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Guest Editorial

Should philosophy find a place in research in health sciences?

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The term Philosophy is an abstract jargon to a large section of scientific community in India. Of late, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has mandated the Universities to conduct a 'two credit' course on Research and Publication Ethics (RPE) compulsory for all Ph D scholars.[1] The opening module of this course deals with the philosophy and ethics.[2] This is a welcome development. How can a candidate walk away with a Ph D degree certificate (Doctor of Philosophy) without understanding meaning of philosophy?

The term 'Philosophy' is derived from Greek words 'Philos and Sophia'. 'Philos' means 'love' and 'sophia' means ' wisdom'. Philosophy literally means love or passion for wisdom. Does it mean that scientists are not passionate? They are indeed. Many scientists are passionate about generating new knowledge, and applying it to their field of study. Philosophers judge 'wisdom' rather than 'knowledge' using the criteria - goodness, fairness and fitness to the mankind. Scientists deal with the knowledge and its application based on the evidence. They do not make value judgement. They believe in a phenomena which can be observed, measured, tested, verified and generalized. The philosophers explore the truth and make value judgment which can be subjective, but authentic.

The major difference between the philosophers and scientists lies in their methods and tools used. Scientists make extensive use of observation and experimentation. They formulate hypothesis, collect data, analyse the same using statistical formula, and interpret their findings to test their hypothesis. On the other hand, philosophers use logic combined with in-depth experience or insight. Luckily, scientists today are armed with sophisticated gadgets. But it is amazing to note that our ancient Indian philosophers, thinkers and even common people unravelled the secrets of nature, lived in harmony with it, and contributed to the mankind.

Let's examine the scope of science versus philosophy. Science deals with disciplines such as physics, chemistry, biology (botany, zoology), health sciences, maths, statistics, agriculture, engineering, technology, geology, and host of disciplines. The fields of medicine and public health have also toed this line. The philosophy deals with five core disciplines: Epistemology (the study of knowledge as a field), Metaphysics (spirituality), Ethics & laws (values, right and wrong), Aesthetics (humanities, art, literature, music etc.), and Theology (study of religions). In addition, fields such as sociology, politics, culture & anthropology, human rights, gender sensitivity have entered in to the fold of philosophy. Many disciplines such as education, sociology, behavioural sciences, economics, business and commerce, ecology and environment, cut across both science and philosophy. As the knowledge gets expanded the difference between the 'science' and 'philosophy' gets blurred. From utilitarian point of view, science brings 'material wealth' to the society and philosophy brings 'human values and ethics'. Both are essential.

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Post-pandemic era has caused major disruption in the way science and philosophy should be addressed. Covid pandemic has shown that the entire humanity should come together and address the systems issues in a holistic manner. Biological issues focus on disease, diagnostics, treatment, protocols, and the production of vaccine. Psychological and behavioural issues deal with the trauma caused by stress factors on account of lock down. The economic issues deal with not only the loss of livelihood and income amongst the victims, but also the infrastructure and resources needed for the distribution of supplies and vaccines. The social issues address the religious and cultural aspects that impede the covid appropriate behaviour and acceptance of vaccination. Unless all these issues are addressed together, we cannot come out of the trap of pandemic era. This is perhaps most important lesson we learnt during the pandemic, which we need to address collectively. The take home for the researchers is therefore to widen their perspectives from narrow analytical approach of science to a broad horizon of philosophy. Every researcher should ask these questions before finalizing the research problem: What is my purpose of life? Will my research study make a small difference to the society? If yes, what methods, tools and techniques are likely to be useful? How can I pursue my study in manner which is ethical and effective? These questions will obviously result in exploration of wide range tools and techniques derived from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. This will also break the silos existing among various disciplines and specialties, resulting in a holistic and integrated approach to the research, science and philosophy. It is encouraging to note that our policy makers, regulators and universities are making efforts to push these issues under the ambit of curricular reform or quality assurance. Some of the positive signs of development are -The concept of Indian Medical Graduate in the new MBBS Curriculum under the National Medical Commission (NMC), the quality assurance guidelines given by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) under the UGC, the changes contemplated by the National Education Policy — 2020, besides the push given by the Government of India for developing Research Innovation Ecosystem leading towards self -sustenance (Atma Nirbhar Bharat)[3–5]

Philosophy and Science are not opposite. They complement each other.

Both of them aim at exploring truth in their own ways. Philosophy seeks values and science seeks utility. Both together constitute the two wheels for moving the society. Philosophy without science may be ‘useless’, but science without philosophy is dangerous!

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