICE OF PHILOSOPHY**

ANIRBAN MUKHERJEE

In this paper, I argue for including philosophical tools as an essential device in educational practices. By 'philosophical tools' I am referring to the mode of doing philosophy. The inclusion of this mode in educational practices would imply encouraging students to engage with their study content by chasing questions and options regarding the content and not necessarily the inclusion of a discussion on a specific philosophical position. Any meaningful engagement with issues in any discipline ultimately leads to questions that have philosophical import. Our aim has to be to take this process beyond the philosophy departments to students who are unacquainted with the charm, utility and significance of the tradition and the practice of philosophy, oblivious to how philosophical thinking affects their political, social, economic and scientific life and views, and how it can be usefully integrated into our educational practice. Philosophy entails deeper engagement with issues fundamental to our being. Hence, in doing philosophy we celebrate what is precious to human existence- the ability to see beyond and behind what seems to be obvious. Philosophy as a discipline provides a space for several such visions to be pursued, articulated, and compared and hence, has an important role to play, not only in the formulation of the theoretical foundation of current knowledge but also in the interplay of various cultures in an increasingly connected 'globalized' world.

### **The Challenge for Education**

Education prepares us for the future. The future is always uncertain. Hence, education must provide us with tools to deal with uncertainty. The future may not resemble the past. The future may bring us new problems. Hence, solutions that worked in the past may not help us in the future, and learning about solutions to just specific problems encountered in the past will be a major handicap. What one needs to learn is the trick to solve new problems. The future may also require us to find new 'problems' in the solutions that the past has given us. Hence the trick of problem-solving is not going to help us either. We would also need the skills of 'problem finding', a nose for going beyond the circle of 'solutions' into a courageous world of new perspectives.

Education needs to give us the courage to fashion oneself freely, flood us with ideas without nudging us towards any of them. It must also instil in us the discipline and courage to be responsible for the way we fashion ourselves, the choices we make and the ideas we cling to. The purpose of education cannot be predetermined in specific terms as the future is not so available. What would people continue to do if they continue to exist? They will trade, they will communicate, they will fight among themselves, they will try to better their lives through newer technologies, they will need to eat and drink, perhaps wear clothes, etc. Or will they? Only time will tell.

It is a difficult task to prepare oneself for an unknown future. Yet we have to carry on doing it hoping that the change will be slight and hence, the past can be taken as a guide to a large extent. However, the crux of the process of educating is that it is not only a preparation to face a future, but it also has to be visualised as a preparation of a generation which is more likely to realize the kind of future that we desire today. Through education, we do not just want to groom our children for the future but also to groom them in such a way that they can envisage a better future for themselves. For the future that one inherits is not all out there to be struggled with, but also one that needs grooming and that one shapes. So education aims to prepare a future generation that would be able to prepare a better future.

Yet without a sense of future, it is difficult to evaluate the present; the desirable present is one that leads to a desirable future. The conception of the desired future may vary; hence, the politics, in an ideal sense and also in the 'unfavoured' sense is about fighting it out in the present for the favoured future from different interest positions. Education gets dragged into that. The different interest positions feel compelled from their sense of commitment to the rightness of their 'interests' to provide a vision of a specific future as part of education.

The economy of any time and its contemporary politics do not have the luxury of contemplating a future that may jeopardise its existence and neither do they have the desire to pursue such a possibility. It aims to convert education into a supplier of its raw human talent, not through any devilish design but because that is only what it exists to do. It seeks the power to think and question to a limited extent in some of them so that they can conjure a future that can be assimilated to the 'current'.

When we sometimes desire thinkers, one has to be aware that there may not be a market for them conceivable from within the folds of the current. When we desire thinkers as a product of our education, one has to be aware that they may challenge the 'current', that they may not be intelligible, and very few of them actually would be able to transform their vision into a 'future', to create a space within which they would be intelligible. Those who would be able to achieve that may get converted into divinities in those future spaces. The current can never / has never been bold enough to encourage such radicalism. When there is a demand for 'out of the box' thinkers, what in effect is demanded is just someone who thinks 'out of a small box' while comfortably remaining within several bigger boxes.

Education does not happen in a vacuum. Despite the prevalent establishment and sometimes in connivance with the current establishment, new thinking emerges and new thinkers devise new ways of being. The community has a bigger role to play in it than just the classroom and the teacher. Education has to be designed to be connected to the community. The take-off points of different communities vary greatly.

Education, though designed and sometimes funded by a community, importantly has to consciously cater to the individual student. Otherwise, it would become an instrument in the hand of the community to manipulate individuals into what it desires them to be. However good the intentions of the community, an education system has to remain true to the needs of the individual pupil by giving that space to the pupil to extract from it as he/she desires. Education has to be a space of learning, not a system of learning.

To be able to communicate one's ideas and collaborate is crucial too. Education traditionally has been an instrument of conditioning, getting a new member of the club to be aware of and to conform to the rules of the game. It is important to understand the rules so that one may communicate with the rest and live harmoniously in the community without creating a ruckus or chaos. The importance of some order in a community and the training of young people to be part of that seem unquestionable. How to reconcile order with freedom, to encourage the ability to think and question and yet be bound to certain norms and conventions is tricky. One way is to design a convention which allows one to challenge conventions conventionally. This is easier said than done. Conventions tend to get institutionalised

and especially reluctant to being overthrown. Hence, is it irresponsible to encourage a young mind to think differently?

The purpose of education is transgression and assimilation. Creative engagement needs to be encouraged. Learning has to be taught; the ability to approach any content rather than just accumulating knowledge of limited content has to be stressed and developed. Learners must be provided with exposure to a variety of ways in which one can get to know. Education should equip us with the tools for educating ourselves rather than providing a finished product. It is not enough to be able to think differently; it is even more important to realise that there could be several other different perspectives on the same issue. It is important to respect others and their other views. To be able to entertain a view that you do not hold, as Aristotle says, shows the maturity of the thinker. It is important to develop civility despite one's ability to think different.

Knowledge is ultimately linked to and founded on ways of living. Ways of living do not have justification which appeals to people beyond that way of life. A certain way of life defines its modes of knowledge production and its value systems. Certain pieces of knowledge and skills are also products of their ways of living within which they get valued and are germinated. Hence, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the knowledge claims and skills of people from other communities. This is a hindrance to learning from the rich tradition of other communities and it can be a loss when we fail to take advantage of the indigenous knowledge systems because we cannot relate to them or there are no power systems to push them into our curriculum.

Specialisation along with the ability to see the big picture is crucial. As we gather more knowledge about every little thing, the demand for specialisation is bound to be there. Everyone cannot know everything in detail. Some people who become experts in a field devote a lot of time to learn and acquire knowledge about certain areas, which become their areas of expertise. However, it should be possible for everyone to understand the findings and opinions of the experts regarding things of general concern, so that the broader population can decide and act using that expertise. It is important that people understand and are given the freedom and dignity to be told about the expert view regarding what affects them, and is then allowed to make the best decision. There might also be many experts in a particular field who disagree among themselves. The community should be prepared

for such situations and be able to make the most satisfactory decision. Hence, though people have narrow areas of specialised knowledge, their education should be such that they can develop a general understanding of other areas if need be.

### **Philosophical Practice**

Learning to do philosophy is like learning to write or to paint, but by challenging the writing that you have read or the paintings that you have seen; bypassing them, taking off from them, demonising them, and yet in crucial ways, sometimes developing on them, and in very rare cases, creating a piece of writing or painting that transcends them. For most, it is a case of finding reasons, demanding reasons within the same spectrum. For very few, it leads to something further than that and it is on both these groups that the sustenance and progress of the human community depend.

Philosophy is an exploration of possibilities in meaning, truth, reality, understanding, beauty, values: anything. One could start anywhere - in films, sports, people, relationships -and dig deeper. It is an exploration of ideas, and ideas run the world. Ideas run through us; they are our beliefs, convictions. Not all of them are ours; not all of them are ones that we decided to carry in our heads; sometimes none of them is. It is like a cold that we catch, but even worse. A cold causes discomfort; one is aware of it. With ideas, though, one is 'comfortably numb'; philosophy is about waking us up, giving us a jolt.

Philosophy is an ability to jump tracks, change the road. It is about keeping alive the sense of wonder. However, it involves a deep commitment to the activity, a certain concern for the possibilities, for the wonder. Being stuck with one possible answer is a real fear. One should not be confusing finding 'the one' possibility as the aim of philosophy. Each possibility is like a ship: the purpose of the ship is temporary; when the planks start rotting; one has to keep replacing them. Gradually, much of the old ship may get replaced; sometimes all of it may have gradually changed. Then again sometimes one has to abandon the whole ship at one go and cross over to a new ship and carry on with new shipmates who may not understand the tales of the old shipmates. One may need to forge new ties, new stories with new mates.

Philosophy is an activity. It involves a certain sense of purpose; a real urge to find out, to know, to raise all the questions, to keep going back and forth. Going back

and forth is not always bad; the urge to reach and go beyond may not be a good idea if the direction we started out in the first place is not something that one is sure about. To keep going in a direction because we have started and that it would not look impressive to change is itself quite dumb. Living beings change; even dead bodies change. Progress happens through going back and forth, going back to the basics, rebuilding everything on top of it, or gradually like the ship.

Philosophy is an attitude of exploration; a commitment to be open to new ideas, to other ways of thinking and doing. Let us repeat, it involves *thinking and doing*. It is a doing because thinking is a doing; it is about doing, about the thinking behind a doing or behind doings; it is also about the thinking that *should be* behind doings. Philosophy questions; it may also answer. There could be many answers to the same questions, and the same question may be understood differently and given varying importance in different cultures and across time. It is sceptical but may not always end in scepticism; it also need not end in certainty. Studied inability to take a position at times is an important option that education systems should train us to do.

Philosophy even questions itself; it questions the hegemony of the set of questions that can legitimately be raised. In raising a certain set of issues and dealing with it in a certain sort of way, mentioning selected individuals as philosophers can be limiting; one may be misled into thinking that that is the only thing that philosophy does when that is *also* what philosophy does.

The history of philosophy, I feel, and quite strongly, is a series of amazing conversations. We sometimes extol the conversations that took place in the past and claim finality for the truths that emerged out of those conversations. Admiration for past conversations should not happen at the cost of present and future conversations. One should also remember that our present re-telling of the past conversations, in admiration or abjection, is also a conversation with them. The truths of these impending conversations cannot be foretold. That is the fun of philosophy and that is the inevitability of doing philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

Education is a process of preparing the current generation of students for a future world. The future world is one which we have certain expectations about and which is uncertain. The future world needs to meet certain ideals, political and moral as well as certain necessities to grow and flourish our human abilities in harmony

with the environment. To visualize an ideal future, to arrive at that ideal, to give it shape, to be able to break out of the current boxes of thinking which hinder our path towards the ideal, to deal with its uncertainties, and not get boxed in within that 'ideal' again, communities should look to use tools from philosophy honed over centuries which help us to conceptualize our situation, envision the future, to deal with uncertainties, to listen to disparate views and to live harmoniously. Philosophy is the only hope.