

# On the Necessity of Teaching Philosophy

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Philosophy is always at the crossroads of thought, and its role is often questioned. In ancient Greece we already read reports of people being sceptical about the business of philosophers: just think of the famous anecdote of Thales' olive presses and of Callicles' appearance in Plato's *Gorgias*. Even in Buddhism, the usefulness of philosophical reflection is often questioned. In modern and postmodern times, however, the role of philosophy in school curricula has become even more controversial, mainly because in the nineteenth century many sciences that were usually considered 'philosophy' (such as physics, biology, psychology, or sociology) branched off from the love of wisdom and became sciences in their own right, mostly based on empirical methodology. The nominal scope of philosophy thus became smaller and smaller, and the increasing pressure on schools from market societies has questioned the existence of purely theoretical forms of knowledge. Indeed, the pressure is sometimes so great that philosophy does not appear as a compulsory subject in many schools in many countries. In fact, UNESCO felt the need to establish a special day – UNESCO World Philosophy Day – to highlight the importance of philosophy for the development of human thought and democracy.

But what are the concrete uses of philosophy in a school curriculum, and why should it not be reserved for elite thinkers? Unfortunately, this is often the view of many people, even intellectuals. Recently I was approached by a full professor of economics who tried to persuade me that philosophy is 'not for the masses' and that it makes sense to study philosophy only in highly specialized environments, such as academies of science and art. I, of course, vehemently disagreed, pointing out that there are at least two ways to think about philosophy today: we can think of it as an academic discipline that develops like any other science, or we can think

of it as a conceptual toolkit that enables us to be better citizens, more responsible in social and political contexts, as well as flourishing individuals in private life. In the first sense, philosophy should definitely be cultivated in specialized institutions, but in the second sense it should be our second nature; thus philosophy is not optional, but obligatory for every human being. Indeed, as I often say, we are all philosophers, since being human means having questions about the meaning of life, the nature of the universe, and so on. But in fact, we are rarely good philosophers unless we dedicate part of our lives to philosophy. So our task is not just to become philosophers, because that is what we are by nature; our task is to become good philosophers, and we can only do that in dialogue with others and with the tradition.

Let us return to the question of the use of philosophy and, consequently, the reasons why it is a compulsory subject in schools. One of these reasons is purely instrumental, and therefore favoured even by market economies. It is called 'critical and creative thinking.' By doing philosophy, we begin to observe ourselves, our beliefs, and thus our world, in a different way. Philosophy teaches us to examine our opinions in a way that makes them stronger and truer. In this sense, philosophical practice is not unlike the general scientific method, which tries to get us closer to the truth and helps us to get better at reading and understanding mathematical concepts.

But this instrumentalist understanding of the role of philosophy is also problematic, for two reasons. The first is that it is not clear why we should impose philosophy on students. After all, do not mathematics and language contribute to mathematical and general literacy just as successfully, if not more so, than philosophy? The second problem has to do with the nature of instrumentalist thinking as such. If philosophy is to be worthy of its name, it must also be critical of instrumentalist approaches, not just try to develop them. To be 'instrumental' is in fact ambiguous, despite today's urge to be 'useful.' For in order to understand the value of the tool, one must first observe and evaluate the value of the goal that the tool seeks to achieve. In fact, something may be very useful for a particular activity, but that activity itself may be problematic. Consider, for example, the use of chemicals in food production.

Thus, what some advocates of philosophy point to is the emancipatory potential that seems to be unique to philosophical thought. Philosophy should not only enable students to survive in the job market, but also to become free subjects. But in order to do this, individuals must be able to

go beyond mere instrumentalist thinking and become critical of social institutions as such. In fact, as Richard Rorty used to say, philosophy is not so much an attempt to solve puzzles as it is an attempt to dissolve them, to understand the concepts and frameworks that give rise to the problems and thus to evaluate their meaning. More specifically, what is often needed for social progress is a Foucauldian (and Rancièresque) transgression of boundaries, which in the first place exposes them. In this sense, the practice of philosophy is crucial for any democratic society, and when we talk about the value and necessity of this subject in the curriculum, we should not overlook this moment.

Because of these complex and pressing issues related to philosophy as a subject in different curricula, the present issue of *Anthropos* is dedicated to reflecting on the role that philosophy can play in schools. More specifically, the issue wants to shed an international, cross-cultural perspective on the subject. Only in this way can the role of teaching philosophy in schools be properly assessed.