

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY (i.e. SINCE c.1900)

Three answers have been given, in our century, to the question of how we should conceive of our relation to the Western philosophical tradition, answers which are paralleled by three conceptions of the aim of philosophizing. They are the Husserlian (or 'scientific') answer, the Heideggerian (or 'poetic') answer and the pragmatist (or 'political') answer. (Richard Rorty)

Many would agree there is no single definition of 'philosophy' today. The hallmark of the field is, rather, a diversity of conceptions, traditions and accompanying vocabularies, each assured of its own 'rightness' and distrustful (and, in some cases, dismissive) of other perspectives.

There are at least three major metaphilosophical tendencies, that is, three broad ways in which philosophers conceive of what they do. These tendencies may cut across philosophical schools. Some ally the discipline with the methods of the natural sciences (the term for this is scientism), arguing that an objective knowledge of knowledge ought to be the ideal of philosophical enquiry. Others, more sympathetic to the aims and methods of the humanities and the arts, tend to ally philosophy with the techniques of hermeneutics (i.e. the interpretation of texts) in general and literary criticism in particular, arguing that objective knowledge may be impossible. Still others see philosophy as a branch of politics and contend that all truth-claims are not only inevitably shaped by their social and historical context, something the first tendency ignores, but are also necessarily imbricated in struggles for political power. The second and third tendencies sometimes intersect (such philosophers see all philosophising as a form of politicised discourse but doubt whether scientific knowledge is possible) while the first and the third sometimes intersect in their faith in the ideal implied, for example, in the name the 'social sciences' (social and political 'scientists,' so-called, believe that an objective knowledge of human institutions is possible).

There are, broadly speaking, two main camps within contemporary philosophy. Analytic philosophers, the dominant tendency or style within the English-speaking world at present, tend to share a scientific and, thus, ahistoricist conception of philosophy. In the hands of Analysts, in fact, physics and mathematics have become the predominant paradigms of philosophy. They believe, too, in paying scrupulous attention to the role played by language in conceptualisation (this is the so-called 'linguistic turn' in modern thought). Many of these philosophers accordingly tend to be interested in specifically scientific disciplines such as physics or believe that methods adopted from the sciences can be fruitfully applied to other seemingly less scientific areas such as the investigation of the nature of right and wrong (ethics).

So-called 'Continental' philosophers (an unsatisfactory geographical label, for various reasons), the predominant tendency within the non-English speaking world, tend to argue that philosophical discourse is more literary than scientific in nature (though some, like Husserl, do share the scientific ideal), is inseparable from its socio-historical context, and is, thus, irrevocably political. They too believe that scrupulous attention must be paid to the crucial role played by language in the production of knowledge but do not share the same philosophy of language as their rivals. They tend to focus on fields of knowledge outside the realm of science (e.g. human institutions and artefacts, cultural discourses and material practices, history, literature, and so on) and advocate a literary and / or ahistoricist interpretation of the so-called hard 'facts' delivered by the sciences.

Many who share a political view of the discipline argue that it is useful to distinguish between Western and Post-colonial / Non-Western forms of philosophy. Philosophers in the latter camp argue that philosophising is inevitably affected by the fact of European colonialism and that the goal of a post-colonial philosophy is partly to critique this fact and partly to articulate an alternative, anti-colonial perspective. Many cultural and racial nationalists, who share an arguably literary model of the discipline, contend that

philosophy like any other cultural artefact is inevitably expressive of the identity of those who engage in this activity. From this point of view, there is a division to be drawn between alien philosophies imported from abroad and imposed upon one and homespun philosophies that are thought to be more relevant.

Many also argue that much philosophy has been androcentric (i.e. largely written by men for men) and consequently advocate a Feminist approach to philosophy designed not only to critique the misogynistic assumptions which informs much male-authored philosophy, but also to articulate an alternative, woman-centered perspective.

There is considerable disagreement, however, whether philosophy as a whole can be culturally-, nationally-, racially-, or sexually-specific in the way suggested above and, thus, whether one ought to speak of, say, 'philosophy in the Caribbean' or 'Caribbean philosophy.' Of course, the answers to such questions are contingent on how one defines philosophy. For Analytic philosophers, philosophy is something akin to a science which, in its quest for objectivity, cannot be culturally-, nationally-, racially-, or sexually-specific. To be objective, knowledge must transcend the circumstances of its articulation. For this camp, what humans have in common (a certain physiology of the brain, certain deep cognitive structures) is far more important than extraneous features like the pigment of skin and social and cultural determinants. As a result, they prefer to speak of, for example, 'philosophy in Italy' or 'philosophy in Africa' rather than a specifically 'Italian philosophy' or 'African philosophy.' However, Continental philosophers tend to take the opposing view, acknowledging the historical and cultural specificity of all rational activities, including philosophising, and thus have less difficulty in admitting the existence of culturally-, nationally-, racially-, or sexually-specific philosophical traditions. This is why, even though in former colonies such as Africa which seem to reproduce the supposed European division between 'Analytic' philosophy in its English-speaking countries and 'continental' in Francophone and Lusophone territories, many, perhaps most philosophers from former European colonies and most Feminist philosophers have tended to find more of interest in the Continental traditions.