

What is the point of philosophy?

Philosophy is love of truth – or more literally of wisdom. But the classical and modern approaches have diametrically opposed understandings of what this means.

- I. TRUTH For classical philosophy, Truth exists. It's real and independent of both our reason and our experience. The philosopher's aim and purpose is to get acquainted with it – but not to possess it. Sophism – pre-philosophy - thinks it does possess the truth, while philosophy knows it does not and cannot (because of its independence). Modern philosophy doesn't really believe in truth at all and certainly not as an independent reality. For them if truth exists it's a product of individual reason and so dependent on us, not an independent reality, or for an empiricist it comes from observation so depends on the things observed and again is not independent. But the majority don't believe in truth at all. So if the purpose of philosophy is to discover truth, what is the purpose of modern philosophy which doesn't believe in truth? Question to discuss – can you stomach the notion of absolute truth? If not, is relative truth any better (something relatively true must also be relatively untrue), or do you think it is better to do without the idea of truth altogether?
- II. ILLUSION In the classical view phenomena are illusory. For the moderns, phenomena are reality.
- III. EXPERIENCE The illusion, in the classical view, is that we think that what we experience comes from reality, and that our ideas are generalisations reached by classifying experiences and noting what is common to them – the “universal”. The reality though is that ideas come first and we cannot have experience without first having the ideas (we call phenomena “appearance” because something is appearing, and that something is an idea that does not have its origins in the phenomenal world). The modern view reversed this and returns to the view Plato thought was illusory, that our ideas are drawn from experience (Locke).
- IV. REASON Nor are ideas drawn from reason in the classical view. Reason is a tool we can use to help us to access the world of ideas, the truth, but it cannot of itself produce truth. In the modern view by contrast the certainty of mathematical propositions and their independence from external reality (= reason, for them) is the paradigm for philosophical truth.
- V. RECOLLECTION All learning in the classical view is recollection, remembering. We cannot learn anything really new. What we call learning is becoming consciously aware of what we already know at some deeper level. For modern philosophy this is mystical nonsense. Truth does not exist independently and rather is a property of statements. All statements are either analytical, derived from pure reason, or synthetic, derived from observation, and any statement that doesn't fit into either category, e.g. God exists, is metaphysical and meaningless. This is the mantra of contemporary analytical philosophy, and is precisely the opposite of the original philosophical insight.
- VI. INITIATION The classical position is profoundly counterintuitive, and life changing if accepted as it turns so many conventional ideas on their heads, and therefore to come to understand them some kind of initiation, the influence of a Socrates maybe, is needed. For the moderns there is no need for initiation into the philosophical attitude. There is no illusion that needs to be broken and reality is what it seems to be. Or to put this another way, modern philosophy simply acquiesces in the illusion of the reality of phenomena, because this is the way

things seem at first sight to be. This acquiescence, or rejection of the philosophical viewpoint, is perversely known as “Enlightenment” and is really a return to pre-philosophical darkness.

In view of these profound differences, you might think that modern thought had overturned the ancient view with some profound critique. If such a critique exists, I am not aware of it. Enlightenment presents itself as the spirit of reason, replacing older more superstitious beliefs, but does not base itself on any understanding of the classical model but rather simply starts again from purely subjective contemplation as if it had never happened (nicely symbolised by Descartes in his “stove”). By contrast, the basic model of modern thought was thoroughly anticipated by Plato and his work is all about showing why this model is wrong and the philosophical attitude is necessary. You might think that as time passes our philosophical understanding would develop and improve, but the evidence is to the contrary. The profound insight of Socrates/Plato, which started this whole thing off, has just been slowly forgotten about – even by most scholars of classical philosophy who tend to view the relationship between ancient and modern as pre-scientific to scientific and see Plato’s Academy as the kindergarten of Philosophy, full of commendable enthusiasm but with but much to learn particularly about rational thought.