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CAN KNOWLEDGE BREED VIRTUE?
A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION, WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY OF MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines one of the fundamental assumptions under-lying many education policies, particularly in developing countries with strong national (or other) ideologies. This assumption was formulated especially impressively by two of the Classical Greek philosophers – Socrates and Plato – and it is therefore referred to in this paper as The Socratic Principle.

This principle is examined in a number of secular and religious forms and we then see how it is entailed in Malaysia's National Education Policy. We ask a number of questions about the validity and implementation of the Principle as well as a number of more general question about the inculcation of society's values during formal education.

This paper does not align itself with the critiques made by The Deschoolers. But it does attempt to raise some fundamental questions concerning the possibility and methodology of Schooling Society.

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In this paper I shall be looking, primarily as a philosopher, at one common conception in the education policies of many developing nations. This conception has been expressed in a variety of ways, most originally and systematically (in my opinion) by two of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Socrates. For this reason, I shall refer to it as 'The Socratic Principle'. In calling it this, I should add that I am not implying that Socrates was the first to expound it. Nor am I suggesting that it is a peculiarly Greek, or even an essentially secular, tradition. Indeed, I shall be looking at two non-Greek and religious forms in which it is held today - the Buddhist and Islamic forms - in addition to its secular Socratic form.

This principle, about which I wish to raise a number of formal and practical questions, can be put most simple as follows:- That Knowledge is a Virtue, and that Knowledge breeds Virtue. What this implies inter alia is that: - If a person is given the right understanding of things, if he/she is shown how things really are in some more-or-less accurate and objective sense, then that person will be able to discern The Good and will wish to act accordingly. In a moment I shall describe the extreme form in which Socrates and Plato taught and tried to implement this principle. But first let me describe an incident showing it being adhered to today.

Recently, a prominent public figure in Malaysia was put on trial for murder. One of the comments that I heard on several occasions went something as follows:- 'I cannot see why he did such an evil thing. After all, he is an educated man and he should have known better.' We can all agree, I think, that this comment is based on the assumption that knowledge or education (which we often distinguish from each other) of themselves somehow can make a person better in a moral sense, that being well educated is or should be aynonymous with being 'good'. It is this assumption -- and I shall insist that it is only an assumption - that I wish to examine. I am interested in it from a formal point of view, i.e., as a philosopher examining the cogency of an argument.

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But I shall try too to make it relevant to educational practice by discussing Malaysia's National Education Policy.

I hope that whatever I say will not be construed as being intentionally and negatively critical of Malaysian education in particular. I could easily have chosen another country. I choose Malaysia because of the location of this conference and because education occupies a position of staggeringly high priority in the governance and ideology of Malaysia. That priority is reflected in the fact that by the mid-1970s education was swallowing at least 25 percent of the national budget.

II: <u>The Classical Greek conception</u>. <u>Buddhist</u> and <u>Islamic</u> conceptions.

One of the most remarkable men of the Classical Greek civilization was the social and moral philosopher, Socrates, who lived in the 5th century B.C. Among the things that he taught was the principle that Knowledge is a Virtue and that people do wrong only out of ignorance. A corollary of this principle that Plato particularly developed and which has thereby entered social and political theory for all time is that:- Education is a key means for the creation of a good society; and if only one can teach people the right principles, in ethics and in other spheres such as natural science, then they will be strongly inclined or even impelled to act accordingly. Or, in other words, teach people what is Truth and Goodness and they will <u>act</u> accordingly.

Precisely in what form Socrates taught this principle we do not know. But Plato, inspired by him and succeeding him as the principal thinker on social and political matters in Athens, expounded what purported to be Socrates' ideas in a number of written works and in particular in a very large work called <u>The Republic</u>. <u>The Republic</u> became one of the most influential secular works in the emergence of at least two religious world-views - namely Christianity and Islam - and it is consequently no exaggeration to say that one's understanding of today's educational theories in the West and within Islam can be enriched if one first sees what Plato said in his <u>Republic</u>. For Plato, the ultimate goal of all education was the implementation of The Good. For him, the realization of The Good within the individual and especially within society was the summit of education. But, as Plato admitted, a number of difficulties must stand in the way of this goal. Firstly, could anyone say what The Good Is? And secondly, if someone can say what it is and tries to teach it, how can he be sure that his teaching will have any practical effect?

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    To both of these difficulties Plato responded optimistically and,
as Aristotle pointed out, remarkable naively. Most people who believe in
The Socratic Principle today handle these difficulties at least as
optimistically and naively as Plato did.

    I have been using a phrase, namely 'The Good', which is familiar
to philosophers but probably sounds rather aloof to non-philosophers. What
did Plato envisage by it? In practical terms (and we should realize that
Plato's Republic was intended as a practicable social and political
programme) it meant the apprehension of some rational unified conception
of the social aim and human well-being, and the consistent relating of all
particular beliefs and measures to that ideal, a thing which could be
achieved by only those with the highest intelligence and education.
(Barrow, 1976, p.26.) For Plato then, and probably too for Socrates,
education was the means for constructing the good society.

    If we ask ourselves what is the most original and influential part
of the Socratic and Platonic legacy in education today it must be the idea
that education is a normative thing, i.e., that education enshrines and
implements social values. In the words of one modern Western philosopher
of education, 'education implies that something worthwhile is being, or has
been, intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner.' (Peters,
1966, p.25.) Virtually everyone would agree with this today. It lies at the
root of the distinction frequently made between mere knowledge on the one
hand and education proper on the other.

    Yet the view that knowledge-by-itself contains some sort of
dynamic-for-good persists. It persists. It persists in secular and in
religious forms. I want to look briefly at one religious form in which it
stands out in bold relief - namely, in Buddhism; and at another religious
form in which it is less boldly held or, rather, in which it is modified by
a particular conception of Man - namely, in Islam. Both of these forms are
of course relevant to the Malaysian context and to many areas in The Third
World.

    According to the Buddha, the root-causes of unhappiness and evil
in this world are ignorance of things-in-themselves and one's craving for
those things which bring gratification of the senses. The Good is to be
sought primarily through knowledge, through seeing things in their most
fundamental and purest form.

To quote from a Buddhist contribution at an international
UNESCO conference on 'Humanism and Education in East and West', 'Buddhism
studies nature, the principles governing the make-up and course of specific,
concrete facts.' It has its own cosmology and philosophy of nature,
although these are not its main concern. It is concerned with this world
as a given fact, with its manifold of things and relations. But it does
not stop there. It wants to get a picture of reality, if only in order to
see the ultimates beyond or deep within the world. It does not seek
knowledge for its own sake but for the attainment of the Good. The Good
is not to be found in particular events of nature's course, in the moment-
to-moment happenings of life. Nor is it to be found by reorganizing the
world with all its complexity, in remoulding human society or in reforming
the State. The Good is to be attained by the realization of ultimate truth,
by the understanding of "things as they are". (Malalasekera G.P., 'The
Buddhist point of view', in UNESCO, 1953, pp.135-6.) To anyone who knows
his Plato, there is much that is familiar in this (as well as much which is
alien). Clearly, in the Buddhist world-view, Knowledge-in-itself possesses
a dynamic-for-good. Certainly, it is held to be a virtue-in-itself, indeed
the cardinal virtue.

If we look at Islam, a similar basic sentiment is found although
it is considerably modified by a more formal theological and a more detailed
historical framework. Before giving my understanding of it, however, I must
here admit that I do not intend, nor am I qualified, to give a definitive
Islamic conception of Knowledge or of education. I am not qualified for at
least one reason, namely my lack of acquaintanceship with Arabic - and more
importantly Quranic - philology. And this philology is an intricate field
of discourse. For instance, in the Muslim world today there are at least
three widely used terms denoting education, namely al-ta'lim (التعليم),
al-tarbiyah (التربية), and al-ma'arif (المعارف), and each of these
carries its own historical and philosophical overtones and nuances that I
am unable properly to appreciate, not being an Islamic scholar. I should
add that these three terms are not all acceptable to all Muslim thinkers
on education and that alternatives even to these three terms are advocated.
For instance, one scholar (incidentally, a Malaysian) advocates term
ta'dib (تأديب), which he believes to possess a firmer cultural and
Quranic basis. (al-Attas, 1980).

With this substantial reservation on my part, I shall now say how I understand the Islamic conception of, and attitude towards, Knowledge. In Islam, the purpose of seeking Knowledge is ultimately to perceive and submit to the Will of Allah, Glorious and Most Exalted. On the individualistic level, it might be said to be the attainment of that combination of right understanding and right action which has been manifested most highly in this world in the person of the Holy Prophet. In this sense, a goal of education in Islam is to produce good men and women as individuals, to produce men and women of adab (أدب). In saying this - that the goal of education in Islam is an individualistic one - I am not, of course, saying that it is 'individualistic' in the liberal Western usage of this word. Nor am I neglectful of the substantial debate which long has existed within Islam itself concerning the weighting of the individual vis-a-vis society. Insofar as I can understand what most (but by no means all) Muslims conclude upon this issue today, it is that insofar as each individual is an integral component of the Umma (الأمة) or of the community-on-earth of Allah, Most Glorious and Most Exalted, the individual must subordinate his needs and desires to those of the community. And among those needs and desires are the goals and criteria of Knowledge and education.

In Islam, knowledge-in-itself is a virtue and is necessarily conducive to virtuous action only when such knowledge is sought and framed within other forms of knowledge. One such other form, which I have mentioned already, is adab (أدب) which might be translated as knowledge of the purpose of seeking knowledge and which might be put most succinctly as the recognition of the proper order of things. In somewhat different words, within Islam Knowledge is a virtue and is a principal vehicle for The Good because, properly speaking, the 'content' of what we learn is inseparable from the 'purpose' of learning it. In the words of an eminent Malaysian scholar at a recent conference on 'Islam and Technology' the ultimate purpose of education 'is to recognize the Divine Will as the driving force of all physical laws of nature, which are manifestations of the Divine presence, Allah the Almighty, the Absolute. In Islam, knowledge is neither pursued for knowledge-sake, nor merely for the satisfaction of the insatiable human needs. Knowledge is to have a higher purpose, leading ultimately to the recognition of Allah and submitting oneself to His Will as His servant and Khalifah on earth. "The most pious are the most learned". (Suhaimi, 1983, p.4.)

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The last phrase we can, I think, legitimately expand as 'The most pious and therefore the most good are those who are the most learned' and in this form it encapsulates the Islamic form of The Socratic Principle. With this as background, we can begin to comprehend the point and the power of the modern movement in Islam towards the 'Islamization of Knowledge', a movement whose philosophical and cultural basis lamentably few non-Muslim commentators and scholars have tried to appreciate. (The 'Islamization of Knowledge' is the title of a recent work by one of the most eminent Muslim philosophers of education; see al-Farugi, 1982. I am unaware of the actual origins of the phrase itself.)

III. Today's Malaysian context.

It might be expected that what has so far been said, particularly on the principal legacy of Socrates and Plato for education-theory and on the Islamic perspective, should have some bearing on the Malaysian context. Before examining the extent to which this is so, allow me to mention another incident in Malaysian public life which shows The Socratic Principle alive and well. Earlier this year, a popular and devout Muslim was appointed to a key ideological position in the Government. Shortly after his appointment, he made a speech in which he made a comment whose gist was that university graduates are more valuable members of society than farmers and fishermen because, being better educated, they must be more anxious and better able to bring about a good society. ('What kind of students we need', New Straits Times, June 5, 1983, p.6) Obviously, this comment entails a major assumption concerning the social efficacy of education.

Such an assumption lies at the basis of Malaysia's National Education Policy. We can best see this if we try to identify the main ends of this policy and some of the means that have been, and continue to be, used to achieve those ends. The main ends are:-

i)   The attainment of a sense of nationhood and of political
           integration. In other words, the construction of a
           Malaysian nation out of the diverse elements of race,
           language, culture and religion - a purpose explicitly set
           out in the Education Act, 1961 (and elsewhere). As Datuk
           Hussein Onn, the then Prime Minister, put it somewhat later:-
           'All aspects of the government's policy are geared towards
           the achievement of national unity.

All projects (including education) are meaningless if the people

are not united.' (Reply of the P.M., at the Dewan Rakyat,

7 April, 1976.)

ii)   The construction of a just and stable society based upon the five

beliefs and five principles in the Rukenegara.-(National Ideology)

which is instilled into all students at every level of education.

iii)   The provision of sufficient social mobility for the attainment

of a more equitable distribution of wealth and power.

There are, as one might expect, other ends to the National

Education Policy; but these three are, in my opinion, the most fundamental

and the least negotiable. (Chai Hon-Chan, 1977; Wong, 1977; and Second

Malaysia Plan, 1971-1975 and Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980.)

It must be clear that any education policy which is so ambitious

presupposes that the provision of knowledge, and especially of a right type

of knowledge within a suitable context, carries with itself two sorts of

dynamic - a dynamic-for-good and a dynamic-for-change. It also presupposes

that the men and women who emerge from the education-process are so deeply

socialized into the values of society, as expressed in Malaysia's case in

the Rukunegara, that they will of necessity enter society as agents for the

implementation of those values.

What means have been employed to bring about these ends and I

have mentioned? Many means have been tried in Malaysia, amongst which one

should mention - the inculcation of society's official values at all levels

of schooling, for example by way of the Rukunegara; the alignment and re-

alignment of syllabuses so as to be better adapted to the national ideology

and the social values (Don, 'Curriculum issues', in Wong, 1977, esp. pp.31-

36.); and thirdly, the provision of Islamic teaching in all government

schools coupled with the provision of an Islamic Religious Department as

one of the fifteen structural components of the Ministry of Education, with

its own Director. Here, I wish to say just a little more about the

Rukunegara. It is a statement of the five guiding principles for the

entire nation, and it is cast almost entirely in moral terms as follows:-

Faith in God

Respect for King and Country

Respect for the Rule of Law

Upholding of the Constitution

Morals and Good Behaviour.   (Malaysia, Rukunegara, Kuala Lumpur,
                                    1970.)

It also entails five rather more secular beliefs: - a united nation, a democratic society, a just society, a liberal society, and a progressive society. One could hardly find a more succinct yet sweeping declaration of the ultimate goal of education and of a society's ideals.

The strength of the Malaysian Government's committment to this ideology and of its belief in the Schooling of Society is shown by the many and often direct ways in which these values are put across at all levels of schooling. There can be no doubt that Malaysia is determined to have a good society and that formal education is regarded as the key vehicle for reaching this end. But we might ask how effective this all is. There are a number of reasons for being anxious about its effectiveness. The first is that in all societies an educated man does not necessarily turn out a good citizen and that providing him with a view of The True and The Good is no guarantee that he will try to attain them. In other words, the Socratic Principle is not borne out by history. Secondly, there is a well-known feature of the human personality, whereby it is often more effective to inculcate ideas and values indirectly than directly. For instance, there is substantial evidence that in the long run people possess a deeper moral sense through the reading of good fiction than through the provision of ethics-instruction during the formal schooling process. (Wilson et al., 1967; Wilson, 1973; Beck et al., 1974.) Thirdly, as every educationlist must know yet too few curriculum planners and teachers appear to realize, the content of a syllabus can be of trivial importance compared with two other things – namely, the degree to which a curriculum has been designed (as opposed to thrown together) to incorporate and act upon its goals and values, and the quality of the teaching. Taking the first of these, there are at least four fundamental questions that must be asked whenever a curriculum is being designed and for which answers have to be found anew every time:-

i)   What educational purposes should the curriculum, and more broadly the institution within which the curriculum is to operate, seek to attain?

ii)　　　What educational experiences could be provided to help attain these purposes?

iii)　　　How might these educational experiences be effectively organized?

iv)　　　How can one assess whether these purposes are being attained?

v)　　　Who are the students? What are they capable of doing, and what are their needs? (For the first four of these questions, see Don, in Wong, 1977, pp. 40-41)

Having read myself into the literature on education in Malaysia and having seen for myself some aspects of this education, I am not convinced that these questions have been asked sufficiently seriously or often, let alone answered. Yet they must surely be taken serioulsly given two facts - namely, the ambitiousness of Malaysia's National Education Policy and the plural nature of Malaysian society. According to one of the leading figures in Malaysian Curriculum Development, the general failure to ask these questions at all levels of Malaysian education has resulted in Malaysian education now possessing various features which are bound to interfere with, and perhaps even arrest, the inculcation of society's values and the production of proper citizens. (Don, in Wong, 1977; and elsewhere). To cite, for instance, the conclusions of the Cabinet Committee appointed in September 1974 to review the implementation of the National Education Policy, the Secondary School Curriculum (which I single out since this is probably the most crucial level in schooling for the instillation of social values) was too academic, lacking in balance for all-round growth, too rigidly compartmentalized, too narrowly geared towards examinations to allow for the development of higher knowledge or of proper understanding, and too narrow to allow for the development of attitudes, skills and values appropriate for adulthood. (Draft Report of Working Group B, Cabinet Review Committee, Ministry of Education, 1975;cited in Don.) The committee reached similarly alarming conclusions about the quality of teaching. The significance of these conclusions for what I am saying in this paper is simply this:- That the effectiveness of a national education policy as a tool for the construction of a particular type of society depends critically upon the care with which that tool has been made and upon the skillfulness - we might even call it 'crafts-manship' - of the people who use the tool, in this case the teachers. In other words, the Socratic Principle pure-and-simple is untrue.

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In many ways, it seems to me, Malaysia's education programme already possesses some of the major flaws that one finds in The Developed World. (The current 3-R's programme is precisely the type of programme that had to be launched a few years ago in Britain when people woke up to the fact that <u>basic</u> skills were being neglected through excessive enthusiasm over new methods, new gadgets and new curricula.) Perhaps this is the price it has had to pay for the speed at which it has been pushed ahead. This fact, coupled with the fact that the National Education Policy rests upon a total commitment to The Socratic Principle which is at best an assumption and which is most likely untrue, makes me wonder whether Malaysia's incredibly high expectations of education as the primary vehicle for social change and the attainment of the ideal society are realistic. Putting this another way, is the cost-effectiveness of Malaysia's National Education Policy with respect to its national ideals as high as it should be in order to justify its enormous expenditure on education? I, of course, am in no position to answer this question for it is, in the last resort, a question for only Malaysian to answer. It is, moreover, ultimately a political question so its answer depends upon political priorities. But I do believe it is worth asking, like so many other questions concerning education. In this paper, I have of course been concerned primarily with another question namely: Is Knowledge a virtue, and does it breed virtue? Or, is The Socratic Principle valid?

Allow me a final anecdote. Recently, I asked an intelligent 20 year old who had received a good state education up tp the age of sixteen to tell me the basic principles of the <u>Rukunegara</u> . He was unable properly to do so. What type of citizen will he turn out to be?

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