

## The Education of Value and The Value of Education

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In an age in which reality is not recognised beyond the concrete matter, in which even man is known as a resource (like any other) to be exploited for the maximum utility possible, any mention of value is viewed as something esoteric, an idle mind's pursuit of things imaginary and impalpable. Science and logic, the two dominant philosophic concerns of our time, have driven the idea of value into a corner. It has not only been pushed to the periphery of ordinary existence but has also been obliterated from the concerns of education. Questioning the conventional concepts of humanity and universality, culture and education, the present-day philosophies of scientific empiricism, economic utilitarianism, behavioural sociology, and empirical psychology have forced a notion of education which reduces learning to information, skill and training, branding all else as unverifiable, unprofitable and unexploitable, and hence entirely irrelevant to the needs and services of contemporary society. No wonder then that "Modern ethics analyses 'good', the empty action word which is the correlate of the isolated will, and tends to ignore other value terms."<sup>1</sup>

When science gained dominance, subjects of history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, even philosophy, turned scientific, preferring even the suffix sciences to their earlier label of the humanities. Now when applied sciences have become dominant under the nomenclature technology, all disciplines of knowledge are getting converted into technologies. Nothing is beyond the operation of this new god today. Another allied force in the field of education today is the discipline of management. All other disciplines, including sciences and their applications, have acquired the tag of management. Here again, the all-inclusive terminology has encompassed the entire corpus of the subjects of study into its fold from

industrial and business management to time and stress management. Nothing is left out in the affairs of society or individual which can be considered beyond the skills of management. Hence the flooding of the territory of education by the institutes of management and technology. The flood is so powerful that the conventional institutions of education, aiming at the cultivation of mind and the refining of sensibility through a curriculum of general education of the humanities, have either surrendered to the powerful sweep of the flood or have continued to exist in the darkened region below the bright surface of the technological world.

If we try to voice with Murdoch that "For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all,"<sup>2</sup> there is no scope for our voice to be heard in the loud noise of the mills of management and the towers of technology, which have come to control every compartment of life in the contemporary world. In fact, such a voice will not only be considered other-worldly but will also be mocked for its utter irrelevance to the present-day goals and purposes governing the business of education as well as the science of living.

The reason why value has become in our time alien to the goals of education is not far to see. Although one could trace the origin of the ailment to the industrialisation of the West in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, the accentuation of the ailment can be clearly seen in the post-War period of the 50's when education came to be considered "as a key investment in the promotion of economic growth."<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the vocationalisation of higher education, followed by its privatisation and commercialisation, education increasingly acquired the character of training. The process forced early specialisation, making education

thoroughly professionalised, relating it increasingly and directly to the requirements of modern trades and professions. Today, the demands for trade and business have increased to such an extent that an almost total subordination of the education system to economic utility has come to be considered a necessary condition for economic prosperity in the twenty-first century. The fact that most business houses and a large number of individual entrepreneurs have entered the education arena, using business norms of investment, production, and marketing, shows how important the instrument of education has become for the post-industrial society of our time.

The valueless education of our time is, of course, a byproduct of the post-Kantian philosophies promoting such an outlook on world and man, as denies altogether the claims of spiritual needs and purposeful existence. As Murdoch has rightly observed:

The idea of life as self-enclosed and purposeless is of course not simply a product of the despair of our own age. It is the natural product of the advance of science and has developed over a long period. It has already in fact occasioned a whole era in the history of philosophy, beginning with Kant and leading on to the existentialism and the analytical philosophy of the present day. . . . The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendental reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. The sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possibly courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will power. The concept inhabits a quite separate top level of human activity since it is the guarantor of the secondary values created by choice. Act, choice, decision, responsibility, independence are emphasized in this philosophy of puritanical

origin and apparent austerity... this image of human nature has been the inspiration of political liberalism. However, as Hume once wisely observed, good political philosophy is not necessarily good moral philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

It is under the force of this very philosophy that moral neutrality is attributed to science and technology; that they are neither moral nor immoral. No doubt, no one can escape in our age the knowledge of science and technology. But education about the use of science and technology is equally (or more) important. It is in education, not in knowledge or information, skill or training, that the question of value arises. Those given to defending science and technology against the charge of amorality would say with General David Sarnoff who while accepting an honorary degree from the university of Notre Dame insisted, "We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value".<sup>5</sup> Here, one feels impelled to ask with Marshall McLuhan, could we say that firearms are in themselves neither good nor bad, and that it is only the way they are used that determines their value? As McLuhan rightly remarks, "There is simply nothing in the Sarnoff statement that will bear scrutiny, for it ignores the nature of the medium."<sup>6</sup> We cannot deny the fact that education, properly understood, lies in understanding the value of things, which can be imparted only by relating our special knowledge to the general knowledge about life; by relating it that is, to the general question "how to live", which, as Matthew Arnold insists, is a "moral question".<sup>7</sup>

What is, therefore, required today to save education from the utilitarian view of learning as an instrument of augmenting trade and industry, and of man as a material resource for economic exploitation, is to strengthen the education of the humanities at the foundation level. From the primary to the high school level, in fact, up to the secondary, education should not be

allowed to be specialised. Whatever the choice of subject a student is allowed to make—science, commerce, or arts—he/she must study compulsorily an equal quantum of learning in the humanities, especially the subjects of literature and fine arts. While history and philosophy impart the general education about man and his universe from the inception to the present day, the arts and literature impart the value education about means and ends, goals and purposes, right and wrong, good and bad, etc. As Murdoch remarks, "Art transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer. It is a kind of goodness by proxy. Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice".<sup>8</sup>

In our time, we have come to acquire rather a vulgar view of art, treating it as a diversion, or a practice peculiar to a group of people, having no relation to general or universal human nature. Interestingly, while technology has gained the status of universality, art has been lowered to the local level. Rightly understood, however, arts alone are the repository of whatever is good and virtuous in man. To quote Murdoch once more, "These arts, especially literature and painting, show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is training in the love of virtue".<sup>9</sup> Hence, rather than consider art a diversion, or even a side-issue, we must acknowledge that it is perhaps the most educational of all human activities, an activity in which the nature of morality can be perceived most clearly.

Our leaders, and at times our educationists, plead for moral education as a separate subject of study at the school. Such an effort cannot yield the desired result, for teaching moral precepts is far less effective than making students read interesting stories of human experience in history and

literature which impart a moral sense without being obtrusive in any manner. Also, all knowledge is moral and valuable, provided it is related to life and placed in the larger scheme of reality in which mankind is to lead a meaningful and purposeful life. If knowledge is related to the whole of which it is a part, it will impart the morals and values which make human life superior to the animal life. Further, the education of the humanities must remain a component at the higher level of education after the school level. The specialised training or skill in any technology or management must be combined with an essential education in arts and human studies. The conventional engineering colleges and the IIT's do have departments of Humanities, although rather in a lower key of their curriculum. But the later crop of the Institutes of Technology and Management in the private sector are so exclusively specialised that they impart skill or training strictly restricted to a particular technology in a particular trade or business. Obviously, such an education is not only incomplete, it is also deficient in the cultivation of mind and sensibility. We must therefore ensure that education is not reduced to special skills and typical trainings; that it is maintained as a unified package for producing not only competent professionals but also cultured members of the human race, exhibiting both the light of learning and the sweetness of soul.

#### NOTES

1. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, 1970, p. 8
2. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
3. See *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, eds. A.H. Halsey et al., New York: OUP, 1997, p.4.
4. *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 78-9.
5. Quoted in McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, 1964, p. 11
6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, 1964, p. 11.
7. See Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, eds. James Henry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd edn., New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1951, p. 619.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 84.