Western Philosophers And Their Methods

Socrates and Plato

Greek philosophy covers an absolutely enormous amount of topics including political philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, ontology, logic, biology, rhetoric, and aesthetics. Socrates was a classical Greek philosopher, was born in Athens in 470 BC, is often credited as one of the founders of Western philosophy and as being the first moral philosopher of the Western ethical tradition of thought (Kraut, Richard (August 16, 2017). 'Socrates'. Encyclopedia Britannica).

A mystifying figure, Socrates had never made any writing. He is known chiefly through the classical writers writing after his lifetime, (M. Blitz, Ann Ward – p. 221).

His largest contribution to philosophy so far is the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method is defined as a form of inquiry and discussion between individuals, based on asking and answering the questions to illuminate ideas. This method is performed by asking question after question with the purpose to expose counterstatement in one's thoughts, guiding him/her to arrive at a solid, tenable conclusion. The principle underlying the Socratic Method is that humans learn through the use of reasoning and logic and ultimately find loopholes in their own theories and then patching them up. The cloud of mystery surrounding his life and philosophical viewpoints propose a problem. The biggest drawback of Socrates was that he did not write philosophical texts, all knowledge related to him is entirely dependent on the writings of other people of the time period. He was seen by some as a figure who mentored political figures and people who wanted to control the world later on became dictators and undermined Athenian democracy (Kofman, Sarah 1998 p. 34).

Plato, was a student of Socrates, also has mystery surrounding him. His birth day is estimated to fall between 428 BC and 423 BC. He was the founder of the Academy in Athens. It was the first institution of higher learning in the Western world (Charles H. Kahn 1998, p. 42).

My favorite of Plato's contributions to philosophy, and the one I'm going to focus on, is the Theory of Forms. This theory was created to solve two problems, one of ethics and one of permanence and change. The ethical problem is that how can humans live a fulfilling life in an ever-changing world if everything that they hold close to them can be easily taken away. The other problem dealing with permanence and change is that how can the world appear to be both permanent and changing. To find a solution to these problems, Plato split the world into two, one is the material realm and the other is mental realm of forms. According to him we have the access to the realm of forms through the mind that allow us access to this unchanging world. This particular world is invulnerable to the pains and changes of the material world. He says that by detaching our souls from the material world we can develop our body's ability to concern ourselves with the forms, Plato believes this will lead to us finding a value which is not open to change (Ragland-Sullivan, p- 88: 740).

Some authors claim that Plato was truly trying to discover objective reality through these mystical speculations while others maintain that the dialogues are stories to be interpreted only as a moral stories and emotional appeals to religious experience. Regardless, Plato formulated

a rigorous and comprehensive philosophy in his life, one that resounds in contemporary Western thought to this day. Some of Plato's famous works are Phaedo, the Crito, and the Meno. (Clarendon Plato Series – Philosophy Series).

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was born on 22 April 1724. He was an influential German philosopher. In his doctrine of supernatural idealism, he argued that space, time and casualties are mere sensibilities, “things-in-themselves' exist, but their nature is unknowable. In his view, the mind shapes and structures experience, with all human experience sharing certain structural features (McCormick, Matt. Internet Encyclopedia).

His contributions to metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics have had a profound impact on almost every philosophical movement that followed him. I am mostly impressed by his important and famous work in metaphysics and epistemology, like The Critique of Pure Reason. Even the large part of Kant’s work addresses the question “What can we know?” He said that our knowledge is constrained to mathematics and the science of the natural, empirical world. Kant argued to extend knowledge to the supersensible realm of theoretical metaphysics. He also argued that the mind plays an active role in constituting the features of experience and limiting the mind’s access only to the empirical realm of space and time (Critique of Pure Reason, A801).

Kant believed that the sole feature that gives an action moral worth is not the outcome that is achieved by the action, but the motive that is behind the action. It is the only motive that can endow an act with moral value. Kant’s famous statement of this duty was: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. “Utilitarian moral theories evaluate the moral worth of action on the basis of happiness that is produced by an action. He said that whatever produces the most happiness in the most people is the moral course of action (Stephen Palmquist, pp. 266–88).

Kant had an insightful objection to moral evaluations of this sort. The essence of the objection is that utilitarian theories actually devalue the individuals it is supposed to benefit. If we allow utilitarian calculations to motivate our actions, we are allowing the valuation of one person's welfare and interests in terms of what good they can be used for. Well his utilitarian theories are bit contradictory. These are driven by the merely accidental inclination in humans for pleasure and happiness, not by the universal moral law dictated by reason. To act in pursuit of happiness is arbitrary and subjective, and is no more moral than acting on the basis of greed (Kuehn 2001, p. 47)

Bertrand Arthur William Russell, 3rd Earl Russell

Bertrand Russell was born on 18 May 1872. He was a philosopher, mathematician, historian, writer political activist and the Nobel laureate (The Life of Bertrand Russell Knopf. 1976. p. 119). He introduced his first contribution within the branch of philosophy that dealt with logic and mathematics. His authorship came to encircle considerably larger areas. His writings were characterized by levity and humor and extended knowledge about science and philosophy to a wide circle of readers. His authorship had also embraced social and moral issues and his opinions were often very controversial (Irvine, Andrew David, The Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy).

Bertrand Russell was an advocate for reason and a dedicated defender of freedom of speech and thought. He is widely held to be one of the 20th century's premier logicians. With A. N. Whitehead he wrote Principia Mathematica. It was an attempt to create a logical basis for mathematics, the typical work of classical logic. (Ray Monk. Phoenix, 1997).

His philosophical essay 'On Denoting' has been considered a 'paradigm of philosophy'. His work has had a considerable influence on mathematics, logic, artificial intelligence, computer science and philosophy, especially epistemology and metaphysics. Russell was also a prominent anti-war activist and he championed anti-imperialism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 'Bertrand Russell”).

Occasionally, he had advocated preventive nuclear war, before the opportunity provided by the atomic monopoly had passed. Russell was among the first to say that sex outside of marriage was not automatically a sin in his view. Though he did not advocated having sex with a different partner every night. But he was a strong advocate of more-or-less monogamous couples experimenting sexually. (Carlo Cellucci, p. 32).

John Locke

John Locke was born in 1632. He was a key figure because his political philosophy was one of the foundations for both the American Constitution and the French Revolution (Hirschmann, Nancy J. p. 79).

He defined government as based on a free contract between people which can be subsequently modified, and he stressed on the importance of religious toleration. Locke has also written on other aspects of philosophy and education.. Locke equated natural law with the biblical revelation. He was the one who derived the fundamental concepts of political theory from biblical texts like the Decalogue, the Golden Rule, and the teachings of Jesus. The Decalogue puts a person's life, their reputation, and property under God's protection (Laslett, Peter (1988)).

Locke’s most famous work was an Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689). In this he developed his theory of ideas and his account of the origins of human knowledge in experience (Locke 1997, p. 307).

Locke’s social contract theory was unrealistic, a social contract such as Locke described almost never has happened. In his social contract theory he assumed that we are separate, independent individuals, as well as we are the members of families who have friends which meant that we have social ties when we go to create the social contract, as well as our independence and our rights to life. This theory aimed to preserve the rights we had in the state of nature. While it didn’t aim to allow new governments to improve social conditions if they contradict those ‘backwards-looking’ rights. Well this contract theory was biased towards those who have inherited property because while everyone has a right to property the great benefits of property-ownership fall to those who have property. According to Locke’s theory, the right to property was as absolute as the right to life, and so you cannot steal someone’s property to allow you to exercise or continue your right to life. (Locke 1997, p. 306).

David Hume

David Hume was born on May 7 in Edinburgh, Scotland and died on August 25, 1776, in Edinburgh. He was a Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism. Hume was also a sentimentalist who held that ethics are based on emotion or sentiment rather than abstract moral principle, famously proclaiming that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (William Edward Morris, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Hume's moral theory has been seen as a unique attempt to synthesise the modern sentimentalist moral tradition to which Hume belonged. Hume also denied that humans have an actual conception of the self, positing that we experience only a bundle of sensations and that the self is nothing more than this bundle of causally-connected perceptions. Hume influenced utilitarianism, logical positivism, Immanuel Kant, the philosophy of science and other movements and thinkers (Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy).

Kant himself credited Hume as the motivation to his philosophical thought who had awakened him from his unchallengeable rest. In one of his most central doctrines, he stated in the very first lines of the paper that the mind consists of its mental perceptions, or the mental objects which are present to it. And divide into two categories as impressions and ideas (“Hume'. routledge.com. 30 October 2014).

Although he wrote a great deal about religion, Hume's personal views were unclear, and there has been much discussion concerning his religious position. Contemporaries considered him to be an atheist. The Church of Scotland seriously considered bringing charges of infidelity against him (These are Hume's terms. In modern parlance, demonstration may be termed deductive reasoning, while probability may be termed inductive reasoning).

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