

## The Seven Cardinal Sins of Philosophy

Although philosophy has become unfashionable today, and turned into the pastime of a diminishing coterie of fringe intellectuals and/or an academic discipline for professional “philosophologists,” yet there was a time not too long ago when it still served as a guide to those seeking a path to the higher grounds of the human experience.

In my lifelong explorations of the labyrinthine pathways of human thought, I have found that only in “capital p” Philosophy (both Western and Eastern) can one truly come face to face with the big questions and some answers to the most serious dilemmas of the human condition –those dealing with our vitally-important confrontation with eternal and fundamental themes, such as Love, Death, the meaning of Life, the World, and the existence or nonexistence of God.

At the dawn of Western culture, the Greek philosophers did not distinguish between practical wisdom and devotion to the gods; which is why the word “philosophy” (Φίλο + Σοφία) meant both the love of wisdom as well as reverence to the goddess Sophia. This attitude of reverence and earnestness was gradually lost –especially with the advent of modern empirical science and its step sisters utilitarianism and pragmatism. But even at the time of Socrates we find that great philosopher challenging his contemporaries with his brutally honest dialectical *epoché* (ἐποχή) which eventually caused his martyrdom.

In Ancient India, the sages of the Vedas and Upanishads warned all who listened that the phenomenal world was *Māyā* –a magic trick or illusion– both sacred and transcendently meaningless. Again, Gautama Shakyamuni “the Buddha,” in his *Pratītya Samutpāda* (*The Vibhanga, Abhidamma Pitaka, Pali Canon*) taught that ordinary reality was but fleeting a construct (*Samskāra*) arising from our ignorance (*Avidyā*) of the truly real.

While most mortals go about their daily business without much caring for the truth or accuracy of what they affirm or deny, true philosophers make it a habit of stopping to analyze each statement they come across as to its inherent meaning and/or importance in scientific, ethical, existential and historical frames of reference before making any decision: Why is this true?... How can this be applied to my life?... Are there lies, biases, ideologies or superstitions hiding behind this statement? These are the sort of questions philosophers tend to ask before accepting each statement they hear or read, regardless of who said it.

The following is my first humble enumeration of what I call the Seven Cardinal Sins of Philosophy (with apologies to Catholic theology):

1. **Aporia** (απορία) – A contradiction in logic or impossibility of passage between two affirmations. An example of an aporia would be the following: Statement (A): “Socrates was a philosopher.” Statement (B): “Socrates drank wine.” Therefore, (C): “All those who drink wine are philosophers.” Or alternatively, (C): “All philosophers drink wine.” That is stated as either “A | B” or “B | A” in logical symbols.
  
2. **Causal inference from *a priori* reasoning without direct substantiation in personal experience.** David Hume revealed that there is no necessary “inseparable and inviolable” connection between our ideas of cause and effect. Hume also warned against assuming that our ability to associate different ideas and memories doesn’t ensure that the result of said association is necessarily true and scientifically sound. A corollary of this is (2.1) **Superstition** –an erroneous association of two or more ideas (usually infused with a strong emotional charge). Examples of superstitious thinking are: to associate the color black with evil or death; or a five-pointed star with patriotism or with Satanism.
  
3. **Anthropomorphism** – This is one of the most frequent errors we find in many fields and sciences: The assignation of personal human attributes to impersonal objects, such as concepts, nations, political or philosophical movements, cultures, etc. Examples are numerous. Such personifications as that of Nature, Humanity, the Market, America, etc., are constantly used in common parlance, with their concomitant errors in practice.
  
4. **Hypostatization** – To construe a contextually-subjective and complex abstraction, idea, or concept as a universal object without regard to nuance or change in character. Another version of this is (4.1) **Reification** – To consider an abstract thing as if it were concrete, or of an inanimate object as if it were alive. A good example of contemporary reification is the use of the word “Freedom” as an ideal lifestyle that defines a person’s socio-political commitment.
  
5. **Confusing the macro, meso and micro levels of discourse.** An example of this common error is to use the behavior of atoms to describe geopolitical behavior, such as “Ukraine is orbiting the NATO alliance” or alternatively, to ascribe individual human behavior to multinational entities, such as “The UN has fallen into a catatonic state when it comes to its member rogue states.”

6. **Syncretism** – The combination of different beliefs and practices of diverse schools of thought. Syncretism involves the merger and analogizing of several originally discrete traditions, especially in theology, mythology and religion. In a sense, practically all of our assertions and expressions are syncretic. Ultimately, even language itself is syncretic, as the etymology of most words reveals the concatenation of originally diverse elements. Most philosophical movements of the last 2,000 years are inherently syncretic. This is another way of saying that there is no such thing as authenticity or originality.
  
7. Finally –and most importantly– **the confusion of physical and metaphysical forms of knowledge**. Depending on the various philosophical traditions, one can view this as the radical difference between Being and Becoming (Platonism), or the diremption of Essence and Substance, or of the Spirit and the Flesh (Christian theology). Or in Indian philosophy as the difference between Sat (Absolute Being) and Chit (knowledge or understanding). Or in Buddhism, as the difference between Vidyā (knowledge or understanding) and Avidyā (Ignorance). All historical traditions roughly coincide in stating that there is a fundamental difference between absolute transcendental wisdom and ordinary human knowledge. The mystics all agree that it's impossible to describe the former using our ordinary language. Thus, that great ancient Chinese book the *Tao te-ching* states: “The Way [Tao] that can be told of is not an unvarying way. / The names that can be named are not unvarying names.” However, Moderns generally agree with the Empiricist and Positivist view of the universe wherein no supernatural realms can be located. Even in religious and political discourse we are reduced today to the lowest common denominator of pragmatic knowhow and common sense.

CONCLUSION: Throughout history, only a few enlightened minds have shown that improper use of a term or erroneous affirmation can cause the death of millions of human beings; and that misinterpreting natural phenomena can end up destroying our biosphere and all living things. These few have been absolved from their cardinal sins and now sit at the right side of the goddess Sophia. Q.E.D.