

Assessing four contrasting approaches to philosophy

What is the point of philosophy? And what can philosophers achieve? There have been different answers to these questions through the ages – from the time when philosophers first burst on the scene in Ancient Greece through to the twenty-first century where some philosophers are embarking on new journeys of exploration.

I'm breaking the history of philosophy here into four epochs. Of course, this is very rough and ready and many important trends and themes in the history of philosophy will not get a mention. The four epochs I identify are:

- 1 – Philosophy as a way of life (399 BCE to 1265 CE)
- 2 – Philosophy as the handmaiden to theology (1265 CE to 1781 CE)
- 3 – Philosophy as the handmaiden to science (1781 CE to the present)
- 4 – Philosophy as a means of changing the world (1845 CE to the present)

I will now say a little about each of epochs.

1 – Philosophy as a way of life (399 BCE to 1265 CE)

Although there were important philosophers in and around Ancient Greece before Socrates, it was through the life and death of Socrates that philosophy became a significant passion for many people.

Socrates conducted his philosophy in the marketplace, interrogating anybody who would engage with him. His method was to ask people about their beliefs regarding how best to live and then tying them in knots of internal contradictions. He was not called a 'gadfly' for nothing, and he annoyed powerful people by exposing their ignorance and foolishness. He was put on trial and condemned to death for blasphemy and corrupting the young in 399 BCE. He had a number of devoted followers including the young Plato who was inspired to write many books which survived the destruction of Athens and the Ancient Greek world.

Plato's work inspired Aristotle and many different philosophical schools such as Epicureanism, Cynicism, Stoicism as well as the schools based around Plato and Aristotle. Ancient Greek philosophers saw philosophy as a way of life. The philosopher stood out from the crowd through the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. The wisdom and knowledge acquired by philosophers through their contemplation and enquiry meant they would lead a life of the mind and of the spirit, in which the pursuit of excess pleasure, excess honour and excess wealth were of no interest to them.

Philosophy to the Ancients was about transforming the philosopher through meditations and 'spiritual exercises', the idea being that through philosophy, the philosopher could lead a better life more in tune with himself, others and the universe as a whole. It involved acquiring knowledge, but this was knowledge which could transform the individual.

In some ways, philosophy in the ancient world was similar to some Eastern traditions today in which the individual chooses a way of life which involves mindfulness and that potentially leads to enlightenment. The focus was to work on oneself and obey the Socratic command to 'know thyself'.

2 – Philosophy as the handmaiden to theology (1265 CE to 1781 CE)

Just like Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth did not write anything down. And just like Socrates, Jesus inspired a number of passionate devotees through his actions both in life and in death. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire during the emperor Constantine's reign (306 to 337 CE).

There were many Christian apologists, starting with Paul of Tarsus whose letters to fellow Christians date from around 50 CE. Augustine of Hippo was a major intellectual figure who justified Christianity with elements of philosophical argument, writing after his conversion in 386 CE until his death in 430 CE. However, it was the more accomplished philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who published his major work *Summa Theologica* in 1265 CE, who ushered in a new epoch in which philosophy was no longer top of the intellectual pile, but only the handmaiden to theology, which was supposed to contain the highest and most significant truth.

Aquinas and other Christian writers sought to explain and justify such complex ideas as the Trinity and how Jesus Christ could be both fully God and fully man at the same time. Aquinas himself based his philosophical arguments within an Aristotelian framework, whilst other theologians (for example Augustine and Descartes) were more influenced by Plato.

These theologians basically used philosophy as a tool to justify their theological beliefs. Philosophy became more technical and the idea of philosophy as a way of life became less prevalent, as it was Christian doctrine which guided action and values.

3 – Philosophy as the handmaiden to science (1781 CE to the present)

I suggest the next major philosophical epoch was ushered in by Immanuel Kant with his publication of his three critiques between 1781 and 1790. He argued that philosophers before him had been over-ambitious in thinking they could work out metaphysical truth based on pure a priori reasoning without needing to pay any attention to experience. So, because it was unrelated to empirical evidence, he rejected dogmatic theology as a category of knowledge.

He kept the idea of the theologians that philosophy should clarify concepts and pursue the truth, but the growing respect for the scientific method meant, in effect, that philosophy remained as a handmaiden to something more respectable – science replaced theology as the arbiter of truth.

After Kant, the majority of philosophers respected science and their philosophical arguments and systems aimed to be compatible with established scientific facts and theories. This is still the case today, although there is a lively debate as to whether scientific truth is the only kind of truth (scientism) or if other kinds of knowledge and truth are possible (such as ethical truth).

4 – Philosophy as a means of changing the world (1845 CE to the present)

In 1845, Karl Marx wrote a text called *Theses on Feuerbach*. This was a set of notes which were not published in Marx's lifetime, but contained a quote which was engraved on Marx's tombstone. The quote ran: "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the

point, however, is to *change* it". This quote became the rallying cry for philosophers who thought philosophy was actually relevant to the real world, and could be used to help bring about more enlightened views and a fairer society and political system.

Since 1848 at least, a minority of philosophers have adopted Marx's quote as guiding their methodology. Perhaps more so in the continental tradition than in the analytic tradition, philosophers have often merged their philosophy with political activism. Think of such philosophers as Sartre, Foucault, and Peter Singer.

This philosophical movement has progressed at the same time as the dominant movement described above – philosophy as the handmaiden of science.

I am particularly interested in this movement as in recent years a number of philosophers in the analytic tradition have questioned the dominant view that philosophy should involve pursuing the truth as it is and not trying to change things. In particular I have read books by Katharine Jenkins and Matthew Cull (see the References below) who argue that some of our concepts are no longer fit for purpose and we should argue for changing them to make them more conducive to the good life. For example, they argue for the reality of gender identity and that we should change our concepts of 'man' and 'woman' so as to include trans men and trans women in them (respectively).

They talk of giving 'ameliorative definitions' of problematic words and concepts. This involves altering the current meanings of these problematic words or concepts to make them more useful for us in our attempts to make our societies better.

Broadly speaking, both the first methodology above (philosophy as a way of life) and the current one (philosophy as a way of changing the world) centre on ethics and politics. But in the former case, the effort is to change oneself for the better, whereas in the latter case, the effort is to change the world for the better.

Questions

1 – Is my way of dividing philosophical epochs convincing?

2 – Which of the four methodologies should we follow?

3 – Are any of the four methods ruled out a priori?

4 – Should we just analyse how our concepts are actually used, or should philosophers promote change of concept use and word meaning?

It may be tackling all these questions and tackling all four methodologies is too much for one meeting. So if the meeting feels we should narrow down the discussion to one or two of these questions, or one or two of the four methodologies, that is fine with me.

I have painted in broad-brush strokes so we can have a view of the wood, but I am happy to restrict discussion to individual trees, if that is the wish of the meeting.

My own view

I think the second approach – philosophy as the handmaiden to theology – is no longer valid. It is certainly not valid for those of us, like me, who are atheists. I think the other three methods are valid approaches, and I would say they are all worthwhile. I guess a deeply religious person could argue that philosophy as a handmaiden to theology was still a worthwhile enterprise.

References

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life*

Katharine Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression*

Matthew Cull, *What gender should be?*