
UNIT 1 SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH IN PHILOSOPHY

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Everyone who seeks knowledge through systematic enquiry do not write it down. Reasons may vary about absence of such attempt to spell out what one thought about something and ‘discovered’ something. Nevertheless, penning down the research would benefit the larger readers and it might help others who are also in the same quest for such knowledge. It might trigger also different opinions, corrections and modifications. It might initiate also fresh study and further research in the same field. Every research follows a certain method. Any systematic study itself is a method. About this we had an elaborate study in the first year MA Philosophy, in the course called ‘Research Methodology.’ Some of the students might have already taken up that course. What we intend to do in this manual is merely to help the students to get a practical hints. The unit introduces the students to the basics of research in philosophy. We shall deal with the basic understanding of systematic research in philosophy.

Human Language is the medium of communication of ideas, relationships, and feeling. Thoughts are products of human faculty, and expressed through proper language. Reality is conceived, comprehended and expressed in and through language. There exists inseparable unity between language and reality. Reality cannot be thought of without language. Philosophical treatises are methodically thought out human rationality. Any philosophical endeavour involves systematic method of cognition and expression. Study of Philosophy makes one dwell within this realm of logical thinking and methodic presentation of one’s own reflection and ideologies. Francis Bacon says, “Reading Makes a Full Man; Conference a Ready Man; and Writing an Exact Man.”

Enquiry into fundamental cause and nature of world, human beings and God is the very act of philosophizing. A student of philosophy is hence called to be a searcher for truth, an inquirer into nature of things and as a critical analyzer. IGNOU offers an opportunity for the students of MA Philosophy, not only for acquiring the knowledge of various systems and thinkers, ideologies and doctrines but also for developing their own skills of right thinking and presenting their ideas systematically. A course on Methodology introduces the students in the first year itself, to the vast area of philosophy, the methodic style of studying and writing, and the scientific method of presenting the papers. This manual deals with theoretical and practical hints of presenting scientific papers in philosophy.

1.2 RESEARCH IN PHILOSOPHY

Understanding the meaning of the word ‘Research’ leads to various conceptions such as; re-searching, searching again and the repetition of a search. In current usage, it would mean ‘careful search,’ or ‘intense investigation.’ T.P. Ramachandran defines Research as, “a critical investigation into a chosen area within a familiar field for the purpose of furthering the knowledge about the area selected.”(Ramachandran 1984, 2) Any research therefore proceeds from the known and familiar notions through careful analysis and finally arrives at new conclusions, theories and thought patterns. Writing scientific papers or assignments is meant to acquire knowledge of the field, to understand the various concepts and theories, to revise and critically reject or accept already held theories, schools of thought and conceptual patterns.

Research has two aspects; its content and its method. The content refers to what one intends to present to a learned audience. It is the substance and subject matter of a research work. The method is how we set about dealing with the subject. Both are of importance, primarily the content and secondarily the method. Content is of primary importance in the sense that this is our contribution to knowledge. Method is instrumental in its value, for it serves adequately to the nature of the content. Thus, the criterion for the excellence of a method is its adequacy to meet the demands of the content. Hence, a research worker has to pay attention not only to what he deals with but also to how he deals with it.

Systematic research is the combination of experience and critical thinking. It is regarded as the proper approach to the discovery of truth. Systematic Research is a way to methodically approaching an issue of philosophical nature and trying to solve logically adopting different methods. Scientific inquiry into a particular notion or issue would eventually throw light on the nature of the problem itself. Using proper tools for conducting serious and useful research becomes necessary. In the post graduate level a student of philosophy, presumably, might be taking up merely certain theoretical issues for a research. The approach and the method would be definitely different from other methods of enquiry in a research. Details of such methods are in the course on Research Methodology. Here we would focus more on the practical guidelines of bringing out the result of a research in a form of a paper.

Research is not merely information gathering, shifting of facts from one source to another. In research one does a systematic processing of collected facts and information through a carefully analysed method to bring out one’s own ideological position of an issue. Research is thus about understanding an issue or asking and answering a complex question or solving a problem. So, to start with, we need to identify an issue, question, or problem. Then we need to discuss with people who want or need your study. Listening to their suggestions and problems will help us. Further, we need to find out what’s already known about it. For this talk with experts and/or read their reviews and the other original research on the topic by different scholars. Then we need to plan, budget and proceed with our study accordingly.

Consulting an expert or the supervisor is essential for a research. Equally it is necessary to read journal articles to find out what's already known. Many authors also often point out topics for future research. This prevents doing research on an area already explored and thus prevents wasting valuable time and effort. Any research is supposed to be original investigations. Research originates with a concrete question; requires clear articulation of a goal and a specific plan for proceeding.

Systematic research is useful and beneficial to all including the student who does the research. It advances wealth of human knowledge. It develops a critical and scientific attitude, disciplined thinking or a bent of mind to observe objectively. It provides opportunity to study a subject in depth. Doing research is the best way to learn to read and think critically and creatively.

Research definitely requires the collection and interpretation of data in an attempt to resolve the problem that initiated the research. Research originates with a question: Examples: Are philosophers accepted well in the society? Why do poor people appear happier? What is the relationship between belief in God and good moral life? It requires clear articulation of a goal: What problem do you want to solve? Moral degradation? Deepening of faith in God? Change of behaviour? Building up an adequate world-view?

Good research requires a specific plan, not groping in the dark to find a solution. In fact, it is a planned discovery with outlined steps for tackling the problem. A good research accepts certain critical assumptions. They must be valid for the research to be meaningful.

1.3 PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

Philosophy is the study of and the attempt to gain knowledge and truth. It is a way of looking at things. It is a collection of ideas and assumptions that are used to interpret reality. Philosophy is a quest for the best arguments. A good argument is a clear, organized, sound statement, the reasons that cure the original doubts in a problem. Philosophy is distinguished by the methods that philosophers follow in tackling philosophical questions. Philosophical method involves a commitment to reason and argument as a source of knowledge.

Methodology process: Methodology means 'the systematic study.' The importance of methodology is that 'it helps us to avoid the wastage involved in the trial and error procedure. The final product of research varies with names like; research paper, scientific essay, special study, thesis, and dissertation. Methodology process is a systematic process of doubting or being skeptical about the truth of one's beliefs. In methodology process methodic doubt which is a systematic process of being doubting the truth of one's beliefs, arguments to support the solutions and dialectic, which is presenting the solution and arguments for criticism by other philosophers, and help them judge their own, are involved.

Doubt and the sense of wonder: Philosophy begins at wonder. Philosophy time and again begins with some simple doubts about accepted beliefs. We get the initial impulse to philosophize from the suspicion that we do not fully understand, and have not fully justified, even our most basic beliefs about the world.

Formulate questions and problems: The next step in the philosophical method is to formulate our doubts in questions to be answered or problems to be solved. Questioning is the first weapon of a philosopher with which one works. The more clearly the question or problem is stated, the easier it will be to identify critical issues, the assessment of which undergirds any genuine progress in coming to some sort of resolution. Here it is not enough to wonder at doubt but to state as clearly as possible what exactly the source of doubt is.

Enunciate a solution: To enunciate a theory, or to give a definition or analysis, which constitutes an attempt to solve a philosophical problem is another essential part of philosophical method. In just a sentence or two a philosophical theory by itself can be stated quite briefly very often all the surrounding philosophical text is offered by way of hedging, explanation, and argument. Here as an example let us take a philosophical theory which has to answer the question what actions are right? For this the answer is given by John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, as the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. Consequently, according to Stuart Mill, the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on their consequences; if they tend to cause happiness they are morally right, and if they tend to cause unhappiness they are morally wrong. Whether we accept the answer or not is a different question but it does answer the question, what actions are right.

Justify the solution: Another important part of philosophical method is philosophical justifications, or arguments. An argument is a set of statements, one of which, the conclusion, it is said or implied, follows from the others which is called the premises. We might think of arguments as bundles of reasons which are logically interconnected statements. The reasons are the premises, the claim they support is the conclusion; together they make an argument. Normally philosophers are very good in giving arguments. They are constantly demanding and offering arguments for different claims they make. The reason for this is that it is only a good argument, a clear, organized, and sound statement of reasons to believe something that will ultimately cure us of the original doubts that motivated us to take up philosophy. Let us illustrate this point with an example of an argument. Say Susan has some doubts about religious matters, and she asks the question: Does God really exist? Susan's answer is, we will say, yes. How might Susan argue for her answer? Here is a very common, popular argument, called the argument from design.

The universe is made up of a huge variety of things, inanimate and living, natural and artificial from the hills and the oceans, to the houses and ships on them, from the stars and planets, to the cities and highways. All of this huge variety of things is, as scientists well know, operating in a splendid order or harmony, much like a very complicated machine, only much more complicated and well-planned than anything that we humans have ever invented. Like a machine, this order or harmony could not have just sprung into existence all on its own; like a machine, it must have had a designer. Moreover, since the universe is so complicated and well-planned, this designer must be incredibly intelligent; and since everything is so well-made for the

habitation of humans, this designer must be very benevolent. And of course, as the creator and planner of the entire universe, this designer must be extremely powerful. So the universe must have had a designer which is incredibly intelligent, very benevolent, and extremely powerful; and this designer is what we call God. Therefore, God exists.

This argument is called the teleological argument which is studied the philosophy of religion. It offers a series of interconnected reasons to believe that there does exist the sort of entity that in various religions is called God. This sort of argument is just exactly what philosophers want from each other. To deserve our consideration, the argument does not have to be perfect. It might have some problems. In fact, it might be a very bad argument. But on the face of it, there should be something rather persuasive about it. That gives us something to analyse and learn.

Philosophical criticism: Philosophical criticism is common in the work of philosophers. It is this philosophical criticism that makes much philosophizing a social endeavour and so on. We offer definitions and explanations in solution to problems; we argue for those solutions; and then other people come along and, often, demolish those solutions, throw us into doubt again, and force us to come up with better solutions. This exchange and resulting revision of views is called dialectic. Dialectic is simply philosophical conversation amongst people who do not always agree with each other about everything. These are the five steps that a philosophical method involves in its journey towards finding the truth. Having studied the philosophical method let us move on to know about scientific method.

1.4 TOOLS OF RESEARCH

A tool is a specific mechanism or strategy that researchers use to collect data. For systematic research in Philosophy, the possible tools of research are: Library and its resources (most useful for philosophy students), Computer and software, and the human mind (this is the strength of philosophy students), Language.

The library: For a philosophical research the library is always the starting point. Here the following will be very beneficial: Referring to the Card catalogue, Browsing through Indexes and abstracts, Consulting the Reference librarian, if s/he is accessible. Browsing the shelves gives a first hand knowledge of the books and journals available on the topic of research.

Computer and Software: In today's context, good research cannot be done without adequate computer facilities. Computer facilitates not just writing, but collecting data (internet, online journals, libraries, etc.) and processing them. For any research today adequate and appropriate use of internet and computer is a necessary.

Language for adequate expression: Proper use of language enables us not only to communicate but also to think more effectively. Clear and concise use of language in writing is important in research. Writing down ideas helps the investigator to get clarity of mind. This, in turn, is useful to organizes thoughts systematically to give the proposed answer to the readers. Writing down the answer is helpful in detecting gaps and logical flaws in thinking in formulating the final answer.

1.5 CHOOSING A TOPIC

Kinds of Topics

Research topics fall into two (though not mutually exclusive) broad categories; the first type having its focal attention on a thinker or text, proceeds to discuss the philosophical / theological insights specially occurring in that thinker or text. The other has for its focus a concept and examines the nature and significance of this concept / doctrine taking into consideration the views offered by a variety of thinkers and texts. Besides this, comparative studies of two or more thinkers on certain issue and comparative studies of two schools of thought, are also considered for scientific papers.

Choosing a topic

Choosing the right topic for research is itself a part of research. The right topic is one which suits, the taste and training of the student, the purpose of research, and the product intended. From the vast area of concern, topics are to be narrowed down to a certain issue or a concept. The range and scope of the paper are also taken into consideration along with the ability of the student to plunge into the area of research. One has to clearly define what one wants to search for. First step to choose a topic is to divide the vast discipline into limited areas. Identifying an area of research should meet the student's interest and the object of research. One must focus on the area of interest and reduce it into definite topic. E.g. from Indian Philosophy to Concept of God in Sri Aurobindo. Preferably the papers should be based on original text or author or a specified area of study. Too generic themes are not recommended for research. The title of the paper should be as short and precise as possible with clarity. The purpose of a research paper is to explore an idea or probe an issue with the help of available resources in the library. Make a statement of thesis which states clearly the area of your research and defines the scope of your paper. The findings of the research have to be clearly and coherently presented in an accepted scientific format. A research paper pays attention both to the content as well as to the style of presentation.

Choose a definite, specific subject. The subject must be of interest to your readers. It should neither be too broad nor too specific. It must be within the limits of time and the length of paper. It must have necessary sources available. The sources available should neither be too vast nor too little. It can be author-based or theme-based. Make sure you have a competent supervisor available to you to deal with that specific subject.

Synopsis

Synopsis is a preparation of an abstract of the topic. A synopsis consists of provisional title to the topic, the aim and objective of research, the outline of the contents of the topic, the method of procedure and the source materials available. It would give clarity and confidence to the student and initiate action on the subject.

Schema

The outline of the topic is schema. The topic is divided into chapters and sub titles. This provisional title and the outline is the preliminary preparation.

With the basic sources available, a working Bibliography of all the books and articles is prepared. All these - schema, synopsis and bibliography - form the preliminary activity of a research works. They are to be done with due consultation of the Supervisor chosen. In the choice of a supervisor, one has to look into various factors like interest of the person on the subject, specialization in the subject, ability to guide and capacity of the student to fulfil the demands. Supervisors are mentors, moderators, guides and directors of the papers. They inspire the student, point out appropriate literatures, show the right direction and challenge the positions and ideas brought out. They also take into consideration the ability of the student and the demands of the theme. Regular consultation and the work done by students are emphasized greatly. Submission of the writings in parts, chapter by chapter, is very much encouraged. There should be ample time for the supervisor to correct and guide. Students are not to submit everything in bulk to the moderator without any prior consultation and proper correction. The corrections suggested by the supervisor should be meticulously carried out.