

# LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY

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In *A Theology of Liberation*, the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez describes ‘liberation theology’ as ‘a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed’ (2001: 59). Inspired by liberation theology, philosophers in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s developed a ‘liberation philosophy’ that sought to contribute to the liberation of the oppressed.<sup>1</sup> However, these philosophers found it difficult to explain *how* their philosophy could be liberatory in this sense. What they lacked was a theory of change, that is, a theory of how their philosophy – or indeed any philosophy - is capable of contributing to the economic, social, and political change that liberation requires.<sup>2</sup>

Liberation philosophy is not the exclusive preserve of Argentinian or of Latin American philosophers. There are other figures in the history of philosophy who might also be regarded as liberation philosophers – Martin Luther King Jr. is one example – and there are even analytic philosophers who might be happy to be characterized as liberation philosophers. Analytic feminists are a case in point. A more vexed question is whether liberation philosophy is the sole preserve of left-leaning philosophers. This would be a natural thing to think for those who view capitalism as a major source of oppression and Marx as the paradigmatic liberation philosopher. From a more conservative standpoint, however, Marxism is a philosophy that has been used to justify oppression on a monumental scale and is diametrically opposed to human liberation and freedom. If there is such a thing as liberation philosophy, conservatives will argue, its leading lights are not Marxists but libertarians like Hayek. Even if this suggestion is rejected, it shows that assumptions about the political affiliations of liberation philosophy need to be carefully considered.

Can philosophy be liberatory? If liberation philosophy is possible, how is it possible? How does it liberate those it seeks to liberate? Who does it claim to liberate, and what does it liberate them from? These foundational questions will be the focus of part 2. Special attention will be paid to the how-possible question. A good way to explain how something is possible is to identify various means by which it is possible.<sup>3</sup> Since a liberatory philosophy is one that at least *contributes* to social, political, or economic change, the means by which it is possible are the means by which it is realistically capable of contributing to these types of change. The identification of such means should be the primary focus of a theory of change for liberation philosophy and part 2 will offer such a theory. Although philosophy can have impacts that are unplanned and unintended, liberation philosophy's contributions – if any – to social or political change are neither unplanned nor unintended. Contributing to change is liberation philosophy's primary objective.

Suppose, next, that a *meliorative* philosophy is defined as one that improves human lives.<sup>4</sup> A genuinely liberatory philosophy would have a strong claim to be viewed as meliorative but there are many other ways for philosophy to be meliorative. For example, Louise Antony describes feminist philosophers as united by the conviction that 'philosophy ought to matter – that it should make a positive contribution to the construction of a more just, humane, and nurturing world than the one we currently inhabit' (1993: 145). A philosophy that makes such a contribution would be meliorative, regardless of whether it is liberatory. The same goes for a philosophy that, in Philip Kitcher's formulation, helps to 'resolve the problems and debates of the age' (2023: 147) or 'guide individuals or societies to better decisions and improved conduct' (2023: 118). This vision of meliorative philosophy will be the focus of part 3, which develops an account, based on the idea of *co-creation*, of what it takes for philosophy to be meliorative. Rather than simply offering solutions or guidance, philosophy needs to work with those it seeks to guide to develop solutions to problems that recognize their lived complexity.<sup>5</sup>

The *virtues* of meliorative philosophy are personal qualities that enable co-creation and enhance the meliorative project.<sup>6</sup> They are the qualities that philosophers with an interest in this project should try to cultivate. They include humility, practicality, an openness to diverse perspectives and, above all, an instinct for lived complexity, for the messiness of reality and lived experience. The *vices* of meliorative philosophy, including liberation philosophy, are attributes that get in its way and make it less likely to offer useful guidance or co-created solutions to the problems of our age.<sup>7</sup> These include a proclivity for virtue-signalling, myopia, and lack of realism. Part 3 will flesh out this conception of meliorative virtues and vices and consider why philosophy might fail to provide the kind of guidance that it ought to provide. The guidance at issue in these examples is moral guidance.

While some philosophers are open to the idea of liberation philosophy, others are more sceptical. *Philosophical purists* think that philosophy has its own priorities and concerns, and that liberating the victims of oppression, whoever they are, is not one of them. Purists believe that philosophy makes the world a better place by helping some who study it to be better thinkers or via its impact on culture. However, they are not in the least embarrassed by the fact that most philosophy, especially most theoretical philosophy, has made little difference to the world outside philosophy. Any impact it may have had is largely accidental and not necessarily benign.<sup>8</sup> They do not think that it is the job of philosophy to be meliorative in any of the senses I have described. In their view, so-called ‘liberation philosophers’ are deluding themselves about the impact of their philosophical endeavors. Their advice to such philosophers is that if they want to change the world or to improve human lives, they would be better off becoming political activists or medical researchers.<sup>9</sup> This challenge to the meliorative conception of philosophy will be considered in part 4.

A way to conceptualize the questions raised by the purist is to distinguish four types of philosophy:

Type A philosophy tries to be liberatory and is.

Type B philosophy tries to be liberatory but isn't.

Type C philosophy doesn't try to be liberatory and isn't.

Type D philosophy doesn't try to be liberatory but is.<sup>10</sup>

Purists conceive of most philosophy, including their own, as type C. They think that so-called 'liberation philosophy' is type B – liberatory in intention but not in reality. Some philosophy might be type D but liberation philosophers are after a type A philosophy. I want to consider the prospects for a type A philosophy that is backed by a realistic theory of change. The issue is not whether *all* philosophy should be liberatory or *every* philosopher should be a liberation philosopher. The issue is whether liberation philosophy is possible and, if so, how it is possible. Even if contributing to the liberation of the oppressed is not a realistic philosophical objective, philosophy can be meliorative in other senses that go beyond what the purist has in mind. Some philosophy has been meliorative, but the discipline can and should do better.

## 2

Who does liberation philosophy help to liberate and what does it think it liberates them from? Guided by Enrique Dussel and other Latin American liberation philosophers, one might view liberation philosophy as contributing to the liberation of the oppressed from oppression.<sup>11</sup> This is by no means the only way to conceive of liberation philosophy. The emphasis might instead be on injustice, which can itself take many different forms. Victims of oppression might be victims of injustice, but injustice does not entail oppression; a person whose slice of the pie is unfair or unjust is not necessarily oppressed.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the objective of liberation philosophy might be to contribute to liberating victims of injustice from injustice or, put more simply, to combat injustice and promote justice. The more precise its theory of oppression, injustice, or other harms, the greater are liberation philosophy's chances of being able to contribute to their alleviation.

Who, exactly, are the oppressed, and in what sense are they oppressed? When liberation philosophers talk about victims of injustice, who do they have in mind and what is their idea of injustice? There is no completely general or ideologically neutral answer to these questions. Oppression in Iran or North Korea is a very different thing from oppression in the United States, and the left's conception of oppression and injustice is very different from more conservative conceptions. There is oppression that takes the form of repression – that involves the deliberate use of coercion or violence to deprive people of their rights and freedoms – and oppression that is more structural or systemic.<sup>13</sup> Analytic liberation philosophers tend to be more concerned with the latter, but this reflects their circumstances. When it comes to the nature of oppression, a philosopher who faces the reality of coercion by the state and the risk of imprisonment for speaking out is likely to have different preoccupations from one who lives and works in a liberal democracy, albeit an imperfect one.

As noted above, the supposition that liberation philosophy is possible amounts to the supposition that it is capable of contributing to the economic, social, or political changes that liberation requires. To understand how philosophy can do this, and thereby to understand how liberation philosophy is possible, the first important step is to formulate a theory of change for liberation philosophy, that is, a theory of how what might be called *philosophical interventions* can contribute to economic, social, or political change. Theories of change were first articulated by social scientists, who use them to understand and evaluate social interventions, such as programmes designed to affect some variable like youth unemployment or child neglect.<sup>14</sup> A theory of change 'is in essence no more than a planned route to outcomes: it describes the logic, principles and assumptions that connect what an intervention, service, or programme does, and why and how it does it, with its intended results' (Ghate 2018: 3). To put it another way, a theory of change for a social intervention is an attempt to articulate how the intervention is supposed to work.

A theory of change should at least specify:

- a. The *issue* or *problem* that the intervention is supposed to address.
- b. The desired *outcome* or target.
- c. The *activities* that constitute the intervention.
- d. *Mechanisms* of change.<sup>15</sup>

These requirements give expression to the assumption that social interventions are not black boxes. There must be a story to be told about how they work. For example, suppose that the problem is child neglect, the desired outcome is a reduction in levels of child neglect, and the intervention consists in a suite of parenting programmes for parents of vulnerable children. In this scenario, parenting programmes are the change activity and improved parenting skills are the hypothesized mechanism of change that connects the intervention with the outcome.

Philosophical interventions are different from social interventions and the way they contribute to change is also different. One idea is that philosophical interventions bring about social or political change via their impact on public debates. For example, Martha Nussbaum describes some of her philosophical work – her book reviews – as philosophical interventions in public debates ‘which attempt in some manner to change the course of those debates, though in some cases rather indirectly’ (2012: 2). However, liberation philosophy needs more than this if it is to contribute to substantive political change. It is not simply designed to change the course of public debates unless, according to its theory of change, changing the course of public debates is an effective way to bring about substantive change. Furthermore, one might question the extent to which publishing book reviews in the *New York Review of Books* has any serious impact on public debates. Those who conceive of the kind of philosophy they do as delivering desirable social or political change need a more compelling account of *how* their philosophical interventions can do this, that is, a more compelling theory of change.

On a more charitable reading, Nussbaum's point would be better expressed by thinking in terms of philosophy's impact on public *understanding* rather than public debates. If it affects public debates, it is because of its impact on public understanding. We have already seen that oppression in one form or another and certain kinds of injustice are among the problems that liberatory philosophical interventions set out to address. Thus, the liberation philosopher might set out to shed light on oppression and justice in a way that improves the *philosophical* understanding of these phenomena and thereby indirectly improves *public* understanding of oppression and injustice. Here, *shedding light* is liberation philosophy's change activity, one of the things it does that contributes to social or political change. The mechanism of change is better public understanding. The hope is that the public will be more open to measures to tackle oppression and injustice if it has a proper understanding of the nature and reality of these harms, especially if philosophical endeavor brings to light hitherto unrecognized forms of oppression or injustice.

A case in point is Marilyn Frye's classic account of oppression. She begins by noting 'human beings can be miserable without being oppressed' (2000: 10). We 'need to think clearly about oppression' but 'there is much that mitigates against this' (2000: 11). Her first substantive observation is that victims of oppression are often in a 'double bind', that is, in 'situations in which options are reduced to very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation' (2000: 11). This leads to another substantive observation, that oppression is often a macroscopic phenomenon that is hard to see from a microscopic perspective. This reflects the fact that 'the experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction' (2000: 12). Although this is not how Frye puts it, this sounds like an account of systemic or structural oppression.

Most of Frye's discussion is concerned to demonstrate that women are victims of this type of oppression. The fact that their oppression is systemic is one reason why it 'can be hard to see and recognize' (2000: 12). Frye's discussion makes systemic oppression easier to see and to recognize. This is her article's contribution to the project of liberation philosophy. By shedding light on systemic oppression, she makes it easier to recognize it for what it is. Once it is understood that 'women are oppressed, *as women*' and that 'one is marked for application of oppressive pressures by one's membership in some group or category' (2000: 16), it is then possible to think constructively about what can be done, legislatively or in other practical ways, to combat this this type of oppression. To tackle a problem, one must first see it and understand it. Helping people to see and understand oppression is a change activity and one of the means by which liberation philosophy contributes to social or political change.

One might object to the notion that shedding light on a problem is a change activity. To tackle a problem, one must first understand it, but understanding the nature of oppression is a very different thing from doing something about it. However, it is important not to downplay the significance of understanding. Lack of understanding can itself be oppressive and coming to understand what was previously obscure can itself be liberating, as when victims of systemic oppression grasp for the first time the nature of the barriers by which they are confined. The point of liberation philosophy is to contribute to social or political change but changing our *understanding* of social or political reality is itself a contribution to social or political change. A changed understanding can make a real political difference. It does so when it stimulates or shapes political action, about which more will be said below. Marx objected that philosophers have only interpreted the world, but the point is to change it. This overlooks the possibility that to promote a better understanding of social and political reality *is* to change it. For Marxists, real change requires political action, but effective political action must be grounded in the type of understanding that liberation philosophy makes possible.



*Whose* understanding is improved by liberation philosophy? It was suggested above that liberation philosophy sets out to improve the *philosophical* understanding of phenomena like oppression and injustice and thereby also to improve *public* understanding. The ‘thereby’ in this sentence needs some explaining. How does improved philosophical understanding result in improved public understanding? Before addressing this question there is another aspect of liberation philosophy that needs to be highlighted: the extent to which it engages in conceptual innovation. The best liberation philosophy sheds light on familiar phenomena in conceptually innovative ways. For example, oppression is familiar, but it was innovative to conceive of it as structural. At times, the conceptual innovations of liberation philosophy help to surface previously unrecognized phenomena. It was only when Miranda Fricker introduced the concept of epistemic injustice to the philosophical lexicon that the existence of this form of injustice came to be widely recognized.<sup>16</sup> The concept is now widely used outside philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

In his seminal work on the diffusion of innovations, Everett Rogers defines diffusion as ‘the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system’ (1995: 5). The conceptual innovations of the liberation philosopher do nothing for public understanding unless they are diffused, and a challenge for liberation philosophy is to develop channels through which its conceptual innovations can be communicated to members of the public. Some philosophical ideas take hold ‘by seepage rather than by name’ (Wolff 2023: 5). Others are diffused by teaching or by public engagement in the form of op-eds or blog posts or other activities on social media. When conceptual innovations like the idea of epistemic injustice take hold outside philosophy, liberation philosophy should reflect on how and why this happened. If Frye’s paper has transformed the public understanding of oppression, this is doubtless the result of the clarity and accessibility of her writing and the intuitiveness of her core idea. Liberation philosophy’s best ideas are obvious once they have been properly articulated and diffused.

Like social interventions, philosophical interventions have targets or objectives. This points to another change activity for liberation philosophy: *target delineation*. A philosopher who wishes to contribute to social or political change needs to explain what they would like to see in place of the *status quo*. As Daniel Chandler notes in a recent book on Rawls' theory of justice, it is easy to decry the state of politics and society today but 'what is much harder to find is a coherent vision of what a better or fairer society would look like' (2023: 1-2). After all, 'without a clear idea of where we want to get to, how can we know that we are on the right course?' (2023: 3). Developing a clear idea of where we want to get to is part and parcel of target delineation. The importance of target delineation is illustrated by Marx's abject failure to engage in it, beyond some programmatic remarks about the dictatorship of the proletariat. The tragic consequence was that it was left to Lenin and Stalin, both authoritarians, to decide what this meant in practice.

Target delineation can be utopian or pragmatic. The Rawlsian model is self-consciously utopian. The long-term goal of political endeavor, which 'gives meaning to what we can do today' (Rawls 1999: 128) is a 'realistic utopia' organized in accordance with Rawls' principles of justice. For Sen, Rawls' version of target delineation is too 'transcendental'.<sup>18</sup> The question the liberation philosopher should try to answer is not 'what would perfect justice look like?' but rather 'how can justice be advanced in practice?'. The emphasis should be on progress rather than perfection, and on the removal of manifest injustice. On this account, comparisons are crucial: the immediate objective of social or political change should be social or political arrangements that compare favourably with the present ones. For present purposes, there is no need to decide between utopian and pragmatic target delineation. Either way, the liberation philosopher must have thoughts about how we can reach their preferred destination. What is required, in other words, is what might be called *route guidance*. Providing such guidance is another important change activity for liberation philosophy.

I have argued that improvements in philosophical and public understanding represent one kind of change to which a liberation philosopher might reasonably aspire, but there is still the Marxist worry that the most effective mechanism of political change is political action and that liberation philosophy's theory of change must explain its impact on political action. Instead of trying to define a political action, one might give examples. Voting in an election, taking part in a demonstration, staging a coup, and committing an act of terrorism are political actions but of special interest in the present context are political actions that constitute *civil resistance*. Erica Chenoweth defines civil resistance as 'a form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence or the threat of violence against people to do so' (2021: 1). Studies indicate that compared with the alternatives civil resistance is a 'stunningly successful method of creating change' (2021: 13). Examples of civil resistance bringing about radical political change include Gandhi's campaign against British rule in India, the struggle for civil rights in America and against apartheid in South Africa, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the Arab Spring.

One reply to the Marxist worry is that changes in political understanding tend to have an influence on political action. People who, for the first time, see themselves as oppressed or as victims of injustice are more likely to become politically active than those who do not. Political action that is not founded on political understanding is unlikely to be effective, and liberation philosophy can provide the necessary understanding. Philosophical reflection has also played a more direct role in civil resistance. Gandhi's civil resistance and Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaign for civil rights were grounded in philosophical reflection about a range of issues, including inequality, violence, civil disobedience, and social justice. King distinguished three ways for victims of oppression to respond to oppression: acquiescence, violence, and non-violent resistance.<sup>19</sup> His moral argument for non-violence is an example of route guidance. It is broadly philosophical and based on the idea that non-violent resistance is the only way for

the oppressed to retain their dignity and self-respect.<sup>20</sup> Non-violence embodies the spirit of *agape*, which he defines as a form of redemptive good will for all men which seeks nothing in return.<sup>21</sup> He also highlights the inseparability of means and ends and the fact that violence is at odds with the goal of political action: integration.<sup>22</sup>

King is the archetypal liberation philosopher, and his example should assuage worries that there is no such thing as liberation philosophy. He was not just an activist and orator whose contribution to the struggle for civil rights was tactical and rhetorical. His contributions were also philosophical, as one would expect from a well-read, trained philosopher. His philosophy did everything that a liberation philosophy should do. He identified segregation and racial oppression as major problems that needed to be solved and argued that the oppressed have little awareness of their latent strengths and ability to shape events because ‘they have been schooled assiduously to believe in their lack of capacity’ (1986c: 599). He delineated integration as the target of political change and identified civil resistance as the route to political change. His theory of *agape* is evidence of conceptual innovation even if opponents saw his approach as naïve and idealistic.

To sum up, it was suggested at the outset that a fundamental question about liberation philosophy is: how is such a thing possible? A way to explain how liberation philosophy is possible is to identify various means by which it is possible. A liberatory philosophy is one that *contributes* to social, political, or economic change. Accordingly, the means by which such a philosophy is possible are the means by which it is realistically capable of contributing to social, economic, or political change. Several such means have been identified in the course of developing a theory of change for liberation philosophy: shedding light on what needs to change, delineating the target of change, providing route guidance, and engaging in conceptual innovation. Few of us can hope to emulate Martin Luther King Jr. in doing all of these things but even mere mortals can contribute to an aspect of the liberatory project.

There is, however, a serious worry about all this. The worry is that the liberationist project is elitist and patronizing. The oppressed don't need philosophers to tell them they are oppressed, and it is not for philosophers to speak for them or advise them how to improve their situation. Who gave philosophers, especially those in elite institutions, the right to do that? It is one thing to acknowledge King's philosophical contributions to the struggle for civil rights, but these were allied to his even more significant contributions as a political activist. Perhaps the lesson is that liberation philosophers should also be political activists but where does this leave those who are disinclined or unable to follow the activist route? Why should anyone listen to them? Reflection on this issue points to a requirement on any meliorative philosophy that hopes to exert influence on others through its guidance or conceptual innovations. This is the requirement that the solutions or guidance it offers must be *co-created* and not simply issued *ex cathedra* from the comfort of the Senior Common Room. The next task, therefore, is to give an account of co-creation and its significance for meliorative philosophy more generally before commenting on its role in liberation philosophy.

### 3

A meliorative philosophy helps to resolve the problems and debates of the age and guide individuals or societies to better decisions and improved conduct.<sup>23</sup> Plainly, there are many issues to the resolution of which philosophy can only make a marginal contribution at best. Philosophy is not going to solve the problem of climate change, for example, but it can help us to think clearly about the moral implications of the fact that our greenhouse gas emissions are going to have an adverse effect on future generations. One might conclude, as John Broome does, that we have a duty to offset all our carbon emissions.<sup>24</sup> This is exactly the kind of moral guidance that a meliorative philosophy can and should deliver. Following it would improve future lives, as well as our own. The primary objective is not to liberate people from oppression unless causing environmental damage counts as oppressing future generations. The issue is

how meliorative philosophy can help us make the world a better place by helping us to make better decisions and improve our conduct here and now. Climate change is one example but there many other problems of the age that philosophy can help with.

Terrorism is another problem of the age in which some meliorative philosophers might be expected to take an interest.<sup>25</sup> After the 9/11 attacks, the CIA subjected terrorist suspects to enhanced interrogation techniques that, according to some, amounted to torture. This raised the question whether torture was ever legitimate. Philosophers like Jeremy Waldron argued that it was not. The title of his volume on torture is *Torture, Terror, and Trade-Offs*, and the sub-title makes it plain that he sought to offer legal and moral *guidance* to those who have a say over such matters: *Philosophy for the White House*.<sup>26</sup> However, it is not enough simply to declare: thou shalt not torture. It is also necessary to offer practical alternatives, given that asking terrorist suspects nicely is unlikely to deliver useful intelligence.<sup>27</sup> A failure to offer alternatives is a serious limitation in philosophical approaches to torture and reveals another important requirement on any meliorative philosophy: it should have useful things to say about what should be done as well as what should not.

Another example: suppose that S is a military commander whose country C has been subjected to a lethal attack by a genocidal terrorist organization T. T has raped, murdered, and kidnapped large numbers of C's civilians and uses its own civilians as human shields. Instead of trying to minimize the death of its own civilians, T systematically places them in harm's way by using schools and hospitals as military bases. Furthermore, T has declared that it will attack C again and again, using the same genocidal methods. Its initial attack on C was not merely an act of terrorism but an act of what has been called *horrorism*, one in which the mutilation and dismemberment of victims played a significant role, especially female victims who were gang raped before being dismembered.<sup>28</sup> What should S do? What tactics should C's military adopt in response to an act of mass horrorism?

S might look to professional philosophers for help with these questions and it would be disappointing if they have nothing useful to say in response. This should prompt one to reflect on the conditions for philosophical guidance to be useful in this and other such cases. The first is a willingness to grasp the complexity of the issues and the lived complexity of S's situation. The real complexity of the military, legal, and ethical challenges facing S is unlike the contrived complexity of trolley problems and calls for a distinctive type of philosophical engagement. In particular, philosophers need to think themselves into S's situation before offering guidance. In responding to the initial atrocity, S must plainly not target civilians or commit war crimes, even allowing for the fact that T uses civilians as human shields. How, then, should S respond to an enemy like T? How much weight should she attach to her desire to minimize casualties among her own troops? How should the hostages figure in her calculations? It does not require much reflection to see the extraordinary difficulty of these questions. The last thing that S needs is ill-informed philosophers blundering in with impractical solutions to half understood problems. Only guidance based on a fine-grained grasp of the situation, realistic military options, and applicable laws is going to be worth the paper it is written on.

If philosophers are serious about offering guidance, they need to interact with people like S, with lawyers who understand the laws of war, high-level military strategists, and experts with a deep knowledge of T's history, tactics, objectives, and leaders. This may well be a case in which there are simply no good options for C or commanders like S. Even so, one would like to think that philosophy at least has *something* to contribute. However, any philosophical advice should be delivered with humility and based on an understanding of S's situation that can only be acquired by interacting with experts with relevant technical knowledge – in this case, legal and military knowledge – as well as knowledge of the facts on the ground. If all goes well, and different specialists are able to come up with useful guidance, this would be a case in which the guidance has been *co-created*. As with many other challenges, real life moral

dilemmas – rather than the artificial dilemmas that philosophers like to construct – can only be properly addressed by multi-disciplinary teams.

The term ‘co-creation’ was first coined by business studies academics to describe the novel practice of involving customers in product development. For example, toy manufacturers invited consumers to create designs of toy robots and also sought input from internal players who would not previously have been part of the design process.<sup>29</sup> In social and human services, co-creation means involving service end-users in the design of services that are supposedly for their benefit. Co-creation is a type of ‘interactional creation’ (Ramaswamy & Ozcan 2018:198). It happens when two or more stakeholders with particular characteristics work together in a particular way to create a new product or service or to solve a problem. The problems addressed by co-creation are typically intractable and affect well-being. Proponents regard co-creation as synergistic, that is, as providing solutions that ‘transcend what would otherwise be produced by the participants acting on their own’ (Easterling 2016). Two people who make breakfast together haven’t co-created breakfast if they could each have made the same breakfast on their own.

A key characteristic of those engaged in co-creation is social and intellectual *diversity*. Co-creation works best when it involves agents with different bodies of knowledge, interests, perspectives, assumptions, skills, and thinking styles. When what is being co-created is a new service, end-users are involved in the creative process not just as sources of information but as active participants and contributors whose interests and perspectives are embedded in the co-created product. The sense in which co-creation involves working in a particular way is that it is inclusive and collaborative. It requires an openness to diverse perspectives and interests, a willingness to listen, and the ability to see things from the point of view of service users.<sup>30</sup> The alternative to co-creation is the *expert model*, where an expert or a group of experts with shared



assumptions and common social and educational backgrounds create a product and present it to users. The expert model is top-down in a way that co-creation is not.

Talk of stakeholders, synergy, and end-users will be rebarbative to most philosophical ears but the basic idea of co-creation should not be. The pertinent question here is whether it is helpful to think of the guidance offered by philosophers along the lines suggested by the expert model or as the product of a co-creative enterprise. Consider the following analogy offered but not endorsed by Philip Kitcher: ‘Other areas of human inquiry have a problem. They send for the philosopher, in much the way homeowners might send for a plumber, to fix things. (Or, quite often, the philosophical plumber turns up, uninvited.)’ (2023: 116). This is the expert model. When it comes to fixing a leak, the plumber is the expert and solutions to plumbing problems are typically not co-created. The plumber only needs the help of the homeowner to understand the problem, not to solve it. But the position of the philosopher is quite unlike that of Kitcher’s plumber. It would be absurd for philosophers to think of themselves as being able to offer to S, in virtue of their philosophical expertise, useful guidance without engaging in a co-creative process, as described above. Philosophers who want to offer useful guidance must first do a great deal of learning and interacting with other “stakeholders”.

What does co-creation have to do with liberation philosophy? Rather like meliorative philosophy more generally, liberation philosophy is in the business of offering guidance. There is the obvious role of providing route guidance, but target delineation is also a type of guidance. The issue here is not just what the destination of political change is, but what it should be. To the extent that political change is supposed to improve the situation of the oppressed or victims of injustice, it would be desirable for recipes for change to be co-created with those who will be directly affected by the proposed changes. The alternative looks elitist and undemocratic. Target delineation might be grounded in abstract philosophical principles of justice but must also take account of the aspirations and experiences of the least well-off members of society.

This is something that liberation theologians understood, and their understanding was reflected in their choice to live among those for whom they spoke. Liberation philosophy would benefit from the same spirit of humility.

Humility is one of the virtues that meliorative philosophers generally need to cultivate if they are at all serious about co-creation. It is hard to exaggerate its importance for co-creation, if not for plumbing. Returning to the case of S, philosophers arguably have more to learn about her situation than she does from them. A little humility goes a long way. An openness to diverse perspectives is another co-creative virtue that has been mentioned. Then there is practicality: the guidance and solutions that are on offer must be practical. There are two dimensions to this. First, as noted above, it is not enough to tell people what they should not do. Alternative courses of action must be suggested. Second, an effort must be made to demonstrate the feasibility and efficacy of the suggested alternatives. This is where another co-creative virtue comes into its own: an instinct for lived complexity. To have this instinct is not just to acknowledge in theory the complexity and messiness of moral reality but to perceive its complexity as a matter of course and tailor one's responses accordingly. It consists in the ability to perceive ambiguity and nuance, and to display subtlety in one's judgements and recommendations.

These virtues, which philosophers can cultivate, are among the enabling conditions for philosophy to be meliorative. Just as there are virtues that promote meliorative philosophy, so there are vices that hinder it. One of these is virtue-signalling, which can take multiple different forms. One kind of virtue is ideological, and ideological virtue-signalling consists in acting in such a way as to signal one's endorsement of what is regarded by one's community as a virtuous ideology. For example, one might signal one's virtue by ostentatiously condemning particular views or behaviours or even nations while praising others that are deemed more acceptable in one's peer group. Virtue-signalling is vicious from the standpoint of meliorative

philosophy because it is antithetical to an empirically informed and empathetic engagement with morally and politically complex situations.<sup>31</sup>

Myopia is another potential vice of meliorative philosophy generally and of liberation philosophy in particular. In its most general form, the myopia that is at issue in these contexts is a type of narrow mindedness. A person is myopic in this sense if they can see some problems or solutions clearly but are blind to others that are no less clearly visible. One is myopic in this sense if one sees one type of oppression but not another or reacts with indignation to one type of injustice but with indifference to another that is just as serious. The uncritical use of terms like ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’ is a source of myopia when it encourages a binary view of social groups. It should be possible to recognize the oppressed as such without believing that being oppressed (or an oppressor) is an essential property of anyone or denying that the oppressed in one context might be oppressors in another. A meliorative philosopher does not essentialize people and sees the limitations of concepts like *oppressor* and *the oppressed* as clearly as their positive uses. Myopia results in an inability to see the extent to which such concepts can obscure complexity when used without due care.

Lack of realism is a vice for any philosopher who wishes to suggest solutions to real problems. In the case of torture, for example, it consists in a preoccupation with highly artificial ticking bomb scenarios, with their inherent implausibility and tenuous hold on reality, rather than with the actual circumstances in which torture is used.<sup>32</sup> An example of lack of realism masquerading as realism is the notorious proposal that since governments are going to use torture regardless of any ethical objections, it is better if its use is regulated by a system of judicial torture warrants.<sup>33</sup> As well as being impractical, this proposal is self-defeating since a true ticking bomb scenario would not allow time for judicial warrants to be sought or granted. Another bone of contention in the philosophy of torture is whether an exact definition of torture should be given. Waldron argues that it should not but unless all forms of interrogation that go

beyond questioning are ruled out, it is difficult to see how a system for interrogating terrorist suspects can function in practice without a working definition of torture.<sup>34</sup> It must be as clear as possible to interrogators what they must not do, even if some forms of interrogation that go beyond questioning are permitted.

As for oppression, one manifestation of a lack of realism in this connection is a lack of attention to the reality that in many countries it mainly takes the form of brutal repression rather than the types of symbolic or structural oppression that tend to preoccupy Western philosophers of oppression. There is no surer way to oppress someone than to torture them or kill them. A meliorative philosopher of oppression who is also a realist will recognize that the worst forms of oppression in the world today are not to be found in the liberal democracies but in religiously or ideologically inspired authoritarian dictatorships. Lack of realism also becomes an issue if liberation philosophers have an overly naïve and sentimental view of groups that claim to be freedom fighters but whose ultimate political objective is an authoritarian state constructed in accordance with an extremist ideology. A meliorative philosopher is, above all, a practical philosopher with a solid grasp of reality.

#### 4

In a review of Philip Kitcher's *What's the Use of Philosophy?* Kieran Setiya argues that philosophy, like music, is valuable in itself.<sup>35</sup> It satisfies a need, but that need is philosophical and stems from a curiosity about questions that the natural and social sciences cannot answer. According to Setiya, there is something philistine about the demand that philosophy should always answer to practical needs. This is just the kind of thing one would expect a purist to say in response to someone who, like Kitcher, has a meliorative conception of philosophy. Another purist is Tim Williamson, who notes that 'most philosophical questions lack direct applications' (2011: 537). Imagine a metaphysician who wonders whether people are events. Williamson asks: 'What is wrong with simply wanting to know whether people are events?' (2011: 537).

One can desire cognitive goods and ‘derive the benefit of satisfying one’s desire to know whether people are events’ (2011: 537). If one has no such desire, one need not pursue the question. Although some questions are not worth asking, we have no general method for deciding in advance which questions are worth asking. Consequently, ‘we may simply have to trust the instincts of leading practitioners in the field’ (2011: 537).

How sharp is the disagreement between the philosophical purist and the philosopher who believes that philosophy can and should be liberatory or meliorative in some other way? Is there any possibility of a rapprochement? It depends on how extreme a version of each view is adopted. The extreme philosophical purist is someone who thinks that philosophy should *never* concern itself with answering practical needs and that if it has any positive social impacts, they are unplanned side-effects rather than the point of doing philosophy. On this account, there can be a type D philosophy – one that doesn’t try to be meliorative but is – but most philosophy is type B or type C: it tries to be meliorative but fails (type B) or it doesn’t try to be meliorative and it isn’t (type C). The main sense in which philosophy makes the world a better place is by satisfying the cognitive desires of philosophers.

There is, however, no need for philosophical purists to adopt such an extreme position. They need not deny the existence of philosophies that try to be meliorative and sometimes succeed. Despite being a purist, Williamson provides a compelling example of how philosophy can be meliorative. Imagine a moral theorist who tries to answer the question whether torture is always wrong. He does so not because he thinks that having an answer is valuable in itself but because he thinks that having accurate beliefs about the morality of torture ‘will help us act well concerning torture’ (2011: 537). If the answer to the question whether torture is always wrong is that it is, then our intelligence services should not torture. A purist can and should accept that a philosopher who convinces the authorities not to torture is a *bona fide* meliorative philosopher. The purist’s point is that worthwhile philosophy does not *have* to be meliorative

in this way or any other. It does not *have* to help to liberate anyone or improve human lives, with the possible exception of the lives of philosophers. Knowing whether people are events is unlikely to make the world a better place but that is no reason to ban people from pursuing this question or attack them for their interest in the question. Questions can be worthwhile, the purist insists, even if they have no practical impact or relevance.

This is not something that meliorative philosophers should deny. They should agree with Kitcher that ‘a world in which philosophy is reduced to ventures that make immediate social impact would have lost something important’ (2023: 114). This passage makes it clear that Kitcher does not think that philosophy should *always* answer to practical interests.<sup>36</sup> Meliorative philosophers can and do accept that philosophers should be free to pursue their own interests, not least because nobody can predict which intellectual pursuits will lead to future benefits. To this extent, a rapprochement between meliorative philosophers and purists is possible. However – and this is where the meliorative philosopher parts company from even the moderate purist – these concessions do not amount to a free pass or make it unnecessary for philosophers to reflect on the value of their questions.<sup>37</sup>

Inspired by Pragmatists like James and Dewey, the meliorative philosopher’s opening gambit in response to a question like ‘Are people events?’ should be to ask a series of counter questions: why do you want to know whether people are events? Why does this question matter to you and why should it matter to anyone else? Why this question? What turns on whether people are events? Why do you think it is a worthwhile use of your time and resources to reflect on this issue?<sup>38</sup> These questions might have compelling answers. Perhaps thinking of people as events will completely reshape our conception of personal identity and with it, our conception of moral responsibility. The initial question looks idle but maybe it isn’t. However, taking the counter-questions seriously means reflecting on the value of asking whether people are events. This is far removed from the bluster of the purist who insists that reflection on such

questions is valuable in itself. Some things *are* valuable in themselves but appeals to what is intrinsically valuable can also function as cover for self-indulgence.

It is instructive to compare the purist's attitude with that of some of the great, dead philosophers. For example, Berkeley devotes time and energy to attacking the representative theory of perception and the doctrine that objects of perception can exist unperceived because of what he sees – rightly or wrongly – as the bad consequences of these doctrines. According to him, materialism provides philosophical support for atheism, scepticism, and fatalism, each of which he regards as socially pernicious.<sup>39</sup> For other great, dead philosophers the focus is more on the scientific than the social significance of their doctrines. Their mission is to develop a philosophical world view that is compatible with, and makes sense of, the latest scientific discoveries. They would have been puzzled by the idea that their questions merit philosophical attention *regardless* of their wider significance and consequences or that their philosophical endeavours are sustained and justified by nothing more than their own philosophical curiosity. They thought their questions *mattered* to their philosophical and non-philosophical contemporaries.

When purists say that philosophy has its own questions and concerns, they imply that there is a canon of philosophical questions, determined by tradition and the instincts of leading practitioners in the field, and that questions that do not belong to the canon are not properly philosophical. In contrast, the liberation philosopher agrees with Kitcher that 'philosophical problems emerge from situations in which people – many people, not just an elite class – find themselves' (2023: 5). The philosophical priorities of victims of oppression or social injustice will naturally be different from those who occupy positions of privilege. This includes many philosophers who enjoy the relatively high social and professional status of university teachers, especially if the universities that employ them are elite universities. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that their narrow conception of philosophy and scepticism about liberation

philosophy reflects their relatively comfortable position in the social hierarchy. They can afford the luxury of devoting themselves to satisfying their own intellectual curiosity.

To be a liberation philosopher is to have a capacious conception of the proper business of philosophy. It is to be sensitive to the social and political context in which one does one's philosophizing. Every philosophy is ideological in the sense that it presupposes a conception of the questions that are or are not worth asking. An ideology in this sense is a *philosophical* ideology. It is a grid through which philosophical problems are viewed and sets the agenda for the discipline by making certain problems or issues clearly visible while rendering others invisible.<sup>40</sup> Liberation philosophy is a philosophical ideology with distinctive preoccupations that are grounded in a distinctive vision of what is philosophically important. Philosophers who do not share its vision are, of course, free to continue as before. Those who are attracted by its vision are welcome to join in and assist in the task of putting flesh on the bones of the account I have given here. There is plenty of work to be done.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This description of what Latin American liberation philosophy tries to do is from Nuccetelli 2020: 215. Chapter 9 of her book is a useful though highly critical overview of Latin American liberation philosophy. Many of her criticisms are valid and one of my aims here is to develop a form of liberation philosophy that is not equally objectionable. For a very different conception of ‘liberatory philosophy’, see Read 2021. I won’t be discussing Read’s views here, but I will say that I have little sympathy for the liberatory philosophy he attributes to Wittgenstein.

<sup>2</sup> I’m using ‘theory of change’ in roughly the sense described in Weiss 1997 and Ghate 2018. There is more on this below.

<sup>3</sup> I’m drawing here on the account of how-possible questions given in Cassam 2007.

<sup>4</sup> As Philip Kitcher has noted, traditional epistemology has always had a meliorative dimension. For example, ‘Bacon and Descartes were moved to epistemological theorizing by their sense of the need to fathom the ways in which human minds can attain their epistemic ends’ (1992: 64). My conception of meliorative philosophy is much broader. It is not just epistemology and not only, or even primarily, concerned with the attainment of our *epistemic* ends. Meliorative philosophy as I understand it tries help us to live better lives. Tackling oppression and injustice is one way to improve people’s lives.

<sup>5</sup> I owe the expression ‘lived complexity’ to Richard English.

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion of philosophical virtues more generally in Cassam 2023a.

<sup>7</sup> For a defence of the idea that intellectual vices are obstacles, see Cassam 2019.

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<sup>8</sup> Dennett argues that the worldly impact of post-modernism has been far from benign. See [Daniel Dennett: 'I begrudge every hour I have to spend worrying about politics' | Daniel Dennett | The Guardian](#).

<sup>9</sup> Martha Nussbaum reports that some feminists 'have left the academy altogether, feeling more comfortable in the world of real politics, where they can address urgent problems directly' (2012: 198).

<sup>10</sup> If feminists like Antony are right to see Quine's naturalized epistemology as a philosophy that 'promises enormous aid and comfort' to people who are 'attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society' (1993: 113), then this would make Quine's a type-D philosophy. It would certainly not have been Quine's intention to make such a contribution, given his well-known political conservatism.

<sup>11</sup> Dussel is the archetypal Latin American liberation philosopher. See Dussel 2003.

<sup>12</sup> I thank Guy Longworth for urging me to be clearer about the relationship between oppression and injustice.

<sup>13</sup> See Haslanger 2017: 149 for the distinction between oppression and repression and an account of structural oppression.

<sup>14</sup> The classic paper on this subject is Weiss 1997.

<sup>15</sup> As Weiss describes them, mechanisms of change 'intervene between the delivery of program service and the occurrence of outcomes of interest' (Weiss 1997: 46). My proposed desiderata for theories of change is loosely based on those identified in Ghate 2018. Social scientists like Weiss and Ghate would doubtless insist that theories of change also need to specify ways to *measure* the impact of social interventions. Thanks to Johnny Lyons for this observation.

<sup>16</sup> Fricker 2007.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in the healthcare literature.

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<sup>18</sup> Sen 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Gooding-Williams 2018: 22.

<sup>20</sup> Mantena 2018: 85.

<sup>21</sup> King 1986a.

<sup>22</sup> As King puts it, desegregation is a short-term goal but ‘integration is the ultimate goal of our national community’ (1986b: 118). Many American progressives today reject the idea that integration is liberatory. King was right and they are wrong.

<sup>23</sup> As Kitcher puts it, ‘we should think of philosophy as guiding human practices through its achievements in introducing concepts, proposing lines of reasoning, suggesting standards and rules, posing questions, offering striking comparisons, opening up possibilities, and so on’ (2023: 150).

<sup>24</sup> Broome 2012.

<sup>25</sup> See Cassam and English, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> Waldron 2010. Another excellent contribution to the philosophy of torture is Kramer 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Defenders of enhanced interrogation often make this point. See, for example, Yoo 2006.

<sup>28</sup> On horrorism, see Amis 2006 and Cavarero 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ramaswamy and Guillard 2010.

<sup>30</sup> These are some of the virtues that enable co-creation. See Cassam 2016 and Ghate 2016.

<sup>31</sup> See Cassam 2023b.

<sup>32</sup> See the chapter on torture in Cassam and English, forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> Dershowitz 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Waldron 2010, chapter 7, and Kramer 2014: 286 for a convincing response.

<sup>35</sup> Setiya 2023.

<sup>36</sup> In other words, Setiya misreads Kitcher.

<sup>37</sup> Kitcher 2023: 100-101.

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<sup>38</sup> Compare Kitcher 2023: 14.

<sup>39</sup> Berkeley 1996: 96

<sup>40</sup> See Cassam 2023a for more on this conception of a philosophical ideology.

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