DUSSEL, Enrique

Enrique Dussel (b. 1934) has made innovative contributions to a number of fields, including the philosophy of liberation, ethics, political economy, theology and history. His more recent work offers the prospect of transcending the postmodernist/modernist debate from the ethical and historical standpoint of oppressed and excluded populations, primarily those of the global South.

A key concept is that of the “analectic”, or “ana-dialectic”, in which Dussel claims to incorporate and transcend the Marxist dialectic which he sees as both negative and operating within the totality of the dominant world system. “Ana”, meaning “beyond” refers to the peoples outside that totality who he sees as (actually or potentially) mounting both a negative critique (of the oppression of the system) and a positive critique that counterposes an alternative, utopian horizon, drawing on their alternative cultural heritages and world views. Although working within the discipline of academic philosophy, he has always sought engagement with the oppressed and excluded, whether severely disabled people (in his youth), Palestinian labourers (in his 20s), or indigenous people of the Americas (in recent years).

His key work, the “Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalisation and Exclusion” (2013: original Spanish: Ética de la Liberación en la Edad de la Globalización y de la Exclusión) makes acknowledgement to both the Guatemalan
indigenous activist, Rigoberta Menchú Tum and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) of Chiapas, Mexico, and he uses both (and Marx’s engagement with Parisian workers) to illustrate the process he articulates philosophically. However the book also integrates three approaches to ethics, or perhaps rather the definition of good and bad: material ethics, the priority of life and access to the means for its (social and material) reproduction; discourse ethics, the means and process of reaching consensus (drawing on his debate with Habermas and Apel), and (from the pragmatists) instrumental ethics, the priority of understanding what it is possible to achieve via the principle of feasibility. The analectical critique, in its negative and positive modes is then applied to each principle, yielding an ethics of liberation.

The analectic method takes Dussel to a rejection of both Eurocentric modernism and its pretension of universality (like Quijano and other Latin American coloniality theorists he sees modernity as co-constructed with colonial domination) and postmodern relativism, which he sees as its unresolved antithesis, wrongly rejecting the idea of ethical universals. Instead, he proposes what he calls a “transmodern” position that reconstructs a universal ethics, courtesy of the critique from below and outside the Eurocentric totality of modernity. Dussel thereby provides a corrective to the Eurocentrism of Western philosophy, seeking a solution to the problem of universal standards for ethical claims while responding to the particularities of distinct cultural legacies and traditions in the overall context of a novel reading of the production of the Other through the process of globalisation, understood in terms of a capitalist hyper-expansion, itself building on previous phases of modernism and imperialism.
For Dussel, ethics is the fundamental division of philosophy. He applies his method and findings to other fields. Since La Ética, he has completed a three volume work on the Philosophy of Politics, with its conclusions distilled in his 2008 “Twenty Theses on Politics”, a guide for activists and politicians. Proceeding from a reconstruction of Spinoza’s distinction between “potentia and potestas” he proceeds to address issues such as hegemony and counter-hegemony and the ethics of left governments in power, where he draws on the Zapatista concept of “mandar obedeciendo”, governing while obeying.

His most recent work (16 tesis de economía política, 2014, 16 theses on political economy, not yet available in English) is a similar reconstruction of the critique of political economy. It builds on his three volumes from the 1980s on Marx’s construction of Capital and the emphasis on the transformation of living labour under the capitalist accumulation process, with a consideration of the exploitation of peripheral capital(s) by dominant capital(s) (echoing the Theory of Dependency), and an integration of the critique from Ecological Economics. Despite the theoretical treatment, this latest intervention is intended as a guide for “a new generation of the left that since 1989 … has been left bereft of a theory that can interpret the events of this epoch of a radical transformative crisis”.

Essential readings


Further readings


Gómez, F., & Dussel, E. (2001). *Ethics is the original philosophy; or, the barbarian words coming from the third world: an interview with Enrique Dussel*. *Boundary*, 28(2), 19–73. (Interview)

A rare lecture in English on a non-Eurocentric account of World history:

**Enrique Dussel’s website** has the majority of his works, including many in English, available, including pdf’s of his older books and links to his recent ones.