

# The Distinction between the Historical and the Systematic Approaches to Philosophy

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**Abstract --** The purpose of philosophy is to grasp what reality is. In order to grasp what reality is, we should have some epistemological approach to philosophy. Here, I will attempt to explain and compare two approaches: The historical and the systematic approaches.

I would like to determine both approaches in their historical development. The systematic approach to philosophy has been mostly developed since Descartes, i.e. since modern philosophy. On the other hand, the "historical approach to philosophy" as an epistemological approach means that which examines philosophy in the light of the historical development of the human being and his thought.

**Keywords –** *philosophy, systematic approaches, historical approach, Descartes, Kant, Hegel*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In order to grasp what reality is that is the aim of philosophy, we should have some epistemological approach to philosophy. Here, I will attempt to explain and compare two approaches: The historical and the systematic approaches.

The systematic approach to philosophy has been mostly developed since modern philosophy. Cartesian philosophers, empiricists and idealist philosophers have tried to have a systematic explanation of the whole totality in different systems. Critical philosophy is also based on a systematic approach. In the "Critique of Pure Reason"<sup>1</sup>, Kant talks about the problem of systemacity in several places, such as in "The Architectonic of Pure Reason."<sup>2</sup> Kant means by "architectonic" the art of a system; a system is the unity of manifold modes of knowledge under one idea. ("Critique of Pure Reason", B860)<sup>1</sup>. Kant says that unity under one idea means the unity of reason. Therefore, Kantian understanding of the concept of a system is subjective in accordance with the concepts of reason. The relation of a system and the unity of reason provide complete knowledge. In other words, Kant maintains that philosophy is the system of all philosophical knowledge. (Critique of Pure Reason, B 866)<sup>1</sup>.

This systematic approach sees philosophy as a systematic science in terms of either a linear or a circular character of knowledge. Since Descartes, the systematic approach to philosophy until the middle of the nineteenth century, Hegel and post-Hegelian philosophy see both the systematic and the historical approach to philosophy.

## II. DISCUSSION

First of all, I should clarify my understanding of what these approaches are. By the "historical approach to philosophy", one understands as an epistemological approach is that which examines philosophy in the light of the historical

development of the human being and his thought. By the "systematic approach to philosophy", one understands and examines philosophy within a static system in terms of an abstraction from the axiomatic method.

The systematic understanding of philosophy is purely theoretical, abstract, stable, deductive, and universal. The systematic approach tries to consider a philosophical system which must explain all of reality. Although the concept of a system has been understood in various senses with regard to different philosophers, I understand by a system as a sum of knowledge of what has been unified under a single idea.

The systematic approach is an ahistorical (non-historical) approach. It is timeless; I will go further by stating that it is an approach that is possible everywhere, i.e. it is a placeless approach because, according to the systematic explanation of philosophy, it must explain the universal and the most real being with a theoretical method. For example, Plato's theory of Forms is a systematic approach to philosophy. Plato's forms are timeless and placeless, but in his system, the explanation of forms is logically true and real.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the historical approach is concerned with time and place. This kind of understanding of philosophy examines everything in this world, not any other worlds. For example, for the materialist matter is the real object, and there is nothing beyond matter. Furthermore, for the historical explanation, being is in the history; being and matter encompass history; so, being is understood in time and place. Although some who hold an historical explanation to philosophy, such a Hegel and Croce, believe in an idealistic reality, these ideal realities have foundations in the objective world. For Hegel, the change of the historical object over time is paralleled by theory.<sup>4</sup> Namely, the consideration of history introduces the dimension of time; on the other hand, Hegel thinks that a system and history are merely two aspects of the same process through which objective thought achieves knowledge.

The historical approach is opposite to a static explanation of the systematic approach. According to the historical understanding of knowledge, genuine knowledge comes only through an understanding of history; therefore, the historical approach accepts the change, evaluation and development of knowledge. All knowledge and all forms of experience are understood in the context of historical change. Unlike an historical approach, a systematic approach has a static, unchangeable theory of knowledge. According to the systematic approach, the theory of knowledge is fixed once in the human mind even if it is pre-given or is not pre-given to the human mind. For example, the historical understanding of reality and the context of history cannot affect the Kantian theory of knowledge because Kant's theory of knowledge is a

kind of theory which has been established with all principles and rules by Kant; therefore, everything must be understood according to this theory. You cannot change it, whether or not you can accept it. If you accept it, you should act according to its rules.<sup>5</sup>

A criterion of a system is independent from any social, historical, natural and moral realities. The criterion of the system depends on its own rules and principles. For example, Spinoza's philosophy is a system or a systematic philosophy. His system is based on the principles which are truth. The systematic approach starts from hypotheses, presuppositions, assumptions, axioms, definitions, principles; namely, some presuppositions of analytic truth.

The systematic approach gives an abstract and theoretical explanation of philosophy. This approach explains philosophy at an abstract level. It does not concern social, economic, political, or historical factors. The systematic approach is based on theory because from this view, theory comes first, and then there is practice. Contrary to the systematic approach, the historical approach insists on practice. It concerns social life, economy, politics, history, etc. It is basically a practical approach to philosophy. If the systematic approach does not deal with real human values, then what does it concern? The systematic approach tries to establish the principles of reason, understanding, mind, i.e. the nature of human thought. This approach can be seen in Descartes' philosophy or in Kantian philosophy; for example, the Kantian categories are general concepts of understanding.<sup>6</sup>

A systematic approach has, I believe, a good explanation for the natural sciences. Natural science has to be based on a systematic investigation. The laws of nature can be determined from a systematic view because they are fixed, unchangeable and static laws. I believe that, on the other hand, social science can be explained by an historical approach because the objects of the social sciences are subject to the context of history.

I would like to support my maintenance in that natural science that sciences can be understood without a history of science because a systematic explanation is not based on an historical knowledge of something. I accept that philosophy is historical, and unlike natural science, philosophy cannot be understood without its history. I think that philosophy and the history of philosophy must exist together because philosophical problems have histories. To think that philosophy is timeless is an illusion. One cannot do philosophy at all without going into its origins. One can argue that the Greek philosophers had no history of philosophy. However, they did not start from zero because they took some myths and scientific knowledge from Egypt and Babylon. "In the earliest philosophers of Greece it is impossible to separate ideas of divinity and the human soul from ideas about the mystery of being and the genesis of material change."<sup>7</sup>

One can do a systematic analysis on the history of philosophy or on a philosophical problem. One can argue that my philosophy is not historical, but that it is a systematic approach. However, I would argue that his philosophy could have some point from the history of philosophy. Namely,

even in the systematic philosophy or in an explanation, there would be some historical point. Philosophy and its history cannot be disjoined. If one tries to separate philosophy from its history, I think he destroys the ground and the origin of philosophy. On the other hand, the system also has its history, since I believe that a human being does not start from zero, and at least he has a nature before he has produced the culture. Consequently, the system can be developed in its own history.

The historical approach to philosophy concerns human life, because human life is the subject matter of philosophy. There is nothing beyond the human being. There is no thing-in-itself. There is no absolute starting point. For the historical approach, man has no nature but has a history. Man philosophizes himself in the light of his history. Therefore, philosophy must deal with human life and his thought. Basically, the historical approach reduces philosophy to the philosophy of man.

According to my understanding of the historical approach to philosophy, philosophy must explain the activities of man in the physical and intellectual world. Man is an historical being. Man has social, economical, moral values. For this reason, if philosophy must explain something, that something must be human beings. And if philosophy must explain what man is, then philosophy should use the historical approach for itself, because the historical approach, as I explained above, can give the most possible and best explanation of human beings because of the nature of this method. An historical explanation of philosophy does not freeze the nature of man in a timeless and spaceless position. This approach understands man in real life and in the real world. This approach takes man as a whole.

The historical understanding of philosophy becomes the historical understanding of man. An historical understanding of man can be idealistic, materialistic, or existentialistic, phenomenologicistic, or subjectivistic, etc., but it is a better approach than the systematic approach because it gives an understanding of man rather than an explanation.

### III. CONCLUSION

After discussing the basic characteristics of both approaches to philosophy, I would like to argue why the historical approach to philosophy should be more acceptable, since I believe that philosophy should use the historical method for its explanation.

As it was previously stated, the purpose of philosophy is to grasp what reality is; that is to say, the philosopher must seek the reality. First of all, if the philosopher seeks something, it must exist, so there must be a reality. If he speaks about reality, it must be in this world, i.e. reality must be in the spatial-temporal world. My understanding of reality is a realistic and materialistic approach. Therefore, I believe that materialistic philosophy can explain reality.

After establishing what kind of reality in which I am interested, I would like to argue that the historical approach can only be the only method in order to grasp the materialistic understanding of reality.

1. The historical approach grasps the reality in a dialectic progress of human thought and objective-material world.
2. The historical approach grasps the reality in time and space.

3. The historical approach does not limit the reality such as the systematic approach does.
4. The historical approach grasps the reality in terms of the circumstances, human values, namely human life.
5. The historical approach grasps the reality in accordance with objectivity rather than subjectivity.

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