

To What Extent Can We Encourage People To Do Philosophy?

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The ancient philosophers strongly exhorted their fellow citizens to do philosophy. But today, we do not encourage the practice of philosophy with nearly as much confidence. Where does this difference come from?

The citizens of the Greek city-states competed fiercely with each other for the honor of being the most virtuous. The philosophers urged citizens to pursue philosophical wisdom as the highest virtue. Moreover, the activity of philosophical intuition—that is, *theōria*, or contemplation—was believed to give us the purest pleasure and the best form of happiness. The felicity of the unification with divine truth was not only the foundation of metaphysics in classical antiquity, but also the reason for the medieval emphasis of *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa*.

At the dawn of the modern age, this superiority of *vita contemplativa* was totally defeated. The ideal of *theōria* lost its prestige. “Theory” survives today only as an accessory to practical utility. The problem of the interrelationship between theory and practice has bothered many modern philosophers, including Nietzsche and Heidegger. In the same tradition, Hannah Arendt noted the loss of the dignity of *vita contemplativa* in the modern age.

In her major philosophical work *The Human Condition*, whose German version is titled *Vita activa*, Arendt asks how the traditional honor given to *vita contemplativa* faded away. At the very beginning of the modern era, Galileo discovered the amazing exploratory power of his hand-made telescope, which assured him of the truth of the Copernican view of the world. Not through their own immediate sensory capacity, but with resort to artificial sight through an optical instrument, can mankind attain “scientific truth.” Since then, the concept of truth has radically changed: Truth is what is made, while appearance in general is to be doubted.

From this modern point of view, the old-fashioned goal of philosophical intuition, the static beholding of the self-revealing truth as such, turns out to be more than doubtful. The ideal of *theōria* has become meaningless. Nevertheless, we cannot say that modernity is always correct. The premodern alternative of truth as appearance may be problematic, but the modern scientific understanding of truth as a productive process should be also criticized. In this gap between ancient and modern times, we hope to find a possibility of thinking further today.

And one more question remains: modern humans, as a whole, are striving to obtain truth in the best way possible. If this is another way of “philosophical” thirst for truth for its own sake and at the cost of themselves, then to what extent *may* we encourage people to do philosophy?