

WORLD PHILOSOPHY DAY

# Philosophy's role in bridging societal divides



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In a world marked by societal divides, philosophy stands as a crucial tool in confronting issues of justice, inequality, and community. It urges us to question assumptions, reflect on shared values, and engage in conversations that bridge cultural and ideological divides.

Philosophy's engagement with issues of social fragmentation resonates deeply with the literary and hermeneutic turns that reshaped 20th century thought. Paul de Man's assertion that philosophy is "an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature" captures this shift. By embracing deconstructive inquiry, philosophy is compelled to question its foundational assumptions, fostering introspection that strengthens its capacity to address complex social issues. In this self-critical light, philosophy mirrors literature's interpretive openness and inexhaustible reading practices, embracing Barthes' ethos of the "writerly text" as it moves away from the prescriptive "readerly text." This allows philosophy to examine and dismantle its own paradigms, enhancing its responsiveness to human complexities with agility and empathy. For instance, Lyotard's concept of the "loss of metanarratives" challenges the overarching, universalising stories that once provided coherence to society, advocating instead for localised, plural narratives that reflect diverse experiences and perspectives. Similarly, Adorno's "negative dialectics" calls for a rejection of simplified synthesis, insisting that philosophy must remain open to contradiction and tension rather than resolving them into harmonious conclusions.

In today's world, philosophy may seem an unlikely contender in bridging social divides, given the dominance of doxa—the unquestioned common sense that shapes daily life. Philosophy's capacity to challenge prevailing ideologies may appear as hindered as Baudelaire's albatross, whose grand wings, suited for the open skies, become heavy and awkward on the deck of the ship. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* describes ideologies that normalise social structures, making them appear natural and inevitable. Combined with Lukács' theory of *reification*, which objectifies social relations into seemingly fixed realities, this worldview stifles critical examination of power relations and social inequalities. Similar to this albatross (unlike Coleridge's, which has more mystical and moral implications), philosophy possesses a

far-reaching vision, yet when confined to the restrictive frameworks of *doxa* and *reification*, its grandeur risks being diminished by the weight of societal conformity. Moreover, *axioms* in philosophy create a double bind by both supporting and restricting inquiry. They provide a structured foundation, offering coherence and enabling systematic exploration of complex ideas. However, they can also stifle critical thinking by constraining perspectives, fostering dogmatism, and oversimplifying nuanced issues. This double bind—the tension between needing foundational principles and the risk of limiting openness to alternative views—highlights a central challenge in philosophical inquiry: balancing the clarity axioms with a critical stance that questions these very foundations.

Philosophy counters these constructs through reflective consciousness and critical inquiry. Michel Foucault's concept of *episteme* governs the intellectual frameworks that define truth in society, shaping what is accepted as knowledge. His *archaeology of knowledge* exposes the historical layers of discourse, revealing how power structures shape societal truths. His *genealogy of knowledge* traces the historical evolution of concepts, illustrating the coevolution of power and knowledge. These tools unsettle the "naturalised" status quo, creating space for alternative possibilities—a dynamic rooted in the insights of early thinkers like Parmenides, who explored the *fixity* of reality, and Heraclitus, who emphasised *flux* or perpetual change.

Alain Badiou's concept of "truth as a hole in knowledge" suggests that truth is not merely an addition to existing knowledge but a disruptive force that reshapes our understanding. This is vividly illustrated by the famous debate between Einstein and Bohr on quantum mechanics. Bohr's probabilistic interpretation revealed the limitations of both Newtonian and Einsteinian physics, pointing to an inherent indeterminacy in reality. Einstein, however, resisted this view, famously declaring, "God does not play dice with the world." Their clash embodies a profound rupture in knowledge, where quantum mechanics revolutionised our understanding of the universe. This shift toward an uncertain, probabilistic worldview aligned with Thomas Kuhn's *paradigm shift* in the theory of scientific revolutions and Stephen Jay Gould's "*punctuated equilibrium*," revealing that knowledge evolves through the tension be-

tween competing epistemes.

Popper's philosophy of scientific *falsifiability* emphasises that theories must be testable and open to being proven false, promoting the idea that knowledge is always provisional. In contrast, Saussure's *structuralism* argues that meaning is not inherent but arises from the arbitrary relationship between signs (the signifier) and their meanings (the signified), constructed through social con-

"clockwork universe" and introduced a worldview grounded in probabilistic, inferential reasoning, expanding philosophical reflection on knowledge and truth. Furthering this philosophical reach, *superstring theory* seeks to reconcile the super grand scales of general relativity and the super small scope of quantum mechanics, envisioning a universe unified in its fundamental forces. Similarly, *quantum entanglement*, revealing a pro-

in Kristeva's *intertextuality* and Derrida's, *différance*, and *dissemination*. Kristeva's concept of *intertextuality* highlights how texts and disciplines (re)shape each other endlessly without being beholden to a single, fixed meaning or authoritative interpretation. Derrida's *différance* embodies the interplay of presence and absence, where meaning emerges only through a network of relational forces, shaped as much by what is deferred or missing as by what is directly present. This evolving, non-static meaning is enriched by trace, which introduces the ontological presence of absence—fragments of past contexts or meanings that leave an imprint, shaping current interpretations while pointing to something beyond immediate grasp. Finally, dissemination reflects how these interwoven traces and deferred meanings scatter across contexts, ensuring that meaning remains fluid and non-fixed. This interplay of presence and absence emphasises that understanding is not about locating a single truth but rather engaging with an open-ended matrix of interpretations that span disciplines and continuously reshape each other.

Understanding philosophy's role in bridging social gaps is incomplete without unpacking key ideologies such as *commodity fetishism*, *false consciousness*, *creative destruction*, *simulacra*, and *spectacle*, that discreetly obscure social inequalities. Marx's concept of *commodity fetishism* explains how commodities are imbued with intrinsic value, masking the labour and exploitation that produced them. This distortion fosters *false consciousness*, where the working class inadvertently supports a system that benefits the ruling class—reinforced by media, culture, and religion. Schumpeter's idea of *creative destruction* generates an illusion of progress, diverting attention away from the real sources of exploitation. Baudrillard's theory of *simulacra* asserts that representations replace authentic reality, constructing a *hyperreality* that obscures the true social conditions. Meanwhile, Debord's *spectacle* explores how media culture transforms social life into a performance, turning individuals into passive spectators of their own existence. Together, these ideologies reinforce capitalism's dominance, making it seem like an unchallengeable natural order.

In times when society fractures both with a resounding "bang" and a quiet "whimper," echoing Eliot's portrayal of a world ending not with grandeur but with silent collapse, philosophy stands as our last best hope. As the gaps in society widen and the darkness deepens, Hegel's words resonate powerfully: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." This imagery of wisdom emerging in times of darkness reminds us that, even as challenges mount, philosophy offers a guiding light, helping us reimagine a world founded on inclusivity and shared understanding.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

ventions. Peirce, on the other hand, presents a triadic *semiotic model* in which meaning is dynamic, shaped by the relationship between the sign, its object, and the interpretant, with an ongoing, fallible process of interpretation.

Philosophy's role, once central to intellectual and ethical discourse, has been marginalised over time, particularly as universities prioritise market-driven pursuits. Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, critiques how economic imperatives have overshadowed philosophy's critical role in fostering ethical discourse, relegating it to the sidelines. However, it has been proven time and again that a renewed commitment to philosophy can bridge social divides, fostering a Socratic dialogue that promotes critical thinking and ethical reflection on societal norms even outside the ivory towers of academia.

In science, particularly in physics, mathematics, and statistics, pioneers like Heisenberg, Einstein, Bohr, Gödel, and Fisher introduced philosophical challenges that questioned conventional understandings of causality, certainty, and knowledge. Heisenberg's "*uncertainty principle*" and Einstein's "*theory of relativity*" questioned the nature of reality and certainty, while Gödel's "*incompleteness theorem*" exposed interpretive complexities and limitations within formal systems. Fisher's innovations in statistical inference added further dimensions, emphasising the role of probability and interpretation in knowledge production. These developments dismantled the positivist

found interconnectedness among particles, serves as a metaphor for the interconnectivity of modern societies

These scientific advances resonate with 20th and 21st-century philosophical movements, where thinkers began challenging the certainty of rational knowledge. Post-modern and post-structuralist philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari emphasised the fluid, contingent, and socially constructed nature of truth and reality. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, rejected hierarchical structures in favour of a *rhizomatic* model of knowledge, where multiple, non-linear connections shape understanding and societal organisation. This aligns with the collapse of certainty in science, loss of metanarrative in literary theory, and social research, in which unpredictability challenges conventional norms. The boundaries among the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences have increasingly blurred, reflecting a growing recognition that complex social issues cannot be adequately understood through isolated disciplines. As these fields converge, they provide a more holistic approach to understanding human agency, ethics, and the structures that govern societies.

Edward O Wilson's concept of *consilience*—the idea that all knowledge, regardless of its disciplinary origin, can ultimately be unified—offers a powerful framework for understanding this convergence. This reconstellation is attuned to the nuances captured

# Chandabaji, mamla baniya can't be our only future



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Except for Sheikh Hasina, her ministers, and a privileged few who were close to the corridors of power, the rest of us—including ordinary Awami League supporters—were at the receiving end of her misrule. Though to different degrees, none of us were out of its harm's way—directly or indirectly.

The Hasina regime was characterised by Pikhana and Shapla Chattar carnages, enforced disappearances, election fraud, destruction of government institutions, plundering of banks, capital flight, favouring a neighbouring country at the expense of our national interests, and similar other corruptions and crimes. Despite media censorship, these were occasionally reported—but there were many other forms of oppression and abuse of power that did not receive media attention.

It was an open secret then that the neighbouring hegemonic country got the better of us in all bilateral deals. The transit facilities that the Hasina government gave it are tantamount to a violation of our sovereignty. Innumerable people from that nation held highly paid jobs in our country, while our youths were living a despicable and respect-less life without employment, bearing the stigma that comes with not having a career upon graduation. We knew all these though they were under-reported in the media.

What most Bangladeshis didn't know at all was that our printing sector was excluded from government contracts and our textbooks were printed from the neighbouring country at a higher price. As time goes by, more misdeeds and anti-Bangladesh measures of the Hasina regime may come to light.

What is most surprising of all is that, while Hasina and her cabal of sycophants were exploiting us, plundering our land and siphoning off our money to foreign accounts, she didn't have any shortage of (sell-out) intellectuals to confer upon her the badge of patriotism. They often used the 1971 sentiments to protect her



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPILOB CHAKROBORTY

government from criticisms.

The worst sufferers were our student population. College and university students of our country were rarely given the dignity that they deserved. They were abused, exploited and mistreated at campuses and dormitories by thugs affiliated with successive governments. However, on Hasina's watch, their ordeal reached the most excruciating levels of suffering and pain.

Chhatra League thugs and hired miscreants (known as *Tukai League*) made the life of our students unbearable. Ordinary students—both male and female—have stories of harrowing suffering and misery at the hands of

Hasina's hooligans. What is more deplorable is that media people were not very interested in reporting their suffering.

The example below may shed some light on this.

On behalf of the Forum for Bangladesh Studies (FBS), in April 2023 I helped put together a webinar on repression of students at Bangladesh's universities. Guest speakers of the webinar included Dr Mohd Saiful Islam

The student-led formidable movement against Hasina's misrule reached its climax in July 2024 and achieved its goal on August 5, 2024. The bravery that our young people exhibited on the streets of Bangladesh is unprecedented in its history.

Hasina ordered our security forces to kill our young people with the bullets bought with our money. Eventually, her cruelty was defeated by their selflessness and sense of sacrifice.

butchered by the Hasina government suddenly turned into bullies themselves. They started following in the footsteps of Awami League thugs and hooligans.

First, like their Awami League counterparts, they started committing the crime of *chandabaji* (money extortion) from business people and others right after the fall of Hasina's fascist regime. Second, they embarked on *mamla baniya* (lawsuit deals)—this needs some explanation.

The reprobates among the affiliates of this major political party have given the police an impression that they are coming to power soon so that the law enforcers feel it important to abide by their wishes. They identified Awami League brutes who were involved in killing our youth in July and August 2024 and allegedly brokered deals with them to protect them from murder cases in exchange for money. No wonder most Awami League killers and assailants are still at large while our young people are living with life-changing injuries and trauma.

These two crimes—*chandabaji* and *mamla baniya*—wreaked havoc in the lives of innocent people of our country during the Hasina regime. Our young people didn't give their lives to liberate our country from the oppressors of one political party only to hand it to those of another. Nor did they do so to enable another group of miscreants to exploit us. Previously, our brave freedom fighters also didn't liberate our country from Pakistan in 1971 to be enslaved by—or to serve the interests of—another country.

We must not forget that opposition political parties during Hasina's rule tried several times to depose her. But they failed for various reasons—including cowardice and corruption of some opposition leaders (rumour had it that they were on the payroll of the Hasina government).

Our brave and valiant youth succeeded in achieving what political parties failed to do for 15 years. It will be very unfortunate if thugs and hooligans of another political party are allowed to extort money or to negotiate with killers (for monetary gains) assuring them absolution from murder charges.

I hope exploitation by one or the other political party is not the only future of Bangladesh. Committing the financial crimes of *chandabaji* and *mamla baniya* is not the right way to repay the debt of gratitude to our young people who made phenomenal sacrifices for our country.

They didn't hesitate to lay down their lives for their country.

Over a thousand young people who were killed in July and early August 2024 and are still dying of injuries and tens of thousands of others who were ready to die finally liberated our country. They gave it back to us through pools of their blood. We owe them a deep debt of gratitude.

However, unfortunately, some incidents that have been happening in parts of Bangladesh since August 5 are a betrayal of the colossal sacrifices made by the youth of our country.

Affiliates of a particular political party who were routinely bashed, bludgeoned, and