

Philosophy as Practice

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Every people speaks its own tongue of good and evil: this the neighbor does not understand. It has invented its own language of customs and rights. But the state lies in all the tongues of good and evil.

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

As a student and teacher of philosophy, I have often wondered how altruism, benevolence, and charity (A-B-C) became the cornerstone of helping the other. People—poor and rich, young and old—fall victims of exigencies of life. Humans have tirelessly worked to improve their conditions but circumstances of life proved their invincibility. All traditional societies improvise some kind of safety net and other residual arrangements. However, the growth of civilization and its complexities—industrialization, modernization, automation, war, and related ideological factors—have left individuals and communities unprotected. These unmitigated difficulties of life, especially amongst the vulnerable populations, usually drive private and public impulses to institutionalize help with the assistance of trained professionals. One of the twentieth century’s social development endeavors has remarkably been fruitful in the social service sector.

I felt privileged to reflect on a book that explores the “philosophical foundations of social work” (Reamer, 2022). I am familiar with professional advancements in the West and many Asian countries. I read the scholarly authored book, now revised nearly three decades after its first edition. The author, as I read the Preface, is a renowned professor and seemingly well known in his field. As I have mentioned, my assessment of the book’s subject is mainly from the vantage point of “philosophical foundations” that interest me the most. It’s my earnest hope that social

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work practitioners—students and faculty—will find my observations and comments constructively helpful.

Frederic Reamer's philosophical foci include five areas of exploration: political philosophy, moral philosophy, logic, epistemology, and aesthetics. The author comments: "Philosophical issues related to the profession must be carefully considered if social workers' practice-based decisions are to be firmly anchored in core values and tenets that uniquely frame and characterize the profession" (Reamer, 2022, p. xi). Philosophy, in this pursuit, "can be defined as the rational, methodological, and systematic consideration of those topics that are of greatest concern to humankind" (Reamer, 2022, p. xii). Admittedly, the book is not a "comprehensive" and "exhaustive" review of all relevant philosophical issues. An effort has been made to cover clinical and macro domains as related to political philosophy, moral philosophy, logic, epistemology, and aesthetics. As the profession has evolved over the decades, emerging trends in feminism, multiculturalism, and non-Western views have been taken into consideration.

Almost two decades ago, when I made a choice of a discipline I would be "master" of, I heard of social work, offspring of an American professional diploma that qualified and licensed graduates to work with people in need of help in or beyond institutional structures. I knew of School of Social Work at Delhi University, India. I wondered how and why certain people would "help" a vast humanity of needy people. Everyone needs help. It did not take much to infer why social work's marketability was so high. Now that all professional colleges and schools in the private sector have been allowed to offer professional courses, one finds management and engineering—even law and medicine—easily accessible to interested people who can afford it. The middle class burst has imploded with a frenzy of commoditized professional education. However, Reamer has confined himself to certain professional spheres: What is a social worker's own inclination to a particular philosophical strand? Not what is philosophically required! Social workers are also human beings—sensitive and caring. Are they not vulnerable to life's cruelties, stresses, and traumas?

People have philosophical outlooks and proclivities without being philosophers. Likewise, many pioneers in the field of social work have no social work degrees or diplomas. On a closer look, the learned author puts the cart before the horse. It's doubly important to understand, know, and analyze which particular philosophical strand is relevant to ameliorate human miseries and misfortunes. If inequality, injustice, and poverty are "structural" problems, then Plato might not help. Since oppression is rooted colonially, it's more an issue of decolonization than "capacity-based" *strength perspective*. Of course, individuals and groups have their own viewpoints about their personal and social problems. However, professional objectivity calls for truth and justice, rather than pragmatic and empathetic emptiness.

Another drawback of this scrupulously written book that seems to manifest is the author's one-sided view of Western philosophy, which is mostly Platonic. Postmodern philosophers are anti-Platonic. Rorty (1999) braggged about it.

Racism—like casteism in India—is pervasive and endemic; it’s both structural and institutional (cf. Kendi, 2019). Would it not be helpful to signify Jean Paul Sartre, or a few of those lonely thinkers and scholars who have been existentially Sartrean? Is it not epistemologically relevant to highlight anti-racist intellectuals and their anti-essentialism? Neglect of continental philosophy deprives students to comprehend the world through a non-Platonic lens. Paulo Friere was correct: All education is political.

One of my mentors, a distinguished social work philosopher in his own right, once told me that his field is awash with “philosophically illiterate” people. Reamer has done a favor to guide these kindred “illiterate” souls without enlightening them about the zeitgeist of modern philosophy!

References

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