

The value of philosophy

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When individuals endeavor to accumulate material needs as an end to life, and such individuals, being referred to as “ practical” men by the society, do not find any necessity in the acquisition of knowledge. Bertrand Russell believes, and rightfully so, that the tag “ Practical men” does not accurately describe such individuals. To these individuals, life, in all certain terms does not include the awareness that the acquisition of knowledge is necessary. Here, he makes a very vibrant distinction between the practical school of thought and the philosophic one.

The interaction between philosophy and science is brought to the fore in Russell’s work “ The Value of Philosophy”. The value of philosophy is discovered, although with some effort, when one journeys the extra mile to distinguish between substance and ideas. Philosophy, aided by open thinking, therefore, stands out principally as a source of enlightenment. Human beings, by looking through their actions and past choices can gain enlightenment, and according to Russell, and I am of a similar conviction that the primary objective of philosophy is to impart enlightenment. Russell contends, “ Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge. The knowledge it aims at is the kind of knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of science, and the one which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our conviction, prejudices, and beliefs¹.”

There has been widespread concern that philosophy as a field is shrouded in a great deal of doubt, and therefore, pursuit of knowledge along a path that is not so clear becomes an exercise in futility. However, I should point out that although we might seek “ veritable” answers, these answers are mostly subject to other constraints like customs and beliefs, opinions and

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inclinations among others, and therefore, “right” answers may be rendered not very certain in their truth when subjected to the criterion of proof. Thus, as stated in Russell’s work, the uncertainty of philosophy is largely more apparent than real. He admits that several questions, like ones pertaining to spiritual life whose comprehension are beyond the human intellect. To reinforce this view of state of affairs, J. L. Mackie in his work says that the theologian “must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved from other beliefs he also holds... this is because the theologian can maintain his position as a whole only by a much more rejection of reason².” This tells us that as far as religious doctrines are concerned, what is “true” in a particular instant is not necessarily so in the next. Thomas Hobbes likens the uncertainty of philosophy to perception of man to the light of the sun, which obscures that of the stars, so we are unable to see the stars during the day, because our senses are only able to perceive the predominant³. This lack of perception, however, does not mean that light from the stars does not exist.

In conclusion, it can be said that philosophy raises doubt, a deep state of uncertainty if you may, but at the same time, it offers suggestions to these uncertainties instead of direct answers. In this manner, our thinking is broadened. As Donald Abel puts it, our thoughts are then liberated from the tyranny of custom. The more complex a situation becomes, the more the effort that is needed to find its solution and the more insight it offers into some minute and inconspicuous details that would have otherwise been ignored.

Bibliography

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