

# The Practical Relevance of Philosophy

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IF YOU THINK THAT PHILOSOPHY BEARS LITTLE RELEVANCE to societies that are struggling to develop economically and technologically, think again. To those who argue that countries struggling to develop cannot afford to use their meagre resources to support such programmes should consider that development is not only about economic and technological advancement. Development in a broad sense, involves progress in all forms which encompass the physical, mental, ethical and spiritual aspects of the human being. It is only when these various aspects are harnessed that a country's human capacities will be unleashed to experience growth in all facets of society. It is inadequate to relate development to the physical and mental advancement of the person alone while neglecting his or her ethical and spiritual aspects. Embedded in any sensible notions of development, should be the idea that subjects like philosophy are indispensable to the project of moving a nation forward along the path of multidimensional development.

As a discipline that is concerned with rational thinking, philosophy engages the human mind to think logically and rationally. The branches of philosophy that help in this kind of thinking are logic and epistemology. Simply put, logic is the act of correct reasoning while epistemology means a theory of knowledge. Logical thinking is based on evidence, a type of thinking in which conclusions are derived from clearly articulated foundations and premises. Rational thinking is thinking that is unprejudiced and de-tribalised. All societies require this kind of thinking in science and technology as well as in social and human affairs, to promote order and to engender growth and development. A synonym for rational thinking is reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is the kind of

thinking that asks metaphysical, ethical and spiritual questions. Metaphysics and ethics are also branches of philosophy.

While metaphysics is concerned with existence, ethics relates to the theory of human conduct and by extension how human beings arrange themselves into collectives. In practical terms, metaphysics asks questions about human existence along spiritual, spatial and social dimensions: Who created me? For which purpose was I created? How can I fulfil the purpose of my creation? Who am I? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? These questions are important if we wish to discover who we really are as persons and as peoples. Questions about human identity are such that they instil in us a sense of pride that is derived from the past and also a motivating factor in driving progress towards the future. It enables recognition of the necessity to cooperate and collaborate in order to achieve a common goal.

## Reflective Thinking

However, apart from critical and rational thinking, societies also require ethical thinking about natural events and human organisation. The ethical dimension of reflective thinking enables us to weigh and consider the probable consequences of our intended actions. Ethical thinking is an act of putting ourselves in the position of others and asking ourselves if we will be willing for others to treat us as we want to treat them.

Thus, a criminal is expected to think and ask himself the question: if these acts were directed against me or my loved ones, how would I feel? Given the fact that human beings have feelings and are deemed moral beings, they should be able to undertake a thinking process that involves a role reversal of the aforementioned acts. If this is so, then it would dawn on rational persons who engage in harmful acts against other people, that such acts are intolerable and horrendous. This may eventually lead to such evil-minded but rational persons refraining from their nefarious activities. There are many instances in which convicted persons, upon reflection, become campaigners against the atrocity they committed.

Even in the sphere of the family, where dangerous emotional feelings and

attitudes can abound, there is need for some modicum of rational thinking to navigate any breakdown of relationships. The lack of logical and rational thinking in human relationships has resulted in the kind of crime-ridden society in which we have found ourselves as a people. Rational thinking helps in tolerating and accepting one another in the face of differences in opinion, gender, class, race and sexual orientations.

Love affairs among couples require some amount of rational thinking. Couples should reflect on the situations and conditions that brought them together. They should reflect on the purpose of their union and on that day when they were joined together with pomp and pageantry. Even if they were not joined together in such ceremonial circumstances, they should cast their minds back on those good times when they shared positive sentiments with one another. The benefit of such reflection is the ability to tolerate one another in the face of misunderstanding and the willingness to settle differences amicably rather than resorting to violence and abuse.

The public space also requires reflective and ethical thinking. The business and political spheres are the arenas in which different interests coalesce. Business and politics are similar because they are concerned with the provision of services. However, while business orients towards tangible service; politics is directed to the production of services that cater to all aspects of human and community needs. What is important for both business and politics is that they be guided by wholesome human relationships that are anchored on acceptable ethical behaviour.

Ethics as theory and practise is able to provide the tool for human beings to navigate the arena of public relationships. Such ethical theories revolve around our duties to ourselves (self-duty), our duties to one another (deontology), the cultivation of good qualities (virtue ethics) and awareness of the effects of our actions on ourselves and others (consequentialism). These are well-known ethical theories provided by the discipline of philosophy, which also provides the connecting link by which these theories are put into action through arguments.

The spiritual aspect of human beings is serviced by reflection about the source of existence and the relationship which that source shares with living creatures. Consequently, human beings are bound to reflect on the source of their

existence. This reflection is necessary in order for a greater understanding of the Being that is identified as the source of existence. Our society should not neglect the spiritual aspects of the human person. If we want to develop as an ethical and morally-centred country, then we should use all spiritual and rational means at our disposal to achieve this goal. Such means should themselves be seen to be ethical, just and equitable. Philosophy provides a set of guiding concepts that can reawaken, renew and empower a society to more ethically take advantage of the changing economic and technological aspect of society.