

Recognizing and Nurturing the Philosophical Spirit

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“Our philosophy must develop from our life. It must be created out of our current problems.”¹

Nicholas Berdyaev

Critical Philosophy in Reflection and Education

The idea of introducing and cultivating philosophical thinking is certainly relevant in our aim to bring philosophy to our schools and universities. But the philosophy that we aim for cannot be endless enumeration of concepts and technicalities. Instead, it should inculcate the culture of inquiry, reflection and deliberation on man’s existential and concrete needs. Its primacy must be the human person and its focus should be to unravel human frailties and strengths. Most important, philosophy must direct us to engage and contemplate the issues that humankind is confronting today. According to Alkindi, “philosophy is the knowledge of the reality of things within man’s possibility; because the philosopher’s purpose in his theoretical knowledge is to gain truth, and in his practical knowledge to behave in accordance with truth.”² Central to the philosophic spirit is the conviction to seek truth and to articulate for it whenever necessary. When Sayidina Ali r.a. enumerated the four dimensions that should constitute conviction, it points to an ability to reflect serious and deeply:

“Conviction has also four aspects to guard oneself against infatuations of sin; to search for explanation of truth through knowledge; to gain lessons from instructive things and to

¹ Nikholay Berdayev, *The Russian Idea* (London, G. Bles, 1947), p. 160

² Cited in Ahmed Foad el-Ehwany, *Islamic philosophy*. Lectures delivered in 1956 in Washington University, St. Louis (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1957), pp.39-40

follow the precedent of the past people, because whoever wants to guard himself against vices and sins will have to search for the true causes of infatuation and the true ways of combating them out and to find those true ways one has to search them with the help of knowledge, whoever gets fully acquainted with various branches of knowledge will take lessons from life and whoever tries to take lessons from life is actually engaged in the study of the causes of rise and fall of previous civilizations”

Peter Lavrov (1823-1900), a distinguished Russian populist intellectual once said: “Philosophy is the comprehension of all existence as a *unity*, and the *embodiment* of this comprehension in artistic images and moral actions,” and “to philosophize is to develop a human being in oneself as a single harmonious entity.”³ According to Victor Ivanovich Nesselov (1863-1920), “Philosophy is a special science of man – not as a zoological specimen, but man as bearer of the rational principles and ideals ends of life.”⁴ While religion to Nesselov is “life lived according to faith in God,” philosophy, he adds is “thought about true life according to true faith in God.”⁵

Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838-1897), a renowned Muslim reformist of the nineteenth century who clamoured for the recognition and restoration of philosophical spirit in Muslim intellectual culture, noted the significance of philosophy. Eloquently he writes:

“Philosophy is the escape from the narrow sensations of animality into the wide arena of human feeling. It is the removal of the darkness of bestial superstitious with the light of natural intelligence; the transformation of blindness and lack of insight into clear-sightedness and insight. It is salvation from savagery and barbarianism, ignorance and foolishness, by entry into the virtuous city of knowledge and skillfulness. In general, it is man’s becoming man and living the life of sacred rationality. Its aim is human perfection in reason, mind, soul, and way of life. Perfection in one’s way of life and welfare in livelihood are the chief preconditions for the perfection of mind and soul...It is the foremost cause of the production of knowledge, the creation of sciences, the invention of industries, and the initiation of the crafts.”

³Zenkovskii, Vasilii Vasilevich, *A History of Russian Philosophy* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 352, 354

⁴ Ibid., p. 562

⁵ Ibid., p. 561

Al-Afghani's call for philosophical spirit as an aid to human well being, is akin to what Antonio Gramsci had envisioned also:

“Philosophical activity is not to be conceived solely as the “individual” elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also and above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular “mentality” and to diffuse the philosophical innovations which will demonstrate themselves to be “historically true” to the extent that they become concrete – i.e. historically and socially – universal.”⁶

A dialectically philosophical space would allow for exchange and debate, mitigating simplifications and totalitarian versions and insistence. Ideally, those engaging in philosophy should be “good at making distinctions, at disambiguating claims, at providing support for some view or other, at bringing to the forefront a suppressed or forgotten point, at evaluating arguments and reasons given in support of, or against, a position, at critical thinking in general, and at pursuing the truth.”⁷

In the era of digitalness, where the space for book reading and argumentative culture is giving way to fast reading of packaged and uniformed information, the need for critical thinking is ever more urgent. Already, as Raja Halwani points out, the public is very much conditioned by the dominant mass media which made them less patient “in listening, watching, or reading philosophical arguments and positions. A cursory look at how popular magazines and television programs are made these days tells us that they are usually (and there are exceptions, of course) designed for a public that has a short attention span and prefers to go for sound bites and short episodic programs rather than long, intellectual ones.”⁸

Philosophical critical thinking is therefore an urgent priority that must be given

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 348

⁷ Raja Halwani, “Introduction to the Philosopher as Public Intellectual,” *Metaphilosophy*, Vol.33, No.5, 2002, p. 497

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 500

serious attention before manufactured ideological consensus and pamphleteer evangelism become all triumphant. Indisputably, an engaged critical philosophical thought, alongside a problem-posing pedagogy should be appropriated diligently and contextually to mitigate the above-mentioned problems.⁹ And this must start somewhere and somehow in our education system without hesitancy and a curriculum planning and pedagogical deliberation that begins with clear objectives.

In short, it becomes imperative today to ensure a genuine appreciation of the *philosophic spirit* that is aimed at preventing and mitigating the process of dehumanization, underdevelopment, corruption, injustices and exclusivism. This philosophic spirit must be encouraged and nurtured at all times. Certainly, this is no easy task. Yet, we must start somewhere, and certainly our schools are one of the important social sites to begin with. No magical formula can deliver it, except through intellectual planning, ethical commitment for critical thinking and praxis, alongside a concrete hope that we must always endear, albeit difficult this endeavour would be.

Muslim Philosophical Culture

In the classical intellectual traditions of Islam, long before medieval Christianity initiated its philosophical culture, philosophy had been a strong feature of its intellectual history. However, with the demise of royal patronage, alongside an upsurge of puritanical and mystical tendencies, the philosophical heritage was weakened in as much as it is less tolerated by the conservative religious circles which regarded philosophical deliberation as potentially injurious to man's faith. It must be noted here that the term 'philosophy' in Islamic intellectual tradition does not have a strict sense: "It refers neither to a method nor a system. It has a very wide sense including religious reform, socio-political thinking and secular scientific thought. The word 'thought' is more adequate than the word 'philosophy.'¹⁰

⁹ Read, Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2002)

¹⁰ Read, Hassan Hanafi, "Contemporary Islamic Philosophy," *Companion Encyclopaedia of Asian Philosophy*. Edited by Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam. (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1025-1042

In the modern era, the importance of philosophical spirit was first uttered by a nineteenth century reformist, Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani, who advocated strongly for the re-appropriation of philosophical thinking in Muslim intellectual and religious thought.¹¹ Al-Afghani spoke in the context where there was a strong religious traditionalism in the Muslim intellectual scene. Foremost, Afghani elevated without hesitancy, the vitality of philosophy that integrates, scrutinizes, defines, and gives meaning to human knowledge and directs our purpose and progress. He defines philosophy as “the science that deals with the state of external beings, and their causes, reasons, needs, and requisites.....A philosopher is someone whose mind is stimulated by all the events and parts of the world.....”¹² Afghani attributes positively to philosophy since it

“makes man understandable to man, explains human nobility, and shows man the proper road. The first defect appearing in any nation that is headed towards decline is in the *philosophic spirit*. After that deficiencies spread into the other sciences, arts, and associations.”

Hence it will be of great detriment to a society if the philosophic spirit is absent:

“If a community did not have philosophy, and all the individuals of that community were learned in the sciences with particular subjects, those sciences could not last in that century for a century....That community without the spirit of philosophy could not deduce conclusions from these sciences.”

Al-Afghani also noted during his time that Muslim societies did not make much progress in sciences although they had spent huge amount of resources towards the modernization plan by Muslims governments. The reason for this inertia is the absence of philosophic spirit within the education system itself:

“The reason is that teaching the philosophical sciences was impossible in those schools, and

¹¹ Read Muhsin Mahdi, “Islamic Philosophy in Contemporary Islamic Thought,” in *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought: Proceedings*. Edited by Charles Malik. (Beirut: 1972), pp. 99-111

¹² Nikki R. Keddie. *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968)

because of the non-existence of philosophy, no fruit was obtained from those sciences that are like limbs. Undoubtedly, if the spirit of philosophy had been in those schools, during this period of sixty years they themselves, independent of the European countries, would have striven to reform their kingdoms in accord with science. Also, they would not send their sons each year to European countries for education, and they would not invite teachers from there to their schools. I may say that if the spirit of philosophy were found in a community, even if that community did not have one of those sciences whose subject is particular, undoubtedly their philosophic spirit would call for acquisition of all the sciences.’

In short, the science which is most important to be nurtured and encouraged in Muslim thought is *philosophy*. Eloquently, al-Afghani advocates:

“Thus a science is needed to be comprehensive soul for all the sciences, so that it can preserve their existence, apply each of them in its proper place, and become the cause of the progress of each one of those sciences. The science that has the position of a comprehensive soul and the rank of a preserving force is the science of *falsafa* or philosophy because its subject is universal. It is philosophy that shows man human prerequisites. It shows the sciences what is necessary. It employs each of the sciences in its proper place.”

Syed Hussein Alatas on Backwardness and The Will to Think

Al-Afghani’s discussion is certainly relevant. In any society where socio-economic development and advancements in science is to be attained and developed substantively (not just through technological import or transfers) a spirit to think that is creative and independent is vital. A philosophic spirit is one that induces man to inquire, to critically scrutinize prevailing ideas, to discerningly analyse the complexities in society and natural phenomenon, and to creatively suggests alternatives as the way out of the predicament that man and society is facing. This point is also appreciated today by a contemporary Southeast Asian Muslim thinker, Syed Hussein Alatas. “The will to think’, according to Alatas, must begin with the intelligentsias of the society, for “if a country lacks thinkers, both the people and the ruling powers are deprived of a clearer and deeper understanding of their problems.”

Alatas sees the presence of the spirit to think precedes any other change in society,

and certainly crucial to the prevention of corruption of ideas in society. He listed out some important traits of the philosophical spirit as such: “(a) the desire to know the network of causes comprising a question, (b) respect for scientific methods, (c) the use of intelligence as widely as possible, (d) the cognizance of interdependence between events, efforts and problems of the community or the universe, (e) the possession of confidence, clear and progressive, (f) the ability to think on both a short-term and a long-term basis, (g) the capacity to view a question from its whole perspective, [and] (h) the ability to persist when facing any problem.”¹³

Hence, this spirit to think critically can only come about when we are prepared to adopt an emancipatory type of education where critical and diagnostic thinking is at its core, including the ability to infuse a sense of history and a good grasp of the concrete realities of the present day. Hence Berdyaev’s assertion remains an apt reminder: “True philosophy must reach out towards concrete reality, towards what actually exists.” To ignore this is detrimental for our ability to grasp what is happening around us, perhaps blurring our conviction to act and rethink.

¹³ Syed Hussein Alatas, “Backwardness and the Will to Think,” in *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernization, Religion, Social Change and Development in Southeast Asia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), pp. 166-167