THE ROLE OF THOUGHT AND BEING IN THE PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN CLASSROOM

An important aim of all education is to instill a sense of well being in the child. Growing up with a sense of well being helps the child to be balanced and wholesome in its interaction with other human beings and the world at large. While we all readily admit that a sense of well being is desirable, we may still be very far from understanding the deep implications of it. An important characteristic of this sense of well being is that it is not a tangible attribute and is not easily reducible to any particular characteristic or set of characteristics. It is this indeterminacy and irreducability that makes us less aware of it. Our minds seem to be engrossed in the futile attempt to determine what cannot be determined, to measure that which cannot be measured and to possess that which cannot be possessed. In this paper, we will attempt to probe this serious question. We realize that true inquiry should expose the very foundations of our thought at any given point of time.

The condition of modern education is a result of modern society. Modern society is heavily influenced by science and technology and this is particularly true of the West. All those who are concerned with good education need to find out whether the present educational system, in being excessively concerned with imparting knowledge and different skills and techniques is, at the same time, concerned to attend to the inner development of the young. If one's sense of being is limited to knowledge alone, then the question arises whether such an approach contributes to true sense of well being. One of our concerns in this paper is to explore this question of knowledge and its relationship to education and life as a whole.

The Philosophy for Children program has made an attempt to respond to this challenge of good education by taking a number of significant steps. In questioning the role of authority and bringing in dialogue into the educational practices of our times, Philosophy for Children programs attempt to rid the young mind of fear so that learning can take place naturally in an atmosphere of cordiality, care, and joy. The tender minds of children are not intimidated by the possibility of an inquiry that may go deep. This creates an ambience where learning can take place both among the students and the teacher. Elimination of fear is of primary significance in the learning process and it is extra-ordinarily difficult to achieve in the classroom. This is primarily due to the way our society conditions us from the time we are young. Children are not only instilled fear at a very early age, but see fear in the adults around them. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to conceive of a life which is free of fear. Indeed, this means that we should help the child to see the structure of fear as it permeates the society in which he or she is living and the way it is taking roots in his or her mind. This is quite a challenge for any teacher to grapple with, for more often than not, the teacher himself is the victim of the very disease that he is hoping to cure in his students.

Another significant contribution that Philosophy for Children has made to the educational practices of our times is the development of dialogue in the classroom. The notion of dialogue, rich and profound as it is, has had a historical development both in the eastern and western traditions. In Greek philosophy, Socratic inquiry was

mainly dialogical, learning through conversation, willing to listen to what the other person is saying, in order to find out the truth of the matter. Readiness to pursue a line of thought to its very end. These were some of the values inculcated in the notion of dialogue as practiced in Greek philosophy. A very important characteristic of dialogue is that it is not *partial* but *total.* While it may begin at superficial levels, it soon tends to move deeper. Dialogue which is restricted to the superficial levels rapidly disintegrates and becomes antithetical to true inquiry.

A major confusion in much of human thought it seems to me is the confusion between *thought* and *being.* In many ways, it permeates the deepest levels of our life, distorting our emotional and intellectual life and giving rise to a great deal of conflict and disorder. We will attempt to discuss this broad and fundamental question in relation to education and the Philosophy for Children program. A very outstanding characteristic of the Philosophy for Children program is it's willingness to expose its own assumptions, ideas, and methods to constant scrutiny and seek a deep understanding of what is happening to us as educators and our educational practices. A major stumbling block in any inquiry is when we are unwilling to look at the instrument of inquiry to find out if it can or cannot deliver the goods. In the Philosophy for Children program, this important truth is seen clearly and is related to the best traditions in Western philosophy. Philosophy becomes, in a deep sense, a fundamental inquiry where basic questions are raised and discoveries are made, rather than a simple statement of a metaphysical position or beliefs. True inquiry is always in the present. The nature of inquiry itself should be examined repeatedly for, otherwise, there is a real danger of falling into a complacent mood which begins to undermine serious reflection. The conclusions of the past need not be an should not be treated as the starting point for present inquiry. The Philosophy for Children program has seen the need to develop the notion of inquiry in a deeper sense by examining carefully the notion of authority in education. It has also tried to question the simple belief that education is merely information transfer from the teacher to the taught and conformity to accepted ways and patterns of thought. An important aim, as I understand, of the Philosophy for Children program is the well being of the child. Though we may not be able to say exactly what it means to talk of the well being of a child, we can at least indirectly understand it as a disposition created by absence of fear, competitiveness and a readiness to learn, to question, a certain curiosity to find out, etc. Here the notion of well being is used not to imply a static concept, but a dynamic state of movement and change, of fresh perception and a certain natural concern and care for what one comes into contact, be they other human beings, animals, things, etc.

An important characteristic of our thought process is that it contains our past in a very significant way. We are conditioned by our past, and thought is the repository of the past, both collectively and individually. Thought contains our pleasurable and the not-so-pleasurable experiences, it carries within its folds the many hurts, fears, and attitudes which are being constantly projected into the present and the future. Thought creates rigidity and prejudice; it also creates frustration and hatred in the minds of human beings. Thought is also extremely capable in the functional domain where it is *absolutely essential.* Thought, then, is not merely a set of images, words, and ideas that pass through our minds, but is something that permeates our whole being in a very fundamental way, including its physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects. As I see it, unless we help the child to discover the complexities of the thought process and the way it conditions our being, education will fail in its most important aim, which is to help the child to grow in true awareness of life. How can one have a

sense of true well being if one is jealous, arrogant or full of fear and greed? Will mere intellectual explanation and doctrines solve our problems? The question, then, is how are we to bring about a sense of well being in the child in the sense that we have been talking of it? I would like to suggest that we cannot impart this sense of well being or an interest in deeper inquiry unless and until we, as teachers and educators, understand the degree to which we are conditioned by this thought process. The challenge that is facing educators and philosophers is, indeed, a very fundamental one, a challenge that needs to be understood with utmost care and diligence, for everything may be dependent on it ultimately, including the survival of the human race itself.

If only we can work toward this sense of well being, it may well prove to be the most significant factor in changing the direction of modern education. A number of issues need to be examined before we can really get a deep insight into the nature of the thought process and the way it structures our sense of being. In this paper, we shall examine the problem created by almost an universal assumption that thought is *primary* and that being is merely *secondary*. Quite a few assumptions are rooted in the unconscious and act as the basis for much of our thinking, one such assumption both historically, collectively, and individually is the one where we treat what is contained in our thought process as the form of reality that exists independently of it. The structure of our thought process becomes the structure of being or rather the structure of our thought is mistaken to be the structure of being. In this approach, being is limited to the kind of thought one can have of it. We invariably tend to confuse what is contained in our thought with the entirety of being. One essential feature of our thought process that we constantly overlook is its *inherent limitation*, and it is limited to the background from which it arises. Normally, we tend to assume that our thought process has *unlimited validity* and, therefore, to be *universally significant*. This can be illustrated by taking the example of Newtonian mechanics which believed in the universal validity of its conclusions. The developments that took place in twentieth centry physics clearly drew attention to the limitations of Newtonian thought. The nature of thought is to undergo *dialectical change* and experience *contradiction*. Thought experiences contradiction when its limitation is not seen clearly. Such contradictions are experienced almost always in our day to day life. In human relationships, we run into problems mainly because the images we have of each other are being constantly contradicted. The question that arises here is whether this conflict and contradiction in our thought process is inevitable? Is it at all possible to free thought from this endless cycle of conflict and contradiction? In Hegelian thought, contradiction was seen as an essential feature of the dialectical movement of thought. In positivism, contradiction was a sign of our present imperfection which should be rectified by advancing a set of categories of thought that were perfect, and so, free of all contradictions. In taking such a position, positivism implicitly believed in the primacy of thought over being. A classic example of such a positivist approach is the one that we mentioned earlier, i.e., Newtonian mechanics. Despite the fact that Hegel saw clearly the dialectical nature of thought process, he identified this very dialectical movement with the nature of being in a way that it appeared as if thought encompassed the whole of being. Unless and until we treat thought as *limited*, we are bound to run into contradictions of all sorts as, in fact, it is happening throughout the world. One may argue that thought itself is a mode of being after all, and therefore, it is not essentially different from it. While this is undoubtedly true, what is generally overlooked is the fact that thought is merely a *part* of being and should never be confused with the *whole* of it.

One will get a better insight into this question by examining the notions of *abstract* and *concrete*. The word *abstract* means to "take away" or "separate", thought is abstract in the sense that it is taking away aspects of our experience and presenting it to our consciousness. Thus, thought is presenting to us the world of experience in terms of its own divisions. We refer to it as the *concrete world*, but by and large this *concrete world* is a result of perceiving it through *abstractions* made by thought. The word *concrete*, interestingly enough, is derived from another word, *concrescence*, which means "growing together". Thus, what is primary or really concrete is that which exists before the abstractions are made, and abstractions then become secondary. Abstractions of thought are really dependent on the whole from which it is abstracted. Unless we make this *radical reversal* in the meanings we attach to the words *abstract* and *concrete*, there is bound to be confusion at the center of our thinking. Thus, thought is merely a part of being and should never be confused with the whole of it, a tendency deeply rooted in our thought process itself.

One of the aims of this paper is to show that this confusion between thought and being is very deep rooted in modern education. Our educational practice is influenced excessively by intellectual concerns. Acquisition of knowledge in various forms, specialties and sub-specialties, acquisition of techniques, thinking skills, critical thinking, etc. Knowledge as we know it today is very fragmented and, as a result, there is very little perception of the whole. The assumption of the educational system seems to be that, if we refine our thought process, make it sharper and more capable, our problems will disappear. The products that come out of our schools and colleges will be better equipped to meet life, etc. Such an assumption is totally unwarranted, for in reality, we do have any number of people very well equipped with knowledge, skills, etc., leading lives that are selfish and of no value to society at large. An important consequence of this excessive concern with knowledge and its different manifestations is the loss of *creativity* in our relationship to life as a whole. The relationship between knowledge and creativity is not clear to most of us. Creativity is generally the explorations of new domains, a willingness to give up what we already know and not to be tethered to the past. It is more to do with psychological disposition to inquire than any particular intellectual skill or ability. The present preoccupation with knowledge has lead to loss of interest in the true investigation of life. In modern times, there is very little perception of *nature* because of technological growth. We are enveloped by our own creation, as it were. Nature is creative and in constant movement. In the West, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has enshrined creativity as an act that occurred in the distant past. Creativity, on the other hand, is something that is occuring right now if only we have the eyes to see. Unless our education recognizes the immensity of nature and its extraordinary movement, it is bound to give excessive importance to knowledge. Right now, we see nature as a part of our lives, man and his needs seem to be *primary*, whereas nature is *secondary*. When we look at this fact closely, we realize that it is nature which is actually primary and man and his needs are only secondary. There should be a radical reversal in our relationship to nature, for otherwise, we will continue to live in a state oblivious of the vast movement of life. The educational system should develop the right perspectives, where knowledge and thought are given the importance they require. This will lay the foundations for a creative and wholesome education.

It may not be irrelevant to make a few remarks here about the historical origins of the present world view. In the West, early in the development of Greek philosophy, this assumption that, through thought, we can understand the nature of being, took root

in much of what they said. Systems of philosophy began to develop as a result. Generally, a system of thought implies that such a system can comprehend the whole of being. Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things, implying, thereby, that man can, through the categories of thought he has developed, weigh and assess the importance of things. The danger in such a statement is the implicit conviction that man's thinking is primary, and that the categories of thought that he has determines the nature of reality, etc. In contrast to the Greek views, it is interesting to see that in the East, there was a persistent questioning going on about the nature of thought process and its relationship to reality. In some of the great traditions of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, the limitation of thought process was seen clearly, and comprehending *oneself* and the *universe* was not through an explanation offered by a system of thought, rather freeing oneself from illusions created by the mind. *Negation* became a very important approach, negating the categories of thought as a mode of comprehending life. Man was not the measure of all things, instead, his categories are totally inadequate to comprehend the vastness and the immeasureable totality of existence on which he is dependent. Some of these insights were later systematized and developed into systems of meditation, etc., thereby destroying their profound quality. This implies that even in the East which questioned vigorously the identity of thought and being in early times lost, this fundamental dimension and settled comfortably in the assumption that thought is primary and being is secondary. Thus, we see that everywhere the primacy of thought over being has taken deep roots in human consciousness, and one important aim of educators is to inquire into this important question. There is nothing wonderful about belonging to any tradition of thought, be it Western or Eastern or any other, for the simple reason that all traditions seem to get systematized in our minds into patterns of thought from which we function mechanically, resulting invariably in loss of active investigation in the present.

An important feature of the Philosophy for Children program is its willingness to inquire into the nature of the thought process. This helps inquiry not to be fixed to any particular content, instead it widens the scope of investigation to include the dialectical movement of the thought process and the limitations of categories of thought. A number of assumptions that structure our thinking can be examined for the sake of clarity and depth. The Philosophy for Children classroom is a real challenge for the teacher, for it makes him or her reflect on a number of assumptions that we generally take for granted. An important assumption that we could be making is that all inquiry is *essentially intellectual.* The teacher needs to probe into this question carefully. Asking a fundamental question, is it merely a matter of intellectual capacity or is it a result of deep perception? Are there not emotional and aesthetic elements in search for truth? Does cleverness in talking and an ability to use language guarantee depth of insight? Is perception of the whole an intellectual phenomena? I think there are no clear cut answers to these questions, but there is a need to ask these questions, both during training sessions as well as in the classrooms; otherwise, as I see it, Philosophy for Children will tend to become deeply entrenched in the belief that thought is primary and the sense of being merely of secondary concern.

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