

Why Philosophy Matters in Times of Crisis



We seem to be living more and more in times of permanent crisis: terrorism, armed conflicts, unprecedented waves of desperate refugees, crises in practically every field of public life, including financial and economic, environmental, political, cultural, educational, institutional, (mental) health, etc. There is hardly any area which is not affected by some crisis in one form or another. The very term ‘crisis’ conjures up feelings of danger, threat and panic and urges us to act as quickly as possible. Taking time to think seems to be a luxury of the past and not something we can afford now.

To a certain extent, this is true. In moments of emergency, we do need to act quickly and don’t have much time to think. But it is also precisely in these moments that our habits of thinking are revealed and exposed and show their true nature. Our actions are generally a reflection of our thoughts, mindsets, beliefs – whether conscious or unconscious – and sometimes it is our way of thinking that has brought about the crisis in the first place. As Einstein famously said: “The world we have created is a product of our thinking, we cannot change it without changing the way we think.” Once we see where our thinking went wrong, we are able to correct it.

A crisis also forces us to examine our assumptions. It makes us question our way of life and reflect on what needs to change in order to achieve different outcomes. It highlights what is really important and of value to us. Philosophy helps us to reframe our questions and to find new perspectives. Philosophy not only teaches us how to think and reflect but it also puts us in contact with the wisdom that has been passed down to us for many centuries and already stood the test of time. Unlike information, knowledge or technology, wisdom does not become obsolete and insights into universal principles and understanding the interconnectedness of all things are more relevant than ever.

We could even say that philosophy is a child of crisis. More often than not our reflections are born out of adversity, pain, loss, suffering, having to deal with problems – rather than comfort and complacency. Hegel said that philosophy can be defined as the crisis of each epoch, which

is expressed in concepts. Most philosophers lived through turbulent times and their insights are a response to the crises of their own age. Socrates lived through war, the bubonic plague, the decline of Athens, political upheavals. Stoicism was founded by Zeno after he was shipwrecked near Athens. Many Stoics had difficult lives, whether Epictetus as a slave, Marcus Aurelius as Roman emperor at very challenging times or Seneca who, after a volatile life was forced to commit suicide by the Emperor Nero. The Stoics even prepared themselves for difficult times and welcomed them as an exercise in applied philosophy. One of their practices was called *premeditatio malorum* – ‘premeditation of adversity’. Contemplating worst case scenarios helps us lose our fear and appreciate what we have.

Lastly, philosophy teaches us to think for ourselves. In times of so much false or misleading information and fake news; where information can travel within seconds all over the world; where information has the power to trigger the reaction of millions of people; in times like these it is paramount that we all think for ourselves and that we have a philosophical and ethical framework and points of reference for our choices and actions.

Philosophy has always made constructive contributions and been at the service of solutions. Philosophy is relevant at all times, but particularly in times of crisis. The role of philosophy is both to help us understand who we are, to make sense of what is happening and to enable us to discover universal principles. Philosophy is a valuable tool for diagnosing what is going wrong and why, and for predicting the outcome of lines of action. In times of crisis, philosophy is not a luxury but a necessity, and one of the most important means for arriving at shared values, lasting solutions and wise actions.