

What is philosophy?

In the “Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology”, Nicholas Rescher¹ and Alessandra Tanesini² each present their view.

Rescher defines philosophy as “cognitive and practical rationality” geared towards answering the big questions we humans grapple with. Philosophy provides “a basis for understanding ourselves, the world we live in and the linkage between the two”. He uses the word ‘rational’ in two senses: as a motivation and as a method. Our evolutionary curiosity is rational, because it makes us better at surviving. Doing philosophy is also rational because it involves the use of ‘reason’. To ground this claim, he invokes Aristotle who took rational enquiry to be the essence of philosophy; next F.T. Bradley, as saying that the use of reason cannot reasonably be denied. From this Rescher concludes that in philosophy, ‘reason’ is all, although it is not quite clear from these quotes why only ‘reason’ would qualify.

Rescher styles his concept of the philosophical method on the scientific practice of working from data. Philosopher’s data, he says, are of many kinds: knowledge, beliefs, traditions, scientific and historic facts. The philosopher must collect these data and make sense of them; turn them into a coherent theory best fitting the facts. Such a theory, he says, quoting Peirce by the way of explanation, should be built on a large network of related facts, rather than on single strands of individual premises. Rescher has strong feelings on how the true philosopher should behave: the philosopher must look beyond himself and the needs of his own narrow field. He must boldly³ go where no one has gone before, so his new theory may benefit philosophy at large.

Tanesini makes a smaller claim. She takes a leaf from Socrates and the Stoics, building upon the idea that one way of looking at philosophy is as the art of living well. Since a person is to be identified with his soul and not with his body, a well-lived life requires taking care of the soul. This requires skill. Skill requires know-how, i.e. propositional knowledge, which distinguishes a skill from a mere routine. Hence it is possible to teach someone the art of living well.

To the above, Tanesini adds her own views. She claims that “taking care of the soul” requires not just cognitive abilities but also affective and emotional states. She argues that a desire, either directly for a well-lived life or through an accepting Stoic attitude, cannot be our goal. Once the desire is satisfied, life would become pointless. The problem disappears when we replace ‘desire’ by ‘love’. The idea is that the well-lived life is a performance to be pursued for its own sake, as a labour of love, rather than a goal-oriented project. The distinction between ‘desire’ and ‘love’ is not explained, nor is the series of claims Tanesini next makes about the psychological state of the philosopher: love for the well-lived life is motivated by self-love which is in turn rooted in self-respect. Self-respect is founded on self-trust; self-trust is the key to a well-lived life. Tanesini has strong feelings about doubts, Socratic or otherwise, which she regards as a destructive force that destroys self-trust. One must be sure of oneself and be seen to be sure. This assuredness is to be achieved by self reflection, social acceptance, autonomy and self-reliance.

¹ Rescher, N. (2017). Philosophy as Rational Systematization. In G. D’Oro & S. Overgaard (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology* (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy, pp. 32-43). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781316344118.003

² Tanesini, A. (2017). Doing Philosophy. In G. D’Oro & S. Overgaard (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology* (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy, pp. 13-31). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781316344118.002

³ To Boldly Go: The Hurried Evolution of Star Trek’s Opening Narration | Library Special Collections Blog | UCLA Library. (n.d.). Retrieved 10 September 2019, from <https://www.library.ucla.edu/blog/special/2016/10/11/to-boldly-go-the-hurried-evolution-of-star-treks-opening-narration>

Rescher regards philosophy as the enterprise of rational enquiry, driven by our evolutionary need to make sense of this world. Tanesini views philosophy as an art performed for the sake of a well-lived life and motivated by self-respect. Despite these differences, there are similarities. Both Rescher and Tanesini ground their ideas in ancient Greek philosophy, without providing much argumentation to support the personal views they add. They both feel that philosophy has an important task to fulfil and hence much is expected of the individual philosopher. They agree that philosophising involves cognition and rationality. They probably would not object to each other's projects. However, they disagree on the ultimate goal of philosophy: for Rescher, understanding is all, whereas for Tanesini understanding is only a means to the well-lived life.