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Introduction to

Philos-ophy

Epistemology 7

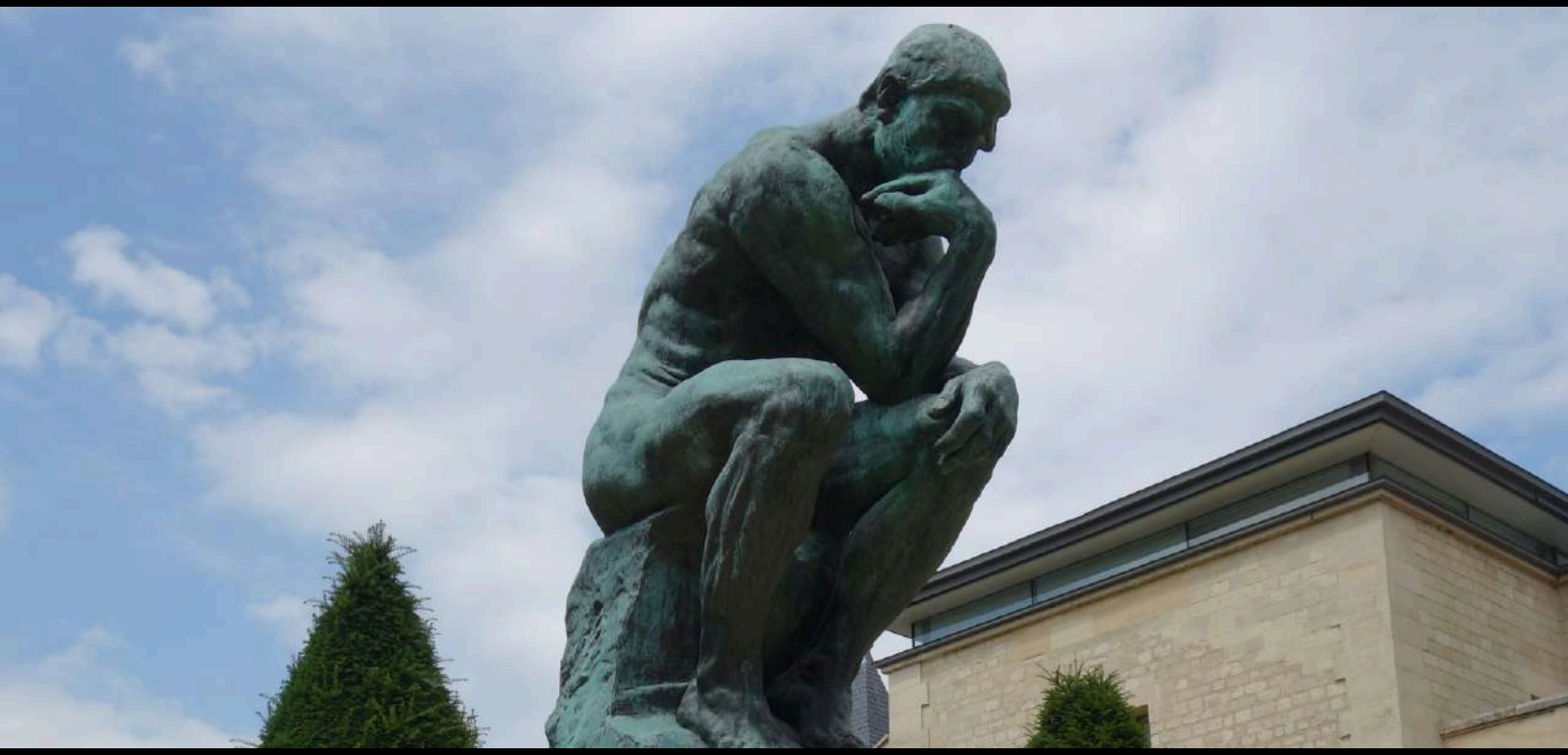

FIGURE 7.1 *The Thinker*, sculpted by French artist Auguste Rodin at the very beginning of the 20th century, has become a symbol of the intellect-centered pursuit of truth characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition. (credit: modification of "at Rodin museum" by Evgenii/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION Within any discipline of study, the acquisition of new knowledge is a primary goal. Theorists and researchers throughout academia seek to expand the body of knowledge associated with their discipline. Philosophers likewise aim for knowledge acquisition but are also concerned with the nature of knowledge itself. What *is* knowledge? Is there a limit to what we can know? How can we increase our knowledge without first understanding what knowledge is? **Epistemology** is the field within philosophy that focuses on questions pertaining to the nature and extent of human knowledge. This chapter seeks to provide a general understanding of the discipline of epistemology.

7.1 What Epistemology Studies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the study of epistemology.
- Explain how the counterexample method works in conceptual analysis.
- Explain the difference between a priori and a posteriori knowledge.
- Categorize knowledge as either propositional, procedural, or by acquaintance.

The word *epistemology* is derived from the Greek words *episteme*, meaning "knowledge," and *logos*, meaning "explanation" and translated in suffix form (*-logia*) as "the study of." Hence, epistemology is the study of knowledge. Epistemology focuses on what knowledge is as well as what types of knowledge there are. Because knowledge is a complex concept, epistemology also includes the study of the possibility of justification, the sources and nature of justification, the sources of beliefs, and the nature of truth.

How to Do Epistemology

Like other areas within philosophy, epistemology begins with the philosophical method of doubting and asking questions. What if everything we think we know is false? Can we be sure of the truth of our beliefs? What does it even mean for a belief to be true? Philosophers ask questions about the nature and possibility of knowledge and related concepts and then craft possible answers. But because of the nature of philosophical investigation, simply offering answers is never enough. Philosophers also try to identify problems with those answers, formulate possible solutions to those problems, and look for counterarguments. For example, in questioning the possibility of knowledge, philosophers imagine ways the world could be such that our beliefs are false and then try to determine whether we can rule out the possibility that the world really is this way. What if there's a powerful evil demon who feeds you all your conscious experiences, making you believe you are currently reading a philosophy text when in fact you are not? How could you rule this out? And if you can't rule it out, what does this say about the concept of knowledge?

In answering epistemological questions, theorists utilize arguments. Philosophers also offer counterexamples to assess theories and positions. And many philosophers utilize research to apply epistemological concerns to current issues and other areas of study. These are the tools used in epistemological investigation: arguments, conceptual analysis, counterexamples, and research.

Conceptual Analysis and Counterexamples

One of the main questions within epistemology pertains to the nature of the concepts of *knowledge*, *justification*, and *truth*. Analyzing what concepts mean is the practice of conceptual analysis. The idea is that we can answer questions like "What is knowledge?" and "What is truth?" by using our grasp of the relevant concepts. When investigating a concept, theorists attempt to identify the essential features of the concept, or its necessary conditions. So, when investigating *knowledge*, theorists work to identify features that all instances of knowledge share. But researchers are not only interested in isolating the necessary conditions for concepts such as knowledge; they also want to determine what set of conditions, when taken together, always amounts to knowledge—that is, its sufficient conditions. Conceptual analysis is an important element of doing philosophy, particularly epistemology. When doing conceptual analysis, theorists actively endeavor to come up with counterexamples to proposed definitions. A counterexample is a case that illustrates that a statement, definition, or argument is flawed.

CONNECTIONS

The introductory chapter provides an in-depth exploration of conceptual analysis. Counterexamples are discussed in the chapter on logic and reasoning.

Counterexamples to definitions in epistemology usually take the form of hypothetical cases—thought

experiments intended to show that a definition includes features that are either not necessary or not sufficient for the concept. If a counterexample works to defeat an analysis, then theorists will amend the analysis, offer a new definition, and start the process over again. The counterexample method is part of the philosophical practice of getting closer to an accurate account of a concept. Understanding the process of conceptual analysis is key to following the debate in epistemological theorizing about knowledge and justification.

For example, a theorist could contend that certainty is a necessary component of knowledge: if a person were not completely certain of a belief, then they could not be said to know the belief, even if the belief were true. To argue against this "certainty" theory, another philosopher could offer examples of true beliefs that aren't quite certain but are nevertheless considered to be knowledge. For example, take my current belief that there's a bird on a branch outside my office window. I believe this because I can see the bird and I trust my vision. Is it *possible* that I am wrong? Yes. I could be hallucinating, or the so-called bird may be a decoy (a fake stuffed bird). But let's grant that there is indeed a real bird on the branch and that "there is a bird on that branch" is true right now. Can I say that I *know* there is a bird on the branch, given that I believe it, it's true, and I have good reason to believe it? If yes, then the "certainty" thesis is flawed. Certainty is not necessary to have knowledge. This chapter includes several examples such as this, where a theorist offers an example to undermine a particular account of knowledge or justification.

Arguments

As with all areas of philosophy, epistemology relies on the use of argumentation. As explained in the chapter on logic and reasoning, argumentation involves offering reasons in support of a conclusion. The aforementioned counterexample method is a type of argumentation, the aim of which is to prove that an analysis or definition is flawed. Here is an example of a structured argument:

1. Testimonial injustice occurs when the opinions of individuals/groups are unfairly ignored or treated as untrustworthy.
2. If the testimony of women in criminal court cases is less likely to be believed than that of men, then this is unfair.
3. So, if the testimony of women in criminal court cases is less likely to be believed than that of men, this is a case of testimonial injustice.

The above argument links the general concept of testimonial injustice to a specific possible real-world scenario: women being treated as less believable by a jury. If women are considered less believable, then it is problematic.

Research

Notice that the above argument does not say that women are in fact considered less believable. To establish this thesis, philosophers can offer further arguments. Often, arguments utilize empirical research. If a theorist can find studies that indicate that women are treated less seriously than men in general, then they can argue that this attitude would extend to the courtroom. Philosophers often search for and utilize research from other areas of study. The research used can be wide-ranging. Epistemologists may use research from psychology, sociology, economics, medicine, or criminal justice. In the social and hard sciences, the goal is to accurately *describe* trends and phenomena. And this is where philosophy differs from the sciences—for epistemology, the goal is not only to describe but also to prescribe. Philosophers can argue that unjustifiably discounting the opinions of groups is bad and to be avoided. Hence, epistemology is a normative discipline.

The Normative Nature of Epistemology

This chapter began with the observation that knowledge is the goal of many disciplines. If knowledge is a goal, then it is desirable. Humans do not like being proven wrong in their beliefs. Possessing justification in the form of reasons and support for beliefs makes a person less likely to be wrong. Hence, both justification and knowledge are valuable. If knowledge is valuable and there are proper methods of justification that we should

follow, then epistemology turns out to be a *normative* discipline. Normativity is the assumption that certain actions, beliefs, or other mental states are good and ought to be pursued or realized. One way to think of epistemology is that in describing what knowledge, truth, and justification are, it further *prescribes* the proper way to form beliefs. And we do treat knowledge as valuable and further judge others according to the justification for their beliefs.

A Preliminary Look at Knowledge

Because the concept of knowledge is so central to epistemological theorizing, it is necessary to briefly discuss knowledge before proceeding. Knowledge enjoys a special status among beliefs and mental states. To say that a person knows something directly implies that the person is not wrong, so knowledge implies truth. But knowledge is more than just truth. Knowledge also implies effort—that the person who has knowledge did more than just form a belief; they somehow *earned* it. Often, in epistemology, this is understood as justification. These features of knowledge are important to keep in mind as we continue. First, we will look at the different ways of knowing.

Ways of Knowing

The distinction between a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge reveals something important about the possible ways a person can gain knowledge. Most knowledge requires experience in the world, although some knowledge without experience is also possible. **A priori knowledge** is knowledge that can be gained using reason alone. The acquisition of a priori knowledge does not depend on experience. One way to think of a priori knowledge is that it is logically *prior* to experience, which does not necessarily mean that it is always prior in time to experience. Knowledge that exists before experience (prior in time) is innate knowledge, or knowledge that one is somehow born with. Theorists disagree over whether innate knowledge exists. But many theorists agree that people can come to know things by merely thinking. For example, one can know that $4 \times 2 = 8$ without needing to search for outside evidence.

A posteriori knowledge is knowledge that can only be gained through experience. Because a posteriori knowledge depends on experience, it is empirical. Something is empirical if it is based on and verifiable through observation and experience, so empirical knowledge is knowledge gained from sense perception. If my belief that there's a bird on the branch outside my window is knowledge, it would be a posteriori knowledge. The difference between a posteriori and a priori knowledge is that the former requires experience and the latter does not.

While a priori knowledge does not require experience, this does not mean that it must always be reached using reason alone. A priori knowledge can be learned through experience. Think of mathematical truths. While it is possible to figure out multiplication using thinking alone, many first understand it empirically by memorizing multiplication tables and only later come to understand why the operations work the way they do.

FIGURE 7.2 Some facts that students are asked to memorize in school, such as multiplication tables, fall into the category of a priori knowledge—knowledge gained through reason alone. Knowledge about the shortest route to the nearest restroom, while possibly informed by looking at a map, typically is grounded in a posteriori knowledge—knowledge that can only be gained through experience. (credit: modification of work "Ventura Elementary-12" by US Department of Education/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Things You Can Know: Types of Knowledge

Philosophers classify knowledge not only by source but also by type. **Propositional knowledge** is knowledge of propositions or statements. A proposition or **statement** is a declarative sentence with a truth value—that is, a sentence that is either true or false. If one knows a statement, that means that the statement is true. And true statements about the world are usually called facts. Hence, propositional knowledge is best thought of as knowledge of facts. Facts about the world are infinite. It is a fact that the square root of 9 is 3. It is a fact that Earth is round. It is a fact that the author of this chapter is five feet, one inch tall, and it is a fact that Nairobi is the capital of Kenya. Often, philosophers describe propositional knowledge as "knowledge that," and if you look at the structure of the previous sentences, you can see why. Someone can *know that* Nairobi is the capital of Kenya, and "Nairobi is the capital of Kenya" is a true proposition. Propositional knowledge can be a priori or a posteriori. Knowledge of our own height is clearly a posteriori because we cannot know this without measuring ourselves. But knowing that 3 is the square root of 9 is a priori, given that it's possible for a person to reason their way to this belief. Propositional knowledge is the primary focus of traditional epistemology. In the following sections of this chapter, keep in mind that *knowledge* refers to propositional knowledge.

While traditional epistemology focuses on propositional knowledge, other types of knowledge exist. **Procedural knowledge** is best understood as know-how. Procedural knowledge involves the ability to perform some task successfully. While a person may *know that* a bicycle stays erect using centrifugal force and forward momentum caused by peddling, and that the forces of friction and air resistance will affect their speed, this does not mean that they *know how* to ride a bicycle. Having propositional knowledge concerning a task does not guarantee that one has procedural knowledge of that task. Indeed, one could be a physicist who studies the forces involved in keeping a bike upright, and therefore know many facts about bicycles, but still not know how to ride a bike.

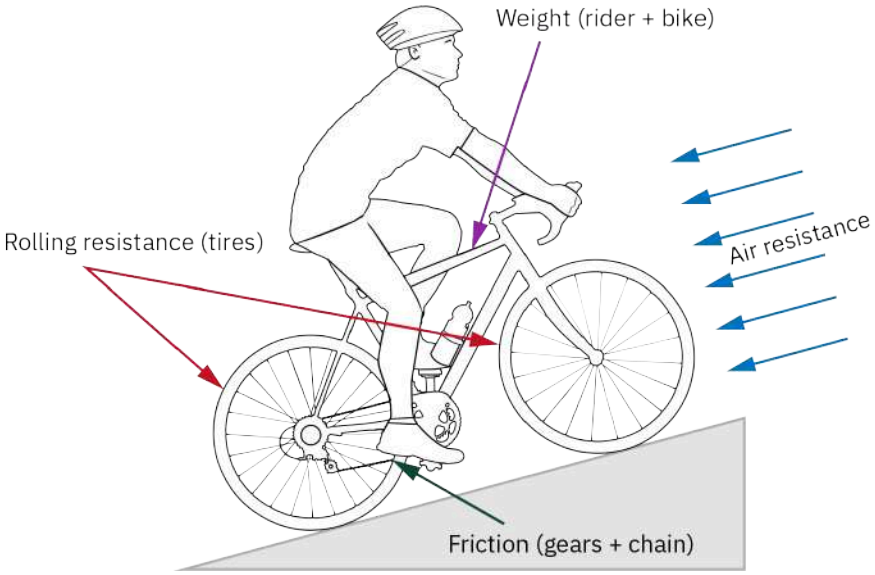

FIGURE 7.3 Several forces are at work when a person rides a bicycle. Understanding the physics of cycling does not guarantee that one knows how to ride a bicycle. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Knowledge by acquaintance is knowledge gained from *direct* experience. A person knows something by acquaintance when they are directly aware of that thing. This awareness comes from direct perception using one's senses. For example, I have knowledge by acquaintance of pain when I am in pain. I am directly aware of the pain, so I cannot be mistaken about the existence of the pain.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) is credited with first articulating a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and propositional knowledge, which he called *knowledge by description* (Russell 1910–1911). According to Russell, knowledge by acquaintance is a *direct* form of knowledge. A person has knowledge by acquaintance when they have direct cognitive awareness of it, which is awareness absent of inference. That knowledge by acquaintance is not the product of inference is very important. Inference is a stepwise process of reasoning that moves from one idea to another. When I feel pain, I am acquainted with that pain without thinking to myself, "I am in pain." No inference is required on my part for me to know of my pain. I am simply aware of it. It is the directness of this knowledge that differentiates it from all other a posteriori knowledge. All knowledge by acquaintance is a posteriori, but not all a posteriori knowledge is knowledge by acquaintance. My awareness of pain is knowledge by acquaintance, yet when I infer that "something is causing me pain," this belief is propositional.

Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and propositional knowledge, if accurate, has important implications in epistemology. It shows that inference is used even in cases of beliefs that people think are obvious: ordinary beliefs based on perception. Russell thought that one can only have knowledge by acquaintance of one's sensations and cannot have direct awareness of the objects that could be the cause of those sensations. This is a significant point. When I see the bird on a branch outside my office window, I am not immediately aware of the bird itself. Rather, I am directly aware of my perceptual experience of the bird—what philosophers call *sense data*. Sense data are sensations gained from perceptual experience; they are the raw data obtained through the senses (seeing, smelling, feeling, etc.). One's perceptual experience is of sense data, not of the objects that could be causing that sense data. People infer the existence of external objects that they believe cause their perceptual experiences. Russell's view implies that people always use reasoning to access the external world. I have knowledge by acquaintance of my perceptual experience of seeing a bird; I then infer ever so quickly (and often unconsciously) that there is a bird on the branch, which is propositional knowledge.

Not all philosophers think that experience of the external world is mediated through sense data. Some philosophers contend that people can directly perceive objects in the external world. But Russell's theory

introduces an important possibility in epistemological thinking: that there is a gap between one's experience of the world and the world itself. This potential gap opens up the possibility for error. The gap between experience and the world is used by some thinkers to argue that knowledge of the external world is impossible.

Table 7.1 summarizes the types of knowledge discussed in this section.

Type	Description	Examples
Propositional knowledge	Knowledge of propositions or statements; knowledge of facts	Examples are infinite: "I know that..." the Earth is round, two is an even number, lions are carnivores, grass is green, etc.
Procedural knowledge	"Know-how"; understanding how to perform some task or procedure	Knowing how to ride a bicycle, do a cartwheel, knit, fix a flat tire, dribble a basketball, plant a tree, etc.
Knowledge by acquaintance	Knowledge gained from direct experience	Perception of physical sensations, such as pain, heat, cold, hunger; important to differentiate between the knowledge by acquaintance that is the sensation (e.g., a physical sensation of feeling cold) and related inferences, such as "the air temperature must be dropping," which is propositional knowledge.

TABLE 7.1 Types of Knowledge

Truth

Philosophers who argue that knowledge of the external world is impossible do so based on the idea that one can never be certain of the truth of one's external world beliefs. But what does it mean to claim that a belief is true? People are sometimes tempted to believe that truth is relative. A person may say things like "Well, that's just their truth" as if something can be true for one person and not for others. Yet for statements and propositions, there is only one truth value. One person can believe that Earth is flat while another can believe is it round, but only one of them is right. People do not each personally get to decide whether a statement is true. Furthermore, just because one has no way of determining whether a statement is true or false does not mean that there is no truth to the matter. For example, you probably don't quite know how to go about determining the exact number of blades of grass on the White House lawn, but this does not mean that there is no true answer to the question. It is true that there is a specific number of blades of grass at this moment, even if you cannot know what that number is.

But what does it mean for a statement to be true? At first, this question may seem silly. The meaning of truth is obvious. True things are correct, factual, and accurate. But to say that something is correct, factual, or accurate is just another way of saying it is true. *Factual* just means "true." Creating a noncircular and illuminating account of truth is a difficult task. Nevertheless, philosophers attempt to explain truth. Philosophers often are curious about and question concepts that most people accept as obvious, and truth is no exception.

Theories of truth and the debate over them are a rather complicated matter not suitable for an introductory text. Instead, let's briefly consider two ways of understanding truth in order to gain a general understanding of what truth is. Aristotle claimed that a true statement is one that says of something that *it is what it is* or that *it is not what it is not* (Aristotle 1989). A possible interpretation of Aristotle's idea is that "A is B" is true if and only if A is B. Notice that this simply removes the quotations around the proposition. The idea is simple: the statement "Dogs are mammals" is true if dogs are mammals.

Another way of understanding truth is as a correspondence between statements and the world. The correspondence theory of truth proposes that a statement is true if and only if that statement corresponds to some fact (David 2015). A fact is a state of affairs in the world—an arrangement of objects and properties in reality—so the statement "The dog is under the bed" is true if and only if there exists in the world a dog and a bed and the dog is related to the bed by being underneath it. The correspondence theory of truth makes truth a relation between statements and the world. If statements are appropriately related to the world—if they correspond to the world—then those statements can be said to be true.

7.2 Knowledge

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify and explain the elements of Plato's traditional account of knowledge.
- Describe the Gettier problem.
- Recall a Gettier case and explain how it is a counterexample to the traditional account of knowledge.
- Identify and explain a way of thinking that attempts to solve the Gettier problem.

What does it mean to say that one *knows* something? Knowledge is an important concept in all areas of thought. Knowledge is the goal and therefore enjoys a special status. Investigating the nature of knowledge reveals the importance of other concepts that are key to epistemological theorizing—justification in particular.

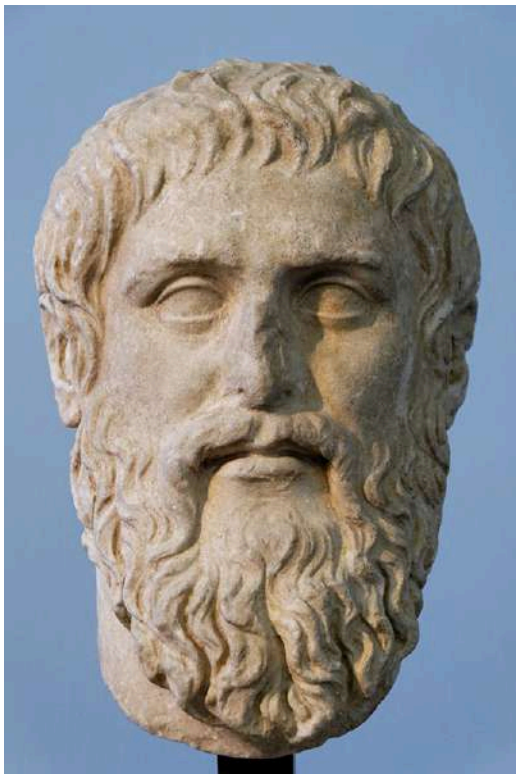

FIGURE 7.4 This is a copy of a sculpture of Plato completed in approximately 370 BCE. Plato is credited with what is termed the *traditional account of knowledge*, which explains knowledge as justified true belief. (credit: "Plato Silanion Musei Capitolini MC1377" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Plato and the Traditional Account of Knowledge

Plato, one of the most important of the Greek philosophers, hypothesized that knowledge is justified true belief. Plato's analysis is known as the traditional account of knowledge. Plato's definition is that a person S knows proposition P if and only if

1. P is true,
2. S believes P, and
3. S is justified in believing P (Plato 1997b).

Plato's hypothesis on knowledge, often referred to as the JTB account (because it is "justified true belief"), is highly intuitive. To say "John knows P, but he does not believe P" sounds wrong. In order to know something, a subject must first believe it. And one also cannot say "Ali knows P, but P is false." A person simply cannot have knowledge of false things. Knowledge requires truth. Last, someone should not claim to know P if they have no reason to believe P (a reason to believe being justification for P).

Problems with the Traditional Account of Knowledge

Amazingly, Plato's view that knowledge is justified true belief was generally accepted until the 20th century (over 2,000 years!). But once this analysis was questioned, a flurry of developments occurred within epistemology in the latter half of the 20th century. This section discusses the counterexample method at play in the dialectic concerning what knowledge is. Plato's JTB analysis was the first to come under scrutiny.

In 1963, American philosopher Edmund Gettier (1927–2021) published a short paper titled "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," which upended the JTB canon in Western philosophy. Gettier presents two counterexamples to Plato's analysis of knowledge. In these counterexamples, a person seems to have a justified true belief, yet they do not seem to have knowledge. While Gettier is credited with the first popular counterexample to the JTB account, he was not the first philosopher to articulate a counterexample that calls into question Plato's analysis. But because Gettier published the first influential account, any example that seems to undermine Plato's JTB account of knowledge is called a **Gettier case**. Gettier cases illustrate the inadequacy of the JTB account—a problem referred to as the *Gettier problem*.

Dharmakīrti's Mirage

The earliest known Gettier case, long predating the term, was conceived by the eighth century Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti's case asks one to imagine a weary nomad traveling across the desert in search of water (Dreyfus 1997). The traveler crests a mountain and sees what appears to be an oasis in the valley below, and so comes to believe that there is water in the valley. However, the oasis is just a mirage. Yet there is water in the valley, but it is just beneath the surface of the land where the mirage is. The traveler is justified in believing there is water in the valley due to sensory experience. Furthermore, it is true that there is water in the valley. However, the traveler's belief does not seem to count as knowledge. Dharmakīrti's conclusion is that the traveler cannot be said to know there is water in the valley because the traveler's reason for believing that there is water in the valley is an illusory mirage.

Russell's Case

Perhaps you've heard the phrase "Even a broken clock is right twice a day." The next case relies on this fact about broken clocks. In 1948, Bertrand Russell offered a case in which a man looks up at a stopped clock at exactly the correct time:

> There is the man who looks at a clock which is not going, though he thinks it is, and who happens to look at it at the moment when it is right; this man acquires a true belief as to the time of day, but cannot be said to have knowledge. (Russell 1948, 154)

Imagine that the clock the man looks at is known for its reliability. Hence, the man is justified in believing that the time is, for example, 4:30. And, as the cases supposes, *it is true* that it is 4:30. However, given that the clock is not working and that the man happens to look up at one of the two times a day that the clock is correct, it is only a matter of luck that his belief happens to be true. Hence, Russell concludes that the man cannot be said to know the correct time.

Fake Barn Country

The last Gettier case we will look at is from American philosopher Carl Ginet (b. 1932) (Goldman 1976). Henry is driving through a bucolic area of farmland and barns. What he doesn't realize, however, is that the area is currently being used as a movie set, and all the barns save one are actually barn facades. While looking at one of the barns, Henry says to himself, "That is a barn." Luckily for Henry, the one he points to is the one true barn in the area. Again, all the conditions in Plato's analysis of knowledge are met. It is true that Henry is looking at a real barn, and he believes it is a barn. Furthermore, he has come to this belief utilizing justifiable means—he is using his vision, in normal lighting, to identify a common object (a barn). Yet one cannot reasonably say that Henry knows the barn is a barn because he could have, by chance, accidentally identified one of the fake barns as a true barn. He fortunately happens to pick the one true barn.

Table 7.2 summarizes the Gettier cases discussed in this chapter.

Case	Proposed by	Description	How does this challenge Plato's characterization of knowledge as justified, true belief?
Dharmakīrti's Mirage	Eighth century Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti	A person travelling in the dessert sees a mirage of a watery oasis in a valley and concludes that there is water in the valley. In fact, there is water in the valley, but it is beneath the surface and not visible.	The traveler cannot be said to know there is water in the valley because the traveler's reason for believing that there is water in the valley is an illusory mirage.
Russell's Case	British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970)	A man looks at a stopped clock at exactly the right time and correctly concludes the actual time.	It is only a matter of luck that the man's belief about what time it is happens to be true. Hence, the man cannot be said to know the correct time.
Fake Barn Country	American philosopher Carl Ginet (b. 1932)	A person driving through a landscape that is being used as a movie and is full of fake barns happens to look at the one barn that is real and conclude, "this is barn."	The person cannot reasonably be said to know the barn is a real barn because they could easily have identified one of the fake barns as a real barn and been wrong.

TABLE 7.2 Gettier Cases

Fixing Plato's Traditional Account of Knowledge

Gettier cases demonstrate that Plato's traditional account of knowledge as justified true belief is wrong. Specifically, Gettier cases show that a belief being true and justified is not sufficient for that belief to count as knowledge. In all the cases discussed, the subject seems to have a justified true belief but not knowledge. Notice that this does not mean that belief, truth, or justification is not *necessary* for knowledge. Indeed, when speaking of propositional knowledge, all philosophers grant that belief and truth are necessary conditions for knowledge. A person cannot be said to know a proposition if they do not believe that proposition. And clearly, if a belief is to count as knowledge, then that believe simply cannot be false. Accordingly, attempts to solve the Gettier problem do one of two things: either they replace the justification condition with something more robust, or they add a fourth condition to JTB to make the account sufficient.

No False Premises

In Dharmakīrti's case, the nomad believes there is water in the valley based on the false belief that a mirage is an oasis. And in Russell's case, the man bases his true belief about the time on the false belief that the clock he's looking at is working. In both cases, the inference that leads to the true belief passes through false premises. In response to this fact, American philosopher Gilbert Harman (1928–2021) suggested adding a condition to the JTB account that he termed "no false lemmas" (Harman 1973). A false lemma is a false premise, or step in the reasoning process. Harman's fourth condition is that a person's belief cannot be based on an inference that uses false premises. According to Harman, S knows P if and only if (1) P is true, (2) S believes P, (3) S is justified in believing P, and (4) S did not infer P from any falsehoods.

Harman theorized that many counterexamples to the traditional account share a similar feature: the truth of the belief is not appropriately connected to the evidence used to deduce that belief. Going back to Dharmakīrti's case, what makes the statement "There's water in the valley" true is the fact that there is water below the surface. However, the nomad comes to believe that there is water based on the mistaken belief that a mirage is an oasis, so what makes the belief true is not connected to the reason the nomad believes it. If Harman's condition that the reasoning that leads to belief cannot pass through false steps is added, then the nomad's belief no longer counts as knowledge.

Harman's emendation explains why the nomad does not have knowledge and accounts for the intuition that the man in Russell's case does not actually know what time it is. However, this cannot take care of all Gettier cases. Consider the case of Henry in fake barn country. Henry comes to believe he is looking at a barn based on his perceptual experience of the barn in front of him. And Henry does look at a real barn. He does not reason through any false premises, such as "All the structures on my drive are barns." His inference flows directly from his perceptual experience of a real barn. Yet it is a matter of luck that Henry isn't looking at one of the many barn facades in the area, so his belief still does not seem to count as knowledge. Because Harman's account is vulnerable to the barn counterexample, it does not solve the Gettier problem.

Ruling Out Defeaters and Alternatives

While driving through fake barn country, Henry happens to form the belief "That is a barn" when looking at the only real barn in the area. While Henry's belief is not based on false premises, there still seems to be something wrong with it. Why? The problem is that certain facts about Henry's environment (that it is filled with barn facades), if known, would undermine his confidence in the belief. That the area is predominantly filled with barn facades is what is known as a *defeater* because it serves to defeat the justification for his belief. Contemporary American philosophers Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson Jr. suggest that justified true belief is knowledge as long as there are no existing defeaters of the belief (Lehrer and Paxson 1969). S has knowledge that P if and only if (1) P is true, (2) S believes P, (3) S is justified in believing P, and (4) there exist no defeaters for P. The added fourth condition means that there cannot exist evidence that, if believed by S, would undermine S's justification.

The "no defeaters" condition solves all three Gettier cases discussed so far because in each case, there exists evidence that, if possessed by the subject, would undermine their justification. Henry cannot be said to know he's looking at a barn because of the evidence that most of the barns in the area are fake, and Russell's man doesn't know the time because the clock is stopped. The "no defeaters" condition thus helps solve many Gettier cases. However, we now need a thorough account of when evidence counts as a defeater. We are told that a defeater is evidence that *would* undermine a person's justification but not how it does this. It cannot be that all evidence that weakens a belief is a defeater because this would make knowledge attainment much more difficult. For many of our justified true beliefs, there exists some evidence that we are unaware of that could weaken our justification. For example, we get many beliefs from other people. Research indicates that people tell an average of one lie per day (DePaulo et al. 1996; Serota, Levine, and Boster 2010). So when someone tells you something in conversation, often it is true that the person has lied once today. Is the evidence that a person has lied once today enough evidence to undermine your justification for believing what

they tell you?

Notice that because a defeater is evidence that would undermine a person's justification, what counts as a defeater depends on what justification is. Of the theories of knowledge examined so far, all of them treat justification as basic. They state that a belief must be justified but not how to measure or determine justification.

The Problem with Justification

The traditional analysis of knowledge explains that knowledge is justified true belief. But even if we accept this definition, we could still wonder whether a true belief is knowledge because we may wonder if it is justified. What counts as justification? *Justification* is a rather broad concept. Instead of simply stating that justification is necessary for knowledge, perhaps a thorough account of knowledge ought to instead spell out what this means. The next section looks more deeply at how to understand justification and how some theorists suggest replacing the justification condition in order to solve the Gettier problem.

7.3 Justification

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain what justification means in the context of epistemology.
- Explain the difference between internal and external theories of justification.
- Describe the similarities and differences between coherentism and foundationalism.
- Classify beliefs according to their source of justification.

Much of epistemology in the latter half of the 20th century was devoted to the question of justification. Questions about what knowledge is often boil down to questions about justification. When we wonder whether knowledge of the external world is possible, what we really question is whether we can ever be justified in accepting as true our beliefs about the external world. And as previously discussed, determining whether a defeater for knowledge exists requires knowing what could undermine justification.

We will start with two general points about justification. First, justification makes beliefs more likely to be true. When we think we are justified in believing something, we think we have reason to believe it is true. How justification does this and how to think about the reasons will be discussed below. Second, justification does not always guarantee truth. Justification makes beliefs *more likely* to be true, which implies that justified beliefs could still be false. The fallibility of justification will be addressed at the end of this section.

The Nature of Justification

Justification makes a belief more likely to be true by providing reasons in favor of the truth of the belief. A natural way to think of justification is that it provides *logical* support. Logic is the study of reasoning, so logical support is strong reasoning. If I am reasoning correctly, I am justified in believing that my dog is a mammal because all dogs are mammals. And I am justified in believing that $3\sqrt{1332} = 444$ if I did the derivation correctly. But what if I used a calculator to derive the result? Must I also have reasons for believing the calculator is reliable before being justified in believing the answer? Or can the mere fact that calculators are reliable justify my belief in the answer? These questions get at an important distinction between the possible sources of justification—whether justification is internal or external to the mind of the believer.

Internalism and Externalism

Theories of justification can be divided into two different types: internal and external. **Internalism** is the view that justification for belief is determined solely by factors internal to a subject's mind. The initial appeal of internalism is obvious. A person's beliefs are internal to them, and the process by which they form beliefs is also an internal mental process. If you discover that someone engaged in wishful thinking when they came to the belief that the weather would be nice today, even if it turns out to be true, you can determine that they did

not know that it would be nice today. You will believe they did not have that knowledge because they had no reasons or evidence on which to base their belief. When you make this determination, you reference that person's mental state (the lack of reasons).

But what if a person had good reasons when they formed a belief but cannot currently recall what those reasons were? For example, I believe that Aristotle wrote about unicorns, although I cannot remember my reasons for believing this. I assume I learned it from a scholarly text (perhaps from reading Aristotle himself), which is a reliable source. Assuming I did gain the belief from a reliable source, am I still justified given that I cannot *now* recall what that source was? Internalists contend that a subject must have cognitive access to the reasons for belief in order to have justification. To be justified, the subject must be able to immediately or upon careful reflection recall their reasons. Hence, according to internalism, I am not justified in believing that Aristotle wrote about unicorns.

On the other hand, an externalist would say my belief about Aristotle is justified because of the facts about where I got the belief. **Externalism** is the view that at least some part of justification can rely on factors that are not internal or accessible to the mind of the believer. If I once had good reasons, then I am still justified, even if I cannot now cite those reasons. Externalist theories about justification usually focus on the sources of justification, which include not only inference but also testimony and perception. The fact that a source is reliable is what matters. To return to the calculator example, the mere fact that a calculator is reliable can function as justification for forming beliefs based on its outputs.

An Example of Internalism: Ruling Out Relevant Alternatives

Recall that the "no defeaters" theory of knowledge requires that there exist no evidence that, if known by the subject, would undermine their justification. The evidence is not known by the subject, which makes the evidence external. The fourth condition could instead be an internal condition. Rather than require that there exist no evidence, one could say that S needs to rule out any relevant alternatives to their belief. The "no relevant alternatives" theory adds to the traditional account of knowledge the requirement that a person rule out any competing hypotheses for their belief. *Ruling out* refers to a subject's conscious internal mental state, which makes this condition internal in nature. Like the "no defeaters" condition, the "no relevant alternatives" condition is meant to solve the Gettier problem. It does so by broadening the understanding of justification so that justification requires ruling out relevant alternatives. However, it still doesn't solve the Gettier problem. Returning to the barn example, the possibility that there are barn facades is not a relevant alternative to the belief that one is looking at a barn. Unless one is in Hollywood, one would not think that facades are a distinct possibility.

An Example of Externalism: Causal Theories

Externalists hold that a subject need not have access to why their true beliefs are justified. But some theorists, such as American philosopher Alvin Goldman (b. 1938), argue that the justification condition in the account of knowledge should be replaced with a more substantial and thorough condition that effectively explains what justification *is*. Goldman argues that beliefs are justified if they are produced by reliable belief-forming processes (Goldman 1979). Importantly, it is the process that confers justification, not one's ability to recount that process. Goldman's account of knowledge is that a true belief is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.

Goldman's theory is called **historical reliabilism**—*historical* because the view focuses on the past processes that led to a belief, and *reliabilism* because, according to the theory, processes that reliably produce true beliefs confer justification on those beliefs. Reliable belief-forming processes include perception, memory, strong or valid reasoning, and introspection. These processes are functional operations whose outputs are beliefs and other cognitive states. For example, reasoning is an operation that takes as input prior beliefs and hypotheses and outputs new beliefs, and memory is a process that "takes as input beliefs or experiences at an earlier time and generates as output beliefs at a later time" (Goldman 1979, 12). Usually, memory is reliable in

the sense that it is more likely to produce true beliefs than false ones.

Because Goldman's approach is externalist, the justification-conferring process need not be cognitively accessible to the believer. His view has also been called *causal* because he focuses on the causes of belief. If a belief is caused in the right way (by a reliable belief-forming processes), then it is justified. One virtue of this approach is that it accounts for the intuition that someone could have a justified belief without being able to cite all the reasons for holding that belief. However, this view is not without fault. The original impetus behind revising Plato's traditional JTB analysis was to solve the Gettier problem, and Goldman's account cannot do this. Consider again Henry and the barn. Henry looks at a real barn and forms the belief that it is a barn. Henry's belief that he is looking at a barn is caused by a reliable belief-forming process (perception), so according to Goldman's account, Henry does have knowledge. Yet many philosophers think that Henry doesn't have knowledge given the lucky nature of his belief.

Theories of Justification

So far, we have looked at theories of justification as applied to individual beliefs. But beliefs are not always justified in isolation. Usually, the justification of one belief depends on the justification of other beliefs. I must be justified in trusting my perception to then be justified in believing that there is a bird outside of my office window. Thus, some theories focus on the structure of justification—that is, how a system or set of beliefs is structured. The theories on the structure of justification aim to illustrate how the structure of a system of beliefs leads to knowledge, or true beliefs.

Foundationalism

Much of what a subject justifiably believes is inferred from other justified beliefs. For example, Ella justifiably believes the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066 because her history professor told her this. But the justification for her belief doesn't end there. Why is Ella justified in believing that her history professor is a good source? Furthermore, why is she even justified in believing that her history professor told her this? To the second question, Ella would reply that she is justified because she remembers her professor telling her. But then one can ask, Why is the reliance on memory justifiable? Justified beliefs rest on other justified beliefs. The question is whether the chain of justification ever ends. Foundationalists hold that justification must terminate at some point.

Foundationalism is the view that all justified beliefs ultimately rest on a set of foundational, basic beliefs. Consider a house. Most of what people see of a house is the superstructure—the main floor, columns, and roof. But the house must rest on a foundation that stabilizes and props up the parts of the house people can see. According to foundationalists, most beliefs are like the superstructure of the house—the frame, roof, and walls. The majority of people's beliefs are inferential beliefs, or beliefs based on inference. And according to foundationalism, all beliefs rest on a foundation of basic beliefs (Hasan and Fumerton 2016). One of Ella's foundational beliefs could be that her memory is reliable. If this belief is justified, then all of Ella's justified beliefs derived from memory will rest on this foundational belief.

But what justifies basic beliefs? If basic beliefs function so as to justify other beliefs, then they too must be justified. If the foundation is not justified, then none of the beliefs that rest on it are justified. According to foundationalism, the beliefs that make up the foundation are justified beliefs, but they are justified *non-inferential* beliefs. Foundational beliefs must be non-inferential (not based on inference) because if they were inferential, they would get their justification from another source, and they would no longer be foundational. Foundational beliefs are supposed to be where the justification stops.

The strongest objection against foundationalism targets the nature of basic beliefs. What is a basic belief, and what are the reasons for thinking basic beliefs are justified? French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) was a foundationalist, and he held that people's basic beliefs are infallible (Descartes 1986). An infallible belief is one that cannot be mistaken. Clearly, if the foundation is made of beliefs that cannot be mistaken, then it is justified. But why think that foundational beliefs cannot be mistaken? Descartes thought that whatever a

subject can clearly and distinctly conceive of in their mind, they can take to be true because God would not allow them to be fooled. As an illustration of how some beliefs might be infallible, recall that knowledge by acquaintance is direct and unmediated knowledge. Acquaintance is unmediated by other ways of knowing, including inference, so beliefs gained though acquaintance are non-inferential, which is what the foundationalist wants. Beliefs gained via acquaintance are also justified, which is why Russell deems them *knowledge*. As an example, imagine that you see a green orb in your field of vision. You may not know whether the green orb is due to something in your environment, but you cannot be mistaken about the fact that you visually experience the green orb. Hence, knowledge by acquaintance is a possible candidate for the foundation of beliefs.

Coherence

Coherentism is the view that justification, and thus knowledge, is structured not like a house but instead like a web. More precisely, coherentism argues that a belief is justified if it is embedded in a network of coherent, mutually supported beliefs. Think of a web. Each strand in a web is not that strong by itself, but when the strands are connected to multiple other strands and woven together, the result is a durable network. Similarly, a subject's justification for individual beliefs, taken alone, is not that strong. But when those beliefs are situated in a system of many mutually supporting beliefs, the justification grows stronger. Justification emerges from the structure of a belief system (BonJour 1985).

Within foundationalism, the justifications for some beliefs can proceed in a completely linear fashion. Ella believes the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066 because her professor told her, and she believes that her professor told her because she remembers it and thinks her memory is justifiable. One belief justifies another, which justifies another, and so on, until the foundation is reached. Yet very few beliefs are actually structured in this manner. People often look for support for their beliefs in multiple other beliefs while making sure that they are also consistent. Figure 7.5 offers a simplified visual of the two different structures of belief.

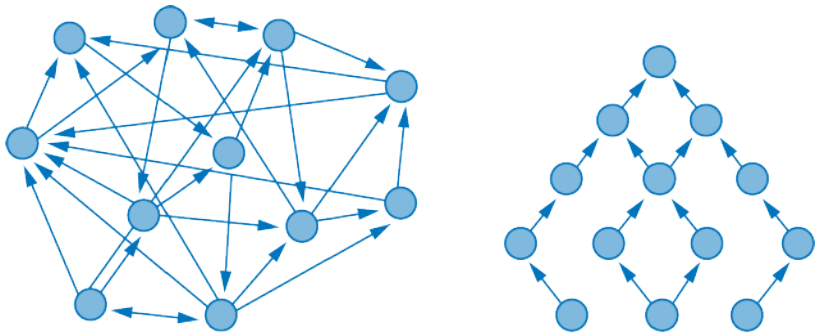

FIGURE 7.5 There are two different ways of conceptualizing belief structures: as a web of interconnected beliefs (left) and as a linear structure (right) in which foundational beliefs justify other beliefs, one after the other in a line. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Often, when we think of the justification for our beliefs, we don't just consider the original source of a belief. We also think about how that belief fits into our other beliefs. If a belief does not cohere with other beliefs, then its justification appears weak, even if the initial justification for the belief seemed strong. Suppose you need to go to the bank, and on your way out the door, your roommate tells you not to waste your time because they drove by the bank earlier and it was closed. Your roommate's testimony seems like enough reason to believe the bank is closed. However, it is a weekday, and the bank is always open during the week. Furthermore, it is not a holiday. You check the bank's website, and it states that the bank is open. Hence, the belief that the bank is closed does not cohere with your other beliefs. The lack of coherence with other beliefs weakens the justification for believing what your otherwise reliable roommate tells you.

To be fair, foundationalists also consider coherence of beliefs in determining justification. However, as long as

a belief is consistent with other beliefs and rests on the foundation, it is justified. But consistency is not the same thing as logical support. The beliefs that there is a bird in that tree, it is November, and a person is hungry are all consistent with one another, but they do not support one another. And for coherentists, logical consistency alone does not make a system of belief justified. Justification arises from a system of beliefs that mutually reinforce one another. Support can happen in many ways: beliefs can deductively entail one another, they can inductively entail one another, and they can cohere by explaining one another. Suppose I am trying to remember where my friend Faruq is from. I believe he is from Tennessee but am not sure. But then I remember that Faruq often wears a University of Tennessee hat and has a Tennessee Titans sticker on this car. He also speaks with a slight southern twang and has told stories about hiking in the Smoky Mountains, which are partially in Tennessee. That Faruq is from Tennessee can explain these further beliefs. Note that I can get more assurance for my belief that Faruq is from Tennessee by considering my other beliefs about him. When beliefs mutually reinforce one another, they acquire more justification.

Coherentism more naturally reflects the actual structure of belief systems, and it does so without relying on the notion of basic, justified, non-inferential beliefs. However, coherentism has weaknesses. One objection to coherentism is that it can result in circularity. Within a system of beliefs, any belief can play a roundabout role in its own justification. Figure 7.6 illustrates this problem.

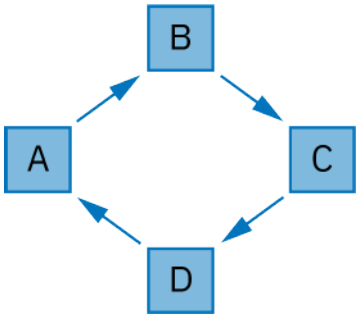

FIGURE 7.6 The circularly problem: Belief A entails belief B, and belief B entails belief C. Belief C entails belief D, and belief D entails belief A. The beliefs are coherent, and all support one another. However, each plays a role in its own justification. D justifies A, but A justifies D through B and C. Circularity results in the beliefs not having any support at all. If D essentially justifies itself, then it has no justification. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Another objection to coherentism is called the isolation objection. A network of beliefs can mutually explain and support one another, thus giving them justification. However, it is not guaranteed that these beliefs are connected to reality. Imagine a person, Dinah, who is trapped in a highly detailed virtual reality. Dinah has been trapped for so long that she believes her experiences are of the real world. Because of the detailed nature of Dinah's virtual reality, most of her beliefs are consistent with and support one another, just as your beliefs about the real world do. As long as Dinah's beliefs are consistent and coherent, she will be justified in believing that her experience is of real objects and real people. So Dinah has justification even though all her beliefs concerning the reality of her world are false. Dinah's situation reveals an important feature of justification: while justification makes beliefs more likely to be true, it does not always guarantee that they are true. Justification is often fallible.

The Fallible Nature of Justification

The sources of beliefs are varied. Perception, reason, hope, faith, and wishful thinking can all result in belief. Yet just because something results in belief, that does not mean that the belief is justified. Beliefs that result from wishful thinking are not justified because wishful thinking does not make a belief more likely to be true. A source of justification is a *reliable* basis for belief. Yet while justification is a reliable source, notice that this does not mean that the belief is true; it just makes it more likely. Justified beliefs can turn out to be false. In order to drive this point home, we will briefly look at four different sources of belief. As you will see, each

source is fallible.

One source of belief is memory. Memory is not always reliable. First of all, that you do not remember something in your past does not mean that it did not happen. Second, when you do remember something, does that guarantee that it happened the way you remember it? Because people can misremember, philosophers distinguish between remembering and seeming to remember. When you actually remember P, then this justifies believing P. When you seem to remember P, this does not justify believing P. The problem is that remembering and seeming to remember often feel the same to the person trying to remember.

Most beliefs are the product of inference. When you use reason to come to belief, the justification you have is inferential; hence, inferential justification is equivalent to logical justification. But as discussed in the chapter on logic, not all forms of inference can guarantee truth. Inductive reasoning, which is the most common source of beliefs, is only probable even when done well. Furthermore, people often make mistakes in reasoning. Just because someone reasoned their way to a belief doesn't mean they reasoned well. But assume for a moment that a person comes to a belief using deductive reasoning, which can guarantee truth, *and* they reason well. Is it still possible that their belief is false? Yes. Deductive reasoning takes as its input other beliefs to then derive conclusions. In good inductive reasoning, *if* the premises are true (the input beliefs), *then* the conclusion is true. If the input beliefs are false, then even good deductive reasoning cannot guarantee true beliefs.

Another source of belief is testimony. When you gain beliefs based on the stated beliefs of others, you rely on testimony. Testimony is usually considered something that happens only in a court of law, but in philosophy, the term *testimony* is used much more broadly. Testimony is any utterance, spoken or written, occurring in normal communication conditions. Instances of testimony include news magazines, nonfiction books, personal blogs, professors' lectures, and opinions volunteered in casual conversation. Often, testimony is a reliable source of information and so can be justified. When you form beliefs based on the testimony of experts, it is justified. But even when justified, those beliefs could be false because experts are vulnerable to all of the weaknesses of justification covered in this section. More will be said about testimony in the section on social epistemology.

Last, perception can be used as a source of justification. Perception includes the information received from the senses (smell, taste, touch, sight, hearing). People often automatically form beliefs based on perception. However, not all beliefs that follow from perception are guaranteed to be true, as the possibility of knowledge by acquaintance shows. As discussed earlier, Russell maintained that the only automatically justified beliefs gained from perception are about the existence of sense data (Russell 1948). When looking at the bird outside of my office window, I only have knowledge by acquaintance of *the experience* of seeing the bird on a branch in my visual field. I know that *it seems to me* that there's a bird. But how do I get from those sense data to the justified belief that there really is bird on the branch? I must rely on another belief about the reliability of my perception—a belief that I can only get by inference, specifically induction. I reason from past instances where I believe my perception is reliable to the general belief that it is reliable. And of course, induction is fallible. Whenever one moves from knowledge by acquaintance to further beliefs—such as the belief that sense data is caused by actually existing objects—there is room for error.

Not all philosophers agree that all perceptual beliefs are mediated through sense data (Crane and French 2021). The view called *direct realism* states that people have direct access to objects in the external world via perception. While direct realism holds that one can directly perceive the external world, it still cannot guarantee that beliefs about it are true, for both hallucinations and illusions are still possible. Figure 7.7 is an example of an illusion.

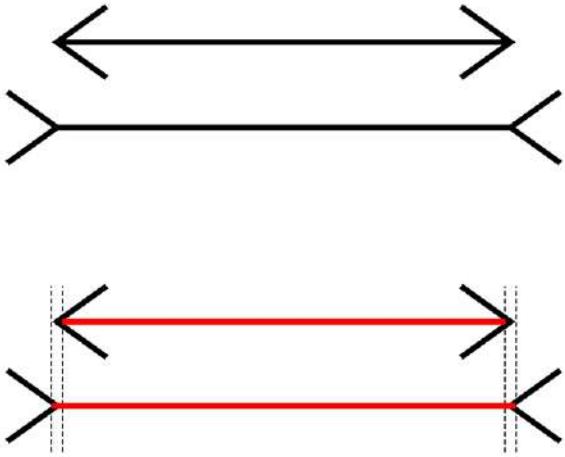

FIGURE 7.7 In the Müller-Lyer illusion, the top two lines appear to be different lengths, but the bottom two lines illustrate that the lines are in fact of equal length. (credit: "Müller-Lyer Counter-Illusion" by Subsidiary account/ Wikimedia, Public Domain)

If you focus only on the top two lines, it appears as though they are of different lengths. Yet the bottom two lines indicate that this appearance is illusory—the lines are actually of equal length. Illusions function as evidence that perception sometimes misrepresents reality. Even direct realists have to contend with the possibility that beliefs gained through sense perception could be wrong. Hence, sources of beliefs, even when they are usually justified, are nevertheless fallible. The possibility that the subject *could* be wrong is what gives rise to philosophical skepticism—the view that knowledge in some or all domains is impossible.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Think critically about the sources of justification explained above. Which of these is more reliable than the others? For each source, identify one instance in which it is reliable and one instance in which it is not.

7.4 Skepticism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define skepticism as it is used in philosophy.
- Compare and contrast global and local skepticism.
- Offer and explain a skeptical hypothesis.
- Outline the general structure of argument for global skepticism.

Philosophical **skepticism** is the view that some or all knowledge is impossible. A skeptic questions the possibility of knowledge—particularly justification—in some domain. A **global skeptic** rejects the possibility of knowledge in general. But one need not reject the possibility of all knowledge. A **local skeptic** questions the possibility of knowledge only in particular areas of study. One can be a local skeptic about moral knowledge or scientific knowledge. This section will first look at global skepticism and the arguments offered in support of it and then will briefly look at local skepticism.

Global Skepticism

Global skepticism is a view that questions the possibility of all knowledge. To make their case, global skeptics point to the lack of the possibility of certainty in our beliefs. Because we cannot know that our beliefs are true, we cannot know in general. Usually, global skepticism attempts to undermine the possibility of forming justified beliefs. Global skeptics target all beliefs, or all beliefs about the external world (which amounts to

most beliefs). Most beliefs tacitly or explicitly assume the existence of an external world. When I have the experience of seeing a bird in a tree and think, "There is a bird in that tree," I assume that there is an actually existing physical bird in an actually existing physical tree in an actually existing real world outside of me. *There is* means "there exists." I believe the bird, tree, and world all exist independently of my thoughts. The global skeptic questions beliefs such as these.

The Dream Argument

How many times have you realized that you were dreaming *while* you were dreaming? Most people believe that whatever they are dreaming is real during the dream. Indeed, the fact that people think dreams are real while dreaming is what makes nightmares so terrible. If you knew the content of a nightmare was a dream, then it would not be nearly as scary. Zhuang Zhou (c. 369–286 BCE) was a Chinese Taoist philosopher who argued that for all we know, we could currently be dreaming while thinking we are awake. Imagine dreaming that you are a butterfly, happily flitting about on flowers. When you wake, how can you determine whether you have just woken from dreaming you are a butterfly or you are a butterfly who has just started dreaming that you are human? Zhuang Zhou explains:

> While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman—how dense! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too. (Zhuangzi 2003, 43)

Zhaung Zhou puts forward the possibility that all of what we take to be conscious experience is actually a dream. And if we are dreaming, then all our beliefs about the external world are false because those beliefs take for granted that our current experience is real.

FIGURE 7.8 Is this a picture of a man dreaming of a butterfly, or is it a picture of a butterfly dreaming of a man? The Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou asks us to consider the possibility that everything we consider waking experience might actually be a dream. (credit: "Zhuangzi-Butterfly-Dream" by Ike no Taiga/Wikipedia, Public Domain)

The Evil Demon Argument

Nearly two millennia after Zhuang Zhou, René Descartes also proposed a dream hypothesis. Descartes argued that because dreams often incorporate experiences we have in real life, it is impossible to distinguish between dreaming and waking life (Descartes 2008). But Descartes eventually concludes that even if he could be

dreaming, there are still some beliefs he can know, specifically arithmetic. Even in dreams, 1 + 1 = 2, and a square will always have four sides. And so, Descartes devises an even stronger skeptical hypothesis: what if we are being tricked by an evil demon?

Descartes's evil demon is powerful. It can make you believe things, and it can trick you by controlling your experience. The evil demon can make you believe you are currently eating a sandwich by directly feeding you the sensory experience of eating a sandwich (the sight, the smells, the taste, the feel). Under this scenario, you cannot tell the difference between actually eating a sandwich and merely believing you are eating one because the evil demon is tricking you. If we cannot reliably tell the difference between experiences caused by reality and experiences caused by an evil demon, then we cannot know anything. We can represent Descartes's argument as follows:

1. If I cannot rule out the possibility that an evil demon is tricking me, then I do not have any knowledge of the external world.
2. I cannot rule out the possibility that an evil demon is tricking me.
3. Therefore, I do not have knowledge of the external world.

Why does Descartes claim we can't have knowledge if we cannot rule out the evil demon hypothesis? If an evil demon is tricking us, then all our beliefs are wrong. And if we cannot rule out the possibility that we are wrong, then we are not justified. And if we are not justified in our beliefs, then we cannot have knowledge of them.

Putnam's Brain in a Vat

If you don't like evil demons, then consider a more modern version of a skeptical hypothesis: the "brain in a vat" conceived of by American philosopher and mathematician Hilary Putnam (1926–2016). Imagine that while you were asleep last night, a group of scientists kidnapped you and took you to their lab. There, they surgically removed your brain and placed it in a vat of nutrients. The scientists then hooked up your brain to a sophisticated new computer system. They were able to download your memories so as to create new experiences. The result is a seamless experience of consciousness between yesterday and today. When you woke this morning, your life seemed to proceed without disruption. Can you prove that you are not a brain in a vat? No, you cannot. The scenario stipulates that your experience will seem exactly the same whether you are a brain in a vat or not. Other, similar skeptical scenarios are easy to come up with. Consider the possibility that you are caught in a virtual reality world or that you are trapped in the Matrix.

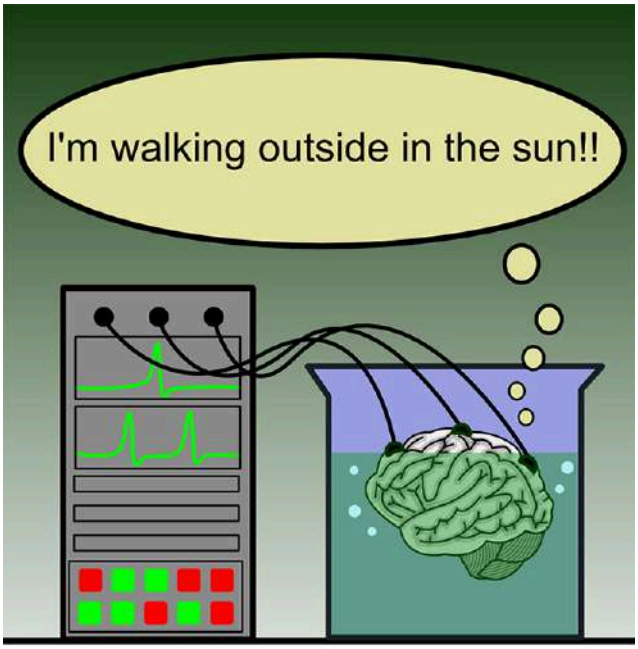

FIGURE 7.9 The "brain in a vat" scenario asks us to consider the possibility that our experiences are the result of deliberate manipulation of our mental processes. (credit: "Brain in a Vat" by Was a bee/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

General Structure of Global Skeptical Arguments

Skeptical hypotheses and the arguments that they inspire all have a similar structure:

1. If I cannot rule out the possibility of SH, then I cannot be justified in believing that P.
2. I cannot rule out the possibility of SH.
3. Therefore, I cannot be justified in believing that P.

SH is a skeptical hypothesis. P is any proposition about the external world. Premise 1 is the skeptic's challenge—that you must rule out skeptical hypotheses. Premise 2 relies on limitations within your perspective. The skeptic claims that you can rule out the possibility of whatever skeptical hypothesis is at hand only if you are able to construct an argument that defeats that hypothesis using the evidence you have (and a priori knowledge). As demonstrated, this is difficult to do. The nature of the skeptical hypotheses used for global skepticism limits your evidence to the contents of your thoughts. What you take to be evidence of the external world (that you perceive things that seem to be separate from yourself) is effectively neutralized by the possibility of a skeptical hypothesis.

Responses to Global Skepticism

The philosopher who wishes to overcome philosophical skepticism must find reasonable grounds for rejecting the skeptic's argument. The different skeptical arguments reveal a specific conception of the level of justification required for knowledge. Skeptical arguments rely on the existence of doubt. Doubt exists when we cannot rule out a possibility. If we have doubt, we are not certain. We cannot be certain that we are not, say, a brain in a vat. And if we cannot be certain, then we cannot know anything that implies we are not a brain in a vat. Certainty is a very strict measure of justification. One clear possible response is to simply deny that one needs certainty in order to be considered justified. This section looks at some of the classical responses to the skeptic's argument that we cannot know anything.

Moore

British philosopher G. E. Moore (1873–1958) presented an argument against skepticism that relies on common sense. In his famous paper "Proof of an External World," Moore begins by raising his right hand and

claiming, "Here is one hand," then raising his left hand and claiming, "Here is another hand" (Moore 1939). Therefore, he concludes that skepticism is false. At first glance, this argument may seem flippant. It is not. Moore means to replace the second premise in the skeptical argument with his own premise: *I know I have hands*. The skeptical argument starts with the premise that if you cannot rule out a skeptical hypothesis, then you do not have knowledge of some proposition pertaining to the external world. Moore uses "I have two hands" as his proposition about the external world. In effect, he accepts the skeptic's first premise, then uses his commonsense belief in the truth of "I have two hands" to defeat the skeptical hypothesis. Here is the argument's structure:

1. If I cannot rule out the possibility of SH, then I cannot be justified in believing that P.
2. I am justified in believing that P.
3. Therefore, I can rule out the possibility of SH.

In claiming that he has two hands, Moore claims that he is justified in believing propositions about the external world. And if he is justified, then he can rule out the skeptical hypothesis. The skeptic's argument takes the form of what is called *modus ponens*, meaning a valid inference where the antecedent of a conditional is affirmed. Moore's argument takes the form of what is known as *modus tollens*, meaning a valid inference where the consequence of a conditional is denied.

But notice that the two arguments contradict each other. If we accept the first premise, then either Moore's or the skeptic's second premise must be false. So why did Moore think his second premise is better? The choice is between thinking you are justified in believing that you have two hands and thinking you are justified in believing the skeptical hypothesis might be true. Moore thinks he has better reason to believe that he has two hands than he does for believing the skeptical hypothesis is true. For Moore, it is just common sense. You have reason to believe that you have two hands—you can see them and feel them—while you have no reason to believe the skeptical hypothesis is true.

Many philosophers remain unconvinced by Moore's argument. Any person who accepts the possibility of the skeptical hypothesis will disagree with his premise 2. The possibility of the skeptical hypothesis effectively undermines justification in the belief that you have two hands.

Contextualism

As we just saw, some theorists reject the notion that you must be certain of a belief—that is, rule out all possible defeaters—in order to have knowledge. Moore thinks he has more justification to believe he has two hands than he does that there's an evil demon tricking him. And in determining whether I am justified in believing in the bird outside my office window, I rarely consider the possibility that I could be a brain in a vat. I'm more likely to focus on my poor vision as a defeater. In the context of bird identification, wild skeptical hypotheses seem out of place. Indeed, we often adjust how much justification we think is needed for a belief to the task at hand. **Contextualism** is the view that the truth of knowledge attributions depends on the context. Contextualism is a theory about knowledge and justification. When we attribute knowledge to a subject S, the truth of the knowledge claim depends on the context that S is in. The context of S determines the level of justification needed for a true belief to count as knowledge. Contextualism comes from the observation that the level of confidence needed for justification changes depending on what the belief is as well as its the purpose and its importance, among other things. We expect a high degree of justification from physicians when they diagnose disease but less justification from friends recalling the title of a movie because there's much more at stake in medical diagnoses.

Contextualism deals with skepticism in a unique way. Rarely are we in situations where we must rule out skeptical hypotheses to consider ourselves justified. Indeed, it is generally only when a skeptical hypothesis has been explicitly raised that we think we need to rule it out to be justified. And in our daily lives, the skeptical hypothesis just does not seem relevant. Yes, the possibility that we are brains in a vat technically still exists; we just do not think of it.

Skepticism in Specific Domains

As explained above, local skepticism questions the possibility of knowledge only in particular areas of study. People can accept that knowledge of the external world is possible while also questioning whether knowledge is achievable in more specific domains. A common form of local skepticism focuses on religious belief, specifically knowledge of the existence of God. Another form of local skepticism concerns the ability to ever have moral knowledge. Skepticism in these domains does not entail that there is no God or that all moral claims are false. Rather, skepticism means that we can never be sufficiently justified in believing that there is a God or that moral claims are true. We simply can never know either way whether, for example, God exists.

Skepticism about morality arises due to the nature of its subject. Moral claims are normative, which means that they assert claims about what ought to be the case rather than what is the case. But moral claims are difficult to prove, given their normative nature. How can you prove what *ought* to be the case? Usually, moral claims are grounded in value claims. An ethicist may say that we ought to help a stranger because well-being is morally valuable. But the skeptic will point out that we cannot *prove* that something is valuable. We do not have sensors that can confirm moral value. Moral claims instead rest on arguments. The problem, as Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) explained, is that no amount of description can ever help us *logically* derive a normative claim (Hume 1985). This leaves room for doubt, and therefore skepticism.

Skeptical positions about God also focus on the lack of sufficient evidence. A skeptic can reasonably ask, What sorts of evidence would show the existence of God? Certainly, if God unambiguously appeared right now to everyone in the world simultaneously, then we would have reliable evidence. But God has not done so. The most we have is testimony in the form of religious texts. And testimony, particularly a chain of testimony stretching back hundreds and hundreds of years, is not necessarily reliable. Why believe, for example, the Christian Bible? Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), himself a devote Catholic, argued that the very nature of God—having no limits and existing beyond time—precludes the possibility of ever comprehending the full true nature of God or God's existence. He states, "Who then can blame the Christians for not being able to give reasons for their belief, professing as they do a religion which they cannot explain by reason. . . . It is in lacking proofs that they do not lack sense" (Pascal 1973, 93). Pascal contends that not attempting to give proof of God is the sensible thing to do. A person can simply rely on faith, which is belief based on insufficient evidence.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

In your view, what is the relationship between reason and faith? Some theologians say that reason can establish the existence of a supreme being. Others think that reason can only partially justify religious belief and that full belief requires faith, or belief without reason. Reason for some is antithetical to faith, which requires blind obedience. For example, in the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only son to God as an act of faith. How do you think we should understand the role of reason in religious belief?

7.5 Applied Epistemology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define applied epistemology.
- Describe the social aspect of knowledge and justification.
- Describe standpoint epistemology.
- Identify examples of epistemic injustice.

Applied epistemology, like other areas of applied philosophy, takes the tools of philosophy and applies them to areas of practical concern. Specifically, it applies philosophical methods and theories particular to epistemology to current social issues and practices. Applied epistemology often approaches epistemological questions on a collective or systems level. When looking at systems, applied epistemology investigates whether

the systems of investigation (like those in the sciences) are structured in the best way to lead to true beliefs. When applied to collectives, applied epistemology examines whether and how groups of people conduct deliberation that leads to reliably true and justified beliefs. The groups focused on can range from small groups, such as a jury, to large collectives, such as a democracy.

FIGURE 7.10 We often attribute beliefs to the Supreme Court, even though it is a collection of people that has changed over time. In this photo, former president Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump stand with members of the US Supreme Court in 2018. (credit: "President Donald J. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump at the Supreme Court of the United States" by Trump White House Archived/Flickr, Public Domain)

Social Epistemology

The traditional epistemology that most of this chapter has covered is singularly focused on individuals. Theories are focused on what *a person* can know or when *a subject* is justified. For the most part, gaining knowledge is often treated as an individual effort. Social epistemology instead investigates how groups pursue knowledge and justification and how an individual can best seek justification and knowledge in a social world. Social epistemology takes seriously the fact that humans are, by and large, social animals that rely on others for belief formation. Because humans are social creatures, we rely on others for much of what we come to know. Our dependence on others for true beliefs eases knowledge acquisition, but it also complicates the task due to concerns regarding the reliability of others.

How much of your knowledge was gained strictly from independent investigation conducted only by yourself? Very little, most likely. We rely on other humans from the past and present for a very large proportion of our knowledge. Scientific endeavors consist of amending and adding to the work of others over the course of centuries. The propositional knowledge learned in school is gained through layers upon layers of individuals trusting the testimony of others—students trusting the testimony of teachers, teachers trusting the testimony of books, the writers of the books trusting the testimony of sources, and so on. The news we view, the books we read, the conversations we overhear—all of these are social means of gaining knowledge.

Testimony

Social means of gaining knowledge are called testimony. Any time you believe something because you read it or heard it somewhere, you believe based on testimony. Of course, people are not always reliable. People sometimes use poor reasoning, misremember, or even lie. Hence, testimony is also sometimes unreliable. And this raises the question, When is testimony justified?

Testimony is clearly of importance to social epistemology. In determining whether to believe what others tell us, we ask whether they are trustworthy. A trustworthy source of testimony is honest, unbiased, rational, well-informed, and clearheaded. We further look for an expert or authority. An expert or authority is a person

whose experience, education, and knowledge in an area make them more reliable. Questions surrounding testimony are questions about justification. When are we justified in believing others? Who are we justified in believing in particular situations? When and how does testimony give us justification for a belief? And what do we do when the testimony of others conflicts with our already held beliefs?

FIGURE 7.11 All of the information contained in libraries is a form of testimonial knowledge. This is one of the public reading rooms in the New York Public Library. (credit: "New York Public Library" by soomness/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Peer Disagreement

When the testimony of another contradicts your own belief, what should you do? In cases where the other person is an expert and you are not, then the testimony ought to weaken your confidence in your belief. You should either change your belief or withhold from believing either way until you can get further justification. But what should you do when the person is not an expert but an **epistemic peer**? An epistemic peer is a person who is in an equal epistemic position relative to some domain—that is, they have the same cognitive ability, evidence, and background knowledge in that domain. A person can be an epistemic peer with respect to one domain but not another. You may know that you are on level epistemic ground with regard to the subject of baseball with your best friend but that they are an authority compared to you on the subject of baking.

Social epistemologists theorize about how peer disagreement ought to function in justification and belief. Some theorists argue that you should always modify your conviction in some way in the face of peer disagreement, though they disagree about exactly how you ought to modify your view. Others maintain that peer disagreement does not always give you reason to think you are mistaken (Frances and Matheson 2018).

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

When assessing the testimony of a person you believe is an epistemic peer, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does the person supplying the testimony have a history of lying?
2. Is this person known to have biases that might distort their perceptions?
3. Does this person have a good track record?
4. Does this person's testimony conflict with testimony from others?
5. What are this person's motives?

When assessing the testimony of a purported authority on some subject, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this a question on which there is expertise?

2. Is the person supplying the testimony an expert in the relevant field?
3. Is there a consensus among experts in the relevant field on the question at hand?
4. Does this person's testimony reflect agreement with the consensus of experts?
5. Is there reason to think this person is biased?

Group Justification

So far, we have looked at how social factors influence an individual's justification and beliefs. Social epistemology also investigates whether it is possible for groups to have beliefs. We often attribute beliefs to groups of people. We say things like "The United States believes in freedom," "The Supreme Court holds that a right to privacy exists," "Scientists believe in climate change," and "The jury knew he was guilty." When can it rightfully be said that a group believes something? One answer is that a group believes P only in cases in which all or almost all members of the group believe P. However, we do attribute beliefs to groups while not always assuming that every member holds the belief. The Supreme Court example above illustrates that not every member of a group must believe something for us to say that the group does. When the court decides an issue with a 6–3 vote, we still attribute belief to the court as a whole.

Another view is a commitment view. Group belief does not require that all members believe; rather, members of the group are jointly committed to a belief as a body merely by virtue of being members of that group (Goldman and O'Connor 2019). Group commitment to a belief creates a normative constraint on members of a group to emulate the belief. Commitment views may work for any group formed around allegiance to specific ideas. Take religious groups, for example, which coalesce around beliefs pertaining to God and religious dogma.

If groups are capable of beliefs, then clearly the question of justification of group belief is relevant. Note that some of the previous theories on epistemic justification are applicable to questions of group justification. Goldman focused on reliable processes. Social epistemology also focuses on the reliability of processes used in juries, democracies, and the sciences.

Standpoint Epistemology

Social epistemology accounts for the social nature of knowledge and justification. The quality and extent of an individual's knowledge depends heavily on the people that individual deems trustworthy. The same is the case for group or public knowledge (knowledge generally accepted as true by a collective). Individuals and perspectives granted expert status have more influence on what is accepted, but this means that many individuals and perspectives will be ignored. Furthermore, it is often types or groups of people who are excluded, which becomes problematic if the perspectives of those groups are valuable to the task of knowledge creation. Standpoint epistemology takes this worry seriously. **Standpoint epistemology** studies the relationship between an individual's social status and that individual's epistemic position. Of particular importance to the theory is the notion that the relative power of individuals and groups influences who we consider to be reliable sources, causing us to ignore the perspectives of less powerful groups. Furthermore, standpoint theory argues that the exclusion of entire groups harms the entire enterprise of gaining knowledge.

Take as an example the president of a large factory who wants to increase efficiency and cut down on waste. The president convenes all the department heads and managers to identify areas of inefficiency and waste; essentially, they want the perspectives of those individuals with more power within the factory. But if the president doesn't elicit the opinion of any of the workers in the warehouse or on the factory floor, they miss out on potentially valuable perspectives. A manager may think they can adequately identify problems in the way that the manual work is done. But given the *position* of a factory worker—situated day after day on the factory floor—the factory worker has a unique perspective. Standpoint theorists hold that perspectives such as that of the factory floor worker are uniquely valuable and cannot be emulated by those not in that position.

Standpoint epistemology is applied to many areas of study. In the social sciences, where the goal is to describe

social structures, behaviors, and relationships, standpoint theorists advocate for focusing on the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups. If the general goal is to study how people do things, then it does not do any good to ignore the experiences of entire classes of people. And when the goal is to discover facts about power dynamics within social institutions, focusing only on privileged perspectives is woefully inadequate. If anthropologists in the 1950s wanted to understand racism and the unequal power structure in the American South, interviewing Black citizens would generate more insightful evidence than interviews with White citizens. Black Americans were in a better epistemic position compared to their White counterparts to describe the power structure. Similarly, women are in a better position to explain sexism within a workplace than their male counterparts. People who use wheelchairs are in a much better position to design a truly accessible bathroom. Examples such as these abound.

Standpoint epistemology also critiques the traditional hard sciences and medical research. Hard sciences, such as biology, chemistry, and physiology, are those that rely on controlled experiments, quantifiable data, and mathematical modeling. Hard sciences are generally noted for being exact, rigorous, and objective. Standpoint theorists question this objectivity and reveal how biases and perspectives of researchers can influence these supposedly objective fields. A clear example of this is early research on heart disease. Because medical researchers, who were mostly male, focused their studies on men, heart disease was considered a men's disease. The symptoms of a heart attack that doctors and patients were warned to look out for did not include many symptoms that women experience when having a heart attack (Kourany 2009). Men most often experience chest pain, while women are more likely to experience symptoms such as jaw pain and nausea (American Heart Association n.d.). As a result, many women did not seek medical attention when experiencing heart problems, and doctors failed to properly diagnose them when they did seek medical treatment. Standpoint theory reveals not only that varied standpoints are valuable but also that specific standpoints often include implicit or explicit bias—not including women or people of color in data sets, only including particular variables in modeling, and so on.

Epistemic Injustice

If standpoint epistemology is correct in concluding that valuable perspectives are often excluded from social and scientific discourse, then this is an instance of epistemic injustice. **Epistemic injustice** is injustice related to epistemology. Epistemic injustices include the exclusion and silencing of perspectives, systematic misrepresentation of group or individual views, unfair conferring of expert status, and unjustified distrust of certain perspectives. British philosopher Miranda Fricker (b. 1966), who coined the term *epistemic injustice*, divides epistemic injustice into two categories: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). **Testimonial injustice** occurs when the opinions of individuals or groups are unfairly ignored or treated as untrustworthy. **Hermeneutical injustice** occurs when a society's language and concepts cannot adequately capture the experience of people living within that society, which thereby limits understanding of their experiences.

Testimonial Injustice

Silencing and distrust of someone's word often occurs by virtue of that individual's membership in a marginalized group. Women, people of color, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, and religious minorities are all examples of marginalized groups. Take as an example a criminal trial. If the jury takes the testimony of a witness less seriously because of their perceived class status or membership in a particular group, this is an example of epistemic injustice, specifically testimonial injustice. Philosophers who focus on testimonial injustice utilize research to show how the voices of individuals and groups are unfairly ignored and discounted compared to others. For example, many studies over the past few decades have illustrated that reports of pain by Black patients are taken less seriously by medical professionals than similar pain reports by White patients. An outcome of this is that Black patients are given less pain medicine and pain management than White patients, even in cases where the patients had the same injury or surgery (Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003; Cintron and Morrison 2006). This is clearly a case of testimonial injustice: Black patients receive

less care because their testimony (reporting pain) is not taken as seriously as the testimony of their White counterparts.

But testimonial injustice also occurs when someone's opinions are systematically misrepresented. To misrepresent a view is to interpret that view in a way that does not align with the original intended meaning. As an example, consider the Black Lives Matter movement and a popular response to it. Black Lives Matter was formed in response to police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people. The idea was to affirm the value of Black lives. However, a popular response to the movement was the phrase "All lives matter." This response implies that the message of Black Lives Matter is really that *only* Black lives matter, which is an unfair and inaccurate representation of the view.

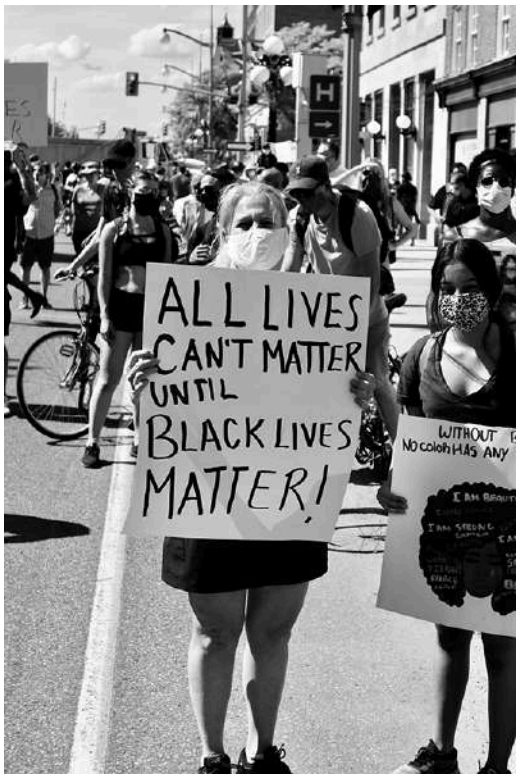

FIGURE 7.12 Interpreting the phrase "Black lives matter" to mean "*only* Black lives matter" is an instance of testimonial injustice. (credit: "Black Lives Matter" by Taymaz Valley/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Hermeneutical Injustice

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when language and concepts cannot adequately capture an individual's experience, resulting in a lack of understanding of that individual's experience by both the individual and those around them. The classic example of hermeneutical injustice focuses on sexual harassment. Before the concept and phrase *sexual harassment* was introduced and understood by society, women had a difficult time describing certain experiences in the workplace. Women experienced unwanted attention and focus, exclusion, comments concerning their bodies and looks, and different treatment based on negative assumptions about their gender. Many women were fired for not going along with such treatment. But there was no word for their experience, so many women could not understand or explain their discomfort. Furthermore, accounts of their distressing experience ran the risk of not being taken seriously by others. The phrase *sexual harassment* was coined to fill a gap in the concepts used to explain and describe experience. Perhaps you have had the experience of being introduced to a word or concept that suddenly illuminated a part of your experience in a way that greatly increased your understanding of yourself and your ability to explain yourself to others.

Summary

7.1 What Epistemology Studies

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and its associated concepts, such as truth and justification. The discipline of epistemology uses many tools, including conceptual analysis, argumentation, and research. Traditional epistemology focuses on propositional knowledge, which is knowledge of facts or statements. There are other types of knowledge, including procedural knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. Because knowledge and justification are treated as valuable and epistemology studies these concepts, epistemology is both descriptive and a normative discipline.

7.2 Knowledge

The traditional understanding of knowledge, which comes from Plato, is that it consists of justified true belief. Plato's account was generally accepted until the 1960s, when philosopher Edmund Gettier offered counterexamples, known as Gettier cases. Gettier cases reveal that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, a problemed called the Gettier problem. Many theorists attempt to solve the Gettier problem by strengthening Plato's account. Fixes include adding another condition to the definition and clarifying what justification is.

7.3 Justification

Justification for a belief makes the belief more likely to be true. How justification works and the nature of justification are important to the study of epistemology. Internalism is the view that justification is entirely dependent on factors internal to the mind of the knower. Externalism is the view that at least some elements that determine justification are external to the mind of the knower. Attempts to solve the Gettier problem have come in both internal and external forms. Theorists also study justification as it exists in the structure of entire belief systems. Foundationalists believe that all beliefs rest on a foundation of basic beliefs, while coherentists hold that beliefs exist in a web of mutually supporting and consistent beliefs. Justification has many sources, but all of them are fallible, which means that even justified beliefs can be false.

7.4 Skepticism

Skepticism is the view that all or some of our knowledge is impossible. A global skeptic rejects the possibility of all knowledge and often focuses on the possibility of justification for beliefs of the external world. Global skeptics usually put forth a skeptical hypothesis—a way that the world could be that would entail that all our beliefs are false—and show that we cannot rule out the hypothesis. Skeptical hypotheses include the possibility that we are dreaming, that a powerful demon is tricking us, and that we are brains in vats or trapped in virtual reality. All skeptical arguments take advantage of the fact that we cannot rule out skeptical hypotheses on the evidence we have. Those who argue against skepticism claim we do not need the level of justification that skeptics claim we do.

7.5 Applied Epistemology

Applied epistemology uses the concepts, methods, and theories particular to epistemology and applies them to current social issues and practices. An important area of applied epistemology is social epistemology, which focuses on the social facets of knowledge and justification and how groups form beliefs. Testimony refers to how we gain knowledge from and share knowledge with others. Social epistemology studies how to evaluate our beliefs when they conflict with the testimony of others. Social epistemology also illuminates how injustice can arise in epistemological endeavors in a social world. Testimonial injustice occurs when the opinions of individuals are systematically discounted or ignored unfairly. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a society's language and concepts cannot adequately capture the experience of all its members.

Key Terms

A posteriori knowledge knowledge gained through experience.

A priori knowledge knowledge that can be gained prior to or independent of experience.
Coherentism the theory that a belief is justified if it is part of a coherent system of interconnected beliefs.
Contextualism the view that the truth of knowledge attributions depends on the context.
Epistemic injustice injustice that arises from or is related to epistemological issues.
Epistemic peer a person who is in an equal epistemic position as you relative to some domain.
Epistemology the field within philosophy that focuses on questions pertaining to the nature and extent of human knowledge.
Externalism any epistemological theory that does not solely use a subjects' mental states to determine justification.
Foundationalism the belief that all truth is either self-evident or derivable from some truth that is self-evident.
Gettier case a case, usually presented as a hypothetical scenario, that acts as a counterexample to the traditional account of knowledge as justified true belief.
Global skeptic someone who rejects the possibility of knowledge in general.
Hermeneutical injustice a type of epistemic injustice that occurs when a society's language and concepts cannot adequately capture the experience of people, thereby limiting understanding of their experiences.
Historical reliabilism an epistemological theory that proposes that processes that reliably produce true beliefs confer justification on those beliefs.
Internalism any epistemological theory that focuses solely on subjects' mental states to determine justification.
Knowledge by acquaintance knowledge gained from direct contact with something and not mediated by inference.
Local skeptic someone who question the possibility of knowledge only in particular areas of study.
Procedural knowledge knowledge of how to successfully complete a task.
Propositional knowledge knowledge of facts that can be expressed as statements.
Skepticism the view that some or all knowledge is impossible.
Standpoint epistemology study of the relationship between an individual's social status and their epistemic position.
Statement A declarative sentence that has a truth value, meaning that it must be either true or false.
Testimonial injustice a type of epistemic injustice that occurs when the opinions of individuals or groups are unfairly ignored or treated as untrustworthy.

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Review Questions

7.1 What Epistemology Studies

1. Why is epistemology considered a normative discipline?
2. Why is conceptual analysis important in epistemology?
3. What is the difference between a priori and a posteriori knowledge?
4. What is propositional knowledge?

7.2 Knowledge

5. What is Plato's account of knowledge?
6. What is a Gettier case?
7. Offer one Gettier case and explain how it works.

7.3 Justification

8. Explain the difference between internal and external theories of justification.
9. Describe the similarities and differences between coherentism and foundationalism.
10. Explain how justification is fallible.

7.4 Skepticism

11. What is global skepticism?
12. Offer and explain a skeptical hypothesis.
13. How do arguments for skepticism rely on the notion of doubt?

7.5 Applied Epistemology

14. Define applied epistemology.
15. Why are knowledge and justification a social matter?

16. Define testimonial injustice and offer an example of it.

Further Reading

Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., eds. 2017. *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. New York: Routledge.

Greco, John, ed. 2008. *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Russell, Bertrand. (1912) 1959. *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Truncellito, David A. n.d. "Epistemology." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by James Fieser and Bradley Dowden. https://iep.utm.edu/epistemo/.

Value Theory 8

FIGURE 8.1 This photo of surrealist artist René Magritte captures him painting an unusual self-portrait. Note that the subject of the portrait is observing an egg but painting a bird in flight. The title of the painting is "Clairvoyance," suggesting that Magritte sees art as a way of envisioning the future or imagining possibilities rather than simply presenting the facts at hand. (credit: modification of "[N] Jacqueline Nonkels - Rene Magritte paints Helderzeinheid (1936)" by cea/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION Chances are you have found yourself in a debate with someone about a matter involving judgments about what is good or bad. Maybe your disagreement was about a contemporary moral issue like abortion or the death penalty. Maybe the conflict had to do with a course of action, like going to college or joining the military, and whether it was the right thing to do. Maybe you got into a disagreement about whether a work of art was beautiful or a movie was good or bad. These types of conversations deal with **values**, and there is a specific area of philosophy that helps people think about these types of debates: value theory.

Value theory is the philosophical investigation of values. In its narrow sense, it refers to ethical concerns. In its

broader sense, it addresses ethical, social, political, religious, aesthetic, and other types of values. Philosophers use value theory to approach questions that require people to think about what they value in life as individuals and as communities, especially in terms of morality, happiness, goodness, and beauty. Value theory provides tools that you can use to navigate difficult debates about what you value and why. This chapter will help you understand what a value is and how it differs from facts, the types of questions and distinctions that help people discuss values and their relations, and specific areas of value theory like metaethics and aesthetics.

8.1 The Fact-Value Distinction

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Articulate the fact-value distinction.
- Distinguish between descriptive and evaluative claims.
- Explain the is-ought problem
- Describe the naturalistic fallacy
- Evaluate objections to the fact-value distinction.

Values are woven into how you live and relate to others. The ideals that guide your life decisions, the morals that shape how you treat others, and even the choices that define your personal aesthetic all express your values. Values signify judgments about the way people *ought* to think, feel, or act based on what is good, worthwhile, or important. For example, you might think you *ought* to read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* because it is considered a great American novel or because you believe that reading about anti-Black racism in the United States is important for forming a more just worldview. Here, your reasoning for a course of action—reading *Invisible Man*—is based on value judgments about the novel's greatness and the importance of understanding racial injustice.

Values describe how people think things *should* be, not necessarily how they are. Philosophers describe this difference as the *is-ought* distinction or, more commonly, the fact-value distinction. The **fact-value distinction** distinguishes between what is the case (facts) and what people think ought to be the case (values) based on beliefs about what is good, beautiful, important, etc.

The line between facts and values is not always clear. It can be easy to mistake a value for a fact, especially when a person feels strongly about something and believes it is truly good or bad beyond any doubt. For example, the statement "killing an innocent person is bad" may seem like a fact, but it is not a description of how things are. This statement describes the way people think things should be, not the way the world is. For this reason, the fact-value distinction is an important place to begin. This section will give an overview of the fact-value distinction by examining the types of claims you can make about facts and values and how facts and values are related to or distinct from each other.

Descriptive vs. Evaluative Claims

One way to think about the difference between facts and values is through the different types of claims you can make about them. People talk about facts using **descriptive claims** and values using **evaluative claims**. Descriptive claims are statements about matters of fact, whereas evaluative claims express a judgment about something's value.

Descriptive Claims: How the World Is

Descriptive claims make statements about *how the world is.* They describe the facts of something, what you observe to be the case without any form of evaluation or judgment. For example, "the weather today is sunny" is a descriptive claim because it simply describes what someone observes.

Evaluative Claims: How the World Ought to Be

Evaluative claims make statements about *how the world ought to be*. They express judgments of value: what is

good, just, fair, beautiful, healthy, important, etc. Instead of simply describing, evaluative claims interpret facts or assert what should be the case.

Evaluative claims can be *prescriptive*—that is, they state what *should* be the case or what people *ought* to do in a given situation. For example, "I should go outside to get some sunshine" is an evaluative claim. It is based on a descriptive claim ("the weather today is sunny"), but it interprets this fact and ascribes a value to it ("sunshine is good for mental health") in a way that prescribes an action ("I should go outside"). When people make evaluations about the goodness of something, it implies that they should do it. Evaluations are thus connected to actions and choices.

Sometimes people struggle to distinguish between facts and values and mistakenly think an evaluative statement is simply a positive claim about the way things are. As the next section will describe, this mistake is a type of fallacy.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Determine whether the statements below are evaluative or descriptive. Propose a descriptive statement and a value statement that form the basis of each statement that you identify as evaluative.

1. You should wear a scarf and mittens to keep warm.
2. People visit Athens to explore the remains of the ancient city.
3. Tomatoes contain vitamin C, which can boost your immune system.
4. The city needs to build more parks where residents can walk, jog, and exercise.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

When thinking about values, it can be easy to make errors. A **fallacy** is an error in logical reasoning. Fallacies involve drawing the wrong conclusions from the premises of an argument or jumping to a conclusion without sufficient evidence. There are many types of logical fallacies because there are many ways people can make mistakes with their reasoning.

CONNECTIONS

Learn more about informal fallacies in the chapter on logic and reasoning, and explore more about cognitive values in the chapter on critical thinking, research, reading, and writing.

The **naturalistic fallacy** is an error in reasoning that assumes you can derive values (what people *ought* to do) from facts about the world (what *is* the case). The British philosopher G. E. Moore (1873–1958) explains the problem with this fallacy in his 1903 book *Principia Ethica*. For Moore, if philosophers based the judgment "x is good" on a set of facts, or natural properties, about x, they have committed the naturalistic fallacy.

There are frequent examples of the naturalistic fallacy in popular discourse. Debates about whether monogamy is good or bad are frequently posed in terms of whether it is "natural," and proponents for either side of the argument often point at monogamous or nonmonogamous animals to justify their answer. Claiming what humans ought to do from observations about animal behavior is an attempt to derive values from facts about the world.

Hume and the Is-Ought Problem

The naturalistic fallacy is related to **the is-ought problem**. This problem asserts the challenge of moving from statements of fact (something *is*) to statements of value (something *ought* to be). The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) provides one of the most famous explanations of this problem in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740).

FIGURE 8.2 The descriptive claim "Having pets has been shown to improve people's mental health" can easily become the evaluative claim "People ought to have pets." This is known as the is-ought problem. (credit: "My cat Toby" by Richard J/Flickr, Public Domain)

At the time Hume was writing the *Treatise*, philosophers were rejecting a morality based on religious faith or dogmatic beliefs and were instead trying to find justifications for morality that relied on undeniable reasons for being a good person or trying to build a better society. Hume countered that you cannot derive *ought* from *is* because morality has to do with sentiments, not facts. In other words, morality has to do with what people believe and how we feel, and beliefs and feelings are not factual or derivable from facts. As Hume explains in the passage below, facts have to do with relations between objects. Morality, however, has to do with a human subject expressing their sentiments about a matter.

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Read this excerpt from David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Part 1. As you read, pay attention to how he describes propositions that use "ought." Does he seem to think they are justified with proper reasoning? Why or why not? Think of an example where using "ought" statements without rational justification could be a problem.

> "I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason."

(Source: Hume, David. (1739–1740) 2002. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section I. Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm - link2H_4_0085)

The Open-Question Argument

Hume's description of the is-ought problem lives on in contemporary philosophy, especially in 20th-century ethics. In his 1903 book *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore introduces the **open-question argument** to argue against the naturalistic fallacy, which he sees as trying to derive non-natural properties, such as "right" and "good," from natural properties. Unlike claims in the natural sciences, which extend understanding of or express a discovery about natural properties of the world, goodness and rightness are non-natural properties that cannot establish their truth based on natural properties and thus are always open to questioning. For example, the natural properties of water (H_20) are not open to questioning in the same way that the non-natural properties of things that people judge to be "good" or "right" are.

In order to answer the question "Is x good?" people frequently have to assert that something else is good. Is being kind to your neighbor good? Yes. Why? Because compassion for others is good. This does not "close" the question because it amounts to saying "good is good." It is circular and thus uninformative, so the question remains open. Moore did believe that claims about moral properties can be true, but not in the same way as claims about natural properties.

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Search social media platforms for examples of "is" presented as "ought" statements. What types of beliefs do you notice people presenting as facts? What types of justifications are given for these claims?

Objections to the Fact-Value Distinction

Not all philosophers agree that there is a strict distinction between facts and values. **Moral realists** argue for a more objective concept of morality. They feel that there are certain moral facts about the world that are objectively true, such as the claim "murder is immoral." **Moral skeptics**, on the other hand, often use the fact-value distinction to argue against an objective basis for morality by emphasizing that moral values are *not* factual and involve a different mode of thinking that is distinct from logical or scientific reasoning. Disagreements with the fact-value distinction come in different forms.

Putnam's Objection to the Fact-Value Distinction

Some philosophers reject the concept of empirical facts by demonstrating that scientific reasoning uses values to establish facts. In his 1982 article "Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy," American philosopher and mathematician Hilary Putnam (1926 – 2016) argues that scientists frequently must choose between conflicting theories and use desirable principles like simplicity or coherence to devise an explanation for complex observational data. To illustrate his point, he explains that Einstein's theory of gravity was accepted over competing theories because it was simpler and preserved other laws of physics. Putnam argues that science's creation of facts is an evaluative practice and does not necessarily stand on a firmer ground than conclusions about values like goodness or kindness. This approach to refuting the fact-value distinction is provocative because it challenges the idea that science is an objective presentation of facts.

Lack of Distinction Claims

Another approach to challenging the fact-value distinction is to emphasize how people connect them in their everyday ways of speaking. Some philosophers argue that certain types of descriptive claims imply an evaluative claim, especially if they are linked by the concept of *purpose* or *function*. For example, if a person says, "This knife is too dull to cut anything," then you can assume they also mean "This is a bad knife" because it does not fulfill its function. If you understand the purpose of function of the knife, you can follow this implication easily. Since people make these types of connections easily in everyday speech, the distinction between facts and values may not hold much meaning.

Claims of Objective Moral Reasoning

Finally, some philosophers reject the fact-value distinction through the concept of **telos** (purpose, end, or goal). They argue that values are based on the fulfillment of a goal. You can objectively assess whether an action does or does not fulfill a goal. For example, if your goal is to help others in need, an action will be good if it fulfills that goal, like volunteering at a homeless shelter. Using this goal, you can objectively determine whether any action is good, bad, or neutral. Telos, therefore, establishes an objective morality.

To investigate the is-ought distinction further, you must explore what a value is. The following section will take up this question.

8.2 Basic Questions about Values

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Relate extrinsic values to intrinsic values.
- Distinguish between monism and pluralism in value theory.
- Explain the concept of incommensurability in value theory.
- Compare and contrast moral pluralism and moral relativism.

People spend much of their time trying to accomplish goals that they deem as "good." But what do people mean when they say something is "good"? What does it mean to value something? Can conflicting values be resolved? This section will explore different answers to these questions and, in doing so, help you understand the meaning of value.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Value

One way to think about what a value is has to do with whether it is valuable for its own sake or valuable for the sake of something else. Something has **intrinsic value** if it is valuable for its own sake. For example, Aristotle asserted that happiness has intrinsic value because it is an end in itself. He believed that all actions ultimately aim at happiness, but happiness is pursued for its own sake. If someone were to ask, "What is happiness good for?" Aristotle would reply that it simply good in and of itself.

Something has **extrinsic value** if it is valuable for the sake of something else. It is a means to an end. For example, you probably engage in a variety of activities that are good insofar as they help your health. Eating a well-balanced diet, going to the doctor regularly, and keeping an active routine all contribute to health and well-being. Health is thus the intrinsic good that makes each of those activities extrinsically good.

FIGURE 8.3 Eating fruits and vegetables is an extrinsic good, in that it contributes to the intrinsic value of human

health. If eating fruits and vegetables were found to not contribute to health, this would no longer be viewed as a desirable action. (credit: "Healthy and tasty fruits and vegetables" by Marco Verch Professional/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Fundamentality

One could argue, however, that health is yet an extrinsic value because people only value health because it contributes to happiness. When people distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic values, they think about not only what is valuable but also how values are related to each other. The example of health and happiness raises the question of **fundamentality**—whether there is only one intrinsic value or many.

Monism argues that there is only one fundamental intrinsic value that forms the foundation for all other values. For example, hedonists think that pleasure is a fundamental intrinsic value and that something must be pleasurable to be good. A monist believes that if people evaluate their values carefully—and the relationship between their values—then one value will be more important than the others and the others will serve that intrinsic value. For a monist, it is important to identify which value is more fundamental so that it can guide your beliefs, judgments, and actions.

Pluralism argues that there are multiple fundamental intrinsic values rather than one. A pluralist can still evaluate which values are intrinsic and which are extrinsic, but that process does not lead them to identify one ultimate intrinsic value that forms the foundation for all other values. Pluralism holds that people have two or more fundamental values because these values are not reducible to each other. For example, knowledge and love are both intrinsic goods if what is good about knowledge cannot be summed up in terms of love and if what is good about love cannot be summed up in terms of knowledge.

Philosophers who argue for monism often see pluralism as a type of relativism that can prevent people from resolving moral issues when values come into conflict. Consider physician-assisted suicide. A monist would want to address the issue of ending one's life for medical reasons by evaluating it according to one ethical principle. For example, if monists hold that pleasure is the intrinsic good, they might argue that physician-assisted suicide is good when it allows the cessation of pain, particularly in cases where the patient's suffering prohibits any pleasure of mind or body. Pluralists, however, would have to evaluate this physician-assisted suicide based on multiple intrinsic values, such as pleasure and life. In this case, the cessation of pain and the continuation of life are both good, and neither is better than the other. As a result, pluralists may not find a way to resolve the conflicting values or may not be able to identify whether this action is right or wrong. By contrast, monism allows someone to hold a unified and coherent metaethical framework because it asserts one fundamental value rather than many.

Pluralists, however, consider life to have many intrinsic goods including satisfying one's desires, achieving one's aims, developing one's abilities, and developing deep personal relationships. In *Women and Human Development*, American feminist and moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1947 - present) describes many intrinsic goods—including life, health, emotional attachment, affiliation, play, reason, and more (2000). A flourishing life will have many goods, not just one. Pluralists, moreover, are concerned with the consequences of monism. Asserting that there is only one intrinsic good, despite differences in opinion, could potentially restrict individual's freedom, especially when their values differ from the mainstream.

Incommensurability

Pluralism frequently relies on the concept of **incommensurability**, which describes a situation in which two or more goods, values, or phenomena have no standard of evaluation that applies to them all. You can compare the size of one object in feet and another object in centimeters by converting feet to centimeters. But you cannot compare the speed of a running cheetah to the size of the Taj Mahal because one involves measuring miles per hour and the other involves measuring square feet.

Similarly, some values are simply too different to be evaluated in the same way. For example, there are some things in life that you cherish and cannot describe in terms of a dollar amount, such as love or friendship. The

value of friendship is not commensurate with the value of money. Furthermore, physical health and supportive friends are both valuable, but they are good in different ways, so they are incomparable values. Even if you can evaluate values in the same way, you might not be able to compare them in the sense of judging what is better or worse than the other. For example, you might have many friendships that you value highly but not be able to rank them or determine who your best friend is.

Moral Pluralism vs. Moral Relativism

Moral pluralism argues that there are different moral frameworks that cannot be unified into one. One implication of this is that one culture may have difficulty understanding the values of another culture because they have completely different concepts of what is good, and we might not be able to find a way to reconcile these differences. Cultural differences play an important role in value pluralism and the idea that there can be multiple frameworks for understanding morality.

At the same time, pluralism is not the same as relativism. **Moral relativism** makes a larger claim than pluralism because it not only asserts that there are multiple moral frameworks, it also asserts that each framework is equally valid insofar as individuals, communities, and cultures determine what is moral. Moral relativism thus prohibits cultures from judging each other's value systems.

Nussbaum uses the example of genital mutilation as an example of why moral relativism raises issues (1999). If morality is completely relative to a culture's own traditions and values, it would be impossible for any outsiders to condemn female genital mutilation or other practices that harm women or keep them in a weakened or exploited state. Nussbaum argues that feminist issues should not be evaluated by local traditions and that a global notion of justice is needed to address gender inequality. She thus argues for a universal account of justice that is sensitive to differences between cultures, which she calls reasonable pluralism.

Pluralism and relativism get at the heart of many real-world ethical issues that people navigate in life, especially when they look at moral beliefs from historical or cultural perspectives that show how different values can be. Situating different values in relation to each other is difficult, and how people do so has practical outcomes for how they define what is right or wrong, which actions they consider ethical or unethical, and what aims they pursue in life.

8.3 Metaethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the meaning of the phrase "ontology of value."
- Identify the significance of realism and anti-realism for moral discourse.
- Compare and contrast different theories regarding the foundations for moral theory.
- Explain the importance of the Euthyphro problem for metaethics.

Ethics is the broad study of morality and is often divided into metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Normative ethics and applied ethics are covered in separate chapters. Each field is distinguished by a different *level* of inquiry and analysis. **Metaethics** focuses on moral reasoning and foundational questions that explore the assumptions related to moral beliefs and practice. It attempts to understand the presuppositions connected to morality and moral deliberation. Metaethics explores, for example, where moral values originate, what it means to say something is right or good, whether there are any objective moral facts, whether morality is (culturally) relative, and whether there is a psychological basis for moral practices and value judgements.

In the previous two sections, in asking whether there is a fact-value distinction and what values are, we encountered a central question in metaethics—whether morality is grounded in objective or subjective values. We have also encountered questions about what is good or bad and right or wrong, which is the main concern of normative ethics. This section dives deeper into these questions and explores different foundations for moral values, such as God, religious faith, nature, society, politics, law, and rationality.

Ontology of value

An important area of metaethics is the ontology of value. Ontology is the study (ology) of being (ōn). It gets at the nature of what makes something what it is. **Ontology of value** is the study of the being of values. What is a value? Is it a statement about reality? A subjective idea or belief? A mental state or emotion? As you will see, there are different ontological accounts of value.

Realism and Anti-realism

Do moral values have a basis in reality, or are they purely subjective and relative to individuals or communities? Depending on your answer, your approach to ethics will look completely different. Thus, the first major distinction between different types of ethical reasoning is the difference between realism and anti-realism. Moral realists, as discussed earlier, object to the fact-value distinction. **Realism** asserts that ethical values have some basis in reality and that reasoning about ethical matters requires an objective framework or foundation to discover what is truly good. For a realist, values are not simply subjective opinions. **Anti-realism** asserts that ethical values are not based on objective facts about the world but instead rely on subjective foundations like individuals' desires and beliefs.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Are you a moral realist or anti-realist? Before answering this question, consider the list of actions below. For each, consider both whether you think the action is objectively wrong and why or why not you take this position. Both your responses and your reasons for your responses will help you to determine which category you fall into,

- Murder
- Lying
- Corporal punishment
- Harming an innocent person

This section extends moral realism beyond the fact-value distinction to examine why many argue that moral realism is an important position to take and the types of objective realities people have used to establish a moral reality.

The Importance of Debate within Moral Realism

Moral debate poses a challenge to moral realism because it makes morality seem subjective. If people disagree on important moral issues, such as abortion, or on how to justify moral beliefs, how are we to determine who is right? Maybe no one has the right answer and moral claims are simply subjective opinions.

For a realist, moral disagreements do not mean that morality is subjective. Many fields, including the natural sciences, have vibrant debates and disagreements that do not necessarily indicate that their claims are subjective. For example, astronomers used to think that the sun and planets revolved around Earth, and the heliocentric concept of the universe was considered heretical. This disagreement does not mean that astronomy is subjective but instead that astronomy requires ongoing observation and debate to improve its understanding of reality. Along similar lines, moral debates do not necessarily prove morality is subjective and in fact can even improve one's understanding of a moral issue. Moral realism asserts that morality has an objective framework or foundation, which means that you can make true moral claims. People do not necessarily, however, agree on which claims are true.

The Importance of Moral Resolution

Moral relativism, discussed earlier, is an anti-realist position because it denies that there is an objective or universal justification for moral beliefs. Instead, morality is always relative to an individual or community. This means there is no way to say what is truly good or bad.

Moral relativism has taken many different shapes throughout the history of philosophy, and it is debated in popular discourses—especially politics and religion—as well as in metaethics. It is controversial because it seems to undermine the possibility of finding common ground in ethical debates that shape practical action or political policies. Thus anti-realism and moral relativism seem to create insurmountable barriers for overcoming moral disagreements.

For contemporary philosopher Michelle Moody-Adams, however, moral disagreements between different cultures—and even within cultures—do not require us to adopt an anti-realist position. She takes moral disagreements seriously but also argues for "cautious optimism" about moral objectivity (1997). For Moody-Adams, irresolvable moral disagreements are an "unavoidable feature of moral experience" and not a reason to be skeptical about moral reasoning (1997, 107).

Since anti-realism is a form of moral skepticism, it can lead not only to relativism but also to pessimism about whether we can resolve moral debates or whether moral reasoning has any legitimacy. Being able to explain what is right or wrong is important not only for ethics but also for the lives of individuals within communities because people's actions and decisions impact each other. This is one of the critiques that moral realists employ against anti-realists. If morality is purely subjective, then values are arbitrary and people are unable to make true claims about moral values.

Moral realism requires one to find objective justifications for moral beliefs and claims. These justifications take a variety of forms—including God and nature—which the following sections will explain.

Divine and Religious Foundations for Moral Values

One way to analyze moral reasoning is by examining its **foundation**—that is, how it supports claims about morality. Throughout history, many humans have relied upon a concept of the divine to justify moral claims and values.

Ethical frameworks that are based on God can function in a variety of ways depending on the concept of the divine. God can function as the highest good. In this case, God provides an exemplar for the virtues and values that should guide human action. For example, if God is a loving being, humans should develop their ability to love, and performing loving actions will be the basis for morality. The concept of God can function as an ultimate judge who decides what is right and wrong from an omnipotent and infallible position. In this case, God provides an objective standpoint for moral judgment. With this ethical framework, humans may disagree on what is right or wrong because of their limited perspectives, but morality is not relative or arbitrary because it rests on eternal truths from an all-knowing God.

FIGURE 8.4 This medieval engraving of the Great Chain of Being from the *Rhetorica Christiana* by Fray Diego de Valadés (1579) depicts God on a throne ruling over all that exists. The concept of God can function as a foundation for deciding what is right and wrong. (credit: "The Great Chain of Being from the Rhetorica christiana by Fray Diego de Valades (1579)" by Diego de Valadés/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Religions frequently claim knowledge about the nature and source of reality, the meaning of human existence, the foundations for morality, the purpose of suffering in the world, and what happens when people die. Many religions consider the tenets of their faith to come from a divine source, sacred revelations, or prophets. Religions also look to scripture, sacred practices and customs, images, and objects to determine moral values.

Augustine on Faith and Knowledge

Those who challenge the divine as a source of moral authority question whether these moral beliefs are based on only faith or whether they are justified true beliefs that can be accepted as knowledge. **Faith** refers to beliefs that are not proven, including beliefs that cannot be proven. The medieval monk, theologian, and philosopher Augustine of Hippo (354–430) argued that there are many things in life people claim to know that are actually based on faith. His argument attempts to blur the distinction between faith and knowledge. For example, if people are not adopted, they typically claim to know who their parents are and take that as firm knowledge, not belief. Yet people are not able to remember their own births or the earliest years of their lives, so they did not confirm this belief with their own observations. For Augustine, this is how faith works. In this sense, faith and knowledge serve a similar purpose in human life and the values people hold.

The Euthyphro problem

Using God as the basis for moral values can introduce challenging philosophical questions that are difficult to answer. The **Euthyphro problem** describes such a challenge in theistic ethical systems. It asks whether something is good because God commands it or if God commands it because it is good. The name comes from the Platonic dialogue *Euthyphro*, which features a conversation between the philosopher Socrates and a man named Euthyphro who claims to be an expert on piety. Socrates asks, "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" (Plato, *Euthyphro* 10a). In the former case, the gods do not determine what is good, so there must be a higher authority above the gods. In the latter

case, the gods remain the ultimate authority, but there are no discernible principles for why they love what they love. That means that piety is a command from above without reason, which limits one's ability to theorize about it. This idea is called **divine command theory**.

The former case, however, introduces a problem regarding God's sovereignty and omnipotence because it places moral principles above the divine and seems to set up a situation in which there are rules not even God may violate. In other words, if God cannot act immorally, is God truly all-powerful?

Natural and Human Foundations for Moral Values

Different ethical frameworks rest on different foundations or justifications: some appeal to a nonhuman principle like nature; others appeal to shared human institutions like culture, tradition, society, or law; and still others appeal to the individual and their resources for moral reasoning. This section examines moral reasoning based on nature, society, politics, the self, or reason.

Nature and Natural Law

One approach to ethics appeals to nature or natural law to make claims about what is good or bad. An action, goal, or characteristic is good if it accords with nature or natural law and is bad if it violates it. Here, *nature* can refer to human nature or the observed features of the natural world.

According to the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), there are four types of laws: eternal, natural, human, and divine. Eternal laws govern the universe, natural laws govern the natural world, and human laws govern human societies. Divine laws are supernatural and allow humans to reach salvation but cannot be known through human reason alone. Instead, they must be revealed by God (e.g., the Ten Commandments, Scriptures, and other divine revelations). Humans can use reason, however, to discover natural laws and create human laws. For Aquinas, human laws must align with natural law. Human laws that violate the laws of nature are "no longer a law but a perversion of law" (Aquinas [1485] 1948, 649). Aquinas's argument contributes to classical **natural law theory**, which sees laws as upholding natural order. Because nature is not subjective, natural law theory sees values as objective.

Ethical Naturalism

As discussed earlier, some philosophers believe that an essential link between values and telos, or purpose, creates an objective moral reality. **Ethical naturalism** argues that performing good actions fulfills human nature, while performing evil actions distorts it. If this is the case, moral values and "what is good" are based on natural facts about the world, not individuals' subjective feelings or beliefs. Ethical naturalism often relies on concepts of pleasure, desire, happiness, or flourishing to define what is naturally good or bad.

The 20th-century philosopher Philippa Foot (1920–2010) provides one of the most famous philosophical arguments for ethical naturalism. In *Natural Goodness* (2003), Foot argues that moral values like "goodness" are not about statements, as G. E. Moore suggested in *Principia Ethica*, or about mere emotions that individuals feel, but are instead about human flourishing. Just as bees have qualities that help them thrive and build strong colonies, so humans have virtues that help them to thrive in life and build flourishing communities. Foot's description of flourishing is influenced by Aristotle, who based his concept of ethics on an examination of different virtues, which involve fulfilling one's telos, or purpose. This approach to morality is called **virtue ethics**. In ethical naturalism and virtue ethics, discovering moral values requires understanding one's nature, which must be based on an objective understanding of human life.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theory explores virtue ethics in greater depth.

In *Natural Goodness*, Foot further argues that moral evaluations are similar to the types of evaluations that people make about other living things in the natural world. Moral goodness describes how one should live

according to human nature. Just as you can know what is good for an animal by studying its nature, you can know what is good for humans by understanding their nature.

More importantly, Foot argues that part of understanding *what* an organism is involves knowing what is good for it based on its vital processes. For example, you know what is good for a duck based on knowledge of what a duck is. This knowledge would include an understanding of the duck's nature and what helps it live a good life. A duck is an aquatic bird, so a habitat with water will be good for it. Along similar lines, you can know what is good for a human based on knowledge of human nature.

In this sense, she connects morality to biological flourishing, or achieving the goals of human life. For example, if the purpose of human life is to develop meaningful relationships and to actualize one's potential, then morality is based on the virtues that allow someone to achieve these ends. For example, one could argue that humans, like other primates, have evolved to cooperate and care for others as a part of their survival, so actions that promote cooperation and care are good, and actions that harm others are bad.

Reason

Some ethical theories focus exclusively on certain human capacities, like reason. **Reason** is a methodical way of thinking that uses evidence and logic to draw conclusions. The use of reason as the grounds for morality became particularly important in Enlightenment philosophy because philosophers wanted to assert the validity of moral principles without relying on religious beliefs or God.

FIGURE 8.5 Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that an action is moral if it can be universal. (credit: "Bildnis des Immanuel Kant" by Johann Friedrich Schleuen (senior)/Leipzig University Library, Public Domain)

The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that as rational agents, humans express general principles or maxims when they act. You always act for a reason—namely, a goal or end in mind. For Kant, an action or decision is moral if you can universalize it, which he formulates in the **categorical imperative**. Kant's categorical imperative states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant [1785] 1998, 31). That means you know an action is moral if can be universal for everyone. The categorical imperative works best when we note that an action

contradicts it. For example, lying cannot be moral because it is not universalizable. It is impossible for everyone to lie. Even the act of lying assumes that people usually tell the truth.

Self

Other approaches to ethical theory argue that morality originates in the self. How do people know what is right or wrong? What motivates them to be good and care for others? Some argue that the **conscience**, an individual's inner sense of right and wrong, forms the basis for ethics. But where does one get this inner sense? Some argue that it comes through **intuition**—cognition that seems completely self-evident and impossible to deny—while others assert that individuals develop it through education or reason.

Other approaches to ethics rely upon the individual's psychology, moral sentiments, or feelings. Multiple moral theories emphasize **compassion** and **empathy**, the ability to suffer with and share others' feelings. For the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius (371–289 BCE), the feeling of compassion allows benevolent actions, which are the basis for ethics and well-being. Compassion and empathy might also be considered virtues that individuals cultivate. Virtue ethics bases its moral theory on virtues as personal characteristics that an individual can develop.

Feminist care ethics bases ethics on individuals' feelings for the people who play a significant role in their lives. In her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, the American philosopher Nel Noddings (b. 1929) argues that an "ethics built on caring" is "characteristically and essentially feminine" insofar as it arises out of women's experiences, which are traditionally defined through caregiving roles (2013, 8).

An important debate within ethical theory is the importance of **altruism**, which is the selfless care for others' well-being. Some moral philosophers argue that only altruistic actions are completely moral, while others assert that self-interest can motivate the moral treatment of others. It is this issue that the next section addresses.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

In the above section, you learned that there are many different possible sources for moral knowledge. Do you think there are objective sources of moral knowledge? Why or why not?

8.4 Well-Being

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe Epicurean hedonism and utilitarianism.
- Analyze arguments for and against satisfactionism as a determinant of well-being.
- Identify objective goods that contribute to well-being.
- Outline different approaches to eudaimonism.

Well-being—or flourishing, as it is sometimes called—is a widely discussed topic in value theory because it helps us to understand what we value and why. The things people value in life—for example, a just society, good health, beautiful art, physical pleasure, and supportive friendships—contribute to their well-being. For some philosophers, well-being determines values. If you want to define whether an action is valuable, you must determine whether it promotes the well-being of a person.

Well-being focuses on what is good *for a person*, not simply what is good in an abstract sense. It also focuses on intrinsic goods that contribute to a flourishing life. In what follows, you will learn about different concepts of well-being and how they can help you think about what is valuable and good. There are three general ways philosophers approach the value of well-being: (1) pleasure, (2) desire, and (3) objective goods.

Hedonism

Some philosophers describe well-being as obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain. The general term for this approach is **hedonism**. The term *hedonism* has a different meaning in philosophy than in popular usage. In everyday language, *hedonism* refers to extravagant indulgence in bodily pleasures. By contrast, philosophical hedonism is not about just bodily pleasure—it takes emotional and mental pleasure and pain into account as well. A philosophical hedonist will prioritize intellectual pleasures or long-lasting pleasures that contribute to a good and meaningful life, rather than momentary and fleeting pleasures.

Hedonism is based on the idea that pleasure and pain are the two most fundamental emotions or states of being. For a hedonist, pleasure is good and pain is bad, and for this reason they can serve as principles for determining well-being.

Epicurus's Hedonism

Hedonism has a long philosophical history. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE) founded a school of philosophy called Epicureanism, which taught that pleasure is the highest good. Epicurus's concept of pleasure, however, is not simply physical and is far from being extravagant, materialistic, or indulgent. He taught that a life of moderation, virtue, and philosophy would be the most pleasurable. He believed it was important to tame wild desires that are impossible to satisfy and that cause unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life. His philosophy focused on methods for achieving freedom from mental, emotional, and physical pain through **ataraxia** (tranquility). For Epicurus, achieving ataraxia requires confronting irrational fears, especially the fear of death.

The concept of hedonism and even the word *Epicurean* have very different meanings in popular usage now. Hedonism describes reveling in indulgent bodily and sensory pleasures like food, alcohol, and sex. The term *Epicurean* often refers to individuals who take especial pleasure in food and drink, like a wine connoisseur or someone obsessed with Michelin star restaurants. However, for Epicurus, the best thing in life was having good friends who want to discuss philosophy.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is considered hedonistic because it bases moral theory on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. For the utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), values rest on pleasure and pain, which are psychological states of mind. Pleasure is a psychological state of mind that is intrinsically good, while pain is a psychological state of mind that is intrinsically bad. The value of an action thus rests on the psychological state it causes. Utilitarians evaluate actions based on the intensity, duration, certainty, and extent of pleasure or pain and the number of people it affects. In general, utilitarian philosophers believe that an action is moral if it leads to the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people. Thus, utilitarianism can be described as a method for maximizing well-being.

Qualitative Distinctions in Pleasure

Pleasure can be a slippery term. It is experiential, but it can be experienced in many different ways. For this reason, philosophers often create distinctions to explain different types of pleasure. Pleasure can be sensory or bodily, affective or emotional, and mental or emotional. You can describe the pleasure of biting into a juicy apple, watching light reflect on water, and feeling soft textures. You can describe the elation of achieving a goal, the joy of receiving good news, and the comfort of spending time with a close friend. You can also describe the gratification of learning something new, the satisfaction of sharing ideas with others, and the euphoria of immersing one's focus entirely in an activity.

Pleasure as a State of Mind

Pleasure seems to be a feeling or sensation, but also much more. For example, savoring an apple means taking pleasure in its taste. Here the pleasure depends on the taste being good, but the pleasure we take in tasting it is not the same as simply tasting it. For this reason, some philosophers have argued that pleasure is not simply

sensation but instead involves a notion of good. That is, pleasure satisfies a desire for what is good, which involves a state of mind, not just a sensation—and so involves reasoning, beliefs, or the satisfaction of a desire.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theory explores utilitarianism in greater depth.

As a result, critics of hedonistic philosophies complain that pleasure is too varied, indeterminate, subjective, and conditional to be a solid basis for ethics, well-being, or any philosophical theory, and that well-being consists of more than pleasure. The experience machine illustrates this issue.

The Experience Machine (a Thought Experiment)

The **experience machine** is a critique of hedonism and pleasure-based concepts of well-being. In this thought experiment created by American thinker Robert Nozick (1938 – 2002) in 1974, a person can be plugged into an "experience machine" that gives them every experience they value and enjoy. Moreover, they would be completely unaware of the machine, which means they would experience everything as real even though it would all be an illusion. The thought experiment prompts one to think about what makes life good. Is well-being simply a state of mind that a machine could replicate, or is there more to it? For Nozick, it is not a good life because it is not real. People want what is real, and they want to really do things. Pleasure alone does not satisfy that need and desire.

Well-Being and the Satisfaction of Desire

Another way to think of well-being is the satisfaction of desire. There are multiple ways to define desire and think about its satisfaction. One approach is to describe desire as action based. A person's desires dispose them to take certain actions—for example, you eat because you desire food. Another approach is to think of desire as related to beliefs about what is good. In this case, you would say that you eat because you believe it is good to do so. This theory of desire explains why it is relevant to philosophical concepts of well-being. Well-being is satisfying one's desires. This concept of well-being is called **satisfactionism**.

In satisfactionism, if an individual is able to satisfy larger desires in their life, they live a good life. Flourishing is thus a matter of desire satisfaction that is dependent upon the individual's preferences. However, individuals can be wrong about what is good and can make choices that they think will bring them happiness but do not. For example, a person may believe that being an astronaut will make them happy in life but then discover that they do not deal well with the loneliness of long space flights. Had they understood what being an astronaut entails, they would not have desired it. So only the satisfaction of informed desires leads to happiness, while the satisfaction of uninformed desires might not.

Cognitivism and Non-cognitivism

Explaining well-being in terms of desire and preferences exposes specific disagreements in how philosophers think about values—more specifically, whether values have content. In other words, do values express explicit ideas and beliefs that you can put in a statement, or are values the emotional states of an individual? **Cognitivism** argues that values are cognitive (involve thought) and express statements about properties of things (e.g., this apple is healthy) or states of events (e.g., the sinking of the Titanic was a tragedy). **Non-cognitivism** argues that values are not cognitive because they do not necessarily make statements about properties of things or states of events and have more to do with a psychological state of mind.

Emotivism

Emotivism is a branch of non-cognitivism that argues that value judgments express someone's emotions, which unlike a belief cannot be true or false. English philosopher A. J. Ayer (1910–1989), a proponent for moral emotivism, proposed that people do not hold moral beliefs; instead, they emote moral feelings. That means that if someone says, "Killing innocent people is bad," they are expressing how they *feel* about killing

innocent people rather than making a statement that can be proven or disproven or that is up for debate.

Contemporary moral philosophers often argue against emotivism because it means that values are dependent on individuals' feelings and thus are completely subjective. Moral philosophy often attempts to assert that there are objective values, particularly when it comes to well-being. The following section will explain such philosophical approaches.

Well-Being and Objective Goods

Another approach to well-being is to create lists of objective goods that contribute to a flourishing life. Unlike desire-based concepts of well-being, objective goods can argue against personal preferences. Distinguishing between desire and objective goods can be useful in situations where personal desire conflicts with what is good for the person. As an example, consider a good that clearly contributes to well-being, like health. One could argue that a balanced diet and frequent physical activity are objective goods. Even if an individual desires to eat unhealthy food or live a sedentary lifestyle, their individual preferences do not change what is objectively good. Philosophers who propose that there are objective goods frequently focus on knowledge, virtue, and friendship as ways to evaluate and understand well-being.

Knowledge

Aristotle began his *Metaphysics* with the idea that the desire to know is a universal human quality. Part of being human is to seek knowledge. People are curious. They have a sense of wonder. They value discovery. By contrast, having a lack of knowledge about the world can lead to poor decisions, confusion, anxieties, delusions, and other states of minds and activities that detract from well-being. For these reasons, knowledge can be considered an important part of well-being and flourishing in life.

Virtue

Virtue is also considered an objective good. The ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle considered virtue to be essential to a good life. In ancient Greek, the word for virtue was **arête**, which can also be translated as "excellence." To determine the arête, or excellence, of something, you have to know what its purpose or function is. For example, the purpose of a knife is to cut things, so its arête is sharpness. A good knife is a sharp knife. It is easier to determine the arête of a practical object like a knife than the arête of a person. For this reason, Socrates argues that people need to "discuss virtue everyday" and continually examine their lives (Plato [399–360 BCE] 2002, 41). Virtue is not simply a characteristic or personality trait for the ancient Greeks. It is a way of living.

FIGURE 8.6 Determining the arête, or excellence, of objects is often a straightforward undertaking. These teacups, for example, should fulfill their function of holding tea very well. Determining the function of human existence,

however, is more difficulty, making determining arête in this context much trickier. (credit: "Teacups" by Heather/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* describes virtue as promoting human well-being. To determine what actions are virtuous, Aristotle proposes that virtue is the mean between a deficiency and excess. Vices, the opposite of virtues, are deficiencies or excesses. Aristotle uses bravery as an example (Book II, Chapter 7, §2). Bravery is virtue that involves having the right amount of fear and confidence. It is the mean between excessive fear and deficient confidence on one hand (cowardice) and deficient fear and excessive confidence (rashness) on the other hand. In this way, the virtuous action will be the golden mean, neither too much nor too little. Virtue thus describes being able to do the right thing in the right way, a quality that contributes to one's well-being.

Friendship

Friendship is also considered an objective good. A person's social relations and close ties to others also allow them to flourish. For Aristotle, friendship is "necessary for our life" (1155a5). In Book VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identifies three different types of friendships: (1) friendships of pleasure, (2) friendships of utility, and (3) friendships of character. The first two types of friendship are instrumental in the sense that these friends are not appreciated for themselves but instead are a means to another end (pleasure or usefulness). Aristotle thinks that these friendships dissolve easily. For Aristotle, friendships based on an appreciation of someone's character are stronger and do not dissolve when circumstances change. These types of friends recognize what is good in each other as people and want what is good for each other. In these ways, friendships contribute to our well-being.

Eudaimonia (Human Flourishing)

Philosophers sometimes use the word **eudaimonia**, the ancient Greek term for "happiness" or "human flourishing," to describe well-being. Eudaimonia is a hard word to translate. People often associate the word happiness with a fleeting moment of elation or personal satisfaction rather than a state of overall well-being. However, eudaimonia is not a mere feeling or temporary high. It describes one's life as a whole, not just how one feels, which is why the term flourishing is used more often. Flourishing also has the sense of thriving according to one's nature. We add human to flourishing to specify that we mean excelling in the things that are proper to a human life.

Ancient Greek View of Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia is derived from the words for "good" (eu) and "spirit" (daimon). A daimon was a guardian spirit that would help someone through life and guide them to the underworld. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates claimed his daimon told him to philosophize so he could awaken the Athenian people. Eudaimonia is more than a temporary feeling of joy or elation. It is having a good spirit through life, or—to put in more modern terms—having a flourishing life, full of all the good things a life can provide.

For Plato and Aristotle, eudaimonia is related to the virtue or excellence of something (arête). Virtue or excellence is determined by the nature and purpose of something. For humans, one simply needs to determine the virtues that are proper to human nature and practice them to flourish in life. Moreover, flourishing in life gives an indication that one is acting well or virtuously. For Aristotle, virtue alone was not sufficient for flourishing. After all, someone could be very virtuous and suffer a grave misfortune. Suffering seems antithetical to flourishing. However, ancient Stoics believed that virtue was sufficient for flourishing and that tragic circumstances could not rob someone of their flourishing, because it could not take away their virtue. These debates in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy help us to think about whether an individual cultivates flourishing through their own agency alone or whether circumstances determine flourishing, or whether perhaps both are true.

G. E. M. Anscombe and Modern Eudaimonism

The British philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (1919–2001), known as G. E. M. Anscombe,

critiqued Aristotle's ethics and eudaimonism in her 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy." For Anscombe, Aristotle's concept of eudaimonism is too vague to be useful to moral philosophy, and many of the virtues he describes in *Nicomachean Ethics* do not fit within a moral framework.

At the same time that Anscombe critiqued ancient Greek eudaimonism as a principle for moral philosophy, she denied that modern philosophy had provided any better alternatives. For Anscombe, modern moral philosophies, such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, use "oughts" that have no firm foundation. She argues that an "ought" implies a command or law, which requires a legislator. This concept of morality works well within a theistic framework where God serves as a legislator, but modern moral philosophy presents itself as secular, not religious. Anscombe's contemporaries took up the challenge of describing human flourishing and virtues in a more rigorous manner that could form the foundation for modern moral philosophy.

Perfectionism

Another way to approach human flourishing is to think of the highest attainable good for an individual, human nature, or society. This approach to ethics is called **perfectionism**. There are a variety of ways that perfectionism can be articulated. For Thomas Aquinas, one's goal in life is to become a perfect image of God (Aquinas [1485] 1948, 439). Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) argued in his *Ethics* ([1677] 1985) that people pursue what will increase and perfect their powers and capacities. For example, joy allows people to rise to greater perfection, while sadness leads to less perfection. There are many other philosophies of self-perfection across the history of ideas. In each of them, you can see how the concept of well-being is tied to perfecting oneself.

Kant's Kingdom of Ends

For Kant, values are not psychological states but instead are rational maxims. As explained previously, Kant bases his moral philosophy on the categorical imperative, which helps one recognize moral and immoral actions based on whether they can be turned into a universal maxim that applies to everyone. Kant provides other formulations of the categorical imperative, where he states that one must always treat humans as "ends in themselves" rather than "a means to an end." This means that you cannot use other people as instruments to achieve your goals.

Kant states that another way to arrive at a universal maxim is to imagine you are creating laws for a kingdom of ends. The **kingdom of ends** is a hypothetical, ideal society in which every individual is treated as an end and no one is treated as a means to an end. It would be a society of equals, where everyone flourishes. In this sense, Kant's moral philosophy uses the concept of an ideal or perfect society as a guiding principle.

Japanese Notion of *Ikigai* (Reason for Being)

Japanese psychology takes up the concept of **ikigai** (reason for being) to describe well-being. Contemporary psychologist Michiko Kumano describes two senses of well-being in Japan: (1) *shiawase*, or hedonic well-being, and (2) *ikigai*, or reason for being. He explains that while shiawase is a state of contentment or happiness and freedom from worry, ikigai deals more with what makes life meaningful. He explains that ikigai is "less philosophical and more intuitive, irrational, and complicated in its nuances than other related terms in Western languages" (Kumano 2017, 421). How does one experience this nuanced, intuitive sense of purpose in life? For Kumano, ikigai has to do with devoting oneself to goals and activities that are aligned with one's values.

8.5 Aesthetics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast objective and subjective concepts of beauty.
- Describe aesthetic judgment.
- Explain the relation between aesthetics and environmentalism.
- Explain the relation between aesthetics and feminism.
- Describe everyday aesthetics.

Thus far, the chapter has touched on fairly abstract concepts related to value. However, value theory has very concrete applications. Aesthetics is an area of value theory that examines how people evaluate works of art and other aesthetic experiences in nature and their everyday lives.

Beauty

A central concept in aesthetics is beauty. What is beauty? Is beauty an objective or subjective value? Even if you take beauty to be a subjective judgment, there are different ways to approach thinking about it. Are judgments of beauty completely "in the eye of the beholder," as the popular phrase indicates, or are there criteria or patterns that determine individuals' responses? Is beauty arbitrary, or can we discover some framework for explaining our experiences of it?

Objective Concepts of Beauty

For ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, beauty is a quality of an object. These thinkers asserted that there was objective criteria for explaining what is beautiful. Plato believed that beauty is a quality of an object and that there is one true "form" or essence of the beautiful that explains why individual things are beautiful. The beautiful itself has to do with harmony, proportion, and balance.

This concept of the beautiful makes sense if you look at ancient Greek art. The ancient Greeks used mathematical ratios to determine the perfect proportions for their temples and sculptures. The Greek sculptor Polykleitos (5th century BCE) developed mathematical rules for sculpting the human form so that the proportions of the body would be beautiful and lifelike.

FIGURE 8.7 Michaelangelo was heavily inspired by Greek and Roman mythology, and Michaelangelo's David displays the mathematical ratios and proportions that were an integral part of the Greek understanding of beauty. This sculpture exhibits the contrapposto stance: one foot forward and the opposite arm raised as if about to shift its weight. The contrapposto position expresses balance and harmonious movement. (credit: "Florence1988" by David Wright/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In Plato's philosophy, moreover, beauty is not simply a sensory or emotional response to things of this world; it is transcendent and immaterial and involves one's soul and mind. The experience of beauty is ecstatic in the sense that it lifts one beyond this world. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the soul sprouting and growing wings when it beholds something beautiful. As the wings grow, the soul is able to ascend to new heights.

Subjective Concepts of Beauty

In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, Enlightenment philosophers argued that beauty is a subjective judgment, meaning it is a statement about what a person feels rather a quality of an object. For Hume, judgments of beauty are statements of taste. In Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), he points out that we witness great variety in taste, even among people who share similar cultural and educational backgrounds. He also notes the way that debates about taste frequently descend into condescension and defensiveness. Taste is very personal, and people feel passionately about their judgments of taste. Yet Hume still asserts that people can educate, develop, and refine their taste, which can then give their judgments more weight. For Hume, critics with refined taste ultimately decide what is good or bad art.

Aesthetic Judgment

Aesthetic theory also examines how people make judgments about art. Are aesthetic judgments rational? Do they have justifications, and if so, what kind of justifications?

Kant and Aesthetic Judgment

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant, like Hume, considers judgments of taste to be subjective—that is, a statement about the subject's response to an object. However, he thinks that when people experience beauty, they also think that others *ought* to feel the same way. Moreover, Kant thinks that art and

beauty are not a matter of personal preference because values and ideals are involved. If you enjoy something that is a mere personal preference, like an ice cream flavor, you will not necessarily expect others to like it and will not feel insulted if they dislike it. But the same is not necessarily true for art. For example, maybe you cannot explain why you prefer chocolate ice cream—it simply tastes better to you. However, you can explain why you love Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and think that others should read it too. Kant cares about the values involved with aesthetic judgments because he believes that the beautiful prepares people to love what is good.

Sibley and Aesthetic Judgment

How do people justify aesthetic judgments? Are there rules or a specific rationale that are needed? In "Aesthetic Concepts," British philosopher Frank Sibley (1923 – 1996) distinguishes between two types of remarks people make about art: sensory observations—what anyone with the sense of sight or hearing can observe—and aesthetic judgments, which require sensitivity to details and discernment (1959). Sibley notes that people frequently base aesthetic judgments on sensory observations. For example, you might describe a painting as melancholic because of its blue palette. However, Sibley argues that this does not mean that a person's sensory observations require that they arrive at a particular aesthetic judgment. Someone could disagree with your assessment of the painting and describe it as calm rather than melancholic. In this sense, aesthetic judgments have justifications but not necessary rules, conditions, or relations between what a person sees and how they interpret or judge it.

The Intentional Fallacy

Who determines what a work of art means? Its audience? Art historians or critics? Some people assert that it is the intention of the artist that determines the meaning of the work of art. For literary theorist William Kurtz Wimsatt (1907 – 1975) and philosopher of art Monroe Beardsley (1915 – 1985), both Americans, this is a fallacy: the **intentional fallacy**. Wimsatt and Beardsley point out that people are able to describe, interpret, and evaluate a work of art without any reference to the artist's intentions and, furthermore, that these intentions are often unknown and unavailable (1946).

There are other reasons not to limit the meaning of a work of art to the artist's intentions. A work of art takes on a life of its own as it becomes known to the public and incorporated into spaces where it is discussed, compared, analyzed, and catalogued. Additionally, intentions do not always land correctly. An artist might intend to provoke a particular reaction and fail to do so, or the work of art might incite a response that the artist could not possibly anticipate. Audiences' reactions to the work of art are meaningful and, more importantly, not always a misinterpretation if they differ from the intentions of the artist.

Art and Values

Studying aesthetics can lay bare what societies value, how they express that value, and who gets to create values. Since aesthetic values are shaped by culture, society, class, religion, politics, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, art intervenes in ethical and social-political issues—and vice versa.

Feminist Aesthetics

Feminism, as defined by American social activist bell hooks (1952 – 2021), "is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks 2015, 1). Art provides one way to investigate the exploitation and oppression of women, particularly since women have been excluded from art. In past centuries, women were not allowed to study at art academies or exhibit their work at galleries. Additionally, the women who managed to create art were often marginalized and at times brutally punished for trying to make their way into the art world, like the 17th-century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, who was sexually assaulted by a man from her father's art circle and then dishonored and tortured in court. Women of color have been excluded from the art world to an even greater degree, particularly if their works of art do not fit within the classical "canon" of art, which focuses on "great" works of art like large-scale paintings, epic novels, and other traditionally masculine arts. Often, works of art that are tied to handicraft and domestic arts are excluded from the canon of great

works of art, which means that many creations by a variety of women are ignored.

In the 1980s, a group of anonymous women artist-activists called the Guerrilla Girls—a reference to guerrilla fighters and the fact that they used gorilla masks to hide their identities—started a billboard campaign to shed light on this issue. They created a poster that pointed out the exclusion of women artists from the Metropolitan Museum. It provided the statistic that "less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female" (Guerrilla Girls 1989) and raised the question of whether women have to be naked to be in a museum. The Guerilla Girls are still active and continue to use playful campaigns to raise awareness about feminist issues.

FIGURE 8.8 In the 1980s, a group of feminists calling themselves The Guerrilla Girls' created this poster about women's objectification and lack of representation in art museums. (credit: "Guerrilla girls" by Ryohei Noda/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Environmental Aesthetics

People often think about art in terms of spaces like a museum or gallery, not the great outdoors. Moreover, some philosophers, like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831), draw a sharp distinction between natural beauty and artistic beauty to assert the superiority of human creation over the natural world. Some art, however, challenges the elevation of art over nature and uses art to immerse people in nature. There are many examples of land art in prehistoric and Indigenous cultures—for example, earthworks and mounds made by pre-Columbian Native Americans. Contemporary land art blurs the distinction between nature and art in ways that allow one to contemplate the profound effect people have had the natural world and to reorient themselves to the sublime beauty and grandeur of natural landscapes.

FIGURE 8.9 *Sun Tunnels*, by American artist Nancy Holt (1938 – 2014) is an art installation of massive concrete tunnels placed in the Great Basin Desert of Utah. The tunnels are large enough for people to sit inside, and they are

placed so that their openings frame the sun on the horizon during solstices. Holt described the purpose of the art installation as bringing "the vast space of the desert back to human scale." (credit: "Nancy Holt, Sun Tunnels, 1973-1976" by Retis/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Land art was an art movement in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to relocate works of art from the commercialized spaces of museums and galleries to the natural world. Some examples of land art challenge the distinction between the human world and the natural world. The Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) did an "earth-body" series of works that involved pressing her body into natural landscapes and photographing the impressions, as well as still and moving film of her interacting with natural landscapes. Her intention was to develop a spiritual connection with the earth using her body. Art can help people think about their relationship to the natural world and their responsibility for the environment.

At times, works of art have also served as environmental interventions. For example, in her 2020 art project *The Distant Is Imminent*, American photographer Camille Seaman (b. 1969) projected images of melting icebergs from Antarctica and the Artic onto buildings in cities that will be affected by the rising sea level. The projections showed the estimated water line for 2050, which allowed spectators to envision their surroundings swallowed by the ocean due to climate change. These works of art are meant to create more than an aesthetic experience—they are calls to collective action and change.

Everyday Aesthetics

While many approaches to aesthetics focus on works of art and artistic creations, you can find aesthetically significant objects, experiences, and practices all around you. **Everyday aesthetics** asserts the prevalence of aesthetically meaningful experiences in one's ordinary day-to-day life—for example, listening to the rain fall on a roof, admiring the pattern of leaves on the ground, and even choosing what shirt to wear or how to decorate your living spaces.

FIGURE 8.10 Everyday aesthetics calls attention to the aesthetically meaningful experiences in day-to-day life. (credit: "Tall Grass" by Tom Shockey/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Japanese aesthetics is a rich source of inspiration for everyday aesthetics. Japanese aesthetics often incorporates Zen Buddhism to encourage mindful attention to the beauty of things around us. Additionally, Japanese aesthetics focuses on the small and impermanent, such as cherry blossoms and tea ceremonies, as opposed to the large-scale grandiose "masterpieces" favored by traditional European aesthetics. As Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo (1863 – 1913) explains in *The Book of Tea*, Japanese tea ceremonies are "founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence" (Kakuzo [1906] 1956, 3). In Japanese culture, everyday aesthetic practices are a moral and religious form of self-cultivation.

Contemporary Japanese American philosopher Yuriko Saito's approach to everyday aesthetics brings

Japanese aesthetics and environmental aesthetics together to address the moral dimensions of aesthetics and its impact on the world. She explains that everyday aesthetics decenters works of art in ways that broaden people's discussions and help them understand the way questions of taste and beauty enrich their lives and impact the environment (Saito 2007). By focusing on the many aesthetic dimensions of life, people can examine what they value.

WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Write a short essay (2-3 paragraphs) addressing the following: What in your everyday life do you consider to be aesthetically meaningful? Describe why you think of it as aesthetic. How is it different from a work of art that you might encounter in a museum or gallery? How is it similar?

Value theory gives people tools for identifying, formulating, and questioning the values that are important to them as individuals and as a society. Even if you never take another philosophy course, you can use these ideas to think about your choices in life, what you desire or find pleasurable and good, and how you define well-being or a just society.

Summary

8.1 The Fact-Value Distinction

The fact-value distinction distinguishes between what is the case (facts) and what we think ought to be the case (values) based on beliefs about what is good, beautiful, important, etc. Descriptive claims are statements about matters of fact, whereas evaluative claims express a judgment about something's value. Descriptive claims make statements about *how the world is.* Evaluative claims make statements about *how the world ought to be*.

The naturalistic fallacy is an error in reasoning that assumes we can derive values (what we *ought* to do) from facts about the world (what *is* the case). The is-ought problem asserts the challenge of moving from statements of fact (something *is*) to statements of value (something *ought* to be).

Moral realists argue for a more objective concept of morality. They feel that there are certain moral facts about the world that are objectively true. Moral skeptics, on the other hand, argue against an objective basis for morality by emphasizing that moral values are *not* factual and involve a different mode of thinking that is distinct from logical or scientific reasoning.

8.2 Basic Questions about Values

Something has intrinsic value if it is valuable for its own sake. Something has extrinsic value if it is valuable for the sake of something else. The question of fundamentality is the question of whether there is only one intrinsic value or many. Monism argues that there is only one fundamental intrinsic value that forms the foundation for all other values. Pluralism argues that there are multiple fundamental intrinsic values, rather than one.

Pluralism frequently relies on the concept of incommensurability, which describes a situation in which two or more goods, values, or phenomena have no standard of evaluation that applies to them all. Moral relativism makes a larger claim than pluralism because it not only asserts that there are multiple moral frameworks, it also asserts that each framework is equally valid insofar as individuals, communities, and cultures determine what is moral.

8.3 Metaethics

Metaethics focuses on moral reasoning and foundational questions that explore the assumptions related to our moral beliefs and practice. Realism asserts that ethical values have some basis in reality and that reasoning about ethical matters requires an objective framework or foundation to discover what is truly good. Anti-realism asserts that ethical values are not based on objective facts about the world but instead rely on subjective foundations like individuals' desires and beliefs.

Different ethical frameworks rest on different foundations or justifications: some appeal to a non-human principles like nature, while others appeal to shared human institutions. Ethical frameworks that are based on God can function in a variety of ways depending on the concept of the divine. Augustine of Hippo argued that there are many things in life we claim to know that are actually based on faith. The Euthyphro problem asks whether something is good because God commands it or if God commands it because it is good. According to Thomas Aquinas, there are four types of laws: eternal, natural, human, and divine. Ethical naturalism argues that doing good actions fulfills human nature, while doing evil actions distorts it.

8.4 Well-Being

Well-being focuses on what is good *for a person*, not simply what is good in an abstract sense.

There are three general ways philosophers approach the value of well-being: (1) pleasure, (2) desire, and (3) objective goods. Some philosophers describe well-being as obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain. The general term for this approach is hedonism. Epicurus founded a school of philosophy called Epicureanism, which taught that pleasure is the highest good. Utilitarianism is considered hedonistic because it bases moral theory on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Critics of hedonistic philosophies complain that pleasure is too

varied, indeterminate, subjective, and conditional to be a solid basis for ethics.

Another way to think of well-being is the satisfaction of desire. There are multiple ways to define desire and think about its satisfaction. Cognitivism argues that values are cognitive and express statements about properties of things or states of events. Non-cognitivism argues that values are not cognitive because they have more to do with a psychological state of mind. Another approach to well-being is to create lists of objective goods that contribute to a flourishing life. Philosophers who propose that there are objective goods frequently focus on knowledge, virtue, friendship, and perfection as ways to evaluate and understand well-being.

8.5 Aesthetics

Aesthetics is an area of value theory that examines how we evaluate works of art and other aesthetic experiences in nature and our everyday lives. For ancient philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, beauty is a quality of an object. In contrast, Enlightenment philosophers argue that beauty is a subjective judgment. Aesthetic theory also examines how we make judgments about art. Studying aesthetics can lay bare what societies value, how they express that value, and who gets to create values.

Key Terms

Altruism the selfless care for others' well-being.
Anti-realism the philosophical position that argues that morality is subjective, not objective.
Arête the ancient Greek word for virtue. It can also be translated as "excellence."
Ataraxia the goal of Epicurus's hedonism: tranquility, or freedom from mental, emotional, and physical pain.
Categorical imperative Kant's concept of moral reasoning and action. "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant [1785] 1998, 31). This means you know an action is moral if can be universal for everyone.
Cognitivism the philosophical position that values are cognitive and express statements about properties of things or states of events.
Compassion the ability to care or share in others' suffering.
Conscience an individual's inner sense of right and wrong.
Descriptive claims statements that describe matters of fact or how the world is.
Divine command theory the philosophical position that uses God as the principle for morality. What is good is determined by God's commands.
Emotivism a branch of non-cognitivism that argues that value judgments only express emotion.
Empathy the ability to share others' feelings.
Ethical naturalism the philosophical position that argues that moral values are based on natural facts about the world, not individuals' subjective feelings or beliefs.
Eudaimonia the ancient Greek term for "happiness" or "human flourishing." It literally means "good" (eu) "spirit" (daimon).
Euthyphro problem a challenge to theistic ethical systems. It asks whether something is good because God commands it or if God commands it because it is good.
Evaluative claims statements that express a judgment about something's value or how the world ought to be.
Everyday aesthetics an approach to aesthetic theory that focuses on aesthetically meaningful experiences in people's ordinary day-to-day lives.
Experience machine a thought experiment in which the possibility is raised that a person might lead a pleasurable life by being plugged into a machine stimulating pleasurable experiences in their brain.
Extrinsic value the quality of being valued for the sake of something else.
Fact-value distinction the distinction between what is the case (facts) and what people think ought to be the case (values) based on beliefs about what is good, beautiful, important, etc.
Faith beliefs that are not or cannot be proven.
Fallacy an error in logical reasoning—for example, jumping to a conclusion without proper evidence.
Feminist care ethics an ethical theory that proposes that morality is based on caring for others and that

caring for others arises out of women's experiences as caregivers.

Foundation a principle, concept, or assumption on which a philosophical position is founded.

Fundamentality the issue of foundations, the philosophical inquiry into the basis for an idea or system of ideas.

Hedonism a philosophical approach to moral theory based on the idea that pleasure dictates what is good and pain dictates what is bad.

Ikigai reason for being; what makes life meaningful in an intuitive way.

Incommensurability when there is no standard of evaluation between two or more goods or values.

Intentional fallacy the faulty argument that the intention of the artist determines the meaning of the work of art.

Intrinsic value the quality of being valued for its own sake.

Intuition cognition that seems completely self-evident and impossible to deny.

Is-ought problem problem that asserts the challenge of moving from statements of fact (something *is*) to statements of value (something *ought* to be).

Kingdom of ends Kant's hypothetical, ideal society in which every individual is treated as an end and no one is treated as a means to an end. It is an idea that can be used to judge the morality of an action.

Metaethics branch of philosophy that focuses on moral reasoning and foundational questions that explore the assumptions related to moral beliefs and practice.

Monism theory that argues that there is only one fundamental intrinsic value that forms the foundation for all other values.

Moral realism the philosophical position that morality is objective, not subjective.

Moral relativism the philosophical position that there are multiple moral frameworks that are equally valid because values are relative to individuals, communities, and cultures.

Moral skepticism the philosophical position that morality is not objective.

Natural law theory an ethical position that asserts that morals are objective and derived from nature.

Naturalistic fallacy an error in reasoning that assumes one can derive values (what people *ought* to do) from facts about the world (what *is* the case).

Non-cognitivism the philosophical position that values are not cognitive because they do not necessarily make statements about properties of things or states of events and have more to do with a psychological state of mind.

Ontology of value the study of the being of values.

Open-question argument G. E. Moore's argument against the naturalistic fallacy, which he sees as trying to derive non-natural properties from natural properties. For Moore, arguing that something is "good" (a non-natural property) based on natural properties is circular and leaves an open question.

Perfectionism an approach to ethics that bases morality on the highest attainable good for an individual, human nature, or society.

Pluralism theory that argues that there are multiple fundamental intrinsic values rather than one.

Realism the philosophical position that asserts that ethical values have some basis in reality and that reasoning about ethical matters requires an objective framework or foundation.

Reason a methodical way of thinking that uses evidence and logic to draw conclusions, or the capacity to think this way.

Satisfactionism a philosophical position that defines well-being as satisfying desires.

Telos the purpose, end, or goal of something.

Utilitarianism an ethical theory that bases morality on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

Value theory the philosophical investigation of values. In its narrow sense, it refers to metaethical concerns. In its broader sense, it addresses a variety of values (ethical, social, political, religious, aesthetic, etc.)

Values beliefs and evaluations about morality, politics, aesthetics, and social issues. They often express a judgment about what people think ought to be the case.

Virtue ethics a philosophical approach to ethics based on the examination of different virtues.

Well being concept referring to what is good *for a person*, not simply what is good in an abstract sense.

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Review Questions

8.1 The Fact-Value Distinction

1. What is the fact-value distinction?
2. How are evaluative claims different from descriptive claims?
3. How does Hume describe the is-ought problem?
4. Why does Moore object to the naturalistic fallacy?
5. Why do moral realists object to the fact-value distinction?
6. How does ethical naturalism argue for moral objectivity?

8.2 Basic Questions about Values

7. What is an intrinsic value?
8. What is an extrinsic value?
9. What is monism? Why would someone argue for this position?
10. What is pluralism? Why would someone argue for this position?
11. What is incommensurability? Why would it lead to pluralism?
12. What is moral relativism?

8.3 Metaethics

13. What does "ontology of value" mean?
14. What does moral realism argue?
15. What does moral anti-realism argue?
16. How does the concept of God serve as a possible foundation for morality? How does religion serve as a possible foundation for morality?

17. What is the Euthyphro problem? How is it related to divine command theory?

18. How does nature serve as a possible foundation for morality and moral reasoning?

19. What is feminist care ethics?

20. What is Kant's categorical imperative? How does it use reason to establish morality?

8.4 Well-Being

21. What is hedonism, and how is it used to philosophize about well-being?

22. What is Epicurus's concept of pleasure?

23. How do utilitarians determine what is valuable?

24. What is Nozick's experience machine, and how does it help you think about the limitations of hedonism?

25. What is satisfactionism? Why is it important to consider informed desire?

26. How do objective goods like knowledge, virtue, and friendship contribute to well-being?

27. What is eudaimonia? How did Anscombe revive eudaimonism?

28. What is Kant's "kingdom of ends"?

29. What is ikigai, and how is it distinct from hedonistic well-being?

8.5 Aesthetics

30. What is Plato's concept of beauty? Why does it make sense within the ancient Greek art world?

31. What is Hume's concept of beauty?

32. What is Kant's concept of aesthetic judgment?

33. According to Sibley, how do people justify aesthetic judgments?

34. What is the intentional fallacy? Why is limiting the meaning of a work of art to the artist's intention a problem?

35. How is art related to environmentalism?

36. How does feminism use art?

37. What is everyday aesthetics? How is it related to Japanese aesthetics?

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Normative Moral Theory 9

FIGURE 9.1 Moral issues are a common impetus for protests and activism. (credit: modification of work "Hundreds of protesters march in down San Diego, CA in support of transgender rights" by Laurel Wreath of Victors/Wikipedia, CC0 1.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION How do you decide what to do when you face a difficult moral dilemma? When you are unsure what is right in a situation, what do you rely on, if anything, to guide you so you can do the right thing? Say, for example, you have borrowed a friend's car. You want to fill the gas tank before returning the car, but you don't know what fuel the car uses. You are in a hurry and can't reach your friend on the phone. What do you do? Do you return the car without filling it up? Do you take a wild guess or ask a person at the gas station and hope the fuel you pick doesn't damage the engine?

What you might need is a good normative moral theory. Normative ethics focuses on establishing norms and standards of moral conduct for effectively guiding our behavior. A normative moral theory is a systematized

account of morality that addresses important questions related to effectively guiding moral conduct. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to apply different types of normative moral theories to help guide your decisions at gas stations and elsewhere.

9.1 Requirements of a Normative Moral Theory

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the meaning and purpose of normative moral theory.
- Distinguish between the three areas of ethics.

This section focuses on the how normative moral theories relate to other branches of ethics, examines the requirements of normative moral theories, and introduces three major types of moral theories.

Three Areas of Ethics

Ethics is the field of philosophy that investigates morality and engages in "systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior" (Fieser 1995). It is divided into three main areas—metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics—each of which is distinguished by a different *level* of inquiry and analysis.

Metaethics focuses on moral reasoning and "whether morality exists" (Dittmer 1995). It is concerned with questions that are more abstract, ones that explore the foundations and assumptions related to our moral beliefs and practice. It attempts to understand the beliefs and presuppositions connected to morality and moral deliberation. Metaethics explores, for example, where moral values originate, what it means to say something is right or good, whether there are any objective moral facts, whether morality is (culturally) relative, and the psychological basis for moral practices and values.

Normative ethics focuses on moral behavior, on what we should do. It thus deals with questions concerning human agency, responsibility, and moral evaluation. Normative ethics attempts to establish criteria or principles for identifying norms and standards to guide correct behavior. Philosophers offer systematized accounts of morality that provide standards and norms of right conduct. There are three main approaches to normative moral theory: consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics. Each approach differs based on the criterion (consequences, duty, or character) used for determining moral conduct.

Applied ethics focuses on the application of moral norms and principles to controversial issues to determine the rightness of specific actions. Issues like abortion, euthanasia, the use of humans in biomedical research, and artificial intelligence are just a few of the controversial moral issues explored in applied ethics, which is covered in the next chapter.

A normative moral theory provides a framework for understanding our actions and determining what's right. A fully worked out moral theory often addresses all three areas of ethics (metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics), but its aim will be establishing and defending the norms of conduct it recommends.

Three Coherent Frameworks for Understanding Morality

A moral theory should make it possible to effectively guide behavior by providing a framework for determining what is morally right and arguments justifying its recommendations. Such a framework must be based on a logical foundation for its principles and provide consistent recommendations. It should, in short, make sense.

This chapter examines three distinct moral framework approaches to normative ethics: consequentialist, deontological, and virtue. **Consequentialism** looks at an action's outcome or consequences to determine whether it is morally right. Consequentialists think an action is right when it produces the greatest good (e.g., happiness or general welfare). **Deontology** focuses on duties or rules to determine the rightness of an action. Deontologists argue that an action is right when it conforms to the correct rule or duty (e.g., it is always wrong to lie). **Virtue ethics** focuses on character and the development of the right habits or traits. Virtue ethicists

argue that right action flows from right character. These three main approaches are distinguished by the criterion (i.e., consequences, duty, or character) used for determining moral conduct.

9.2 Consequentialism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the meaning and purpose of the consequentialist approach.
- Summarize Mohist and utilitarian interpretations of consequentialism.

Most people make at least some decisions based on the likely consequences of their actions. You might, for example, appeal to costs and benefits to justify a decision. For example, you might consider the happiness your friend will feel when discovering that you've filled the gas tank (a benefit) and weigh that against the price of a tank of gas (cost). In doing so, you are analyzing consequences to yourself and to your friend. Consequentialists, however, ask you to take a wider view. In consequentialism, an action is right when it produces the greatest good for everyone. An agent is tasked with assessing possible consequences to determine which action will maximize good for all those who might be impacted. This section looks at two consequentialist approaches, Mohism and **utilitarianism**.

Mohism

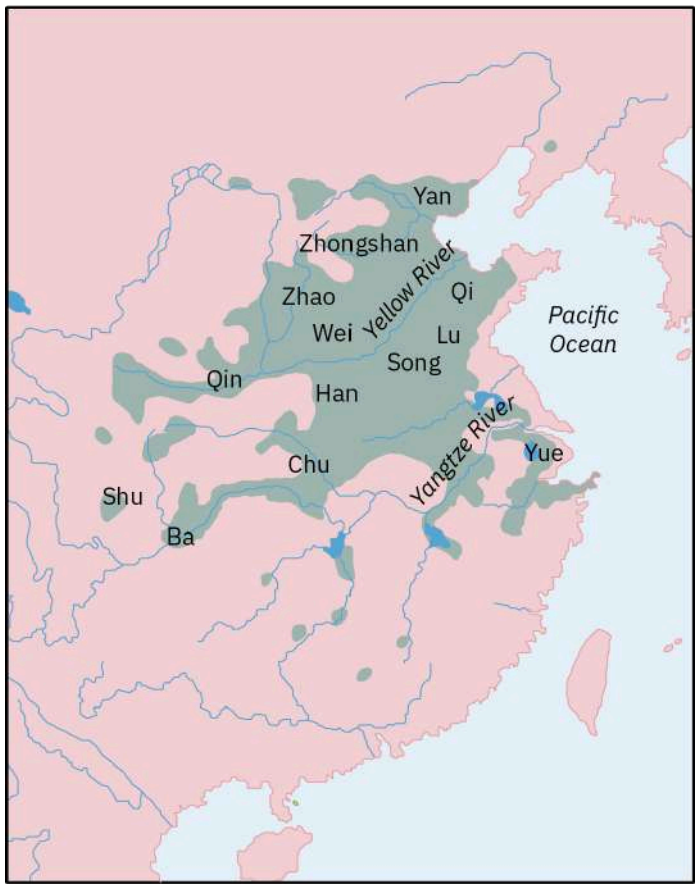

FIGURE 9.2 The Warring States period (ca. 475–221 BCE) saw intense warfare as older states located along the Yellow River declined and Qin, Qi, and Chu rose until Qin conquered the others in 221 BCE and established an imperial government. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The **Warring States period** in ancient China (ca. 475–221 BCE) was a period of widespread social unrest and discord, one characterized by warfare, suffering, and a fractured society. Thinkers in ancient China responded by exploring ways to unite people and discover (or rediscover) moral norms and standards that would promote

a better life and social harmony. Philosophies like **Mohism**, Confucianism, and Daoism were developed, making it a period marked by intellectual and cultural expansion. These philosophies, while different in important respects, are similar in that each is born as a response to the social disharmony and widespread suffering experienced during the Warring States period. Each one shows a desire to facilitate and foster change in order to overcome social challenges and improve the lives of the people.

Very little is known about the founder of Mohism, Mo Di or Mozi (ca. 430 BCE). He lived around the time of Confucius (ca. 479 BCE), the founder of Confucianism, and Laozi, the founder of Daoism. Mozi, like Confucius and Laozi, was considered a great teacher. He and early Mohists sought to establish rational, objective standards for evaluating actions and establishing ethical norms.

Four Concepts of Mohist Ethical Theory

Four interrelated concepts are at the heart of Mohist ethical theory: morality, benefit, benevolence, and care. Morality (*yì*) is determined by benefit (*lì*), which shapes how we understand our duties and define what is right. Benefit (*lì*) is defined loosely as a set of material and social goods, including virtues and practices that strengthen social order. Benefit, in turn, rested on the concept of benevolence or kindness (*rèn*), which requires that we look outside our own interests and treat others with care (*ài*). Practicing kindness is crucial for promoting social order and fair treatment. Mohists believed that we are more likely to achieve social stability and general welfare when we focus not simply on ourselves, but the betterment of others and the community.

Mohists thought ethical norms should be established by looking at what increases overall benefit. To this end, Mozi argued that we should promote the immediate welfare of individuals and consider the welfare of all when acting. If people are suffering or in need now, it makes sense, Mozi thought, to address those issues first.

As the theory developed, Mohists also came to associate benefit with happiness or delight (*xǐ*). However, most essential to Mohism is the value of impartial care of all, or universal love. They thought we should treat everyone impartially and that we shouldn't give preference to some people's welfare over others. Mohists opposed the rulers and elites during the Warring States period who had focused only on their own pleasure and gain to the detriment of everyone else.

Normative Practices: The Ten Doctrines

There are ten doctrines that form the core of early Mohism. These ten doctrines correspond to Mozi's original work, and they were treated as central even by later Mohists who developed and expanded upon early Mohist thinking. The ten doctrines are normally split into five pairs as follows:

1. "Promoting the Worthy" and "Identifying Upward"
2. "Inclusive Care" and "Condemning Aggression"
3. "Moderation in Use" and "Moderation in Burial"
4. "Heaven's Intent" and "Understanding Ghosts"
5. "Condemning Music" and "Condemning Fatalism"

The "Promoting the Worthy" and "Identifying Upward" doctrines highlight the Mohists' concern for a meritocratic system. They believed that an individual should be appointed to a position based on their performance and moral goodness. These officials should serve as models to all. Mohists assumed that people are motivated to act in ways that conform to their beliefs about what is right. They therefore believed that people needed proper moral education informed by rational, objective moral standards. Once people possess the proper knowledge, they conform their behavior accordingly. This, in turn, would address the social upheaval and disharmony that plagued their world. Mozi realized that if people adopt the same morality, they will use the same standards to judge their own actions and the actions of others, which will improve social order and harmony.

The "Inclusive Care" and "Condemning Aggression" doctrines affirm the importance of considering and caring

for everyone equally. They reinforce the idea that it is not just the individual's own benefit that matters, but the benefit of all people. Mohists therefore condemn aggression because others are harmed in the pursuit of personal benefit. During a period in which warlord battled against warlord, Mohists condemned these attempts at military conquest as selfishly immoral.

Mohists promoted the practices of "Moderation in Use" and "Moderation in Burial." They rejected lavish funerals, customs, and practices that were wasteful. Resources should be used to the benefit of individuals and society. They viewed excessive displays of wealth that only benefit the few as selfish.

Mohists use the ideas of "Heaven's Intent" and "Understanding Ghosts" to argue that there is an objective *moral world order* that individuals and society should hasten to emulate. Heaven acts as their principal standard for evaluating and understanding our moral responsibilities.

Early Mohists, in particular, also saw heaven as way to motivate individuals to act selflessly, as moral deeds would be rewarded, whereas immoral ones would be punished. Later, however, Mohists seemed to abandon or at least put less emphasis on this appeal to heaven to justify ethical norms and principles, favoring a greater emphasis on rational argumentation.

Finally, Mohists promoted the norms of "Condemning Music" and "Condemning Fatalism." The Mohist views on music stemmed from their condemnation of the powerful for being wasteful when they enjoyed lavish displays and luxuries. They felt those with wealth had a responsibility to others and should behave morally.

Mohists also believed in social mobility, such that capable, moral individuals should rise. Their support of meritocracy further underscores a belief that the individual has the power to change, to direct their own life, and to determine their own path. The Mohists condemn fatalism because it suggests that human effort is futile and undermines Mohist goals of achieving social order and a large and economically thriving population. Mohists believed that our lot in life is not set in stone, nor does fate determine our path (Fraser 2020).

Utilitarianism

The term *utility* means "useful" or "a useful thing." Utilitarians argue that what is right is whatever produces the most utility, the most usefulness. The question, then, is how do we define usefulness? The utilitarian's answer is that something is useful when it promotes happiness (or pleasure). According to utilitarians, we have a moral obligation or responsibility to choose the action that produces the most happiness.

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was the first philosopher to articulate the principle of utility. James Mill (1773–1836), an economist, political philosopher, and historian, was Bentham's friend and a follower of utilitarianism. James Mill naturally raised his son to be a utilitarian as well. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) received a rigorous homeschooling under his father's tutelage. Scholars in the fields of philosophy, political science, and economics continue to apply the insights of Bentham and Mill to this day.

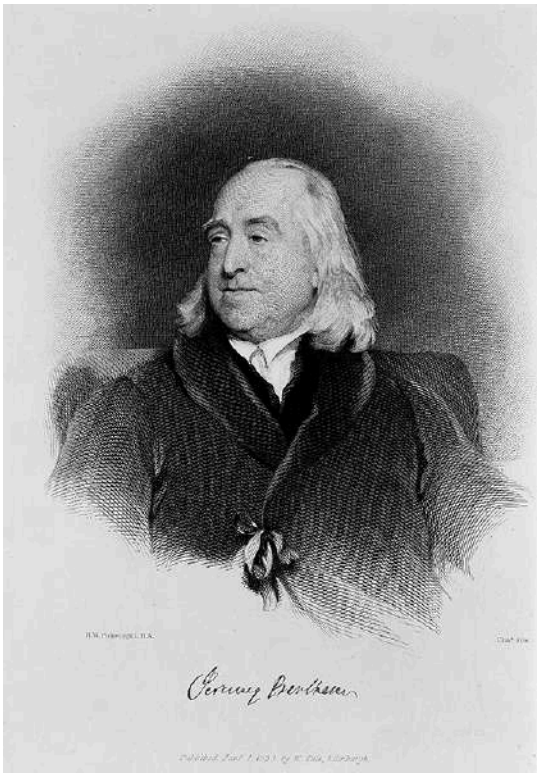

FIGURE 9.3 Portrait of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) by Henry William Pickersgill, 1838. (credit: "Jeremy Bentham. Line engraving by C. Fox, 1838, after H. W. Pickersgill." by C. Fox/Wellcome Collection)

The Principle of Utility

The **principle of utility** states that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill [1861] 2001, 7). Utilitarians argue that moral conduct is conduct that maximizes the good (or produces the most value). In economics, for example, utility is defined as the amount of enjoyment a consumer receives from a good or a service. You might, for example, choose between buying an oatmeal raisin cookie and a chocolate chip cookie. If you like them both equally, the right action would be to compare the prices and buy the cheaper one. Utility, however, is not always so easy to determine, particularly in more complex situations.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on Value Theory covers the topic of well-being in greater detail.

The Trolley Problem

Trolley problems are classic thought experiments first invented by Philippa Foot and widely employed by ethicists to explore moral reasoning (Foot 2002). Consider one such trolley problem, referred to as the *bystander case*. Imagine you are standing by trolley tracks observing the trolley cars in action. To your horror, you realize that one of the trolley cars is out of control. If nothing is done, the trolley will continue down the track, killing five workers who are performing track maintenance. You happen to be standing near a lever you can pull that will divert the trolley. If you divert the trolley, you will change its path so that it takes a different track where only one worker is performing maintenance. Is it morally permissible to pull the lever?

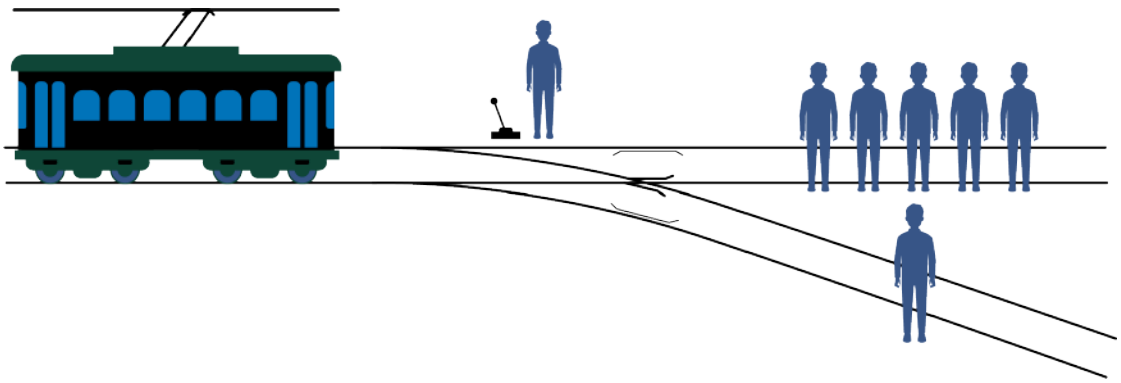

FIGURE 9.4 Trolley problems are thought experiments that use a difficult ethical dilemma to explore moral reasoning and deliberation. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The simplest utilitarian response would be "yes." You would save the lives of four workers. The right decision involves making a simple quantitative calculation: five workers minus one worker is four workers. So the right, moral decision is to divert the trolley. Yet, John Stuart Mill recognized that not all questions of utility can be answered quantitatively.

Higher and Lower Pleasures

Raised to continue in the footsteps of Bentham and his father, John Stuart Mill had a nervous breakdown as a young man. Mill emerged from the crisis with new ideas about utilitarianism, including the realization that Bentham's characterization of pleasure could be improved upon (Durham 1963). He realized that pleasures differ both quantitatively and qualitatively. Mill identified what he calls higher and lower pleasures to distinguish between different qualities of pleasure. With his revised and more nuanced account of pleasure, Mill set out to develop Bentham's earlier formulation of utilitarianism. He refined the calculus and assigned a greater significance or preference to higher-quality pleasures (e.g., mental pleasures).

Mill distinguished between different (higher and lower) qualities of pleasure in his formulation of utilitarianism. What he called **higher pleasures** are those pleasures associated with the exercise of our higher faculties. For example, higher pleasures are often associated with the use of our higher cognitive faculties and/or participation in social/cultural life. **Lower pleasures**, in contrast, are those pleasures associated with the exercise of our lower faculties. For example, lower pleasures are (basic) sensory pleasures like those experienced when we satisfy our hunger or relax after difficult physical activity. As Mill saw it, we have higher cognitive faculties (e.g., reason, imagination, moral sense) that distinguish us from other living things. Our higher cognitive faculties give us access to higher pleasures, and these pleasures are a defining feature of human life.

> It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. (Mill [1861] 2001, 10)

Mill's claim that "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" suggests that it is better to be dissatisfied and aware that you are capable of experiencing different qualities of pleasure than to forfeit the higher pleasures merely for the sake of basic satisfaction.

Some Mill scholars have even suggested that our dissatisfaction is a potential source of higher pleasures. In *Mill and Edward on Higher Pleasures*, Susan Feagin (1983) points out that dissatisfaction stems from a recognition that our situation could be improved. Feagin argues that our ability to formulate plans to improve our situation is a source of higher pleasure. Dissatisfaction motivates us to improve things and pursue a better world and life.

The Greatest Happiness Principle

To apply the principle of utility in broad social and political contexts, Mill formulated the **greatest happiness principle**, which stipulates that those actions are right that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. When agents (individual decision makers) approach a decision, they review and evaluate their possible actions and should choose the action that will promote the most happiness for the most people. It is not simply the agent's own happiness that matters, but the happiness of all individuals involved or affected by the consequences produced. The "happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned" (Mill [1861] 2001, 17). Mill argued that the right action is the one that maximizes happiness or produces the most net happiness.

Mill emphasizes the importance of putting personal interests aside. Mill writes that if an individual is faced with a decision "between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (Mill [1861] 2001, 17). Impartiality makes us able to assess possible consequences without giving preference to how they might impact us or those we are biased toward (e.g., friends, family, or institutions we are affiliated with). Utilitarians, therefore, strive to apply the principle in an informed, rational, and unbiased way.

WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

A Utilitarian Approach

Choose a moral dilemma you are facing or that you have faced. Devise and implement a method of calculating the greatest happiness, such as identifying all the individuals affected by your decision and estimating the impact of your decision on their happiness. Then examine and explain the assumptions that are inherent in the method you are using to calculate happiness.

Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism

Within this moral theory, there is a major division between act and rule utilitarianism. **Act utilitarians** argue that we should apply the greatest happiness principle on a case-by-case basis. Factors may vary from one situation to the next making it possible that different actions are morally right even in two seemingly similar situations. Act utilitarians believe morality requires us to maximize the good every time we act.

Some have argued that act utilitarianism is problematic because it seems to justify doing actions that go well beyond ordinary moral standards. For instance, act utilitarianism could justify a vigilante killing a person, an action that is contrary to our normal sense of right conduct, if it saves lives and so maximizes happiness. However, if many people were to take the law into their own hands, the long-term consequence would be to undermine the security of all individuals within society. Consider also the case in which a jury or a judge were to find an innocent person guilty and sentence them to prison in order to avoid widespread riots. In this particular case, such an act would increase happiness but reduce the overall level of trust in the judicial system.

To avoid such problems, **rule utilitarians** argue that we should apply the greatest happiness principle not to each act, but instead as a means of establishing a set of moral rules. We can test possible moral rules to determine whether a given rule would produce greater happiness if it were followed. Assuming the rules pass the test, they argue that following such rules will maximize happiness and should be followed. Rule utilitarians think this list of rules can be modified as needed by reexamining each one through application of the greatest happiness principle. However, it is not easy and may not be possible to formulate all the exceptions to each rule.

Character and Intent in Utilitarianism

For utilitarians, the only intrinsic value is happiness. Utilitarians believe that no action in itself is right or

wrong, nor is it right or wrong based on an agent's character or intent. Only the scope of consequences should be considered when assessing the rightness of an action. An agent might intend to produce certain consequences when they act, but what they intend may not come about or their action might produce other unintended consequences. If an action produces consequences a person didn't intend or foresee and so does harm, they are still morally at fault, even if at the time it seemed reasonable to assume those outcomes wouldn't happen. For utilitarians, an agent's intent and character are not morally relevant factors. In this, utilitarianism differs from the other normative ethical theories that will be considered in the remainder of this chapter.

9.3 Deontology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the meaning and purpose of the deontological approach.
- Articulate the role of duty and obligation within deontological reasoning.
- Compare and contrast the Kantian and pluralist interpretation of deontology.

The word *deontology* derives from the Greek words *deon*, meaning duty, and *logos*, meaning the study or science of, so that deontology literally means "the study or science of duty." Unlike consequentialists, deontologists do not evaluate the moral rightness of an action based solely on its consequences. Rightness in deontological theories is established by conformity to moral norms or rules that we have a duty to follow (Alexander 2020). Deontologists attempt to establish our moral duties, the set of rules that are morally binding, and using these we can guide our behavior and choices.

Later deontologists—for instance, W. D. Ross (1877–1971)—argue that consequences are morally relevant when considered in light of our moral duties. Ross believed that a moral theory that ignored duty or a moral theory that ignored consequences "over-simplifies the moral life" (Ross 1939, 189).

Kantian Formulation

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is one of the most important figures in modern philosophy. The first philosopher to advance a deontological approach, he has influenced contemporary philosophy significantly in areas such as aesthetics, political philosophy, and ethics.

Good Will

Kant argued that when we focus on outcomes rather than our duty, we prefer something of merely conditional value—beneficial outcomes—over the only thing that has unconditional value—**good will**, a concept that for Kant meant the decision to carry out our moral duties. Kant establishes the unconditional value of good will.

> A good will is good not because of what it effects, or accomplishes, not because of its fitness to attain some intended end, but good just by its willing, i.e. in itself; and, considered by itself, is to be esteemed beyond compare much higher than anything that could ever be brought about by it in favor of some inclination. (Kant 1997a, 4:394)

When we perform an action because it is our duty (or from duty), without influence from outside, merely conditional factors, we act in a way that contributes to the goodness of our will.

Human Reason and Morality

Kant's normative moral theory rests on how he defines what it means to be human. Kant argued that what separated us from other animals is our ability to think rationally. Animals are driven by impulses and so are irrational. As humans, however, we can reason, make decision independent of our desires, and so exercise agency. We can rise above animal instincts. In this sense, humans have freedom and free will. Kant used the term "good will" to refer to our will to rise above our passions and biases and act rationally

Furthermore, through our capacity to act rationally and so exercise "good will," we establish our value above all other (living) things. At the same time, we have a duty to act rationally—which, in Kant's view, is to act morally. We should always act rationally because it is only through rational, moral action that we realize our freedom and affirm our worth and dignity.

FIGURE 9.5 "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*" (Kant 1997a, 5:161). (credit: "The Milky Way" by Erick Kurniawan/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Moral Laws

Kant believed that moral laws, or maxims, could be discovered a priori. No matter what religion we follow or culture we grew up in, we can use our reason to figure out what is right and what is wrong. We use our reason alone to arrive at the moral rules by which we should abide.

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1997, 4:415–416), Kant set out to explore these moral laws by first examining common-sense morality—that is, ideas that most people share about morality, such as do not steal or do not murder. The will, Kant noted, always presents its rules in the form of commands, which he called imperatives. He divided these imperatives into two categories: hypothetical and categorical.

Hypothetical Imperatives

A **hypothetical imperative** "says only that the action is good for some *actual* or *possible* purpose" (Kant 1997a, 4:414–415). In other words, we may follow rules, such as "study hard," "get a job," and "save money." But each of these commands determine only what should be done in order to achieve some (proposed) end. We say "study hard to get good grades," "get a job to earn money," and "save money to buy a house for your family." Through the hypothetical imperative we establish subjective rules for acting. We use these rules regularly to navigate the world, solve problems, and pursue various ends. A hypothetical imperative is thus not a moral rule, but a means to achieve a goal—to fulfill a desire.

Categorical Imperative

Unlike hypothetical imperatives, **categorical imperatives** are universal laws that we must obey regardless of our desires. Kant writes, "For only the *law* carries with it the concept of an *unconditional* and indeed objective and hence universally valid *necessity*, and commands are laws that must be obeyed, i.e. must be complied with even contrary to inclination" (Kant 1997a, 4:416). Categorical imperatives are derived by reason and we have a moral duty to follow them.

Kant suggested that we derive categorical imperatives through four formulations that serve as a standard or guide to test whether our reasons for acting conform to the standard of rationality and thus moral law. The two

most widely examined formulations are the *universal law* formulation and the *humanity* formulation.

The Universal Law Formulation

The **universal law formulation** of the categorical imperative states: "Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant 1997a, 4:421). Kant thought the maxim (or rule for acting) should be able to be made universal in the sense that it is a rule that could bind all rational beings (e.g., always tell the truth). When we lie, for example, we want to act as an exception to the rule for reasons other than fulfilling our moral obligation. In such cases, we wish that everyone else abide by the rule, so that when we lie, we are believed and can operate as an exception to the norm in order to fulfill a desire. Yet, if everyone lied—that is if we universalized lying—then we would no longer achieve our desired end. Everyone would lie, and so you would not necessarily be believed.

Say, for example, members of a specific group, such as university students, get discounted rates at a bookstore. If you, as a nonstudent, tell the bookseller that you are a student even though you are not, you can get the discounted rate. But once you universalize your action—and all nonstudents begin to lie—the bookseller will catch on and likely begin to ask for identification. Therefore, the rule you are following, "I can lie to get a discount," cannot be made universal and is immoral. Moral law must be applicable to all rational beings.

The Humanity Formulation

The **humanity formulation** focuses on how we ought to treat rational beings, whether oneself or others. Kant thought that every person possesses the same inherent value and worth because we are all rational beings. Kant writes, "*So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*" (Kant 1997a, 4:429). The humanity formulation therefore asks us to consider whether our actions treat others and ourselves as ends, as entities valuable in themselves, or whether we seek to reduce rational beings to the status of a mere means, as valuable only in that they help us achieve our goal. When we lie to someone, we fail to treat them as a person. We have obstructed their ability to act as a human, as a rational being that has the ability to rise up above impulses and make decisions based on reason. By telling a lie, we have failed to provide the basic information another human needs to make a rational decision. To do so, is always wrong, for it overlooks the inherent value we all possess as rational beings who possess a will and who are capable of acting as free, rational agents.

Note that Kant is not saying that we cannot rely on other humans to help us achieve a goal. Kant uses the term "never merely as a means" and so indicates that so long as we treat others as humans, and do not impair their ability to act as rational agents, we can derive benefit from others. Humans must cooperate, but in doing so, should treat each other as ends-in-themselves, as rational beings.

Notice that we can arrive at the same imperative from either the universal law formulation or the humanity formulation. If you lie to the bookseller about being a student, you are treating the bookseller as a means to an end. Indeed, scholars often view Kant's four formulations as different means to achieving the same ends—that is, different ways of arriving at the same or a similar list of categorical imperatives.

Pluralism

Some philosophers argue that classic utilitarianism (e.g., Mill) and deontology (e.g., Kant) offer accounts of morality that do not adequately explain our common experience of morality in practice. Do we, like Mill, really think that morality is all about increasing happiness? Do we, like Kant, really treat all moral rules as absolute and always binding? Deontology and utilitarianism seem to offer an overly simplistic account of what is good.

Pluralists offer a more complex, complete account of morality that explains our common experience. In contrast to classic utilitarianism and deontology, **pluralism** recognizes a plurality of intrinsic values and moral rules.

William David Ross

Sir William David Ross (1877–1971) believed (classic) utilitarianism and deontology fail because they "over-simplify the moral life" (Ross 1939, 189). He thought each of these earlier moral theories reduced morality to a single principle (e.g., Mill's greatest happiness principle and Kant's categorical imperative), leaving them unable to adequately account for our common experience of morality. Ross also thought Mill was wrong to assume that rightness is reducible to simply the production of good, just as Kant was wrong to assume that moral rules are absolute and never admit any exceptions. Ross therefore set out to create a moral theory that was not susceptible to the shortfalls of these earlier positions, one that would make sense of our common sense moral life (Skelton 2012).

Competing Duties

Pluralists point out that most people do not treat moral obligations as equally weighty or pressing. Doing so would make it difficult, if not impossible, to determine our moral duty in situations where two or more competing moral obligations are applicable. Let's say you are approached by a woman carrying a gun who asks you what direction your neighbor ran off in. You know in what direction he was headed. Do you follow Kantian moral law not to tell a lie? What if she intends to use her gun on your neighbor? Do you potentially risk your neighbor's life? This example and others suggest that we must consider factors beyond the (relevant) moral rule or weigh more than one rule when we determine our duty in a specific situation. For example, the rule "don't lie" might compete with the rule "don't take actions that will get innocent people killed."

Prima Facie Duties

Ross argued that our obligations are not absolute and derived from pure reason, as Kant would have it, but rather are **prima facie duties** (Ross 1930, 33). He called them prima facie, which means "at first sight," because he believed these duties to be self-evident. They are moral commitments that we come to recognize through experience and maturity.

Ross identified five prima facie duties that represent our main moral commitments: (1) a duty of *fidelity*, or to keep promises and be truthful; (2) a duty of *reparation*, or to make up for wrongs done to others; (3) a duty of *gratitude*, or to express gratitude when others do things that benefit us and to reciprocate when possible; (4) a duty *to promote a maximum of aggregate good*, or to increase the overall good in the world; and (5) a duty of *non-maleficence*, or to not harm others (Ross 1930, 21, 25; Ross 1939, 65, 75, 76; Skelton 2012).

Ross believed each duty each represents an important moral commitment, but they are not absolute or equally important. He thought our duties of gratitude and reparation, for example, are generally more pressing than our duty to promote a maximum aggregate of good, and a duty of non-maleficence is weightier than a duty to promote maximum good (Ross 1930, 19, 21, 22, 41, 42; Ross 1939, 75, 76, 77, 90).

Resolving Conflicts between Duties

Our prima facie duties represent our moral responsibilities and commitments, other things being equal. In situations where two or more prima facie duties are relevant and our actual duty is not clear, Ross argued that we determine our duty using a quasi-consequentialist approach that accounts for a plurality of intrinsic goods. When we face such situations, Ross argued that our duty is whatever action will result in "the greatest balance of prima facie rightness . . . over . . . prima facie wrongness" (Ross 1930, 41, 46).

FIGURE 9.6 If you are the only witness to a bad car accident on your way to get your hair cut, William David Ross would argue that you might judge that your prima facie duty to help anyone who might be injured in the accident outweighs your prima facie duty to be on time for your appointment. (credit: "car accident @ vestavia hills" by Rian Castillo/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In life, it is not always clear what morality requires of us, especially when we face situations where we have multiple, conflicting moral responsibilities and must figure out which one is our (actual) duty. In other words, our actual duty will be whichever duty is most pressing and immediate, the one that we are most responsible for (Ross 1939, 85).

Imagine, for example, that you make a promise to meet a friend after work. As you leave your office building after work, however, you discover a coworker on the ground who is experiencing chest pains. You have a duty to keep your promise, but you also have a duty to help your coworker. You help your coworker because, given the circumstances, it is more pressing than the duty to fulfill your promise. It is clear which obligation is your actual duty in this example. When you are able to, you apologize to your friend and explain what happened. Your apology, Ross thought, is in part motivated by a recognition that you were prima facie wrong; that is, you recognize that had your coworker not needed help, your actual duty would have been to fulfill your promise and meet your friend.

The Role of Judgment

Judgment, Ross thought, plays an important role in moral life. We will often need to determine our actual duty in situations where multiple contradictory prima facie duties are relevant. Ross thought we rank the relevant prima facie duties and use facts of the situation to determine which duty is our actual duty.

In the case in which you are approached by a woman with a gun who seems to be chasing your neighbor, your duty to protect your neighbor from harm probably outweighs your duty to tell the truth. But what if the woman is wearing a blue uniform and wearing a badge indicating that she is a police officer? What if you know that you watched your neighbor carry a carload of computers, televisions, expensive jewelry, and nice paintings into his apartment last night? In this case, to make the best decision, you must make a judgement informed by your own experience and observations.

In practice, it can be difficult to know what our actual duty is in a situation. Sometimes, the best we can do is make an informed decision using the information we have and keep striving to be good. Indeed, this uncertainty can, for pluralists, be an important part of the experience of a moral life.

9.4 Virtue Ethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the central principles of virtue ethics.
- Distinguish the major features of Confucianism.
- Evaluate Aristotle's moral theory.

Virtue ethics takes a character-centered approach to morality. Whereas Mohists and utilitarians look to consequences to determine the rightness of an action and deontologists maintain that a right action is the one that conforms to moral rules and norms, virtue ethicists argue that right action flows from good character traits or dispositions. We become a good person, then, through the cultivation of character, self-reflection, and self-perfection.

There is often a connection between the virtuous life and the good life in virtue ethics because of its emphasis on character and self-cultivation. Through virtuous development, we realize and perfect ourselves, laying the foundation for a good life. In *Justice as a Virtue*, for example, Mark LeBar (2020) notes that "on the Greek eudaimonist views (including here Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus) our reasons for action arise from our interest in [*eudaimonia*, or] a happy life." The ancient Greeks thought the aim of life was ***eudaimonia***. Though *eudaimonia* is often translated as "happiness," it means something closer to "a flourishing life." **Confucianism**, with its strong emphasis on repairing the fractured social world, connects the promotion of virtuous development and social order. Confucians believe virtuous action is informed by social roles and relationships, such that promoting virtuous development also promotes social order.

Confucianism

As discussed earlier, the Warring States period in ancient China (ca. 475–221 BCE) was a period marked by warfare, social unrest, and suffering. Warfare during this period was common because China was comprised of small states that were not politically unified. New philosophical approaches were developed to promote social harmony, peace, and a better life. This period in China's history is also sometimes referred to as the era of the "Hundred Schools of Thought" because the development of new philosophical approaches led to cultural expansion and intellectual development. Mohism, Daoism, and Confucianism developed in ancient China during this period. Daoism and Confucianism would later spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, where they would be adopted and changed in response to local social and cultural circumstances.

Confucius

Confucius (551–479 BCE) rose from lowly positions to become a minister in the government of a province in eastern China. After a political conflict with the hereditary aristocracy, Confucius resigned his position and began traveling to other kingdoms and teaching. Confucius's teachings centered on virtue, veering into practical subjects such as social obligations, ritual performance, and governance. During his lifetime, Confucius despaired that his advice to rulers fell on deaf ears: "How can I be like a bitter gourd that hangs from the end of a string and can not be eaten?" (Analects 17:7). He did not foresee that his work and ideas would influence society, politics, and culture in East Asia for over 2000 years.

FIGURE 9.7 This statue of Confucius, the largest in the world, stands at the Yushima Seido, a Confucian temple in Japan. (credit: "Confucius Statue at the Yushima Seido" by Abasaa/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Confucius is credited with authoring or editing the classical texts that became the curriculum of the imperial exams, which applicants had to pass to obtain positions in government. His words, sayings, and exchanges with rulers and his disciples were written down and recorded in the *Lun Yu*, or the *Analects of Confucius*, which has heavily influenced the moral and social practice in China and elsewhere.

Relational Aspect of Virtue

Like Mohism, Confucianism aimed to restore social order and harmony by establishing moral and social norms. Confucius believed the way to achieve this was through an ordered, hierarchical society in which people know their place in relationship to other people. Confucius said, "There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son" (Analects, 7:11). In Confucianism, relationships and social roles shape moral responsibilities and structure moral life.

A cornerstone of Confucian virtue is filial piety. Confucius felt that the role of the father was to care for and educate his son, but the duty of the son must be to respect his father by obediently abiding by his wishes. "While a man's father is alive, look at the bent of his will; when his father is dead, look at his conduct. If for three years he does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial" (Analects, 1:11). Indeed, when the Duke of Sheh informed Confucius that his subjects were so truthful that if their father stole a sheep, they would bear witness to it, Confucius replied, "Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this." The devotion of the son to the father is more important than what Kant would call the universal moral law of truth telling.

There is therefore an important relational aspect of virtue that a moral person must understand. The virtuous person must not only be aware of and care for others but must understand the "human dance," or the complex practices and relationships that we participate in and that define social life (Wong 2021). The more we begin to understand the "human dance," the more we grasp how we relate to one another and how social roles and relationships must be accounted for to act virtuously.

Ritual and *Ren*

Important to both early and late Confucian ethics is the concept of *li* (ritual and practice). ***Li*** plays an important role in the transformation of character. These rituals are a guide or become a means by which we develop and start to understand our moral responsibilities. Sacrificial offerings to parents and other ancestors after their death, for example, cultivate filial piety. By carrying out rituals, we transform our character and become more sensitive to the complexities of human interaction and social life.

In later Confucian thought, the concept of *li* takes on a broader role and denotes the customs and practices that are a blueprint for many kinds of respectful behavior (Wong 2021). In this way, it relates to ***ren***, a concept that refers to someone with complete virtue or specific virtues needed to achieve moral excellence. Confucians maintain that it is possible to perfect human nature through personal development and transformation. They believe society will improve if people abide by moral and social norms and focus on perfecting themselves. The aim is to live according to the *dao*. The word *dao* means "way" in the sense of a road or path of virtue.

Junzi and Self-Perfection

Confucius used the term ***junzi*** to refer to an exemplary figure who lives according to the *dao*. This figure is an ethical ideal that reminds us that self-perfection can be achieved through practice, self-transformation, and a deep understanding of social relationships and norms. A *junzi* knows what is right and chooses it, taking into account social roles and norms, while serving as a role model. Whenever we act, our actions are observed by others. If we act morally and strive to embody the ethical ideal, we can become an example for others to follow, someone they can look to and emulate.

The Ethical Ruler

Any person of any status can become a *junzi*. Yet, it was particularly important that rulers strive toward this ideal because their subjects would then follow this ideal. When the ruler Chi K'ang consulted with Confucius about what to do about the number of thieves in his domain, Confucius responded, "If you, sir, were not covetous, although you should reward them to do it, they would not steal" (Analects, 7:18).

Confucius thought social problems were rooted in the elite's behavior and, in particular, in their pursuit of their own benefit to the detriment of the people. Hence, government officials must model personal integrity, understand the needs of the communities over which they exercised authority, and place the welfare of the people over and above their own (Koller 2007, 204).

In adherence to the ethical code, a ruler's subjects must show obedience to honorable people and emulate those higher up in the social hierarchy. Chi K'ang, responding to Confucius's suggestion regarding thievery, asked Confucius, "What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?" Confucius replied that there was no need to kill at all. "Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good." Confucius believed that the relationship between rulers and their subjects is and should be like that between the wind and the grass. "The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it" (Analects, 7:19).

FIGURE 9.8 The elaborate Temple of Confucius in Beijing, China was initially built in 1302, with additions added in the centuries that followed. (credit: "Temple of Confucius, Beijing, China" by Fabio Achilli/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Japanese Confucianism

Although Confucianism was initially developed in China, it spread to Japan in the mid-sixth century, via Korea, and developed its own unique attributes. Confucianism is one of the dominant philosophical teachings in Japan. As in China, Japanese Confucianism focuses on teaching individual perfection and moral development, fostering harmonious and healthy familial relations, and promoting a functioning and prosperous society. In Japan, Confucianism has been changed and transformed in response to local social and cultural factors. For example, Confucianism and Buddhism were introduced around the same time in Japan. It is therefore not uncommon to find variations of Japanese Confucianism that integrate ideas and beliefs from Buddhism. Some neo-Confucian philosophers like Zhu Xi, for example, developed "Confucian thinking after earlier study and practice of Chan Buddhism" (Tucker 2018).

Aristotelianism

FIGURE 9.9 This painting by Gerard Hoet depicts Olympias presenting the young Alexander the Great to Aristotle. Aristotle traveled to Macedonian in 343 BCE to tutor the 13-year-old boy, Alexander, who would later become

Alexander the Great. (credit: "Olympias presenting the young Alexander the Great to Aristotle" by Gerard Hoet/ Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was a preeminent ancient Greek philosopher. He studied with Plato (ca. 429–347 BCE) at the Academy, a fraternal organization where participants pursued knowledge and self-development. After Plato's death, Aristotle traveled, tutored the boy who would later become Alexander the Great, and among other things, established his own place of learning, dedicated to the god Apollo (Shields 2020).

Aristotle spent his life in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. His extant works today represent only a portion of his total life's work, much of which was lost to history. During his life, Aristotle was, for example, principal to the creation of logic, created the first system of classification for animals, and wrote on diverse topics of philosophical interest. Along with his teacher, Plato, Aristotle is considered one of the pillars of Western philosophy.

Human Flourishing as the Goal of Human Action

In the first line of Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he observes that "[every] art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1094a). If everything we do aims at some good, he argues, then there must be a final or highest good that is the end of all action (life's *telos*), which is *eudaimonia*, the flourishing life (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1097a34–b25). Everything else we pursue is pursued for the sake of this end.

CONNECTIONS

See the chapter on epistemology for more on the topic of *eudaimonia*.

Nicomachean Ethics is a practical exploration of the flourishing life and how to live it. Aristotle, like other ancient Greek and Roman philosophers (e.g., Plato and the Stoics), asserts that virtuous development is central to human flourishing. *Virtue* (or *aretê*) means "excellence. We determine something's virtue, Aristotle argued, by identifying its peculiar function or purpose because "the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1097b25–1098a15). We might reasonably say, for example, that a knife's function is to cut. A sharp knife that cuts extremely well is an excellent (or virtuous) knife. The sharp knife realizes its function and embodies excellence (or it is an excellent representation of knife-ness).

Aristotle assumed our rational capacity makes us distinct from other (living) things. He identifies rationality as the unique function of human beings and says that human virtue, or excellence, is therefore realized through the development or perfection of reason. For Aristotle, virtuous development is the transformation and perfection of character in accordance with reason. While most thinkers (like Aristotle and Kant) assign similar significance to reason, it is interesting to note how they arrive at such different theories.

Deliberation, Practical Wisdom, and Character

To exercise or possess virtue is to demonstrate excellent character. For ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, the pursuit of intentional, directed self-development to cultivate virtues is the pursuit of excellence. Someone with a virtuous character is consistent, firm, self-controlled, and well-off. Aristotle characterized the virtuous character state as the mean between two vice states, deficiency and excess. He thought each person naturally tends toward one of the extreme (or vice) states. We cultivate virtue when we bring our character into alignment with the "mean or intermediate state with regard to" feelings and actions, and in doing so we become "well off in relation to our feelings and actions" (Homiak 2019).

Being virtuous requires more than simply developing a habit or character trait. An individual must voluntarily choose the right action, the virtuous state; know why they chose it; and do so from a consistent, firm character. To voluntarily choose virtue requires reflection, self-awareness, and deliberation. Virtuous actions, Aristotle claims, should "accord with the correct reason" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1103b30). The virtuous person

chooses what is right after deliberation that is informed by practical wisdom and experience. Through a deliberative process we identify the choice that is consistent with the mean state.

The Role of Habit

Aristotle proposed that humans "are made perfect by habit" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1103a10–33). Habit therefore plays an important role in our virtuous development. When we practice doing what's right, we get better at choosing the right action in different circumstances. Through habituation we gain practice and familiarity, we bring about dispositions or tendencies, and we gain the requisite practical experience to identify the reasons why a certain action should be chosen in diverse situations. Habit, in short, allows us to gain important practical experience and a certain familiarity with choosing and doing the right thing. The more we reinforce doing the right thing, the more we grow accustomed to recognizing what's right in different circumstances. Through habit we become more aware of which action is supported by reason and why, and get better at choosing it.

Habit and repetition develop dispositions. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle reminds us of the importance of upbringing. A good upbringing will promote the formation of positive dispositions, making one's tendencies closer to the mean state. A bad upbringing, in contrast, will promote the formation of negative dispositions, making one's tendencies farther from the mean state (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1095b5).

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Artistotle on Virtue

Read this passage from from Book II of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (https://openstax.org/r/nicomachaen-2), considering what Aristotle means when he states that moral virtues come about as a result of habit. How should individuals make use of the two types of virtue to become virtuous?

> Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.
>
> Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.
>
> This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one.
>
> Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyreplayers are produced. And

> the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

Social Relationships and Friendship

Aristotle was careful to note in *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtuous development alone does not make a flourishing life, though it is central to it. In addition to virtuous development, Aristotle thought things like success, friendships, and other external goods contributed to *eudaimonia*.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle points out that humans are social (or political) beings (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1097b10). It's not surprising, then, that, like Confucius, Aristotle thinks social relations are important for our rational and virtuous development.

When we interact with others who have common goals and interests, we are more likely to progress and realize our rational powers. Social relations afford us opportunities to learn, practice, and engage in rational pursuits with other people. The ancient Greek schools (e.g., Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, and Epicurus's Gardens) exemplify the ways individuals benefit from social relations. These ancient schools offered a meeting place where those interested in knowledge and the pursuit of wisdom could participate in these activities together.

Through social relations, we also develop an important sense of community and take an interest in the flourishing of others. We see ourselves as connected to others, and through our interactions we develop social virtues like generosity and friendliness (Homiak 2019). Moreover, as we develop social virtues and gain a deeper understanding of the reasons why what is right, is right, we realize that an individual's ability to flourish and thrive is improved when the community flourishes. Social relations and political friendships are useful for increasing the amount of good we can do for the community (Kraut 2018).

Friendship

The important role Aristotle assigns to friendship in a flourishing life is evidenced by the fact that he devotes two out of the ten books of *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books VIII and IX) to a discussion of it. He notes that it would be odd, "when one assigns all good things to the happy man, not to assign friends, who are thought the greatest of external goods" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1169a35–b20). Aristotle distinguishes between **incidental friendships** and **perfect friendships**. Incidental friendships are based on and defined by either utility or pleasure. Such friendships are casual relationships where each person participates only because they get something (utility or pleasure) from it. These friendships neither contribute to our happiness nor do they foster virtuous development.

Unlike incidental friendships, perfect friendships are relationships that foster and strengthen our virtuous development. The love that binds a perfect friendship is based on the good or on the goodness of the characters of the individuals involved. Aristotle believed that perfect friends wish each other well simply because they love each other and want each other to do well, not because they expect something (utility or pleasure) from the other. He points out that "those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1156a27–b17). Aristotle argues that the happy man needs (true) friends

because such friendships make it possible for them to "contemplate worthy [or virtuous] actions and actions that are [their] own" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1169b20–1170a6). This affords the good individual the opportunity to contemplate worthy actions that are not their own (i.e., they are their friend's) while still thinking of these actions as in some sense being their own because their friend is another self. On Aristotle's account, we see a true friend as another self because we are truly invested in our friend's life and "we ought to wish what is good for his sake" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1155b17–1156a5).

Perfect friendships afford us opportunities to grow and develop, to better ourselves—something we do not get from other relationships. Aristotle therefore argues that a "certain training in virtue arises also from the company of the good" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1170a6–30). Our perfect friend provides perspective that helps us in our development and contributes to our happiness because we get to participate in and experience our friend's happiness as our own. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Aristotle considered true friends "the greatest of external goods" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1169a35–b20).

9.5 Daoism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Summarize the metaphysical context and ethical properties of the *dao*.
- Analyze the relationship between *wu wei* and Daoist ethics.
- Compare and contrast Mohist, Confucian, and Daoist ethics.

Daoism (also written as Taoism) finds its beginnings during the Warring States period of ancient China. Like Mohism and Confucianism, Daoism is a response to the social unrest and suffering characteristic of that period. Daoism aims to foster harmony in both society and the individual. To do so, it seeks to understand the source of evil and suffering. It locates the cause of most suffering and conflict in desires and greed. Daoists believe that even when we try to regulate human action with moral systems and norms, we still fail to realize a flourishing society and good life. Harmony is possible by living life in accordance with what is natural. While Mohism and consequentialism judge the morality of an action based on the happiness it creates, Daoism equates moral actions with those that promote harmony and accord with the natural way.

Chinese sources tell us that Laozi, also written as Lao Tzu, the founder of philosophical Daoism, lived during the sixth century BCE (Chan 2018). He authored a short book, the *Daodejing* (sometimes written as *Tao Te Ching*). Laozi's teachings emphasize the importance of simplicity, harmony, and following the natural way of things. His basic teachings were expanded upon by Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE). Zhuangzi criticized the artificial way of life humans had created and argued that it led to suffering by creating desire and greed.

FIGURE 9.10 A bust of the founder of Daoism, Laozi, who lived during the sixth century BCE. (credit: "Laozi" by edenpictures/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The Dao

In Daoism, the ***dao*** is often translated as "the way." Daoists rejected the narrow Confucian view of *dao* as a way of behaving in society to ensure order and social harmony, and instead view the *dao* as the natural way of the universe and all things. The *dao* is represented as the source or origin of all that exists. Daoism tells us that we must live in accord with the dao if we want to live a good life or live well.

Properties

In the very first chapter of the *Daodejing*, we learn that the "*dao*" that can be spoken of or named is not *dao*: "Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth. Naming: the mother of ten thousand things" (Laozi [ca. 6th century BC] 1993, 1). When you name something, when you speak about it, you pick it out and give it a definite identity. *Dao* is the source of all that exists, of all characteristics and properties, but it is itself without limits and impossible to define. It represents the underlying connectedness and oneness of everything. *Dao* is an inexhaustible source of existence, of things, and it is that to which all things return.

Naturalism

In moral philosophy, **naturalism** is the belief that ethical claims can be derived from nonethical ones. In Daoism, "moral *dao* must be rooted in natural ways" (Hansen 2020). It emphasizes living in accord with nature by following the *dao*, or natural way of things. The individual who lives in the right way lives in accord with nature and exists in harmony with it. Daoism characterizes a fulfilling life as a calm, simple life, one that is free from desires and greed. Its focus on returning to nature, on naturalness, and on living in harmony with the natural world makes Daoism a naturalistic philosophy.

Daoist Metaphysics

The *Daodejing* offers a metaphysical perspective. The *dao* is characterized as the source of all things that exist, as the source of being and nonbeing. In Chapter 4 of the *Daodejing*, *dao* is said to be "empty—Its use never

exhausted. Bottomless—The origin of all things" (Laozi [ca. 6th century BC] 1993, 4). The source of all that exists, of change, the *dao* nevertheless remains unchanging. Daoism, then, can be read as a philosophy that provides answers to important metaphysical questions in its exploration of the underlying nature of existence.

The metaphysical account of reality found in Daoism provides a foundation for other Daoist positions. Daoism's naturalistic philosophy is supported by its metaphysical claims. The *dao* is the *source* of all, and living in accordance with it is living in accordance with the natural way, with the flow of all existence. Daoists claim, therefore, that we act morally when we act in accord with the *dao* and thus in accord with the natural way of things. Their metaphysics suggests a view of the world that recognizes the dynamic connections and interdependence of all things that exist. When we name things, when we differentiate things and treat them as individual, existing entities, we ignore the fact that nothing exists on its own independent of the whole. To truly understand existence, then, Daoists urge us to be more aware of and sensitive to the way everything depends on and is connected to everything else. Each thing is a part of a larger, ever-changing whole.

Skepticism, Inclusion, and Acceptance

In the *Daodejing*, it can be hard to grasp or form a clear conception of the *dao*. In fact, when Zhuangzi expands upon the earlier teachings of Laozi, he "repeatedly brings forth the issue of whether and how the *Dao* can be known" (Pregadio 2020). The *dao* cannot be known in the sense in which we normally know things about ourselves, objects, or our world. Daoism is thus skeptical not only about those things humans have so far claimed to know and value, but also skeptical that knowledge of the *dao* is possible. This **skepticism** regarding the extent to which we can know the *dao* pushes Daoism to be inclusive and accepting. It makes Daoism open to and accepting of various interpretations and readings of the *Daodejing* so long as through them we are able to live in accordance with the *dao*—to live a fulfilling life.

Paradox and Puzzles

Throughout the *Daodejing*, there is paradoxical and puzzling language. For example, it says that the *dao* "in its regular course does nothing . . . and so there is nothing which it does not do" (Laozi [ca. 6th century BC] 1993, 37). The paradoxical ways the *dao* is described within the texts is a way to bring attention to or highlight a way of thinking that is fundamentally different from our everyday experience of the world. Indeed, Daoists believe that our problems are a consequence of our regular way of being in the world and living without awareness of the *dao*. We are accustomed to treating things as distinct, definable entities, and we think of ourselves in the same terms. Unaware of the *dao*, of the true nature of reality, we act against it and cause pain and suffering. Through paradoxical language and expressions, Daoism attempts to make us aware of something greater that is the generative source of existence. It challenges us to look at things differently and change our perspective so that we can see that our pain and suffering is a consequence of conventional values and beliefs. It attempts to sidestep the limitations of language by using paradoxes and puzzles to encourage and promote a deeper awareness of the nature of existence. Daoists criticize the way humans normally live because it fosters and encourages bad thinking, problematic values, and resistance to living differently.

Wu Wei

The Daoist approach to life is one that recommends reserve, acceptance of the world as it is, and living in accordance with the flow of nature. In ancient China, Laozi and other thinkers responded to the unrest, conflict, and suffering they witnessed in their society. Laozi's response (and Zhuangzi's development of it) is critical of the way we normally live in the world. For example, we are normally wasteful, we resist change, and we try to transform the natural world to suit our needs. Daoism recommends instead that we move with the current of the natural way of things, accept things as they are, and find balance and harmony with the *dao*. The Daoist call this the practice of ***wu wei***, which involves what is often described as nonaction (Chan 2018). Offering a clear account of *wu wei* can prove challenging because it is a paradoxical concept. Our normal concept of action includes motivated, directed, purposeful activity aimed at desire satisfaction. To act is to impose your strength and will on the world, to bring something about. Practicing *wu wei*, in contrast, suggests

a natural way of acting that is spontaneous or immediate. When you practice *wu wei*, you act in harmony with the *dao*, you are free of desire and of striving, and you spontaneously move with the natural flow of existence.

Attitude toward the Dao

One who practices *wu wei*, or nonaction, is someone free of unnecessary, self-gratifying desires. The normal way we act in the world fosters an attitude of separateness and causes us to act against nature or in ways that resist the natural way. Practicing nonaction brings one in harmony with the *dao*. The individual develops an attitude of connectedness rather than individuality, of being one with the natural world and the way of things rather than separate from or against it.

Receptivity and "Softness"

The Daoist way of living in the world is one that values being receptive to the natural flow and movements of life. We practice a "soft" style of action when we practice *wu wei* (Wong 2021). Daoists think we normally practice a "hard" style of action, we resist the natural flow. The common view or understanding of the natural world treats it as separate from the human world, as something valuable only for its usefulness. Such a view promotes values like strength, dominance, and force because we view nature as something that must be overpowered and transformed to fit the human, social world. The Daoist conception of softness suggests living in the world in a way that is in accord with the natural way of things. Instead of acting against the current of the stream, you move easily with the flow of the waters. A "soft" style suggests being receptive to the natural flow and moving with it. When you are sensitive to the natural movements and processes of life, you are free of desire, calm, and able to live in harmony with it.

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Excerpt from the *Daodejing* by Laozi

Identify ethical norms that you feel are communicated through the passages below. How do they compare to the systematic normative theories that you have encountered in this chapter so far? Note that this translation uses the spelling "tao" rather than "dao". These two spellings refer to the same concept.

Laozi (Lao-tzu) *Daodejing (Tao Te Ching) (https://openstax.org/r/Daodejing)*, translated by James Legge.

Chapter 1

1. The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.
2. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.
3. Always without desire we must be found,
   If its deep mystery we would sound;
   But if desire always within us be,
   Its outer fringe is all that we shall see.
4. Under these two aspects, it is really the same; but as development takes place, it receives the different names. Together we call them the Mystery. Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful.

Chapter 4

1. The Tao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fulness. How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the Honoured Ancestor of all things!
2. We should blunt our sharp points, and unravel the complications of things; we should attemper our brightness,

and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. How pure and still the Tao is, as if it would ever so continue!
3. I do not know whose son it is. It might appear to have been before God.

Chapter 8

1. The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Tao.
2. The excellence of a residence is in (the suitability of) the place; that of the mind is in abysmal stillness; that of associations is in their being with the virtuous; that of government is in its securing good order; that of (the conduct of) affairs is in its ability; and that of (the initiation of) any movement is in its timeliness.
3. And when (one with the highest excellence) does not wrangle (about his low position), no one finds fault with him.

Chapter 13

1. Favour and disgrace would seem equally to be feared; honour and great calamity, to be regarded as personal conditions (of the same kind).
2. What is meant by speaking thus of favour and disgrace? Disgrace is being in a low position (after the enjoyment of favour). The getting that (favour) leads to the apprehension (of losing it), and the losing it leads to the fear of (still greater calamity):--this is what is meant by saying that favour and disgrace would seem equally to be feared. And what is meant by saying that honour and great calamity are to be (similarly) regarded as personal conditions? What makes me liable to great calamity is my having the body (which I call myself); if I had not the body, what great calamity could come to me?
3. Therefore he who would administer the kingdom, honouring it as he honours his own person, may be employed to govern it, and he who would administer it with the love which he bears to his own person may be entrusted with it.

Daoist, Mohist, and Confucian Ethics

Daoism, Mohism, and Confucianism were created in response to widespread social unrest, conflict, and suffering. All three aim to end suffering and promote harmony. Daoism's approach is unlike either Mohism or Confucianism in important respects. Daoists reject traditional morality because it promotes a way of life that supports acting against the natural way or against the flow of nature. They therefore reject the Mohist and Confucian affirmation of traditional moral norms. Daoists believe social norms and practices won't solve our problems, because they promote a way of life that is unnatural. Instead, Daoism affirms simplicity, the elimination of desires and greed, and naturalness. Daoists believe we need to look beyond social life, beyond traditional human constructs, and instead find harmony with the natural way, the *dao*.

In contrast, Mohist and Confucian ethics attempt to establish norms and standards for acting and emphasize the important role of social relations in informing our obligations. They reaffirm the value and importance of moral norms and social practices, arguing that widespread adherence will heal social discord and promote well-being. Confucianism focuses on character and argues that through the cultivation of virtue we perfect ourselves. Mohism, however, focuses on consequences to determine rightness, and Mohists believe actions that promote general welfare are right.

9.6 Feminist Theories of Ethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the framework of care ethics.
- Summarize feminists' historical critique of normative moral teachings concerning gender.
- Evaluate the purpose and potential of intersectional moral discourse.

Feminism is, among other things, a political and philosophical movement that aims to end sexism and promote social justice. Feminists argue that the long-standing dominance of the male perspective has caused women's interests to be ignored and their autonomy to be limited. In ethics, feminist thinkers have traditionally explored, criticized, and sought to correct the role gender has historically played in the development and application of moral beliefs and practices. They examine, for example, the ways in which power defines relationships within society and the extent to which it has influenced social/cultural development. Feminist ethics places special emphasis on exploring the role of gender and gendered thinking in shaping our views, values, and our understanding of ourselves and the world.

Historical Critique

At its core, feminism is a response to a world that has by and large ignored the perspectives, interests, and lived experiences of women. Feminists explore historical factors that have caused and perpetuate gender discrimination and oppression. They aim to identify, critique, and correct traditional assumptions about gender. Feminists criticize "institutions, presuppositions, and practices that have historically favored men over women" (McAfee 2018). They point out that the male perspective has been treated as the norm and the stand-in for the human perspective. When theorists and thinkers have historically made claims about universality and objectivity, they ignored the fact that it was their own (male) perspective that was treated as the norm, as a standard human experience. Feminists therefore criticize traditional moral theory for pretending to be universal and objective even though it favored the male perspective and experience (McAfee 2018).

At its core, feminist ethics seeks to understand, uncover, and correct the traditional role gender has played in social/cultural development. The male perspective has celebrated man as the norm, the standard human. We see in all areas of life a celebration of traits associated with men. The belief that we should pursue science and technology to dominate and control the natural world, for example, celebrates strength and reason, values that are used to characterize men. Women, on the other hand, have traditionally been characterized as delicate, weak, submissive, and emotional (as opposed to rational).

The Concept of the Feminine

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that **femininity** is not something given, but something learned, a social construct. "It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity" (Beauvoir [1949] 2011). The concepts of *femininity* and *masculinity* represent society's idea of what it means to be either a woman or a man. These concepts are based on traditional gender roles and the norms, practices, and values tied to them. As Mari Mikkola suggests in her article "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender" (2019), "females become women through a process whereby they acquire feminine traits and learn feminine behavior." Feminine behavior has historically been associated with being delicate, submissive, and emotional. Feminists critique this concept of femininity for being used to justify limits on female autonomy and contributing to the marginalization of women.

Gender Binarism and Essentialism

Most feminists in the 1970s and 1980s believed that gender was binary. **Gender binarism** is the view that each person can be categorized by one of the two genders (male or female). Some feminist thinkers have used

gender binarism as a starting point to explore different, alternative ethical systems in which the norms for human nature are defined by women. Others have suggested that women approach moral problems from a fundamentally different perspective than men. Psychologist Carol Gilligan's work, for example, found that men and women often approach moral problems from different perspectives: men from the perspective of *justice* and women from the perspective of *care*.

Feminists criticize traditional normative ethics for treating man as the human norm. In the traditional view, characteristics associated with masculinity are those characteristics that embody the ideal person.

Some feminists have argued that women should not deny or reject these characteristics, but instead adopt them as essential. **Essentialism** is the view that a set of characteristics makes something what it is. Essentialism suggests that there are certain essential characteristics that make a woman a woman or a man a man. Traditionally, women have been defined by characteristics that define them as morally bad and subversive. Rather than view these characteristics as negative or argue that they are not essential to woman, some feminist ethicists have argued that women should adopt these essential traits as positive.

Ethics of Care

Gilligan's research led to the development of **care ethics** (Gilligan 1982). Gilligan discovered that men and women often approach ethical dilemmas from different perspectives. Gilligan found that men value things like justice, autonomy, and the application of abstract principles and norms. In contrast, she found that women value things like caring for others, relationships, and responsibility. She called the approach favored by men the perspective of justice and the approach favored by women the perspective of care (Norlock 2019).

The ethics of care is an approach that values caring, the relationships of the individuals involved, and the interests of individuals. In contrast to the emphasis on the application of abstract rules and principles found in traditional ethics, the ethics of care emphasizes the complexities of real life and is more sensitive to unique, concrete situations. Gilligan's approach asks agents to consider the specific interests of individuals and their relationships. The ethics of care values caring and moral reasoning that accounts for the unique factors of concrete situations.

The Caring Relation as an Ethical Paradigm

Traditionally, the role of caretaker has been viewed as a woman's role. The caring relationship is one between an individual and their caregiver. A caretaker is compassionate, takes responsibility, understands the importance of relationships, and acts in the best interests of the one they care for. Care ethics uses the caring relationship as an ethical paradigm. It is the model that should be used to determine what's right and guide behavior. The caring relationship emphasizes the importance of concrete situations, the specific individuals involved, and acting to promote their interests.

Nel Noddings on Caring

In her influential work *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), Nel Noddings argues that the care perspective is both feminine and feminist (Norlock 2019). The emphasis on abstract, universal principles in traditional ethics makes the agent insensitive to situational factors and relationships. In contrast, Noddings endorses the moral value of partiality (Norlock 2019). From this perspective, the agent considers specific situational and relational factors in moral deliberation. When we consider the needs of the actual individuals involved in a situation, we are more likely to be sensitive to the interests of those in marginalized or oppressed positions.

Intersectionality

Some feminists have highlighted the important role intersectionality plays in social relations and argue it must be accounted for to end inequality and correct identity-based oppression and discrimination. **Intersectionality** refers to different aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, and class) that intersect in a person's identity and define or influence their lived experience. When we use or assume identity norms (e.g.,

the normal woman) without considering other aspects of identity, it is possible that we advance only some women and not others because there is a tendency to assume a position of privilege (Norlock 2019).

Some feminists have argued that intersectional approaches compromise and weaken the strength of potential advocacy. Naomi Zack (2005), for example, argues that otherwise broad categories of social identity (e.g., woman) are fragmented by intersectional approaches because diverse aspects of identity (e.g., race, class, and/or sexuality) are treated as changing the individual's perspective and experience of oppression. In other words, a group of individuals who all share one aspect of identity (woman) may be fragmented into smaller groups when intersectionality is considered because other aspects of identity shift a given individual's perspective and shared experience (Norlock 2019). This has the adverse effect, Zack argues, of weakening the category and the strength of advocacy.

In response to feminists who question intersectional approaches on the grounds that they compromise and weaken advocacy, other feminists have pointed out that identity categories like *women* include diverse members. If intersectionality is ignored, we ignore the diverse perspectives, interests, and experiences of individuals and cannot advocate effectively. Identities are complex, and different aspects of identity (e.g., race, class, and/or sexuality) may make an individual more or less likely to experience oppression in different circumstances. Intersectional approaches bring a deeper awareness of aspects of identity and sensitivity to the ways social identities contribute to experiences of oppression. A greater emphasis on aspects of identity, they argue, can unite individuals with diverse social identities by increasing awareness of the common struggle of oppressed groups. Intersectionality can therefore foster solidarity among oppressed groups because it makes individuals more aware of their common experiences.

Traditionally, it was thought that oppressed identities had a compounding effect and individuals were worse off if their identities included aspects of multiple oppressed identities. In this view, someone whose identity included multiple oppressed categories would be considered worse off than someone whose identity only included one oppressed category.

Development of Alternative Normative Moral Frameworks

Feminists critiqued traditional moral beliefs and practices for using norms and standards that prioritize certain groups and perspectives. Traditional normative moral frameworks favored the dominant, privileged position by, for example, ignoring actual individuals in concrete situations and therefore making us blind to the ways in which some individuals suffer. Social identities, like people, are diverse and complex. In an attempt to correct oppression based on gender (and identity), feminists have pursued alternative normative moral frameworks.

Feminists have criticized deontological moral theories and duty-centric frameworks. They take issue with the separation of rationality and emotion. Traditionally, woman have been associated more with a capacity for emotion. Historically, philosophers like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, and many others have located the source of human worth and dignity in our rational capacity. Their theories imply, explicitly or implicitly, that women have less worth and dignity, suggesting they are deserving of less respect. The seemingly benign claim that humans are rational creatures has grave implications when what is normal is determined by those who are in a privileged position. Feminists also critique Kant's normative moral framework because it prioritizes abstraction and generalization over consideration of situational factors and the people involved. They argue that such abstraction is problematic because it pretends to be impartial while ignoring the interests of oppressed or vulnerable groups.

In ethics, feminist scholars have explored alternative moral frameworks using all major approaches. They criticize traditional normative moral theories for ignoring the interests and perspectives of women (and oppressed groups) and for failing to consider important facts of the concrete situation and the individuals involved when applying norms or standards. A viable alternative moral framework must find ways to account for the interests of all persons, focus on the vulnerable and invisible, and lead to moral choices that advance

true equality rather than only advancing the interests of the privileged.

Summary

9.1 Requirements of a Normative Moral Theory

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. It is commonly divided into three main areas: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics, each of which is distinguished by a different *level* of inquiry. A normative moral theory is a systematized account of morality that addresses important questions related to effectively guiding moral conduct. This chapter reviews three main approaches (consequentialist, deontological, and virtue) to normative ethics distinguished by the criterion (consequences, duty, or character) used for determining moral conduct.

9.2 Consequentialism

Consequentialism is the view that the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences. Mohism is a consequentialist theory founded by Mozi. It was created as a response to widespread social unrest and suffering characteristic of ancient China's Warring States period. Mohists thought ethical norms could be established by looking at what increases overall welfare. They thought everyone should be treated impartially or equally and that preference shouldn't be given to some people's welfare over others. A key virtue in Mohism is benevolence, or kindness (*rèn*). The concept of benevolence is important because it requires one to look outside one's own interests and treat others with care (*ài*). Mozi realized that if people adopt the same morality, they will use the same standards to judge their own actions and the actions of others, which will improve social order and harmony.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory developed by Jeremy Bentham and later modified by John Stuart Mill. Utilitarians argue that what is right is whatever produces the most utility, the most usefulness. They identify happiness with utility. The principle of utility states that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill [1861] 2001, 7). Classic utilitarians like Bentham and Mill believed that pleasure and pain are basic, primary means by which people navigate the world and find motivation. The greatest happiness principle (or principle of utility) tells us that actions are right that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. When an agent evaluates the moral rightness of an action, they consider the happiness of all affected by the consequences.

9.3 Deontology

Deontological approaches focus on duties (e.g., always tell the truth) to determine whether an act is morally right. Immanuel Kant was the first philosopher to advance a deontological approach. He conceived of morality as rules that any rational being can and should accept because they are norms of rational conduct or agency. He called these rules categorical imperatives. There are two important formulations of the categorical imperative: the universal law formulation and the humanity formulation. Kant distinguished the categorical imperative from the hypothetical imperative, which is an action one takes to achieve a specific goal.

Pluralists like Sir William David Ross attempted to offer a more complex, complete account of morality that explains the common human experience. Ross believed (classic) utilitarianism and deontology fail because they "over-simplify the moral life" (Ross 1939, 189). He thought earlier moral theories reduced morality to a single principle (e.g., Mill's greatest happiness principle and Kant's categorical imperative), leaving them unable to adequately account for our common experience of morality. Ross argued that our duties are not absolute, as Kant would have it, but rather are obligatory, other things being equal, or so long as other factors and circumstances remain the same.

9.4 Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics takes a character-centered approach to morality. Right action is said to flow from right character. To do what is right requires having the right character traits or dispositions. You become a good person, then, through the cultivation of character and self-perfection.

Confucius developed Confucianism in response to the widespread social unrest and suffering characteristic of

ancient China's Warring States period. Confucians maintain that it is possible to perfect human nature through personal development and transformation, and they maintain the importance of *junzi*, a person who is an exemplary ethical figure and thus lives according to the *dao*. *Ren* refers to moral excellence, whether in full or regarding specific characteristics or traits. Important to both early and late Confucian ethics is the concept of *li* (ritual and practice). *Li* plays an important role in the transformation of character. Social and cultural norms and practices shape and influence our interactions with others. These rituals are a guide or become a means by which we develop and start to understand our moral responsibilities.

Aristotle believed virtuous development is central to human flourishing, *eudaimonia*. Aristotle identifies rationality as the unique function of human beings, and human virtue or excellence is therefore realized through the development or perfection of reason. To exercise or possess virtue is to demonstrate excellent character. Someone with a virtuous character is consistent, firm, self-controlled, and well-off. Aristotle thought people "are made perfect by habit" (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1998, 1103a10–33). When people practice doing what's right, they get better at choosing the right action in different circumstances. Through habituation, people gain practice and familiarity, bring about dispositions or tendencies, and gain the requisite practical experience to identify the reasons why a certain action should be chosen in diverse situations.

Like Confucius, Aristotle thinks social relations are important for people's rational and virtuous development. When people interact with others who have common goals and interests, they are more likely to progress and realize their rational powers. Through social relations, people also develop an important sense of community and take an interest in the flourishing of others.

9.5 Daoism

Like Mohism and Confucianism, Daoism is a response to the social unrest and suffering characteristic of ancient China's Warring States period. Daoism aims to foster harmony in both society and the individual. Philosophical Daoism was founded by Laozi. Daoists reject the narrow Confucian view of *dao* as a way of behaving in society to ensure order and social harmony and instead view the *dao* as the natural way of the universe and all things. Daoism characterizes a fulfilling life as a calm, simple life, one that is free from desires and greed. The practice of *wu wei* suggests a natural way of acting that is spontaneous or immediate. When people practice *wu wei*, they act in harmony with the *dao*, are free of desire and striving, and spontaneously move with the natural flow of existence.

9.6 Feminist Theories of Ethics

The ethics of care is often associated with feminism, and its approach is modeled on a woman's moral perspective. Psychologist Carol Gilligan's research led to the development of care ethics. It is an approach that values caring, the relationships of the individuals involved, and the interests of individuals. Gilligan's approach asks agents to consider the specific interests of individuals and their relationships. The ethics of care values caring and moral reasoning that accounts for the unique factors of concrete situations rather than abstraction.

Feminist scholars criticize traditional normative moral theories for ignoring the interests and perspectives of women (and oppressed groups) and for failing to consider important facts of the concrete situation and the individuals involved when applying norms or standards. They have explored alternative moral frameworks using all major approaches. A viable alternative moral framework must find ways to account for the interests of all persons, focus on the vulnerable and invisible, and lead to moral choices that advance true equality rather than only advancing the interests of the privileged.

Key Terms

act utilitarianism a utilitarian approach that proposes that people should apply the greatest happiness principle on a case-by-case basis

applied ethics a branch of ethics that focuses on the application of moral norms to determine the permissibility of specific actions

care ethics an approach to ethics that emphasizes the importance of subjective factors, specifics of concrete situations, and the relationships of individuals

categorical imperative a moral law that individuals have a duty to follow and that is rationally devised through Kant's four formulations

Confucianism a normative moral theory that arose in ancient China during the Warring States period that proposes the development of individual character is key to the achievement of an ethical and harmonious society

consequentialism a moral theory that looks at an action's outcome or consequences to determine whether it is morally right

dao in Confucianism, ethical principles or path by which to live life; in Daoism, the natural way of the universe and all things

Daoism a belief system developed in ancient China that encourages the practice of living in accordance with the *dao*, the natural way of the universe and all things

deontology a moral theory that focuses on duties or rules to determine the rightness of an action

essentialism a view that a set of characteristics makes something what it is

ethics the field of philosophy that investigates morality

eudaimonia the flourishing life, which ancient Greek philosophers (e.g., Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus) set as the aim of life

femininity a social construct that categorizes specific traits as female and establishes society's expectation of women

feminism a political and philosophical movement that aims to end sexism and promote social justice for women

gender binarism the view that each person can be categorized by one of two genders (male or female)

good will the capacity to be a good person

greatest happiness principle a principle that holds that actions are right when they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people

higher pleasures pleasures associated with the exercise of a person's higher faculties (e.g., the use of higher cognitive faculties and/or participation in social/cultural life)

humanity formulation a rational method of devising moral laws that specifies that each person be treated as an end, never merely as a means

hypothetical imperative a rule that needs to be followed in order to achieve some (proposed) end

incidental friendship casual relationships that are based on utility or pleasure

intersectionality different aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, and class) that intersect in a person's identity and define or influence their lived experience

junzi in Confucianism, a person who is an exemplary ethical figure and lives according to the *dao*

Li ritual and practice that develop a person's ethical character as they interact with others

lower pleasures pleasures associated with the exercise of a person's lower faculties (e.g., basic sensory pleasures)

metaethics a branch of ethics that focuses on foundational questions and moral reasoning

Mohism a type of consequentialism established in ancient China by Mozi (ca. 430 BCE) during the Warring States period

naturalism a belief that ethical claims can be derived from nonethical ones

normative ethics a branch of ethics that focuses on establishing norms and standards of moral conduct

perfect friendship relationships that foster individual virtue as they are based on love and the wish that another flourishes rather than the expectation of personal gain

pluralism an approach to normative ethical theory that suggests a more complex, complete account of morality that provides for conflicting rules

prima facie duties duties that are obligatory, other things being equal, or so long as other factors and circumstances remain the same

principle of utility a principle that holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote pleasure

and diminish pain

ren a central concept in Confucianism that is used to mean either someone with complete virtue or to refer to specific virtues

rule utilitarianism a utilitarian approach that proposes that people should use the greatest happiness principle to test possible moral rules to determine whether a given rule would produce greater happiness if it were followed

skepticism a philosophical position that claims people do not know things they ordinarily think they know

trolley problems classic thought experiments that use difficult ethical dilemmas to examine moral reasoning and deliberation

universal law formulation a rational method of devising moral laws that proposes that a moral law must be applied universally to the whole of society

utilitarianism a type of consequentialism introduced by Jeremy Bentham and developed by John Stuart Mill

virtue ethics an approach to normative ethics that focuses on character

Warring States period a period of widespread conflict, suffering, and social unrest in Chinese history that gave rise to highly influential philosophical approaches, including Mohism, Confucianism, and Daoism

wu wei a natural way of acting—also called nonaction—that is spontaneous or immediate, one in which a person's actions are in harmony with the flow of nature or existence

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Review Questions

9.1 Requirements of a Normative Moral Theory

1. Briefly explain how the three main areas of ethics (metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics) differ.
2. What is the purpose of a normative moral theory?
3. What are the three main approaches to normative ethics, and how do they differ?

9.2 Consequentialism

4. What are the ten doctrines of Mohism?
5. Why is the concept of "benefit" important in Mohism?
6. Bentham believed that pleasures only differ quantitatively. Mill, in contrast, believed that pleasure differ both quantitatively and qualitatively. What are the different qualities of pleasure that Mill identifies?
7. For utilitarians, which consequences must be considered when determining the rightness of an action?
8. What is the main difference between act and rule utilitarianism?

9.3 Deontology

9. Why do deontologists like Kant argue that consequences are not morally relevant?
10. Why is good will important in Kant's ethics?
11. Why does Kant distinguish between categorical imperatives and hypothetical imperatives?
12. Contrast Kant's and Ross's view of moral rules.
13. Why did Ross think classic utilitarians and deontologists oversimplified morality?

9.4 Virtue Ethics

14. Why is the exemplary person important in virtue ethics?

15. Why is the concept of *li* (ritual and practice) important in Confucianism? Why role does *li* play in a person's virtuous development?

16. Explain why Confucians believe relationships and social roles shape people's moral responsibilities and structure moral life.

17. Why did Aristotle think virtuous development is important for achieving *eudaimonia*, or a flourishing life?

18. In Aristotle's view, why are perfect friendships an important part of a good or flourishing life?

9.5 Daoism

19. How is the *dao* in Daoism different from the *dao* in Confucianism?

20. Explain why Daoism is thought to offer a naturalistic approach.

21. Explain the practice of *wu wei*.

22. Why does practicing *wu wei* result in a soft style of action rather than a hard style of action?

9.6 Feminist Theories of Ethics

23. Why is the concept of femininity a social construct?

24. How has the treatment of the normal human in traditional ethics ignored the perspective of women?

25. In care ethics, why is the caring relationship treated as the ethical paradigm?

26. Carol Gilligan identified the perspective of justice and the perspective of care. How do these perspectives differ?

27. Explain why some feminists have highlighted the important role intersectionality plays in social relations and argue it must be accounted for if we want to end inequality and correct identity-based oppression and discrimination.

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Applied Ethics

10

FIGURE 10.1 Bioethics is an area of applied ethics that explores the many potential ethical dilemmas that can arise in medicine and related areas. Bioethics addresses questions like: "What is informed consent?" "When, if ever, can a physician assist a patient in ending their own life?" "Under what conditions is it morally permissible to conduct research using human test subjects?" (credit: modification of "Operating Room" by John Crawford/National Cancer Institute/National Institutes of Health/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION Most of us think about ethical issues in our everyday lives. We might wonder, for instance, whether we have an obligation to reduce our use of plastics because of their impact on the environment. We might question whether we treated someone fairly at work or whether we acted in a way that was morally problematic. When we reflect on whether a given action is right or wrong, we are doing applied ethics. We attempt to determine the rightness of some specified action through moral deliberation and the application of ethical principles and norms. Questions in applied ethics focus on whether some action is right, and philosophers apply diverse perspectives when analyzing the morality of a specific action.

Developments and advances in areas like technology and medicine can potentially create otherwise unforeseen or unexpected ethical dilemmas. In most cases, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to predict

potential ethical issues pertaining to an innovation until it is already in use and in the world. Imagine, for instance, trying to predict what moral dilemmas and disruptions the internet would cause before it was created and widely used. Indeed, even after its creation and widespread adoption in the 1990s, there were still many innovations and challenges to come that would have been hard to predict. Ethical dilemmas created by new innovations emerge with use and are often confronted and debated only after they become apparent. This is why it can sometimes seem like ethical debates are always playing catch-up, that we are motivated to debate the ethical implications of something only after issues become apparent.

Metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are the three main areas of ethics, which are each distinguished by a different level of inquiry and analysis. **Applied ethics** focuses on the application of moral norms and principles to controversial issues to determine the rightness of specific actions. While people have done applied ethics throughout human history, as a field of study, applied ethics is relatively new, emerging in the early 1970s. Issues like abortion, environmental racism, the use of humans in biomedical research, and online privacy are just a few of the controversial moral issues explored in applied ethics.

Making sense of these complicated issues often requires a multidisciplinary approach. Applied ethics rarely finds answers within the philosophical frame alone. While philosophy provides the normative framework for analysis by way of the ethical theories, philosophy often generates more questions than functional answers, and in the field of ethics, concerns about the right to life, social justice, and the like sometimes fall into the arena of politics. As a result, many applied dilemmas are solved and resolved through law and policy. As such, applied ethics becomes an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary field of study.

This chapter explores major subfields in applied ethics including bioethics, environmental ethics, and business ethics and emerging technology.

10.1 The Challenge of Bioethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Summarize current scientific advances and social and political factors that contribute to our understanding of today's bioethical controversies.
- Explain the main philosophical positions in major areas of bioethical debate including abortion, euthanasia, clinical trials, and human augmentation.
- Propose a position on each bioethical issue.

The term **bioethics**, which essentially means "life ethics," was coined in 1970 by Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2011), an American biochemist. It is a field that studies ethical issues that emerge with advances in biology, technology, and medicine. For example, bioethics deals with issues related to patient autonomy, the distribution of and access to medical resources, human experimentation, online privacy, and life-and-death decisions in medicine. When confronted with issues like these, ethicists consider a multiplicity of views, any potentially relevant interests, and complex situational factors. The bioethicist, like anyone doing applied ethics, must be prepared to wear many hats in order to explore all sides and perspectives. This section looks at current areas of controversy and debate in the field of bioethics.

The Abortion Debate

This section investigates biological, political, legal, and moral aspects of the issue of abortion. Unlike a miscarriage, a spontaneous loss of pregnancy due to injury or natural defect, an **abortion** is the intentional ending of a pregnancy. When abortions are medically induced, a pregnancy is terminated using drugs, surgery, or a combination of the two. In some cases, abortions are performed out of medical necessity to save the life of a pregnant person (therapeutic abortion), while in others a person who is pregnant elects to have the procedure for other reasons.

Political efforts to legalize contraception and later abortion arose as part of many women's rights movements.

As shown in Figure 10.2, some countries still prohibit abortion, and others place limits on when it is allowed, such as when the life of the person carrying the pregnancy is at risk.

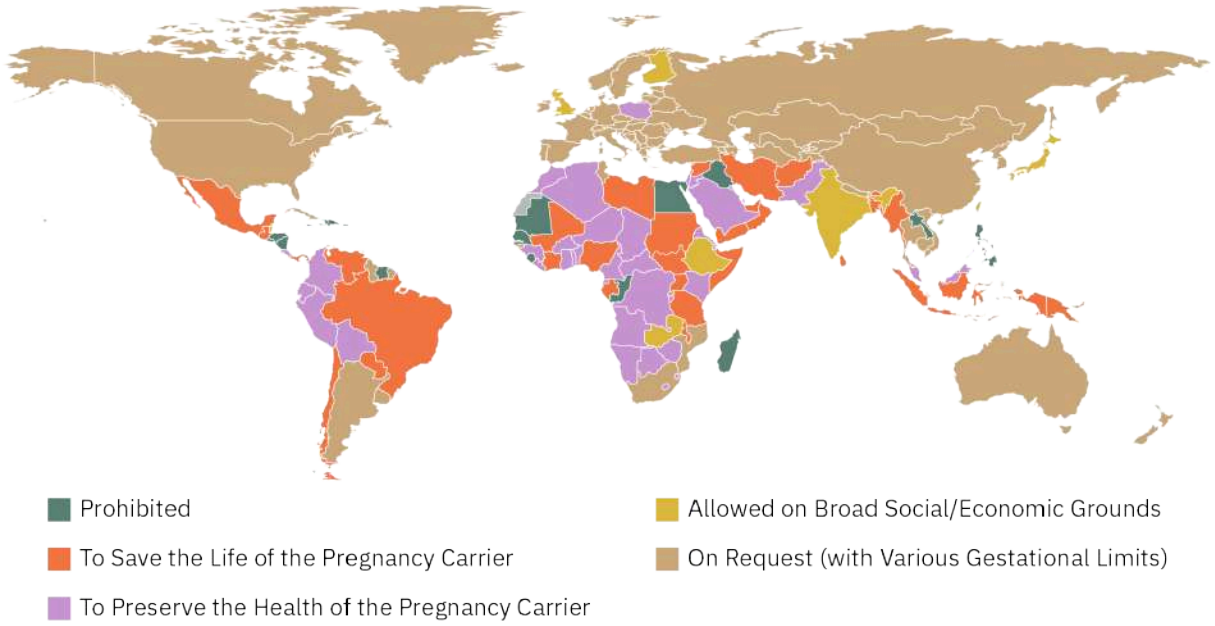

FIGURE 10.2 Legal status of abortion around the world as of March 2022. (source: Center for Responsive Politics; attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

In the United States, the right to an abortion prior to the viability of the fetus was deemed protected by the Constitution in the historic Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973). The court established a trimester system to guide abortion decisions. The court initially acknowledged an unmitigated right to abort in the first three months of pregnancy but left it up to the government to regulate abortion in the second trimester and restrict or ban it in the last trimester if the life of the person carrying the pregnancy was not in danger.

A subsequent Supreme Court decision, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade* and ruled that state abortion regulations could not place serious obstacles in the path of someone who chose to seek an abortion before a fetus was viable. The decision also replaced the trimester system with the notion of fetal viability—or the fetus's ability to survive outside the womb (approximately at 25 to 28 weeks). Someone therefore cannot freely seek an abortion if the fetus is viable.

Utilitarianism and Liberal Views on Individual Rights

Normative moral theories, such as those we considered in the previous chapter, factor into how societies view abortion. In Hinduism, for example, moral actions are based on the principle of *ahimsa*, or "non-harming," which means that in considering abortion, the choice is governed by what does the least harm to all involved (e.g., to the parents, the fetus, and society). Portions of the Vedas, Hinduism's most sacred texts, condemn abortion (BBC 2009). Hinduism considers abortion wrong unless it is necessary to save the life of the person carrying the pregnancy. At the same time, in practice, abortion is common in India because some families prefer to have boy children (Dhillon 2020).

Utilitarianism, the consequentialist approach first advanced by Jeremy Bentham, judges an action to be moral if it provides the greatest good to the greatest number. John Stuart Mill's work *On Liberty* popularized and adapted this idea so that it could be implemented within representative governments. Mill recognized that the natural rights of various individuals in society will often come into conflict. To maximize individual freedom, Mill proposed the harm principle. It states that a person's actions should only be limited if they harm another person. A person's speech should therefore not be curtailed unless it harms another by, for example, directly inciting violence. The harm principle became the cornerstone of 19th-century liberalism. As a result, many

people living in liberal societies today evaluate the morality of abortion by weighing the rights of the pregnant person against the rights of the living organism inside the womb. Those who support abortion tend to use the term *fetus* for the living organism and do not regard it as a person with rights. Those who oppose abortion use the term *unborn child* and maintain that it has the rights of personhood.

Metaphysical perspectives heavily inform the debate over whether or under what circumstances an abortion is a moral act. For some, the question revolves around what constitutes a person and what rights persons and nonpersons possess. For those who embrace the Judeo-Christian view that humans have a mind, body, and soul, the question often becomes about when the soul enters the body.

Personhood

Central to the abortion debate, the concept of **personhood** is best understood as a capacity humans possess that distinguishes them as beings capable of morality. Historically, philosophers like Aristotle and Immanuel Kant have identified reason as a principal factor that justifies the special value assigned to humans. Aristotle argued that rational activity is the peculiar function of humans. He thought we perfect ourselves by perfecting our rational nature. Kant located our worth and dignity in our capacity for rationality. He tells us that "rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves" (Kant 1997, 4:428). In other words, personhood, for Kant, is contingent on possessing a rational nature.

The question, then, is when personhood begins. No one is a fully functioning rational agent the moment they are born. In fact, we categorize some humans as dependents, as unable to act as rational agents, when their reason is not fully functioning or formed (e.g., children or those with late-stage Alzheimer's). Is there some threshold or line of demarcation that distinguishes the point at which reason is sufficiently developed for a human being to be considered a person by this definition? What would it mean for a society if only those who met that threshold were guaranteed the right to life?

Aristotle and Potentiality

The opening of the chapter on metaphysics considered the acorn and oak tree, asking how a being (in this case the acorn) can change so radically and yet remain essentially the same thing. Plato suggested that beings in the physical world are imperfect reflections of perfect **forms** that are part of an invisible, nonmaterial world. Whereas forms represent an unchanging ideal, beings in this world change. Aristotle proposed the theory of **hylomorphism**, which states that form is actually present in the material world and responsible for causing the acorn to actualize its potential as an oak tree. From this perspective, just as the acorn contains the essential identity of the fully grown oak tree, so does the human embryo contain the essential identity of a human being. Since the embryo contains the human essence, pro-life advocates argue that it is just as immoral to kill an embryo as to kill a human that has been born (Lee 2004).

CONNECTIONS

Aristotle's concept of hylomorphism is explored in greater depth in the chapter on metaphysics and the chapter on value theory.

Aristotle and the Soul

For Aristotle, the soul is the form of the living body. In his work *On the Soul*, Aristotle identifies three types of souls. The soul of a plant acts upon the body so that it can survive and reproduce. The soul of a lower-level animal acts on the body so that it can survive, reproduce, perceive, and act. The soul of a human makes it possible for the body to fulfill all the purposes of a lower-level animal and carry out rational thought. Some have argued that Aristotle believed that the rational soul only entered the human body once it was equipped with organs, at 40 days or more after conception. However, this is likely a misinterpretation promoted by the Greek philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias from 200 CE onward. In his text *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle conveys the belief, shared by others of his day, that **ensoulment** occurs upon fertilization (Bos 2012). Yet the

belief that the soul enters the body after 40 days—whether or not Aristotle supported it—became widespread within monotheism and has greatly impacted the abortion debate.

Ensoulment in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions

Today major monotheistic religions object to or seek to limit abortions because they believe that a fetus has a God-given soul. To abort then is to destroy God's creation. The Hebrew Bible, which is part of both Jewish and Christian scripture, is silent on this issue of ensoulment. Genesis 2:7 describes how God created the first man, Adam: "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." One of the Hebrew words for soul, *neshama*, also means "breath." In Judaism, the introduction of form or soul into the body becomes an act of God that gives life. No mention is made in the first five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, about when this occurs in natural procreation. The later Babylonian Talmud, compiled between 200 and 500 CE, divulges that "the embryo is considered to be mere water until the fortieth day" (quoted in Schenker 2008, 271). This pronouncement may reflect the influence of Greek ideas.

The Aristotelian view of ensoulment is expressed within Christianity. The influential Christian theologian Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) saw the killing of a 40-day-old fetus as an act of murder. A century later, the code of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, who reigned from 529 to 565 CE, declared that fetuses under 40 days did not possess a soul (Jones 2004). In the 12th century, the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas also followed Aristotle's thinking and suggested that a human soul was not fully "formed" until a period of time after conception (40 days for boys and 90 days for girls). Moreover, while Aquinas did not sanction abortion at any stage of pregnancy, he specifically notes that murder has been committed only after the fetus has become animated or ensouled. Aquinas's understanding of ensoulment remained the official church view until late into the 19th century. Pope Pius IX (1792–1878) altered the official position of the church on ensoulment in order to address theological concerns regarding the Immaculate Conception (McGarry 2013). Beginning with Pope Pius IX, then, the church's view has been that the soul is present at conception.

According to the Hadith, which along with the Quran constitutes the central written texts of Islam, the soul enters the body 120 days after conception. Yet Islamic clerics have restricted abortions to the first 40 days or prohibited them altogether—as the Quran implores parents not to kill their children for fear of want (Albar 2001). Like in Judaism and Christianity, opposition to abortion arises from a belief in the sanctity of life that God has bestowed on his creations.

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

This excerpt from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* (https://openstax.org/r/summatheologica) addresses questions of how and why the soul should be viewed as distinct from the body and how we might go about defining the soul.

> To seek the nature of the soul, we must premise that the soul is defined as the first principle of life of those things which live: for we call living things "animate," [*i.e., having a soul] and those things which have no life, "inanimate." Now life is shown principally by two actions, knowledge and movement. The philosophers of old, not being able to rise above their imagination, supposed that the principle of these actions was something corporeal: for they asserted that only bodies were real things; and that what is not corporeal is nothing: hence they maintained that the soul is something corporeal. This opinion can be proved to be false in many ways; but we shall make use of only one proof, based on universal and certain principles, which shows clearly that the soul is not a body.
>
> It is manifest that not every principle of vital action is a soul, for then the eye would be a soul, as it is a principle of vision; and the same might be applied to the other instruments of the soul: but it is the first principle of life, which we call the soul. Now, though a body may be a principle of life, as the heart is a

> principle of life in an animal, yet nothing corporeal can be the first principle of life. For it is clear that to be a principle of life, or to be a living thing, does not belong to a body as such; since, if that were the case, every body would be a living thing, or a principle of life. Therefore a body is competent to be a living thing or even a principle of life, as "such" a body. Now that it is actually such a body, it owes to some principle which is called its act. Therefore the soul, which is the first principle of life, is not a body, but the act of a body; thus heat, which is the principle of calefaction, is not a body, but an act of a body.

Secular Notions of Personhood

Some contemporary philosophers have laid aside a belief in a God-given soul and turned to modern views of personhood to justify both support for and opposition to abortion. Mary Anne Warren, for example, identifies five characteristics essential to the concept of personhood (Warren 1973):

- Consciousness (in particular, the capacity to feel pain)
- Reasoning (the developed capacity to solve new, complex problems)
- The presence of self-awareness and self-concepts
- Self-motivated and self-directed activity
- The capacity to communicate messages that are not definite or limited in terms of possible content, topic, or type

Warren argues that a fetus is not a person because it does not satisfy any of the characteristics essential to personhood. Abortion, Warren argues, is always morally permissible because a fetus is not a person and does not have rights (e.g., it does not have a right to life). The rights of the person carrying the pregnancy will always override or outweigh any consideration that might be given to a fetus. Warren believes there is no moral basis for limiting or restricting abortion, but she recognizes the possibility that we might do so on nonmoral (practical or medical) grounds. For example, we might justify restricting abortion in a situation where someone would suffer serious harm from medical complications if the procedure were performed.

Others argue that it is not the rational ability present in an individual that makes them a person or secures their moral status, but rather that our rational nature grounds our moral status—and if human nature is the source of our worth, then any human, even a child, has value whether their reason and agency has fully developed. Children, for example, are not fully functioning rational agents. We recognize this distinction, but we do not use it to justify intentionally harming children or using them as a means to our own ends. We assume that children, like all humans, possess a worth and value that prohibits such treatment. Similarly, people who oppose abortion say that the unborn are potential persons, which is sufficient to grant the unborn child at least a right to life.

Some philosophers, like Ronald Dworkin, go a step further, arguing that full moral status is assigned to any human in virtue of being a member of the human species (Dworkin 1993). Dworkin's approach focuses on whether an entity is human and uses that as a basis for assigning full moral status rather than making such status contingent on whether a specific individual has fully formed rational capacities.

The Right to Bodily Autonomy

When the issue of abortion is couched in terms of rights, the debate centers on the conflict between the right(s) of the fetus or unborn child and the rights of the pregnant person. If a fetus has a right to life, then the question is whether its right is sufficiently strong to outweigh someone's right to bodily autonomy—the right of individuals to determine what happens to their bodies.

In *A Defense of Abortion*, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929–2020) set out to show that granting a fetus a right to life does not mean that its right is unlimited. She proposed the following thought experiment: Imagine that you wake up one morning and find yourself in the hospital lying next to a famous violinist, currently unconscious, with a fatal kidney ailment. The Society of Music Lovers has reviewed all the available

medical records and found you to be the only suitable match for the violinist. They kidnapped you and plugged his circulatory system into yours so that your kidneys can filter out the poisons in his bloodstream. This will cure him within nine hours. Do you have an obligation to stay plugged in? What if the time needed to cure him is nine days? Nine months? Nine years? At what point does your freedom trump the violinist's right to life? Thomson thus asserts that the right to life does not necessarily require someone to carry a fetus to term (Thomson 1976). Because every person has a right to bodily autonomy, abortions are permissible in at least some cases.

The Sanctity of Human Life

One of the most pervasive moral arguments against abortion is based on the idea of the sanctity of human life. Those who oppose abortion on religious grounds often equate abortion with murder. Broader concerns warn that if a society abandons the sanctity of human life, then it becomes easier to justify other types of killing (Singer 1993). Within the United States, it was just a decade or so after abortion was legalized that the debate on euthanasia arose.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia, the ending a human life to avoid suffering, is controversial, as, like abortion, it confronts our belief in the sanctity of human life. Because of advances in medical technology and increased longevity, we can now preserve and extend life in a variety of ways, even when someone is critically ill—and as a result, we face new and difficult end-of-life decisions. Many families now grapple with the issues of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

Euthanasia translated from Greek simply means "good death." Euthanasia can be either passive or active. In **passive euthanasia**, treatment is withheld or withdrawn with the expectation that a patient will die sooner than they would with continued medical intervention. In **active euthanasia**, a patient's life is terminated using medical interventions (e.g., administering a lethal dose of medication). In addition, euthanasia can be voluntary, when it is at the patient's request, or nonvoluntary, when a patient is incapable of voluntarily expressing their wishes (e.g., a patient in a persistent vegetative state) and the decision must be made by someone else acting in their best interests.

FIGURE 10.3 What role should the field of medicine play in end-of-life decisions? Should modern medicine facilitate termination of a patient's life in at least some situations? These are ethical concerns that did not face our ancestors, who did not have the technology to make these questions possible. (credit: "100614-A-2082K-024" by U.S. Army Photo/David Kidd/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

While voluntary active euthanasia is illegal in the United States, in countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Canada, various laws mandate dosages for lethal injection for the

terminally ill who request help with this form of euthanasia (Ashford 2019). Voluntary passive euthanasia is legal in the United States and involves the withholding of lifesaving or life-sustaining measures with the consent of the patient. The most common form of this kind of euthanasia is an advanced directive known as a DNR, or "do not resuscitate," order, in which a person provides written instructions ahead of time, in the form of a "living will," not to restart the heart if it stops and/or not to put the person on a respirator if they cannot breathe on their own. Nonvoluntary passive euthanasia is the same withholding of treatment but without consent of the patient. This form of euthanasia can occur when a person has not made a living will, another form of advanced directive, and is not conscious or competent to make the decision about whether to extend care on their own behalf.

Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) refers to a practice in which a physician provides the means (i.e., a prescription for a lethal dose of medication) and/or information to assist a patient in ending their own life. The American Medical Association has denounced physician-assisted suicide as unethical and is aligned with some significant court cases in its position (AMA 2016). Though a controversial practice, the passage of "death with dignity" laws has legalized the practice of physician-assisted suicide in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington (Death with Dignity 2021). Physician-assisted suicide is distinguished from euthanasia because the patient terminates their own life, whereas euthanasia involves the active or passive termination of the patient's life by a physician.

Utilitarian Views of Euthanasia

Utilitarian philosophers generally advocate seeking the greatest happiness for the largest number of people. Utilitarians weigh the benefits of keeping a person alive against the suffering of the patient and their loved ones and the expense and **opportunity costs** of caring for the individual. Opportunity cost refers to what is lost by choosing one option over another. For example, choosing to keep a patient alive on a respirator means that this respirator cannot be used by another patient. A utilitarian would argue that if the patient on the respirator has no chance of recovery while other patients who may recover need the respirator, the respirator should be given to those with hope of recovery. In such a system of considerations, the benefits of keeping a patient alive may include the extra time the patient or the loved ones need to prepare for death and/or the preservation of the sanctity of life as a value within the community.

Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer (b. 1946), arguing from the utilitarian point of view, supports euthanasia in most of its forms. In Singer's view, whether euthanasia is morally permissible depends in part on whether a person's life is still worth living, whether they still have quality of life. Singer holds that it is moral to help someone avoid the unnecessary pain of a prolonged death and immoral to withhold assistance when a person has voluntarily and consciously waived their right to life. The only form of euthanasia Signer opposes is involuntary euthanasia. Euthanasia is involuntary when the decision to euthanize is made without patient input and against their interests.

Other Philosophical Views on Euthanasia

American ethicist James Rachels (1941–2003) famously challenged the conventional view that active euthanasia is morally wrong whereas passive euthanasia is (at least sometimes) morally permissible. Rachels pointed out that in both active and passive euthanasia the intent is the same, to end suffering, and the result is the same, the termination of the patient's life. The difference, however, is that active euthanasia causes the immediate cessation of patient suffering, whereas passive euthanasia may result in prolonged suffering for the patient because death is not immediate. Passive euthanasia results in greater suffering than active euthanasia. Therefore, Rachels argued not only that active euthanasia is permissible in all cases where passive euthanasia is permissible but that active euthanasia is preferrable because it brings an immediate end to patient suffering.

Some philosophers believe that euthanasia should be morally prohibited. They argue that the ethical harm to the community done by permitting euthanasia is greater than the benefit of ending suffering. They focus on

the wrongness of killing, the physician's role, and the potential slippery slope if euthanasia were widely practiced. Those who oppose active euthanasia argue, for example, that it is wrong to kill another person or that killing is incompatible with our concept of what it means to be a physician. In cases of active euthanasia, a physician must take action to cause the termination of their patient's life. Physicians, however, first and foremost aim to help others and above all do no harm. Practicing active euthanasia seems to therefore be at odds with the very idea of a physician. Additionally, the practice of active euthanasia carries with it the potential for misuse or abuse.

Clinical Trials

In order to test new medical interventions and establish a drug's dosage, determine possible side effects, and demonstrate efficacy, scientists run **clinical trials**. Clinical trials can involve both animal and human subjects. While it is essential to determine whether treatments are safe for general consumption, clinical trials, especially those using human subjects, have been a source of ethical dilemmas. Since the Enlightenment, many societies have adopted the Kantian value that humans should not be treated as a means to an end. Many societies have likewise embraced the view, grounded in social contract theory, that all individuals have natural rights, which make everyone equal before the law. (For more on social contract theory, see the chapter on political theories.) These ethical and political values have consequences for clinical trials. They have raised issues related to, for example, informed consent, access to medical resources, and whether the ends of using human subjects justify the means. Identifying and debating these ethical issues can promote, where applicable, changes to the way trials are conducted to address areas of concern.

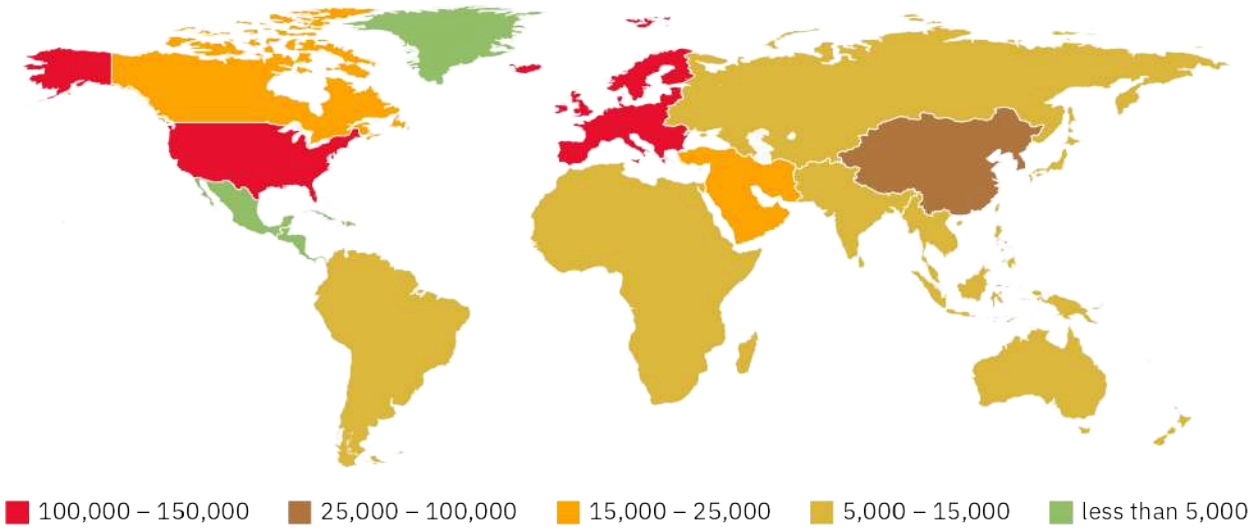

FIGURE 10.4 Ongoing clinical trials nationwide as of November 14, 2021. (source: National Library of Medicine; attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Equipoise and Double-Blind Methods

In randomized clinical trials, a random process determines the treatment each participant receives. Randomization is used to ensure that researchers don't influence data by assigning treatments based on clinical assessment or other factors. Double-blind methods in clinical research refer to trials in which information about the treatment a participant receives is not disclosed to either the patient or the researcher. Randomization and double-blind methods create potential ethical issues because they seem to favor producing good data over patient interests. In other words, such methods seem to value the science more than the individual lives and health of the participants.

The **principle of clinical equipoise** offers a way to conduct randomized trials in a way that balances the interests of participants and aims of science. A trial satisfies the principle of clinical equipoise when (1) there are no treatments that exist that are better than the ones being used in the trial and (2) clinical evidence does

not favor the use of one of the treatments in the trial for the participants involved. If it obtains, clinical equipoise suggests that a trial does not sacrifice the interests of participants in the pursuit of scientific information and data. It balances the interests of trial participants and scientific interests in a clinical trial so one isn't pursued at the expense of the other.

Four Guiding Principles

Trials involving human subjects have historically been a source of difficult ethical issues. There are four main ethical principles that can guide our thinking whenever faced with ethical issues in physician and patient or researcher and participant relationships, namely the principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice.

Principle of autonomy: The principle of autonomy states that in clinical settings, patients have a right to exercise agency or self-determination when it comes to making decisions about their own health care. In clinical trials, participant autonomy is protected when potential participants are entered in a trial only after giving their informed consent. Informed consent means an individual is provided all the relevant information about a trial to make their own decision about whether to participate. Participant autonomy and informed consent protect participants from exploitation.

Principle of beneficence: The principle of beneficence proposes that we should act in ways that benefit others or that are for the good of others. In research settings involving human subjects, researchers satisfy beneficence by considering the interests of participants, ensuring participants are treated fairly, and considering the good of research subjects in addition to advancing science (see clinical equipoise above).

Principle of nonmaleficence: The principle of nonmaleficence states that we should act in ways that do not cause harm to others. In clinical settings, nonmaleficence requires that patients are not unnecessarily harmed. In some cases, a procedure, treatment, or test may result in some harm to the patient. Physicians practice nonmaleficence when any potential harms are considered and patients are subjected only to those that are necessary for effective treatment. In research trials, nonmaleficence requires that trials are designed in ways to limit harm to participants as much as possible.

The principle of justice: The principle of justice insists that the distribution and practice of health care should be equitable or fair. In clinical settings, the way patients are treated and the care they receive should be similar in relevant circumstances, and similar cases should be treated similarly. In clinical trials, the principle of justice dictates that researchers treat all participants fairly and equally. Researchers should not, for instance, give special treatment to some participants. Additionally, trial design and participation requirements should be fair and promote the impartial treatment of participants.

In the arena of human experimentation, modern safeguards and guidelines were created in response to historical cases of exploitation and abuse. The Nuremburg Code, for example, represents the first attempt to establish guidelines for clinical trials created in response to the abuses and horrors perpetrated by Nazi physicians during World War II. The creation of **institutional review boards** (IRBs) was another method to mitigate ethical issues posed by clinical trials. IRBs comprised of experts in science, medicine, and the law are tasked with reviewing and vetting parameters of trials to protect participants and identify potential issues. Clinical trial guidelines and IRBs aim to promote that all trials with human subjects adhere to the four ethical principles above and protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

Human Trials in Historically Marginalized Communities

Historically marginalized communities and members of vulnerable populations have been especially susceptible to exploitation when participating in trials and research involving human subjects. Vulnerable populations have been particularly susceptible to coercion. Coercion, whether explicit or implicit, undermines a person's autonomy because it makes informed consent and the exercise of agency impossible. It can occur, for instance, in cases where researchers do not explain the parameters of a trial or misrepresent it in some

way to elicit consent from prospective trial participants.

In the United States, the Tuskegee syphilis study (1932–1972) is perhaps the most notorious example of a trial that exploited individuals from marginalized communities. Over a period of 40 years, researchers tracked the progression of syphilis in a group of some 400 Black men to determine whether it differed in any way when compared to its progression in White men. The subjects were Black sharecroppers who, like many Americans, were experiencing increased hardships and difficulties because of the Great Depression (1929 to late 1930s). The desperate situation of potential subjects was exploited by recruiters who used the allure of free food and medical care to get their consent to participate in the study. The trial aimed to study the progression of untreated syphilis in human subjects. Researchers not only withheld the fact that participants had syphilis but also intentionally withheld treatment as well. Even when a treatment for syphilis was discovered in 1947 (penicillin), subjects in the Tuskegee experiment still received no treatment. The interests and rights of trial participants (e.g., their health, well-being, autonomy, and life) were ignored and abused for the sake of science (Taylor n.d.).

The Tuskegee experiment and experimentation conducted by Nazi physicians on human subjects during World War II are examples in which vulnerable populations are exploited and treated as expendable in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. When subjects are recruited in exploitative trials, their "consent" is often a consequence of coercion, whether explicit or implicit. Issues of coercion occur when recruiters, for example, withhold important information about the trial, misrepresent trial goals, take advantage of participants' desperate situations, and fail to adequately bridge language barriers to ensure trial parameters and participation requirements are understood.

Normative Moral Frameworks Applied to Clinical Trials

The four main ethical concepts discussed above can (and should) guide decision-making in a clinical setting. Not only do normative moral frameworks provide additional and more robust guidance for moral decision making and conduct, but their application to specific issues can also shed light on why we support the adoption of ethical practices.

Utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) proposed that the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences, by what it produces. They argued that we act morally when our actions produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. In clinical trials, the utilitarian emphasis on consequences and, in particular, happiness provides a framework that may help us balance scientific/research goals and the interests of human research subjects. Mill argued that we should assess the morality of an action from the standpoint of an impartial, benevolent spectator. We are impartial when we consider everyone's happiness, including our own, equally and don't give preference to some individuals' or some groups' happiness or interests over others. We are benevolent when we strive to choose those actions that produce the most overall happiness and do not sacrifice the happiness of some for the happiness of others. Clinical trials ought to weigh the interests of human subjects carefully and be conducted in ways that do not sacrifice the subjects' interests for the sake of science. Research is often funded by the private sector. Companies pursuing new treatments and interventions must balance their interests in profits, the costs associated with research and clinical trials, the aims of science, and the interests of the human subjects in their trials. If decisions are not made with these interests in mind, it is possible that choices in how clinical trials are conducted may be made not based on producing the greatest overall happiness but rather to increase overall profits for certain individuals or private groups.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theory provides a framework for the philosophy of utilitarianism and deontology.

A **deontologist** like Kant would examine the relevant rules and norms that apply to clinical trials. For Kant, an

important rule that must be considered when using human research subjects is the imperative to always treat all persons as ends in themselves, never as means only. In other words, Kant believed that all people have inherent worth and value that is not dependent simply on usefulness for some end or goal. Kant's ethics emphasizes the rights of human subjects and makes clear that potential research subjects must make an informed, free decision whether to participate in a clinical trial. Additionally, human beings' rights cannot be ignored or denied because some other end (e.g., the goals of science, profits, or even greater human interests) is deemed more valuable. A Kantian approach would affirm the rights, choice, and autonomy of trial participants.

Care ethics takes a character-centered approach, but it makes the values of caring central in our moral deliberation and decision-making. Care ethics uses the caring relationship as the ethical paradigm and thus highlights the importance of subjective and concrete factors when evaluating the rightness of certain actions and choices. In clinical trials, care ethics reminds us to value all humans and consider the importance of virtues like compassion and empathy when interacting with and treating patients.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theory provides a framework for care ethics.

Human Augmentation and Genetic Modification

Human augmentation refers to attempts to enhance or increase human capabilities through technological, biomedical, or other interventions. While the notion of enhancement is broad, philosopher Eric Juengst and psychiatrist Daniel Moseley define it as "biomedical interventions that are used to improve human form or functioning beyond what is necessary to restore or sustain health" (Juengst and Moseley 2019). Human augmentation, then, refers to interventions sought not for individual health but for the sake of improving an individual's capabilities and functioning. For example, the cyclist Lance Armstrong famously won the Tour de France seven years in a row (1999–2005). Armstrong became infamous, however, when he was later stripped of his titles after it became clear that he had practiced "blood doping" to improve his performance when competing in the Tour de France. He used illegal and banned interventions to enhance his performance and gain an unfair edge over competition. There are many potential biomedical interventions (e.g., pharmacological) that can be used to improve or enhance capabilities in certain areas, and it can often be difficult to clearly define why some raise moral concerns and others do not. Many people, for instance, ingest caffeine on a regular basis. Caffeine is a mild stimulant that may enhance capabilities, but caffeine use is accepted and generally does not raise moral concerns. In contrast, using Adderall, a pharmaceutical amphetamine salt, not as prescribed for medical and health reasons but to enhance energy levels and memory is the sort of intervention that is often viewed as ethically problematic.

FIGURE 10.5 Elon Musk stands next to a machine for inserting a Neuralink implant in the human brain. This implant is designed to make it possible for people to operate devices like smartphones and computers using their minds. (credit: "Elon Musk and the Neuralink Future" by Steve Jurvetson/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Advancements in human biotechnology have created an opportunity for some people to exercise genetic choices that could yield potential therapeutic benefits and make it possible to augment human capacities through genetic modification. Developments in gene editing technologies like CRISPR (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats), for example, have made genetic modification easier, faster, and more affordable. New technologies have also demonstrated the potential of gene editing.

The characteristics of an organism can be deliberately modified and altered through genetic engineering. Genetic modification has been practiced in agriculture to intentionally alter the characteristics of certain crops (e.g., rice and corn) so that plants, for example, produce higher yields, are more robust, and have increased nutritional properties. Human augmentation through genetic engineering raises numerous ethical concerns. If genetic information is altered to promote certain traits, then how we define "positive" and "negative" genetic traits could have far-reaching consequences. Positive genetic traits will naturally be ones that are promoted and reinforced, whereas negative genetic traits will be reduced and eliminated. In the future, if human genetic modification becomes widely practiced, it is possible that a focus on "positive" genetic traits will decrease human genetic diversity, making us less adaptable and more vulnerable.

A Utilitarian Approach to Genetic Engineering

Whether a utilitarian would find the practice of genetic engineering morally permissible when applied to humans would depend, as it so often does, on how it is used. Utilitarians would likely find human augmentation through gene editing a morally worthwhile endeavor if it improved overall human welfare and happiness. For instance, utilitarians would support the use of genetic modification to eliminate disease and disability. If it turns out to be an extremely costly intervention, however, utilitarians might not support it on the grounds that only the very wealthy would be able to access it.

New advancements in biotechnology often come with high costs, making it so only the wealthiest can afford them. If the costs of human genetic modification are too high, many people won't be able to access such interventions, and it will worsen the inequality gap. Imagine if prospective parents were able to access gene editing technologies to modify their offspring's genetic traits. If these services are only accessible to the very wealthy, then naturally only the select few and their offspring will benefit from them. Such a scenario would no doubt have negative social implications. The inequality gap would widen, the children of wealthy parents would have numerous advantages over other children, and it might even lay the groundwork for new forms of discrimination and oppression.

Utilitarians argue that conduct is morally right if it promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Human augmentation through genetic engineering has the potential to increase quality of life by curing or preventing illness and eliminating certain forms of disability, but it could also negatively impact society by, for example, widening the inequality gap, benefiting only a very small percentage of the population, and laying the groundwork for new forms of discrimination. Whether utilitarians support the use of gene editing technologies on humans depends on how such technologies are used and whether their use promotes the greatest good for the greatest number. There are numerous ethical quagmires ahead in the arena of gene editing, but at the same time, this technology holds the promise of eradicating the most terrible of human diseases and thus eliminating unnecessary suffering and improving quality of life. Utilitarians argue that all potential benefits and harms need to be carefully considered and weighed to determine whether gene editing technologies are used in a morally responsible way.

Gene Editing and Biodiversity

Some ethicists argue that we should distinguish between somatic cell interventions and germ-line interventions when discussing the morality of human genetic modification. In **somatic cell interventions**, genetic changes cannot be inherited or passed to a patient's offspring. In **germ-line interventions** (inheritable genetic modification), however, genetic changes can be passed down to future generations (Gannett 2008). Any genetic modifications that result from germ-line interventions are inheritable and therefore have the potential to become part of the larger human gene pool. Ethicists have identified numerous ethical issues and concerns related to inheritable genetic modification. For example, it is unclear what long-term effects would result from gene modification, future generations cannot consent to genetic modification, and germ-line interventions may have a negative effect on biodiversity.

Some ethicists also argue that the distinction between therapy and enhancement is morally relevant when considering genetic modification. A gene editing therapy (or negative genetic modification) is an intervention that is pursued to "restore normal function," whereas a gene editing enhancement (or positive genetic modification) is an intervention that is pursued to enhance or increase normal capacities and functioning (Gannett 2008). Ethicists argue that genetic modification is morally permissible when it aims at therapy and morally impermissible when it aims at enhancement. A therapy only aims to return an individual to a normal state of health, but an enhancement aims to go beyond an individual's normal capabilities. In cases of enhancement, however, interventions are pursued because patients possess a desire to go beyond their current capacities. The latter run a greater risk of having unknown and long-term effects on the gene pool and genetic diversity.

Genetic diversity is important for any species to thrive, evolve, and adapt. If genetic engineering is widely practiced, it is possible that modification will focus on certain favored traits. This would result in less biodiversity within the species and would threaten humanity in unforeseen ways. For instance, it is possible that a less diverse gene pool would make the human species vulnerable to some unknown future illness. The concern is that the more homogenous and narrow our gene pool becomes, the less adaptable we become as a species. Like all technologies that are new and that push the boundaries of what's possible, it is hard to imagine all the possible (positive or negative) consequences that exist on the horizon until we use them and are able to gather data to help us better understand the implications of their use.

Patenting of Genetic Material

Before 1980, the United States did not consider living organisms patentable because they were considered naturally occurring entities. This changed in 1980 when the US Supreme Court issued its decision in *Diamond v. Chakrabarty*, which found that a genetically modified bacterial strain could be patented because "it was 'man-made' and not naturally occurring" (Gannett 2008). The court's decision opened a door that allowed individuals, institutions, and private entities to patent organisms that they genetically modified and even patent specific genes when they were first to identify them. This made it possible for private entities to gain the exclusive rights to develop diagnostics for specific genes. Myriad Genetics, for example, "patented BRCA1 and BRCA2 breast and ovarian cancer genes and granted Eli Lilly exclusive rights to market applications based on

the BRCA1 sequence" (Gannett 2008). Eli Lilly's exclusive rights allowed it to charge patients thousands of dollars to get tested for cancers resulting from the BRCA mutations, as well as charge researchers who worked to develop a deeper understanding of these genes and their role in the development of cancer.

Philosophers debate whether patenting genetic material is an ethical practice. Some philosophers think gene patents are generally beneficial and not morally problematic. They argue, for example, that patents are an important reward and help motivate researchers, they incentivize progress and scientific advancement, and gene patents benefit society because they lead to the development of better, more affordable medical testing and intervention. Other philosophers, in contrast, raise doubts about the morality of gene patents. They argue, for example, that gene patents impede scientific progress by encouraging secrecy, they reward the pursuit of commercial interests, they award private entities the exclusive right to develop market applications and embolden them to drive up the costs of medical testing and treatment, and genes are naturally occurring and not the sort of thing that should be patentable.

An ethical position on gene patenting depends on what factors and outcomes are considered to be morally relevant. Ethicists debate whether gene patents are generally beneficial or not, whether they produce more good or harm. They explore how they impact scientific progress and development, question whether they create conflicts of interest that harm patients or contribute to higher medical costs, and debate what makes something intellectual property.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Genetic engineering is the process by which scientists modify or alter a gene to improve an organism in some way. Genetic engineering is currently a common tool of science: for example, some crops such as corn have been modified to be more resistant to certain types of bugs and pests. More recently, the COVID-19 vaccine was created by using mRNA genetic sequencing to help an individual's body recognize the COVID virus. However, many have raised concerns about the potential for genetic engineering to be used to change attributes of human beings.

In one or more paragraphs, address the following questions, and provide examples to support your position. Is it moral for parents to genetically engineer an embryo for the purposes of producing a healthier child than they would otherwise produce without such technology? How about a more physically beautiful or intelligent child? Why or why not? Do you consider there to be significant differences between the two aims (health versus beauty or intelligence)?

10.2 Environmental Ethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the current environmental and climate crisis.
- Describe different philosophical positions pertaining to humanity's relationships to the natural environment.
- Identify the circumstances that have led to marginalized groups being especially affected by climate disasters.

Before environmental ethics emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s, some people were already questioning and rethinking our relationship to the natural world. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, called upon humanity to expand our idea of community to include the entire natural world, grounding this approach in the belief that all of nature is connected and interdependent in important ways. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) drew attention to the dangers of what were then commonly used commercial pesticides. Carson's essays drew attention to the far-reaching impacts of human activity and its potential to cause significant harm to the environment and to humanity in turn. These early works inspired the environmentalist movement and sparked debates about how to deal with emerging environmental challenges.

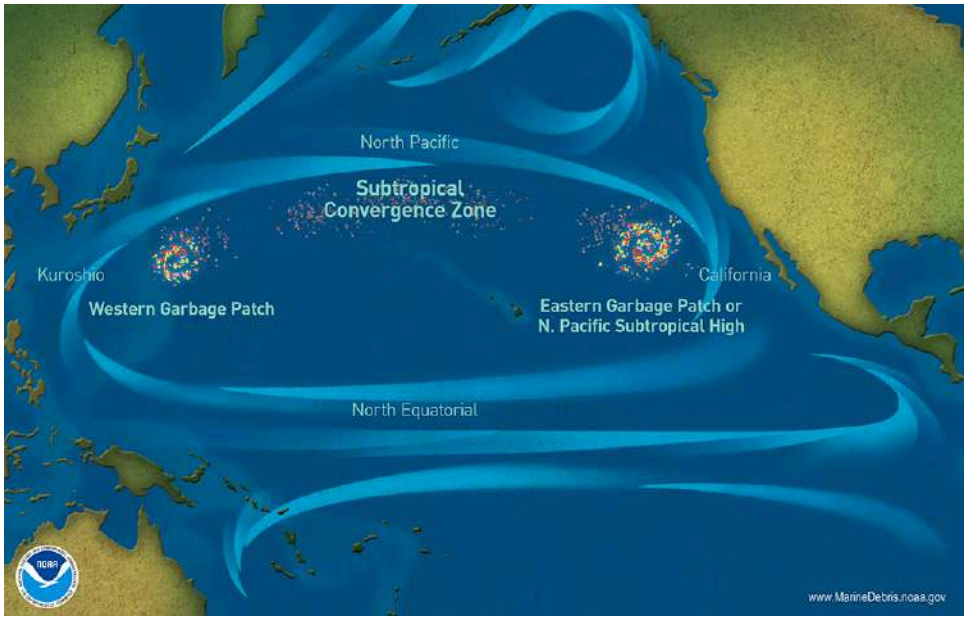

FIGURE 10.6 This map indicates areas in the Pacific Ocean where small particles of plastic and other waste collect in enormous clusters. (credit: "Garbage Patch Illustration" by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Public Domain)

The Emerging Crisis

Humans directly and indirectly change and shape the natural world. Our reliance on fossil fuels to meet our energy needs, for example, releases a key greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO_2), into the air as a result. Greenhouse gases trap heat in Earth's atmosphere, resulting in changes in the planet's climate. The two countries that produce the most CO_2 are the United States and China. The United States is the biggest gasoline consumer in the world, using approximately 338 million gallons of gasoline per day. China is the biggest coal consumer, burning approximately three billion tons of coal in 2020—more than half of the worldwide total consumption of coal. Our demand for the energy provided by fossil fuels to power our industries, heat our homes, and make possible travel between distant locations is the main factor that has contributed to increased levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Human activities have had and continue to have significant impacts on the natural world. The term **anthropogenic climate change** refers to changes in Earth's climate caused or influenced by human activity. Severe weather and natural disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity because of the changing climate. As just one example, record-setting wildfires were experienced in recent years in both the United States and Australia. In a span of just five years (2017–2021), the United States experienced four of the most severe and deadliest wildfires in its history, all of which occurred in California: the 2017 Tubbs Fire, the 2018 Camp Fire, the 2020 Bay Area Fire, and the 2021 Dixie Fire. In 2020, Australia experienced its most catastrophic bushfire season when roughly 19 million hectares burned, destroying over three thousand homes and killing approximately 1.25 billion animals.

FIGURE 10.7 The wildfires that affected Australia in 2020 are one among many effects of climate change that have harmed both human and animal life in recent years. (credit: "Australian Wildfires" by National Interagency Fire Center/Flickr, Public Domain)

Environmental ethics is an area of applied ethics that attempts to identify right conduct in our relationship with the nonhuman world. For decades, scientists have expressed concern about the short- and long-term effects that human activities are having on the climate and Earth's ecosystems. Many philosophers argue that in order to change our behaviors in ways that result in healing of the natural world, we need to change our thinking about the agency and value of the nonhuman elements (including plants, animals, and even entities such as rivers and mountains) that share the globe with us.

Political and Legal Dimensions

The environmental movement began with specific worries about air and water pollution and the effects of pesticides on food crops. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was influential in the creation of nonprofit organizations and government agencies, such as the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), designed to protect human health and the environment. Agencies like the EPA can significantly affect national policy and aspects of the economy related to emissions from factories, use of and disposal of toxic chemicals, and nearly anything else that can adversely impact the environment or human health.

Legal approaches to protecting the environment vary from country to country. The economic drive to produce quickly and efficiently with little to no regulation pits many industrializing countries against the more established economies in Western Europe and North America. China, for example, which currently contributes 43 percent of the world's annual carbon emissions, is attempting to enact policies that extend beyond mere cleanup to foster regeneration of ecological systems (Gardner 2019). With unaddressed environmental concerns, China is currently facing a loss of financial and intellectual capital as 60 percent of citizens with a net worth of $1.5 million or more have emigrated.

International efforts to address the climate crisis have met with mixed success. In 1985, after scientists discovered that some aerosol sprays were causing holes in the ozone layer in the atmosphere, 20 countries initiated the Montreal Protocol, which banned the use of these sprays. The international community rapidly adopted the agreement, and today 197 countries have signed the treaty. One major reason for this success, however, is that these sprays were relatively easy and inexpensive to replace. Such is not the case for global climate change. Currently, there is no single, viable alternative to the carbon economy—a term used to reference our current economic dependence on carbon-based fuels such as petroleum and coal. Renewable energy sources, such as solar panels, are available, but not at the scale needed to fuel high-energy and high-

consumption lifestyles. More than 150 countries have signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which laid the groundwork for the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). With these agreements, most nations have committed to future goals for reducing fossil fuel emissions, but to date no nation has made significant progress toward these goals. Climate change is a complex problem, intrinsically tied to an economy that depends on access to inexpensive and abundant fuel sources. It is also a problem that cannot be addressed by one nation or group alone but rather calls attention to the shared nature of our planetary ecosystem and the impact that activities in one location have on every other life.

Philosophical Contributions to Environmental Ethics

Instrumental Value of Nature

Traditional Western philosophies have been anthropocentric (human-centered), as discussed in the chapter on value theory. Humans are regarded as the sole possessors of **intrinsic value**, meaning that each human life is understood to possess value in itself and for its own sake. The natural world, on the other hand, has been viewed as having **instrumental value**, understood as having value solely as a means to satisfy human needs and desires. From ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, philosophers and scientists have studied the natural world with the goal of understanding how better to use it to achieve the goals of human societies.

Anthropocentric Obligations

Empiricism is often traced back to the work of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), whose experimental techniques led to the development of the scientific method and who advocated an inductive approach to scientific inquiry in his essay *Novum Organum*. According to Bacon, when nature becomes the object of study, it can be completely manipulated and used in accordance with God's original plan for humanity on Earth. Bacon held the prevailing Christian view that God gave human beings dominion over the nonhuman world. Unlike an autonomous subject, an object can be treated without regard, manipulated for study, and exploited as a resource—all of which occurred as capitalism evolved in Western countries (Bacon 1878). Contemporary Western societies have viewed science and technology as an important vehicle for empowering humanity to manipulate and control nature, to force nature to bend to our will.

Early advocates of the environmental movement in the West associated this **anthropocentric** (human-centered) perspective with the environment crisis. In a well-known essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), Lynn White argues that the way we think about the environment has its roots in Judeo-Christian thinking that maintains the superiority of humans over the nonhuman world and teaches that the natural world was created for human use. If nature only has instrumental value, then we do not violate morality when we manipulate, destroy, or otherwise harm nature.

Some philosophers, however, point out that this same anthropocentric approach has the potential to foster an ethics of environmental care. According to this perspective, moral obligations concerning our treatment of the natural world can be justified by appealing to human interests and the desire for self-preservation. For example, we might argue that all humans have an interest in having access to clean air and drinkable water and in ensuring the longevity of Earth for future generations to enjoy. These basic interests that all humans share can be used as a basis for establishing moral obligations to reduce pollution, create more sustainable practices, and take actions to diminish harm caused to the environment by human activity.

In *People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution* (1974), for example, William Baxter offers an unapologetically anthropocentric environmental ethic. Baxter adopts a traditional view that assigns intrinsic value only to persons. He proposes that the fact that some harm has come to certain aspects of the nonhuman world is, in itself, not enough to justify moral responsibility. "Damage to penguins, or sugar pines, or geological marvels is, without more, simply irrelevant" (Baxter 1974, 5). That acknowledged, Baxter goes on to state that a moral obligation to the nonhuman world does exist, because human interests are intrinsically tied to the natural world. When it comes to pollution, for example, Baxter argues that we have a moral obligation to balance the benefits we get from causing pollution with the harm caused by pollution to establish a level of

pollution that is optimal.

One proposed solution to the environmental crisis, in line with an anthropocentric approach, is to levy taxes on people and corporations when their activities are deemed detrimental to society and/or to planetary health. Currently, in the United States, many states levy extra taxes on the purchase of cigarettes and alcohol, above and beyond the established sales tax. These extra taxes are justified by pointing out that these products are detrimental to human health and that their consumption puts an unnecessary burden on the state's health care systems. Some economists recommend using a similar approach to control environmental impact. In this scenario, a tax cost or liability would be imposed on companies or individuals who cause harm to the environment. A carbon emissions tax is an example of a such a tax. Of course, rewarding positive behavior could also work, for example, by giving tax breaks or other types of rewards to organizations that are working toward environmental sustainability. These policies align with the anthropocentric approach in that they hold organizations accountable for the harm they are doing to human society and human interests.

Deep Ecology and the Intrinsic Value of Nature

In stark contrast to the anthropocentricism that has long dominated Western thinking about the environment, **deep ecology**, a term first coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912–2009), assumes that all living things are valuable in their own right (Naess 1973). If all life has intrinsic value, then all life is deserving of respect. Deep ecology thus advocates a practice of restraint when it comes to the environment and to nonhuman life.

Deep ecology argues that we need to fundamentally change how we think about ourselves and our relationship to nature. This approach proposes that it is wrong to view ourselves as individual, separate entities. Instead, all of nature, including human beings, should be understood in terms of their relationships with everything else. This interrelatedness implies a responsibility to act in ways that respect the intrinsic value of all living things and promote life in the broadest sense. For deep ecologists, a first step in this approach is to become sensitive to and aware of the deep relationships that exist between everything in nature. Aware that we are more than this body and this mind, that we are members of a larger whole, we recognize that we have an obligation to promote and care for the natural world. Naess thought of deep ecology as a movement promoting a radical new worldview that contrasted sharply with the traditional view that valued nature only as a means to human ends.

Critics of deep ecology sometimes note that it is a position of privilege taken by people in developed nations and that less industrialized countries may not be in a position to respect the environment in the same way when their own survival is at risk. Environmental initiatives may be challenging for smaller, less industrialized countries to pursue. In these nations, the call to environmentalism may ring hollow to those who face a daily struggle for food or clean water.

Social Ecology

Social ecologists see environmental problems as stemming from the same faulty political and economic system that promotes inequity and is responsible for racism, sexism, and classism. In this view, capitalism has created a system of domination over both humanity and nature and has turned nature into just one more commodity. Murray Bookchin (1921–2006), an American political philosopher and a founder of social ecology, was highly influential in this line of thought. Bookchin believed that most, if not all, of the problems that make up our current environmental crisis are the result of long-standing social problems. He argued that the only way to address our ecological problems is to address our social problems. Bookchin proposed that we change society by rejecting large political structures and big business and empowering smaller, locally based groups that are more tied to their environments and thus more environmentally aware.

FIGURE 10.8 Wind is a renewable energy source, in that there is theoretically an infinite supply of it. Wind farms have been popping up in the landscape in many parts of the world. (credit: "Wind Turbines" by Zechariah Judy/ Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Concerns have also been raised about the unequal impact environmental problems have on different segments of society. Robert Bullard's 1990 book *Dumping in Dixie* argues that environmentalism is intertwined with issues of racial and socioeconomic equity. It is thus not just an issue of individual health but rather a concern about the health of communities. Historically marginalized communities in particular are statistically more likely to be exposed to environmental dangers. One egregious and well-publicized example of these types of dangers is the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. In 2014, it was realized that drinking water in Flint was contaminated with high levels of lead. This contamination was the result of a decision made by emergency managers appointed by the state government to switch Flint's water supply from the Detroit water system to the Flint River, in order to save money. The Flint River water not only contained bacteria and carcinogens but also leached lead from the pipes that brought water to people's homes. As a result, many suffered from rashes, hair loss, and elevated blood levels of lead (Denchak 2018). Another example can be seen in the South Bronx, in New York City. This area is sometimes referred to as an "island of pollution," as it lies at the confluence of three major highways. The pollution from the traffic has resulted in an increase in asthma diagnoses and asthma-related hospitalizations in those living in this neighborhood, the majority of them Black Americans, Latinos, and new immigrants (Butini 2018).

Similar differences in environmental dangers can be observed on a global scale. A 2016 United Nations report reported that people in developing countries are more likely to live on land that has been exposed to contamination and chemical pollutants than those in wealthier nations (United Nations 2016).

VIDEO

Environmental Racism

Click to view content (https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/10-2-environmental-ethics)

10.3 Business Ethics and Emerging Technology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the role of codes of ethics within business and technology.
- Assess how much responsibility corporations should take for social, economic, and environmental problems.
- Evaluate the difficulty of establishing ethical practices pertaining to emerging technologies.

Ethical questions pertaining to business and to emerging technology raise a number of broad issues, including

corporate responsibility and the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. Additionally, a great deal of work in these subfields supports the development and implementation of codes of ethics used by organizations to guide the conduct of their members. This section explores both these broader issues and the practical concerns.

Codes of Ethics

A business is defined as an organization that engages in selling goods and services with the intent to make a profit. Governments generally restrict the activities of businesses through laws and regulations. To ensure that their members act in accordance with these laws and regulations and to meet additional goals that reflect the values of the societies in which they operate, businesses often create a code of ethics. These codes outline what actions are and are not permissible for an organization and for its individual employees. They address concrete matters, such as bribery, discrimination, and whistleblowing, while also laying out guidelines for how to accomplish environmental and social goals and how to build and maintain trust and goodwill.

Businesses are not the sole entities, however, that issue such codes of ethics. Professional organizations serving specific groups, such as nurses and teachers, also issue these codes, and members must study them and commit to abide by them in order to be qualified as members of these professional organizations. Within the fields of science and technology, for example, the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers Computer Society (IEEE-CS) provides a wealth of resources for computer science and engineering professionals, including education, certification, research, and career and solutions centers. In 2000, the IEEE-CS adopted the Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice, which defines the ethical obligations of software engineers. These obligations include a commitment to approve software only if it meets certain specifications and passes appropriate tests, is deemed safe, and does not threaten to diminish the quality of human life, impinge on privacy, or harm the environment (IEEE-CS/ACM Joint Task Force 2001). Determining what would constitute outcomes such as diminishing the quality of life or impinging on privacy ties these concrete codes of ethics to larger questions that involve normative moral theories and political debate.

Corporate Responsibility

Businesses range from small family-owned organizations to large corporations. Governments often allow for businesses to classify themselves as one or more legal entities, each of which must fulfill specific legal requirements. Corporations are considered to be single entities distinct from the individuals who compose them. Early in the modern era in the West, a business was understood to be a collection of individuals who could be held responsible if something went wrong. Historians of business trace the birth of the modern corporation to the Dutch East India Trading Company, founded in 1602. As noted, modern corporations are legal entities understood to be separate from the individuals who work there. This definition allows individuals to engage in business practices without necessarily bearing the legal consequences of the business's actions. Instead, the business entities are held accountable and usually punished with financial penalties.

The status of corporations is a hotly debated topic in the United States, with many arguing that the rights of corporations have expanded in inappropriate ways in recent decades. For example, the Supreme Court of the United States recently ruled that companies can contribute to political elections and that some for-profit corporations may refuse on religious grounds to cover birth control in their employee health plans (Totenberg 2014). Some argue that these legal rights challenge or threaten other ethical expectations acknowledged in contemporary US society. We can rationally ask whether the legal rights of corporations also imply that these entities have moral responsibilities. Moreover, to whom are corporations morally responsible: shareholders, employees, customers, or the community?

Interests of Shareholders and Stakeholders

In 1970, Milton Friedman published a now-famous essay in the *New York Times* in which he argues that businesses have a moral responsibility to increase profits (Friedman 1970). Friedman makes the case that all individuals acting on behalf of a firm have an obligation to make decisions that will result in the increase of a

business's profits and thus the profits of shareholders. He argued that employees that make decisions on behalf of a company are obligated to take whatever actions will maximize profits. From Friedman's perspective, it is the responsibility of government to impose regulations that rein in businesses, which should be motivated only by a desire to benefit themselves, so that they don't act in ways that cause harm to society.

A company, Friedman argued, is owned by shareholders, who have a right to the maximum return possible on their investment. **Shareholders**, also referred to as stockholders, are individuals who own a share of a corporation. Shareholders invest capital and receive a positive return on their investment when a company is profitable. Friedman's position favors the interests of the shareholders. **Stakeholders**, in contrast, are any individuals who have a stake in a business's operations. Stakeholders include but are not limited to employees, customers, shareholders, communities, and the like. So while the term *shareholders* refers to a relatively narrow group of individuals who have invested capital and own a portion of a given corporation, the term *stakeholders* refers to a much wider group and includes individuals who have not simply invested money but who are affected by the business's operations.

Some argue for the view of shareholder primacy—that a firm's managers ought to act solely for the interests of shareholders—based on deontological grounds. Such positions appeal to the concept of duty to justify an obligation to promote the interests of shareholders. In this view, shareholders invest capital and own (a portion of) a company, and executives are tasked with running the firm in the shareholders' best interests. In contrast to shareholder primacy, stakeholder theory argues that "managers should seek to 'balance' the interests of all stakeholders, where a stakeholder is anyone who has a 'stake,' or interest (including a financial interest), in the firm" (Moriarty 2021). While shareholder theory asserts that the principal obligation is to increase the wealth of shareholders, stakeholder theory differs insofar as it advocates using corporate revenue in the interests of all stakeholders.

Safety and Liability

Today, corporations in the United States are held to standards of workplace safety established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), created in 1971. Such government regulation of corporations is relatively new. After the Industrial Revolution, which began in the mid-18th century, manufacturing created new work models based on production efficiency, some of which created hazards for workers. Early classical economists like Adam Smith (1723–1790) advocated for a laissez-faire, or "hands off," approach to business, in which there was minimal interference on the part of government in the activities of companies or manufacturing firms (Smith 2009). Once the Industrial Revolution was well established, workers in factories were expected to labor for long hours with few breaks, in very dangerous conditions. They received little pay, and children were commonly part of the workforce. While philosophers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called for a revolutionary change—to replace the capitalist economic system with a communistic system—others called for political reforms (Marx and Engels 2002). Little by little, laws were passed to protect workers, beginning with the 1833 Factory Act in the United Kingdom (UK Parliament n.d.).

FIGURE 10.9 Safety helmets and other protective equipment are a common sight at construction sites today, but safety was not always a primary concern in the workplace. (credit: "SRR Construction Employees Reach 12-Year Milestone of Working Safe" by Savannah River Site/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

More recent legislation affords employees the right to lodge confidential complaints against their employer. Complaints may point to hazards in the workplace, work-related illnesses, or anything else that endangers employee health and safety. If concerns are verified, the company must correct these violations or face fines from the government. Cutting costs in manufacturing processes, while it theoretically should increase shareholder profits, can be dangerous to both employees and the public and ultimately harm a company's long-term profits. For example, consider the Firestone/Ford tire controversy at the turn of the 21st century. An investigation into unusually high rates of tire failure, which resulted in thousands of accidents and 271 fatalities worldwide, brought forth multiple lawsuits and a congressional investigation in the United States. These were Firestone tires on Ford vehicles. Millions of tires were recalled, costing Firestone and Ford billions of dollars. Consequently, a number of executives at both companies resigned or were fired (Jones 2000).

Meaningful Work

Modern multinational corporations are entities that operate throughout the world, the largest employing over a million people. The relationship between corporations and their employees is an important area of focus in business ethics. Analyzing the moral obligations that corporations have toward their employees is more important than ever as large firms continue to gain power and control within the market.

We spend a significant part of our lives at work. The experience of working is one that most people are familiar with. The Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith (1723–90), famously expressed concern with the trend he observed toward increased specialization in work in order to improve efficiency and increase production. While good for production and profits, Smith observed that specialization made work repetitive, mindless, and mechanical (Smith 2009). Smith worried that such work was harmful because it wasn't meaningful in the sense that it didn't require skill, offered workers no opportunities to make choices, and was highly repetitive and uninteresting. While Smith expressed concern about the lack of meaningful work, he did not believe businesses have an obligation to provide it.

Unlike Smith, later philosophers such as Norman Bowie have argued "that one of the moral obligations of the firm is to provide meaningful work for employees" (Bowie 1998, 1083). Applying a Kantian perspective, Bowie develops a robust concept of meaningful work based on the belief that people must always be treated as ends in themselves. To treat people as ends means respecting them as rational agents capable of freely directing their own lives. He argues that to treat a person as anything other than an end is to strip them of their moral status. Bowie characterizes **meaningful work** as work that (1) a worker freely chooses, (2) pays enough for a worker to satisfy their basic needs, (3) provides workers opportunities to exercise their autonomy and

independence, (4) fosters rational development, (5) supports moral development, and (6) does not interfere with a worker's pursuit of happiness. As Bowie sees it, meaningful work recognizes the important role work plays in a person's development. It is through work that we develop our ability to act autonomously and live independently (Bowie 1998). Importantly, when workers earn a living wage, they acquire the means to be independent, live their own lives, and pursue their idea of a happy life. When workers are not paid a living wage, they are not treated as human beings deserving of respect. We see this, for instance, in the United States, where some workers who are employed full time by large corporations earn so little that they qualify for government assistance programs. In such cases, Bowie believes that workers cannot be truly independent because they do not earn enough to cover their basic needs.

Fair Treatment of Workers in an Age of Globalization

In some countries, labor laws are minimal or nonexistent, and workers may face the same level of danger that factory workers experienced in the West in the 19th century. Often such operations supply goods for US companies and a Western market. During the 20th century, most US corporations relocated their manufacturing overseas in order to save money. These savings were passed on to consumers as cheaper goods but also resulted in large-scale job loss for American workers and the economic decline of many US cities and towns (Correnti 2013). Outsourced labor has also been accused of exploiting workers in other countries, where government regulation and protection may not even exist. On the one hand, if there is no law to violate, some may argue that corporations are not doing anything wrong. Moreover, people working in these factories are paid a wage that may be more than they can earn any other way. Nonetheless, most would acknowledge that there must be some standard of morality and fair employment practices, even when the government does not provide it. Regardless of where labor is procured, it carries dilemmas regarding balancing just treatment of workers with company profits.

Equity through Affirmative Action

Affirmative action refers to taking positive steps "to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded" (Fullinwider 2018). The goal of increasing representation of underrepresented and historically excluded groups is understood to be desirable not simply to increase diversity but also to provide examples that affirm possibilities for those in underrepresented and marginalized groups. Affirmative action has never mandated "quotas" but instead has used training programs, outreach efforts, and other positive steps to make the workplace more diverse. The goal has been to encourage companies to actively recruit underrepresented groups. In application processes (e.g., for employment or college admissions), affirmative action sometimes entails giving preference to certain individuals based on race, ethnicity, or gender. Such preferential selection has been the driver of much of the controversy surrounding the morality of affirmative action.

Critics of affirmative action argue that it encourages universities to admit or companies to hire applicants for reasons other than their merit. If preference is given to individuals based on race, ethnicity, or gender, then admissions and employment become not about what a person has done and shown they can do but about factors unrelated to performance. The concern is that we unfairly preference less qualified individuals over those who are more qualified simply to achieve greater diversity and representation. This raises an important question about the purpose of the application process. Is the goal of having individuals compete through an application process to ensure that a university or business is able to select only the best candidates, or is it to promote social goals like the representation of underrepresented groups?

Some argue that employers who hire or promote based on qualifications, regardless of race or gender, are doing the right thing and that specifically seeking members of a particular race or gender for a position challenges the institution's own success and competitiveness. An institution's ability to compete and succeed depends on the quality of its workforce. Instead of focusing on the hiring or application process, we should instead focus on ensuring that individuals from underrepresented groups are able to be competitive on their own merit. Another potential problem concerning preferential selection is that individuals from groups that

have historically been excluded may be viewed as less qualified even when they were admitted or hired solely based on their own merit and achievements. In other words, affirmative action may inadvertently make it harder for qualified and competitive individuals from underrepresented groups to be taken seriously or to fulfill their responsibilities.

Contemporary American philosophers have provided various supports for affirmative action practices. James Rachels (1941–2004) argued that giving preference based on race is justifiable because White people have enjoyed privileges that have generally made it easier for them to achieve. While so-called reverse discrimination may harm some White people, Rachels thought by and large it was a positive practice that helped groups who have historically faced discrimination. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929–2020) similarly "endorsed job preferences for women and African-Americans as a form of redress for their past exclusion from the academy and the workplace" (Fullinwider 2018). Mary Anne Warren (1945–2010) similarly argued in favor of preferences as a way to make the admission and hiring process fair. As Warren saw it, "in a context of entrenched gender discrimination," such preferences could very well "improve the 'overall fairness'" of the process (Fullinwider 2018).

Ethics and Emerging Technologies

Almost everyone in the contemporary world uses technologies such as cell phones and computers, but few of us understand how these devices work. This ignorance hampers our ability to make informed decisions as a society regarding how to use technology fairly or judiciously. A further challenge is that the pace of technological evolution is much faster than the human ability to respond at societal level.

FIGURE 10.10 This image of an android makes many people uncomfortable because it appears so humanlike. Is artificial intelligence a threat to human existence? Will there come a time when robots are afforded what we now call human rights? (credit: "Lipstick" by Steve Jurvetson/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Artificial intelligence (AI), originally a feature of science fiction, is in widespread use today. Current examples of AI include self-driving cars and quantum computers. Philosophers and engineers sort AI into two categories: strong and weak. **Strong artificial intelligence** refers to machines that perform multiple cognitive tasks like humans but at a very rapid pace (machine speed). **Weak artificial intelligence** refers to artificial intelligence that performs primarily one task, such as Apple's Siri or social media bots. Philosophers of mind such as John Searle (b. 1932) argue that truly strong artificial intelligence doesn't exist, since even the most sophisticated technology does not possess intentionality the way a human being does. As such, no computer could have anything like a mind or consciousness.

Despite Searle's assessment, many people—including leaders within the field of computer science—take the

threat of AI seriously. In a Pew Research Center survey, industry leaders expressed common concerns over exposure of individuals to cybercrime and cyberwarfare; infringement on individual privacy; the misuse of massive amounts of data for profit or other unscrupulous aims; the diminishing of the technical, cognitive, and social skills that humans require to survive; and job loss (Anderson and Rainie 2018). These concerns may reflect a deeper problem—what Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom (b. 1973) calls a mismatch between "our ability to cooperate as a species on the one hand and on the other hand our instrumental ability to use technology to make big changes in the world." Although leaders express more immediate concerns reflected in the Pew report, Bostrom's fundamental worry—like those expressed in science fiction literature—is the emergence of a superintelligent machine that does not align with human values and safety (Bostrom 2014).

Summary

10.1 The Challenge of Bioethics

Bioethics studies ethical issues that emerge with advances in biology, technology, and medicine. Important contemporary ethical issues in bioethics include abortion, euthanasia, and clinical trials. Different philosophers view these issues in different ways, resulting in various ethical or moral positions, each privileging certain social obligations, individual rights, and/or ideas about personhood.

10.2 Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is an area of applied ethics that attempts to rethink our relationship to the natural world and identify right conduct in our dealings with the nonhuman world. This section explores important aspects of environmental ethics like the political and legal dimensions, the value of nature, deep ecology, social ecology, and inequalities in environmental impact globally.

10.3 Business Ethics and Emerging Technology

Although business and information technology (IT) ethics raise broad issues such as corporate responsibility and the potential dangers of artificial intelligence, a great deal of work in these subfields serves to support the development and implementation of codes of ethics that organizations use to guide the conduct of their members. The relationships between firms and their employees and between firms and shareholders is an important area of focus in business ethics. This section also explores important issues related to equality with a discussion of the important ethical issues related to affirmative action in university admissions and the hiring process. Finally, ethical issues pertaining to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence are considered.

Key Terms

Abortion the intentional ending of a pregnancy.
Active euthanasia a form of euthanasia in which a patient's life is terminated using medical interventions (e.g., administering a lethal dose of medication).
Anthropocentric human-centered.
Anthropogenic climate change changes in Earth's climate caused or influenced by human activity.
Applied ethics an area of ethics that focuses on the application of moral norms and principles to controversial issues to determine the rightness of specific actions.
Bioethics a field that studies ethical issues that emerge with advances in biology, technology, and medicine.
Clinical trials trials designed to test new medical interventions and establish a drug's dosage, determine possible side effects, and demonstrate efficacy.
Deep ecology an approach to environmental ethics that assumes all living things are valuable in their own right and not only because of their usefulness.
Deontologist someone who believes that ethical actions follow universal moral laws.
Ensoulment the point in time when a developing life is believed to possess a soul.
Environmental ethics an area of applied ethics that attempts to rethink our relationship to the natural world and identify right conduct in our dealings with the nonhuman world.
Euthanasia means "good death" and refers to the ending of a human life to avoid suffering.
Forms the means by which an invisible, unchanging creator gives rise to the material world that we live in.
Germ-line interventions inheritable genetic modification.
Human augmentation refers to attempts to enhance or increase human capabilities through technological, biomedical, or other interventions.
Hylomorphism the idea that being is composed of matter and form that causes the being to actualize its potential.
Institutional review boards (IRBs) committees tasked with reviewing and vetting parameters of trials to

protect participants and identify potential issues.

Instrumental value possessing value as a means to something else or for the sake of something else.

Intrinsic value possessing value in itself or for its own sake.

Meaningful work work that is at the same time understood as an end and a possessor of moral status.

Opportunity cost the cost incurred by not pursuing other options.

Passive euthanasia a form of euthanasia in which treatment is withheld or withdrawn with the expectation that a patient will die sooner than they would with continued medical intervention.

Personhood the capacity humans possess that distinguish them as beings capable of morality.

Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) a practice in which a physician provides the means (e.g., a prescription for a lethal dose of medication) and/or information to assist a patient in ending their own life.

Principle of autonomy principle that states that patients have a right to exercise agency or self-determination when it comes to making decisions about their own health care in clinical settings.

Principle of beneficence principle that states that we should act in ways that benefit others or that are for the good of others.

Principle of clinical equipoise principle that states that randomized trials should be conducted in a way that balances the interests of participants and aims of science.

Principle of justice principle that states that the distribution and practice of health care should be equitable or fair.

Principle of nonmaleficence principle that states that we should act in ways that do not cause harm to others.

Shareholders individuals who own a share of a corporation.

Somatic cell interventions genetic interventions in which genetic changes cannot be inherited or passed to a patient's offspring.

Stakeholders any individual who has a stake in a business's operations.

Strong artificial intelligence machines that perform multiple cognitive tasks like humans but at a very rapid pace (machine speed).

Weak artificial intelligence machines that perform primarily one task, such as Apple's Siri or social media bots.

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Review Questions

10.1 The Challenge of Bioethics

1. Define *applied ethics*.
2. Why does bioethics often require a multidisciplinary approach?
3. Historically, what have philosophers like Aristotle and Kant identified as the principal factor that justifies the moral status of human beings?
4. What are the five characteristics Mary Anne Warren identifies as essential to the concept of personhood?
5. What is the difference between active and passive euthanasia?
6. What is the most common view in the United States on the morality of euthanasia?
7. What is the principle of clinical equipoise?
8. What are the four main ethical principles that can be used to guide our thinking whenever faced with ethical issues in physician and patient or researcher and participant relationships?

10.2 Environmental Ethics

9. Historically, Western thinking has been dominated by the anthropocentric perspective. What does Lynn White attribute this to?
10. Why does William Baxter adopt an anthropocentric environmental ethic?
11. What are some of the main beliefs held by deep ecologists?
12. For social ecologists, what is the root cause of most of our environmental problems?

10.3 Business Ethics and Emerging Technology

13. In Milton Friedman's view, what is the moral responsibility of businesses?
14. What are shareholders?
15. What are stakeholders?
16. How does Norman Bowie characterize meaningful work?
17. What are some reasons cited by philosophers to support the morality of affirmative action?
18. What is the difference between strong AI and weak AI?

Further Reading

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Political Philosophy

11

FIGURE 11.1 *Guernica* (1937), a large oil painting on canvas by Pablo Picasso, is a powerful example of politically engaged artwork. Originally displayed at the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, *Guernica* depicts the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in northern Spain by Italian and German forces on behalf of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. (credit: "Gernika - Guernica" by Andy Roberts/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION Politics invades much of our daily lives. Whether we are actively engaged in politics or not, it is difficult to interact on social media, watch television, or even have a casual conversation without political topics creeping in. Many of the things integral to our lives, such as getting an education, working, or even traveling, are dependent upon political systems. However, we rarely think about what grounds these systems. This chapter examines that grounding by introducing **political philosophy**. A branch of philosophy that looks at how society determines governance, political philosophy also considers core concepts such as justice, citizenship, and authority; investigates questions of legitimacy in political institutions; and examines the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities a citizen may hold in a society. This chapter begins by looking at a few key historical figures from different parts of the world and discovering how they pictured an ideal society. Next, it examines different types of rule and theories about how best to govern a society and address the roles

leaders and citizens play. Finally, the chapter looks at some of the issues currently being discussed by political philosophers.

11.1 Historical Perspectives on Government

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the connection between Aristotle's theory of virtue and political philosophy.
- Compare views of a just society across cultures.

As political philosophies emerged in different cultures, their followers adopted notions of ideal societies and systems of government. This section examines the ideas of Aristotle and Plato in ancient Greece, Mozi in ancient China, and Al-Farabi in the early Islamic world.

The Just City in Ancient Greece

FIGURE 11.2 The history of political philosophy in the West is typically traced to ancient Greece. (credit: "parthenon" by claire rowland/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The history of political philosophy in the West can be traced back to ancient Greece. The term *polis*, from which is derived the word *political*, refers to the city-state, the basic unit of government in ancient Greece. Early inquiries were concerned with questions such as "Which qualities make for the best leader?" "Which is the best system of government for a city-state?" and "What is the role of a citizen?" For many philosophers, the most fundamental moral questions—such as "How should I treat others?" and "What constitutes a good life?"—are the basis for corollary political considerations. The philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) links the two through the concept of *telos*, which means "goal directed." All things in life have a goal, or an end purpose, he says. It is the goal of human beings to live a good life, which is only achievable by living a virtuous life. Acquiring virtue is a difficult task, requiring constant practice. The acquisition of virtue necessarily involves a community to provide education, model virtues, and provide opportunities for a person to behave virtuously. Therefore, living in a well-constructed political society is an essential part of living a good life. According to Aristotle, "This truth is attested by the experience of states: lawgivers make the citizens good by training them in habits of right action—this is the aim of all legislation, and if it fails to do this it is a failure; this is what distinguishes a good form of constitution from a bad one" (1996, 1103b20).

Plato and *The Republic*

Plato's *Republic* is perhaps one of the best-known early texts examining the concept of a just society and the role of the citizen. Plato (ca. 428–348 BCE) uses a method of guided argumentation, known today as the Socratic method, to investigate the nature of justice. Using his mentor, Socrates, as the main interlocutor, Plato

opens *The Republic* by asking what it means to live a just life, and the text evolves into a discussion about the nature of justice. Socrates asks, Is justice simply an instrument used by those in power, or is it something valuable in itself?

Socrates believes that behaving justly provides the greatest avenue to happiness, and he sets out to prove this idea by using the analogy of the just city. If a just city is more successful than an unjust one, he argues, it follows that a just man will be more successful than an unjust man. Much of Plato's *Republic* imagines this just city. First, society is organized according to mutual need and differences in aptitude so that all the people can receive essential goods and services. For example, some people will be farmers, while others will be weavers. Gradually, the city begins to develop trade and introduce wages, which provide a basis of a good society. But commerce with outsiders opens the city to threats, so soldiers are needed to protect and defend the city. Soldiers of a just society must be exceptional in all virtues, including skill and courage, and must seek nothing for themselves while working only for the good of the society. Plato calls these soldiers *guardians*, and the development of the guardians is the main focus of the text because the guardians are the leaders of the society.

The Role of the Guardians

The guardians' training begins when they are quite young, as they must be exposed only to things that will develop a strong character, inspire patriotic feelings, and emphasize the importance of courage and honor. The guardians must not be exposed to any narrative that dwells on misery, bad luck, illness, or grief or that portrays death or the afterlife as something to fear. Furthermore, they must live communally, and although allowed to marry, they hold children and property in common. Because the guardians begin their education at such an early age, they are taught to view their lifestyle not as a sacrifice but as the privilege of their station. The guardians who are considered to be the most virtuous, both morally and intellectually, eventually become the city's rulers, known as philosopher-kings: "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one . . . cities will never have rest from their evils" (1892, 473d–e).

Plato establishes the four virtues upon which the state should be founded: wisdom, courage, discipline, and justice. While wisdom and courage must be present in the guardians, all members of the city must be at least partially disciplined, performing their jobs and roles to maintain the peace and harmony of the state. Even for those who are allowed private property, accumulating wealth is discouraged because it encourages laziness and selfishness, traits that endanger the peace of the city. The theme of communal property appears several times in *The Republic*. Socrates claims that when things are shared in common (including women and children), sufferings and joys are also shared (461e). Thus, when one person loses something, the whole community loses, but when one gains something, the whole community gains. Second, when words such as *mine* are eliminated, conflicts over property are also eliminated, along with a sense of lack or suffering when someone else prospers. Communal sharing helps eliminate rebellion, strikes, and other forms of discontent and promotes social harmony, which is essential for a good society.

Plato's notion of three tiers of society—guardians, auxiliaries, and laborers—corresponds with elements of the soul. Just as these three groups work together for the good of the city, reason and knowledge work together with discipline to overrule passions that threaten to disrupt the harmony of individuals. These three qualities allow individuals to be just and virtuous.

The Tradition of Exclusion

When thinking about foundational texts, we must pause to consider the missing voices of those denied a role in governance, which ironically represents a significant injustice embedded in early theories of justice. In ancient Greek texts, as in many texts that make up the foundational base of political philosophy, the citizenry generally consists of wealthy men. Women are excluded from consideration, as are those born into slavery (rights are occasionally extended to enslaved individuals obtained through war). According to Aristotle, women are by nature born into a lower hierarchy than men and are not reasonable enough to engage in political life. Aristotle

also deems the elderly to be no longer competent to engage politically, while children (presumably male children) are not yet old enough to be competent: "The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority; the child has it but it is incomplete" (1984, 1260a11). Aristotle's requirements for citizenship are a bit murky. In his view, an unconditional citizen is one who can participate in government, holding either deliberative or judicial office. Nonetheless, Plato's *Republic* does imagine a role for women as members of the ruling guardian class: "Men and women alike possess the qualities which make a guardian; they differ only in their comparative strength or weakness" (1892, 456a).

Mohism in China

Roughly 8,000 miles east of the birthplace of *The Republic*, a group of thinkers called Mohists were engaged in similar conversations about justice and governance. **Mohism** arose during China's Warring States era (481–221 BCE), a period of great social upheaval. Though this conflict was eventually resolved by the unification of the central states and the establishment of the Qin dynasty, the constant shifting of political boundaries led to a massive exchange of cultural, economic, and intellectual information. For this reason, this era is also known as the "'hundred schools' of thought" period (Fraser 2020, xi). The chapter on normative moral theory discusses the central tenets of Mohist thought; this section will examine its political ideals.

The Book of Mozi

The central tenets of Mohism can be found in the *Mozi*, an important text in Chinese philosophy. Compiled by followers of the teacher and reformer Mo Di, or Mozi (470–391 BCE), the *Mozi* explores a range of topics, including logic, economics, science, and political and ethical theory. Like Plato's *Republic*, the *Mozi* explores what constitutes virtuous behavior and arrives at ideas of universal love and benevolence. Mohists evaluate behavior according to how well it benefits others. Governance should focus on how best to promote social welfare. The morality of an action or policy is determined by its outcome. According to the *Mozi*, aggression and injury to others, even in military operations, should be opposed.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theory covers consequentialism in greater detail.

The Mohist Ruler in China

The Mohists believed that individuals are essentially good and want to do what is morally right, but they often lack an understanding of moral norms. Therefore, a virtuous and benevolent ruler is necessary to provide a standard of moral education and behavior. The *Mozi* describes social disorder in antiquity:

> In the beginning of human life, when there was yet no law and government, the custom was "everybody according to his own idea." Accordingly each man had his own idea, two men had two different ideas and ten men had ten different ideas—the more people the more different notions. And everybody approved of his own view and disapproved the views of others, and so arose mutual disapproval among men. (Mozi n.d., I.1)

To combat this disorder and establish a form of peaceful cooperation, it became necessary to identify a ruler. Thus, "Heaven" chose a sage ruler, "crown[ing] him emperor" and "charging him with the duty of unifying the wills in the empire" (Mozi n.d., II.2).

The sage ruler in turn chose three wise ministers to help him. However, they realized "the difficulty of unifying all the peoples in mountains and woods and those far distant," so they further divided the empire and appointed feudal lords as local rulers, who in turn chose "ministers and secretaries and all the way down to the heads of districts and villages, sharing with them the duty of unifying the standards in the state" (Mozi n.d., II.2). Once this governmental hierarchy was established, the ruler issued an edict to the people to report moral misconduct among both the citizenry and the leaders. In this way, the *Mozi* says, people would behave

judiciously and act in good character.

In the Warring States period, Mohism competed with Confucianism. With the rise of the Qin and Imperial dynasties that followed, it declined, although many of its tenets were absorbed into Confucianism, whose influence in China lasted over 2,000 years.

Al-Farabi's View of Rulership

The emphasis on virtuous behavior as a condition for a civic peace can also be seen in the work of Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi (870–950 CE). While there is not much information regarding Al-Farabi's life, it is known that he came to Baghdad during the golden age of Islam, likely from central Asia. Alongside Arab geographers and historians and Christian scholars translating texts from Greek to Arabic, Al-Farabi wrote and taught. Baghdad was home not only to the largest urban population at the time but also to great libraries and educational centers that produced advances in math, optics, astronomy, and biology. Al-Farabi fled Baghdad due to political turmoil later in his life and is believed to have died in Damascus. He remains an important thinker who influenced later, and perhaps better known, philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes. Early biographers emphasize his contributions to the fields of logic and metaphysics, which are still recognized as pivotal today. Al-Farabi was one of the first Islamic philosophers to study Greek political philosophy and write about it (Fakhry 2002). He advances some of the Greeks' ideas in his discussion of the supreme ruler and the city of excellence (Galston 1990). For this reason, he is often called the "second master," with Aristotle being the first.

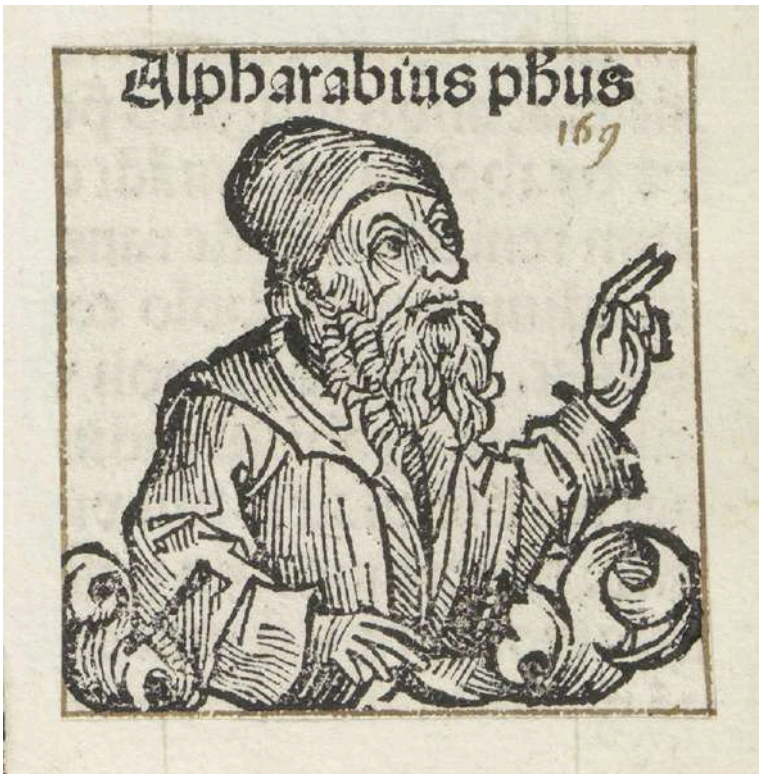

FIGURE 11.3 This woodcut from the fifteenth century depicts Al-Farabi as a wise, old man. Al-Farabi made important contributions to philosophy as well as to the fields of science, sociology, medicine, mathematics, and music. (credit: "Al-Farabi" by Michel Wolgemut/Europeana, Public Domain)

The Supreme Ruler

Al-Farabi's supreme ruler is the founder of the city—not a historical founder, but rather one who possesses both practical and theoretical knowledge and is not bound by any precedent or prior authority. While a supreme ruler bases their decisions on careful analysis, their "successor" accepts and builds upon the

judgments of the supreme ruler without subjecting those judgments to philosophical scrutiny (Galston 1990, 97).

The supreme ruler has knowledge of both political philosophy and political science. For Al-Farabi, political science is the practical understanding of statecraft, which includes managing political affairs. It is the job of political science to investigate the ways in which people live their lives, including their moral dispositions and inclinations, and to look at the motivations behind actions and determine whether their aim is "true happiness." True happiness comes about through virtuous actions and the development of moral character. By contrast, presumed happiness focuses on things that corrupt, such as power, money, and material pleasures. Political philosophy is the theoretical knowledge needed to identify virtuous behavior.

Philosophical and Nonphilosophical Rulers

Al-Farabi draws a distinction between philosophical and nonphilosophical rulers. Nonphilosophical rulers may possess practical knowledge and be able to make judgments based on their experience observing and interacting with individuals in the city. They will be able to recognize patterns and similarities in conflict and thus make the fairest decisions possible to ensure the peace, even as they rely on the wisdom of the supreme ruler. On the other hand, philosophical rulers possess theoretical as well as practical knowledge and will be able to determine the wisdom of actions themselves (Galston 1990, 98). A philosophical ruler can become a supreme ruler, while a nonphilosophical ruler cannot.

Cities of Excellence

Like Plato's *Republic*, Al-Farabi's city must be ruled by a philosopher and seek to educate a class of philosopher-elites who can assist in the city's management. The classes to which the citizens of the city belong are determined by the supreme ruler and are based on their natural attributes, actions, and behaviors (Galston 1990, 128). The overarching goal is to create a virtuous city or nation that gives its citizens the greatest chance of attaining true happiness.

This is in stark contrast to the immoral city, in which people embrace vices such as drunkenness and gluttony and prioritize money and status over virtuous actions. Citizens act in this way not out of ignorance but rather by choice. Such a people can never attain true happiness because their happiness is based on temporary things (Galston 1990). If a city is not ruled by a supreme ruler, however, it is not necessarily destined to become an immoral city, and its citizens may still be able to achieve true happiness through the pursuit of virtue. In the *Political Regime*, Al-Farabi states:

> Among the necessary cities, there may be some that bring together all of the arts that procure what is necessary. Their ruler is the one who has fine governance and excellent stratagems for using [the citizens] so that they gain the necessary things and fine governance in preserving these things for them or who bestows these things on them from what he has. (quoted in Germann 2021)

Nonetheless, such a city can never be considered a city of excellence; its aim is to provide for the material well-being of its citizens, but it lacks philosophical understanding of well-being in a larger sense.

The city of excellence is governed by the practice of the "royal craft," or the management of political affairs. The royal craft attempts to establish a social order based on positive character, virtuous behavior, and moral action. When the citizens of the city embody these principles and encourage others to embody them as well, a harmonious society results, one in which all inhabitants can achieve their greatest possible level of happiness and fulfillment

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Plato and Al-Farabi both thought that a just city should be ruled by a philosopher. What factors determine whether a government will make good decisions? Do you agree with Plato and Al-Farabi that these factors are the virtue and

abilities of its leader or leadership? What role does the structure of the government play in how it makes decisions and how good those decisions are? Identify two or three good decisions your government has made. Using the SIFT or four moves approach from the chapter on critical thinking, research each decision. Then write a paragraph about each decision, describing how the decision was made. Explain why it does or does not support Plato's and Al-Farabi's position.

11.2 Forms of Government

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the difference between absolute and constitutional monarchies.
- Distinguish between representative and totalitarian forms of government.
- Relate social classes and caste systems to political systems.

Political schools of thought from ancient Greece, China, and the Islamic world have influenced governments for centuries. The ideological beliefs of individuals holding power within a government play a large role in the way that government operates. In addition, these ideas may inspire people to reform the structure of their political system. This section looks at some of the most common forms of government and examines their social and ideological roots.

Monarchy

Monarchy is a system of rule in which authority resides in one individual, who is head of state. Generally, monarchical rule is passed down through a line of succession. Monarchies have existed at least since 3000 BCE and have been a common form of government around the globe. Some examples are the Germanic Franks and Visigoths of the third and fourth centuries, the kingdoms of Spain and France, and the African countries of Morocco and Eswatini, which are still in existence today (Kostiner 2020).

Absolute Monarchies

A monarchy can be either absolute or constitutional. In an absolute monarchy, the ruler retains complete control and is not beholden to any other state authority. In the Zoroastrian tradition, following the idea of the divine right of kings, rulers were chosen by the gods and bestowed with *khvarenah*, or royal glory, which gave them wisdom, marked them as "supreme among the people, and indicated that they had been divinely endowed with kingship" (Choksky n.d.).

Constitutional Monarchies

A constitutional monarch, on the other hand, works within the framework of a constitution and with other political figures of the state. In a constitutional monarchy, the monarch acts as head of state and has some executive powers but does not personally make policy. The British monarchy is an example of a constitutional monarchy, although prior to the mid-1600s, it was an absolute monarchy. As a result of agricultural and industrial revolutions and religious conflict, a middle class arose in England that demanded political power through Parliament. Today, the United Kingdom is ceremonially headed by the royal family, but the right to create policy and develop legislation belongs to the democratically elected Parliament, which acts under the leadership of a prime minister. For this reason, the British system is also considered a parliamentary democracy. While the power they exercise is limited, the royal family is still considered by many in the UK to represent tradition and serve as the physical embodiment of the nation (Royal Household at Buckingham Palace 2021).

Watch the video for a discussion on the types of monarchies still governing today.

VIDEO

Types of Monarchies

Click to view content (https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/11-2-forms-of-government)

Aristocracies and Caste Systems

Ruling authority in an **aristocracy** is in the hands of a small number of individuals considered to be elite members of society. Similar to monarchy, an aristocracy is determined through lines of succession. Generally, the higher a person's class, the closer they get to the actual seat of power.

Greek Class Systems

In a class system, members of society are placed in different groups based on their perceived worth and benefit. From these social hierarchies arise a system of political obligations from which rulers and their governments derive power and authority.

A classic example of a class system is found in *The Republic*, when Plato divides society into five classes of citizens: agricultural or industrial producers, sailors and shipowners, merchants (i.e., importers and exporters), retail traders, and manual laborers. In Plato's view, individuals should keep to the jobs they know best. Moreover, because people are not equal in aptitude, "we must infer that all things are produced more plentifully and easily and of a better quality when one man does one thing which is natural to him and does it at the right time, and leaves other things" (Plato 1892, Book 2).

Indian Caste Systems

A current example of a class-based system is the Hindu caste system in India, called *jati*, which assigns people their role in society according to the social class into which they are born. There is a great deal of debate about the origin of the caste system, but the *Rig Veda*, the oldest texts in Hinduism's most sacred scriptures, offer a mythical origin of *jati*. In one poem in the *Rig Veda*, primordial man, called Purusha, sacrifices himself to create humanity, and from Purusha's body the castes are created. The four original castes (*varnas*, or social classes) are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), the Rajanya or Kshatriya (rulers and warriors), the Vaishya (workers, farmers, and craftsmen), and the Sudra (servants and laborers) (Johnson and Johnson 2008). In addition, outcastes or "untouchables" make up a fifth group, now called Dalits (Mayell 2003). The Hindu caste system is intimately bound with religious beliefs about karma and reincarnation. Hindus, who make up the majority of people in India, believe that the fruits of a person's good and bad deeds (karma) are carried from one life to the next when the soul reincarnates. Therefore, a person's place in the social hierarchy is determined by fate or karma, based on their behavior from life to life.

In the 20th century, with the establishment of self-rule, the modernization of its economy, and the establishment of a democratic system, India reformed its social system. Today, caste discrimination is no longer legal, although it is still rampant in India. From four primary castes, the caste system grew to encompass some 3,000 subcastes over time, along with further subdivisions of the subcastes. Proponents of the caste system, including some within Hindu nationalist parties, argue that caste is a way of organizing society. Lone individuals lack power, they argue, but if individuals see themselves as part of a larger group, they may function as a de facto union. These defenders of the status quo argue that it is extraordinarily rare for wealthy, politically powerful families to give up their power, just as it is extremely rare for impoverished people to increase their political power.

Representative Government

In representative government systems, individuals are chosen by various means to represent the larger group. Representative government likely has deeper roots than monarchies or aristocracies. Cheyenne, Iroquois, Huron, and other Native American peoples established tribal democracies prior to European settlement of the Americas, and San (Bushmen), Pygmies, and other African peoples practice "campfire democracy" (Glassman

2017). These examples and others suggest that cooperation between bands of peoples may have featured elements of representative government prior to urban settlements.

The story of **democracy** in urban settings is often linked to ancient Greece, specifically Athens, where the hand of government was extended to the people, but only to individuals in particular classes. The Athenian mode of government was unique in the region. Before 700 BCE, Athens was ruled by single individuals or small groups who often encountered social and economic problems that brought about instability. Around the year 600 BCE, the Athenian ruler Solon (c. 630–c. 560 BCE) implemented a proto-democratic system. He did not allow nonaristocratic individuals to hold certain offices, but he did allow all male citizens (which is not to say all inhabitants) to vote on local leaders, and he did his best to outlaw debt slavery. His successes were short-lived, but he paved the way for an impressive span of democratic rule in Athens.

In Thucydides's (c. 460–c. 404 BCE) *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Pericles (c. 495–429 BCE) praises the Athenian constitution, in particular the idea that all members of a state should be allowed to participate in its governance. The Athenian constitution "favors the many instead of the few," he says, and the laws "afford equal justice to all in their private differences" (Thucydides [1996] 2008, 112).

Pericles links the notion of freedom to success both in governance and in people's daily lives. On both fronts, he holds that happiness is "the fruit of freedom" (Thucydides [1996] 2008, 115). His view is that, despite the imperfections in its implementation of democracy, Athens has the best form of government in existence. Athenians are happy in a way that members of other polities are not, says Pericles, so much so that Athens is worth defending in battle.

Current forms of democracy center on the notion of rule by the people, but today's democracies are not administered by direct rule, with all policy decisions voted on by a majority. For example, the United States has a representative democracy, which means that individuals are elected to make legislative decisions on behalf of the people.

American philosopher Richard Arneson (b. 1945) holds that "what renders the democratic form of government . . . morally legitimate . . . is that its operation over time produces better consequences for people than any feasible alternative mode of governance" (2009, 197). This statement is an instrumental defense of democracy, arguing that democracy is a good in itself and that democracies must prove themselves over time. Many argue that democracies seem to outperform extant rival systems. Indian philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (b. 1933) has argued that democratic nations are the wealthiest in the world, and because positions of power are determined through elections, their leaders are more likely to try to meet the needs of the population.

According to Sen, "No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press" (quoted in Christiano and Bajaj 2021). What is more, democracies are less likely to go to war with one another than are nondemocratic states. Sen also points out that democratic governments allow people with different moral and political views to coexist. He observes that democracy has allowed multiple religions to exist relatively peacefully in India. Nonetheless, democracy is not a flawless system; some of the problems found in the system are discussed in Section 11.4 below.

Totalitarian Forms of Government

Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is a system of government that exercises complete control over its population in both personal and public life by eliminating free press and imposing censorship and mass surveillance, along with other social controls. In a totalitarian system, opposition to the state is prohibited, and repercussions for disobedience are generally severe. Totalitarianism can also take the form of autocracy, in which power is concentrated in the hands of an individual, through a dictatorship under a single leader. For example, in the 20th century, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) and the Italian Fascist regime under Benito

Mussolini (1883–1945) were totalitarian regimes. A totalitarian system is different from tyranny, fascism, or communism, although there are enough similarities among these terms that the terms are often *incorrectly* used interchangeably.

Communism

Communism, an ideology that has engendered totalitarian governments, is largely associated with the Soviet Union (1922–1991) and the People's Republic of China (1949–present). While traces of communist ideas can be found much earlier in history, modern communism springs from the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who called for a "dictatorship of the proletariat" to seize the means of production from private control and establish instead a system of labor and goods distribution that would benefit the working class.

In modern communist countries, the state owns the means of production, sets wages, regulates production, and controls prices. Although these countries may hold elections, the leadership of the ruling political party monopolizes political power, dictating policies that cross over from public life into private life and severely restrict individual freedom. Between 1932 and 1933, for example, the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, implemented an agrarian collectivization program in Ukraine. Stalin ordered that any family that owned 24 acres or more of land lose all their possessions and be deported to work camps in Siberia. Somewhere between four and seven million people starved to death.

Fascism

Fascism is another ideology that produced totalitarian political systems. As an ideology, fascism is characterized by a strong sense of nationalism, a disdain for democratic principles, and a belief in social hierarchy (Soucy 2021). Fascism was largely popular during the time known as the interwar years, meaning the years between the two world wars (roughly 1920–1938), although the fascism of Italy and Germany continued through World War II (1939–1945) and fascism under Francisco Franco in Spain, which began in 1936, continued until 1975. In Italy, Benito Mussolini rose to power and established a fascist dictatorship beginning in 1925. The devastation caused by World War I (1914–1918), after which Europe struggled to rebuild and cope with food shortages and unemployment, created conditions that were ripe for the emergence of charismatic strongmen who promised to bring prosperity back to their nations.

It was during this same period that German citizens, suffering under heavy sanctions from the Allied powers at the close of World War I, embraced the leadership of Adolf Hitler, who was elected as Germany's chancellor in 1933. Hitler quickly moved to consolidate power and establish himself as absolute dictator in what had formerly been a democratic country. Hitler's National Socialism was a fascist ideology, with the added component of a genocidal program carried out against Jews and the Romani as well as other groups (Wiener Holocaust Library n.d.).

Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism

In the seminal book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) argues that totalitarianism is a relatively new form of government that seeks to exert control over every aspect of not just social and political life but citizens' personal lives as well. She says that a key difference between dictatorships, including those operating under fascism, and totalitarian regimes is that while the former assumes power and seeks to install members of its party in all offices of government, the latter includes a proliferation of the party into all arenas, including the state, the police, elite groups, and so forth. Furthermore, under a totalitarian system, laws are fungible, meaning they can change day by day. The ultimate goal of such regimes, Arendt says, is the eradication of any notion of the self as an individual in favor of the creation of the self as an extension of the government (Arendt 1951). The power of totalitarianism lies in the use of systematic violence to create a sense of total terror at the thought of countering the government and the dismantling of one's capacity for independent thought until people are wholly dependent on the government. The survival of the regime depends on eliminating any factor of identity for individuals beyond that of "citizen"—although people under totalitarian rule are more captives than citizens.

FIGURE 11.4 Hannah Arendt wrote extensively on the origins and power of totalitarianism, following the upheaval and suffering caused by totalitarian regimes in the first half of the twentieth century. (credit: Portrait of Hannah Arendt in 1924; Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Table 11.1 summarizes these various forms of government.

Form of Government	Description	Examples
Monarchy	Authority resides in one individual, who is the head of state	Numerous, including past kingdoms, such as Spain and France, and modern kingdoms, such as Morocco
Aristocracy	Authority is in the hands of a small number of individuals considered to be elite	Greek class system, Indian caste system
Representative Government	Individuals are chosen to represent the larger group	Tribal democracies of Native American peoples; the majority of contemporary governments in North America, South America, and Europe
Totalitarianism	Government limits individual freedom through controls over the press, mass surveillance, and other social controls	Soviet Union under Stalin, Italian regime under Mussolini

TABLE 11.1 Forms of Government

Form of Government	Description	Examples
Communism	The state owns the means of production, sets wages, regulates production, and controls prices	People's Republic of China
Fascism	Totalitarian political system characterized by a strong sense of nationalism, a disdain for democratic principles, and a belief in social hierarchy	Germany under Hitler, Spain under Franco

TABLE 11.1 Forms of Government

WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

View Hannah Arendt's revisions to the introduction of the third edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (https://openstax.org/r/The-Origins-of-Totalitarianism) at the Library of Congress. Read through the hand-edited, typewritten manuscript. Then, answer these questions.

- Arendt's passion inspires every word she writes. She is obviously not impartial. What is Arendt's attitude toward her topic?
- What are the main points Arendt raises in her introduction?
- Consider what you learned about critical thinking and logic in the chapter on critical thinking. Is Arendt's passion an asset or a barrier to her ability to reason and write philosophy? Explain your reasoning.
- What edits to the third edition does Arendt make? What is the purpose of those edits?
- What can you learn from this manuscript about writing philosophy?

11.3 Political Legitimacy and Duty

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify two key arguments for political legitimacy.
- Explain how a person might have a duty to others without having an obligation to the state.

No matter what system of government a society adopts, a government needs authority to rule. What gives rulers their authority, and what rights, if any, do citizens have? One fundamental question of political theory becomes, What are the sources of the **legitimacy** of a political system, and by extension, how much authority do rulers or leaders have over citizens? Further, what obligations does a state owe its citizens, and vice versa? This section will explore different ideas and characteristics of the source of authority and the obligations of its members.

Divine Rule

The Mohists claimed that the emperor is chosen by heaven rather than the people. In order to fight against social chaos, heaven identifies a wise ruler to establish control and act as a model of virtuous behavior (Mozi n.d.). This is an example of **divine rule**, which legitimizes the rule of monarchs and lines of succession in a royal family by stating that monarchs are chosen by divine authority and therefore are not answerable to the people. The idea of divine rule became prevalent in Europe after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity. Yet with the rise of Protestantism and the middle classes in Europe, new ideas emerged about authority and the rights and responsibilities of leaders and citizens. Philosophers in western Europe, such as Thomas Hobbes

and John Locke, began to argue that the legitimacy of government rests on a **social contract** between the ruler and the ruled.

Thomas Hobbes and Absolute Monarchy

FIGURE 11.5 Thomas Hobbe's *Leviathan*, first published in 1651, presents absolute monarchy as an order-creating and necessary force in society. (credit: "Frontispiece of Leviathan engraved by Abraham Bosse, with input from Thomas Hobbes, the author" by Abraham Bosse by unknown author/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Leviathan, written by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and first published in 1651, looks at the structure of systems of government and develops the social contract theory. In the text, Hobbes imagines a time prior to the creation of social institutions, when humans were motivated solely by satisfying their desires. When land and food are plentiful, people can meet their needs and even store surplus for lean times. But as population increases, people compete for resources, which means that one person's gain is another's loss. Scarcity leads to conflict when people fight to obtain what they need. Prior to the establishment of political authority, there is no check on violence, and thus human beings enter a state of perpetual war, which Hobbes considers the state of nature. In this state,

> there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes [1968] 2002, ch. 13)

To successfully leave the state of nature, people must form a political community that ensures their basic needs are met, moderates conflicts, and codifies rules of behavior. Part of that project includes identifying a power that can hold authority. Hobbes believed that power should be held by the monarchy, arguing that one absolute and central authority is the best method of maintaining peace and avoiding discord and factionalism.

John Locke and Representative Government

Other proponents of the social contract, including French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), rejected absolute monarchy. Instead, they argued for representative government. In fact, John Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689) served as a major inspiration for the American founding fathers. Some of his well-known ideas can be found in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Locke defends the necessity of the separation of the church and state, for example, and provides the origin of the edict on self-preservation that leads to retaining the right to bear arms.

Similar to Hobbes, Locke imagines that people begin in the state of nature and eventually agree to give up some liberties to an impartial authority in exchange for peace and security. But unlike Hobbes, Locke says that we exist peacefully for the most part and can be counted on to act in our interests when necessary. Locke invokes **natural law**, which is the notion that humankind is granted rationality by God and can use that rationality to determine moral laws. These laws are obligatory and include respect for others and the recognition of individual liberty. As Locke sees it, humans are born into "a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal" (Locke 2016, 122). We are naturally free and equal; no one person has more natural power or right to rule than another. Locke maintains "that all men are naturally in that state, and remain so, till by their own consents they make themselves members of some politic society" (129).

In Locke's state of nature, we have the right to own ourselves and can do what we like with ourselves, and we can own limited property. At first, property is things from nature that God gave to us in common to fulfill our basic needs and survival. Later, as society develops and begins using money, property is extended to include what we improve through our labor. Even in this early state, we are not free to abuse others. We are not free to take more than we need, for example. The law of self-preservation is prominent throughout Locke's treatise and can be found in his discussion of war as well in his solution to a tyrannical government (that people exercise their right to change it). Locke's philosophy is based on the assumption that moral law, which precedes the establishment of any political structure, leads to a type of natural justice.

Locke also differentiates between natural liberty, which grows out of natural law, and civil liberty, which is the product of governance by a commonwealth. Remember that Locke establishes that we are allowed to gain property. We do so through our labor, when we improve the land that was given to us in common. This work, in turn, benefits others. As we gain more and more property, we develop a need to defend our property. If a person does not have property, they will still be under the protection of the laws of the civil society, though they will not have a hand in determining those laws. We agree to move from the state of nature into a society to protect property, both ourselves (as property) and our goods. By moving into a civil society, we gain the protection of laws, an impartial judge, and a means to enforce laws. The legislative power of civil society establishes its laws. These laws presumably are created with the interests of the entire commonwealth in mind, so individual interests may not supersede the interests of the whole. The executive power enforces these laws and should not have a hand in establishing laws. Locke views this requirement as a safeguard against personal interest.

After civil society is established, Locke addresses the question of how much freedom the government should have to act without consulting the commonwealth as a whole and what limits should be put on its power. Above all, the good of the society must be the goal of government. Those who make up the legislative and executive powers must be cautious that these powers do not become a micro society. The longer individuals stay in positions of power, the greater the chance they may fall into corruption. If that happens, then the civil state will become worse than the state of nature. For that reason, people then have the right to remove the governmental powers; a state that has become tyrannical can justly be dissolved. The people may reestablish the structure that previously worked best or change to a system that better protects their interests. Ultimately, it is the commonwealth (the people) who oversee the society at large and determine its ability to function properly. Thus, Locke's safeguard against tyranny allows people to return to the state of nature, if necessary, and begin

again.

Watch a short overview of Locke's ideas about government.

VIDEO

John Locke on Government

Click to view content (https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/11-3-political-legitimacy-and-duty)

Max Weber and Descriptive Legitimacy

Legitimacy can be descriptive (an explanation of authority) or normative (a justification for authority). Hobbes and Locke tackled issues of normative legitimacy. A descriptive account of legitimacy can be found in sociologist Max Weber's (1864–1920) influential essay "Three Types of Legitimate Rule," in which he identifies three sources of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.

Traditional Legitimacy

Traditional legitimacy, not surprisingly, relies on tradition, or long-standing practice, to determine authority. Once a system is deemed legitimate, power is granted to certain individuals based either on inheritance or a belief that they are given rule through divine right. Al-Farabi's idea of a supreme ruler is one such example. Perhaps the most common form of traditional legitimacy, however, is monarchy: a system in which the state is ruled by a single individual, usually for the duration of their lifetime. In an absolute monarchy, the right to rule usually is grounded in the notion that the monarchy was established by God and derives its authority from God (known as the divine right of kings). As such, the monarchies in medieval Europe, for example, were not beholden to any form of constitutional authority. In a constitutional monarchy, the head of state is subject to a constitution.

Charismatic Legitimacy

Charismatic legitimacy is granted to an authority figure who has tremendous social appeal. Citizens of society grant these figures power to speak and act on their behalf due to their perceived ability to understand and empathize with the people they represent. Charismatic figures may or may not hold official government positions. Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) is an example of a charismatic authority figure who held great influence as an anti-apartheid activist even prior to becoming president of South Africa. Weber maintained that this is the most unstable form of authority because it is dependent on the individual and can be lost through death or a failure to live up to expectations.

FIGURE 11.6 Two leaders often described as charismatic: South African president Nelson Mandela (center) with US

president Bill Clinton (left). Prior to serving as the first Black president of South Africa, Mandela spent 27 years in prison for leading the anti-apartheid movement. (credit: "Philadelphia Freedom Festival & Awards" by Robert McNeely/White House Photograph Office/Clinton Digital Library, Public Domain)

Rational-Legal Legitimacy

Finally, rational-legal legitimacy comes from belief in the government itself rather than a specific individual. A leader is justified in upholding laws and setting policy as long as they are working within the established structure. Modern representative democracies are examples of this form of authority. Individuals are elected to hold positions within the government for a specified period of time, or term. When the term is over, the position is turned over to another elected individual. While people may not always have faith in the individual elected to office, they retain faith in the legitimacy of the office itself. Weber saw this form of legitimacy as the most stable.

Political Obligations

So far, this chapter has examined the role of rulers in society. But what responsibilities do citizens have to the government and to each other, and what responsibilities does the government have to its citizens?

Communitarianism

Building on the idea of an individual's responsibility to community, communitarianism is a theory about human identity that holds that people's values and worldviews are contingent on their social environment. Most of us spend our lives as members of one community or another, and often these communities provide us with our first introductions to moral values, which in turn influence our interactions with others and our political views. The implication of this position is that individuals have obligations to their communities that may supersede their individual interests. While communitarian ideas can be found in many historical texts, including Plato's *Republic*, the modern understanding of communitarianism has its roots in early sociological theories. Later, communitarianism grew as a reaction against John Rawls and the liberal position (Bell 2020).

Constraints on Universalism

Communitarians deny the notion of universal values and assert that values, being determined by society, can vary. Moreover, they argue that reliance on tradition and a belief in shared goals can help stabilize a society. Communitarians reject the notion of individualism, or the idea that self-reliance and personal goals should take precedence over social interests, and hold that "it makes no sense to begin the political enterprise by abstracting from the interpretive dimensions of human beliefs, practices, and institutions" (Bell 2020). A Rawlsian framework that asks us to imagine ourselves in a theoretical position in which personal facts are unknown to us doesn't make sense, when our values are in fact determined by the society we find ourselves in. According to this view, the community is the focal point for enforcing a sense of responsibility for protecting the fundamental rights of others.

Principles of Communitarianism

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (b. 1929), the founder of the Communitarian Network, elaborates on three main principles at the heart of communitarianism. First, human beings need social interaction. Etzioni points to existing literature showing that individuals in solitary confinement in prisons, as well as elderly persons living alone and without a support network, experience significant psychological and physiological harm. Societies that embrace community and prioritize community involvement have a much greater chance of remaining healthy than societies that do not (Etzioni 2015).

Next, societies have moral norms that are enforced by members of the community. We are motivated to obey moral rules, such as picking up our trash when in public places, keeping our promises, and helping others whenever possible, due to the corresponding praise or blame we receive from our communities. Etzioni claims that this sort of community oversight can take the place of laws that must be enforced by police and other authorities. He explains, "We will agree with each other on what's right and what's wrong, and we reinforce it

by nothing more than by public education and by mutually appreciating when people do what needs doing and express our concern when they do not" (Etzioni 2015).

Finally, people have not only rights but also responsibilities. In the United States, for example, the notion of individual rights is so strong that often the connection between rights and social responsibility is overlooked. Etzioni gives the example of the competing concerns of personal privacy and national security. We recognize that it is important to maintain our right to privacy; however, we also recognize that sometimes it is necessary to make certain information public to protect the general welfare of the society. Rather than positioning this scenario as a war of competing values, the communitarian sees it as an opportunity to balance the needs of the individual with those of the community (Etzioni 2015).

Mahatma Gandhi and *Ahimsa*

Some political obligations are primarily to individuals. This view can be seen in the writings of the Indian activist Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), better known as Mahatma Gandhi, who believed his primary responsibility was to the people of India. He and many other Indians wanted to drive the British colonizers out of their country. Gandhi's obligation to bring about Indian independence existed independent of any obligation to obey the government. According to Gandhi, "Civil disobedience . . . becomes a sacred duty when the State has become lawless or, which is the same thing, corrupt. And a citizen that barters with such a State shares in its corruption or lawlessness" ([1969] 1994, 172). Thus, it becomes a duty to disobey the government predicated on the obligation to serve both oneself and others. Gandhi offers the following injunction: "Let each do his duty; if I do my duty, that is, serve myself, I shall be able to serve others" (n.d., "Hind Swaraj"). Gandhi is not advocating that people simply serve their own self-interest; he says that "service without humility is selfishness and egotism" ([1940] 1998, 443).

Gandhi recommends robust restraints while disobeying the government. The doctrine of ***ahimsa***, or non-harming—a key idea in Indian philosophy and religion—constrains how one may disobey the government and even governs all interactions in the process of nonviolent noncooperation with the government. Speaking of *ahimsa*, Gandhi notes, "For one who follows this doctrine there is no room for an enemy" (n.d., "Ashram"). Gandhi calls his particular doctrine *satyagraha*, or embodying or holding to the truth. One who follows this doctrine is a *satyagrahi*. For Indians resisting the British, satyagraha took the form of passive, nonviolent resistance to the injustice perpetrated by India's colonial invaders. The person grounded in ahimsa and satyagraha does not act out of anger or violence, which is why Gandhi says, "A satyagrahi loves his so-called enemy even as he loves his friend. He has no enemy" (n.d., "Epigrams"). For Gandhi, a person's first duty was to practice *ahimsa*. Indeed, he practiced ahimsa to the extent that he went on a hunger strike to end Hindu–Muslim infighting once India began to establish its own government. Moreover, he refused to defend himself when he was physically attacked multiple times throughout his life. These obligations to his moral code, as he saw it, existed apart from the government or any law it might have passed.

Gandhi's writings and political work raise the question, What are people's obligations when it comes to obeying specific laws? Most theorists separate the obligations to the state from those to the law. For example, American civil rights leaders and activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Rosa Parks recognized the legitimacy of the government, but they opposed laws that they felt were unjust. They popularized the idea of civil disobedience as a means of opposing unjust laws.

READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Mahatma Gandhi gave his "Quit India" speech on August 8, 1942, calling for the adoption of his plan of passive resistance to British colonial rule in order to achieve independence, which India did five years later. Read the excerpt below. In it, Gandhi proposes using "the weapon of ahimsa." Is this phrase a contradiction? What duty does Gandhi feel to his people? Do you feel that he is carrying it out appropriately?

> There are people who ask me whether I am the same man that I was in 1920, or whether there has been any change in me. You are right in asking that question. Let me, however, hasten to assure that I am the same Gandhi as I was in 1920. I have not changed in any fundamental respect. I attach the same importance to nonviolence that I did then. If at all, my emphasis on it has grown stronger. There is no real contradiction between the present resolution and my previous writings and utterances.
>
> Occasions like the present do not occur in everybody's and but rarely in anybody's life. I want you to know and feel that there is nothing but purest ahimsa in all that I am saying and doing today. The draft resolution of the Working Committee is based on *ahimsa*; the contemplated struggle similarly has its roots in ahimsa. If, therefore, there is any among you who has lost faith in *ahimsa* or is wearied of it, let him not vote for this resolution.
>
> Let me explain my position clearly. God has vouchsafed to me a priceless gift in the weapon of *ahimsa*. I and my ahimsa are on our trail today. If in the present crisis, when the earth is being scorched by the flames of *himsa* [harm, the opposite of *ahimsa*] and crying for deliverance, I failed to make use of the God-given talent, God will not forgive me and I shall be judged unwrongly of the great gift. I must act now. I may not hesitate and merely look on, when Russia and China are threatened.
>
> Ours is not a drive for power, but purely a nonviolent fight for India's independence. In a violent struggle, a successful general has been often known to effect a military coup and to set up a dictatorship. But under the Congress scheme of things, essentially nonviolent as it is, there can be no room for dictatorship. A nonviolent soldier of freedom will covet nothing for himself; he fights only for the freedom of his country. The Congress is unconcerned as to who will rule, when freedom is attained. The power, when it comes, will belong to the people of India, and it will be for them to decide to whom it placed in the entrusted.

(source: https://www.mkgandhi.org/speeches/qui.htm)

11.4 Political Ideologies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify key ideologies or theories in political philosophy, such as conservatism, liberalism, egalitarianism, socialism, and anarchism.
- Discuss distributive justice within political ideologies.
- Demonstrate how alienation continues to be a problem for workers in modern industrial societies.

When Bernie Sanders, the American senator from Vermont, ran for president of the United States in 2016 as a democratic socialist, he set off an intense debate in the country. What exactly was democratic socialism? This was a debate about political ideologies, or people's beliefs about how a society should be run. Ideology can shape policies and laws, as the individuals holding office and positions of authority and the people who elect them are often influenced by ideological beliefs. This section looks at some key ideologies that have influenced how people think about their rights and the responsibilities of government.

Distributive Justice

One of the important differences among the ideologies examined below is how they approach the question of distributive justice. Distributive justice can be seen as a moral framework made up of principles that seek to ensure the greatest amount of fairness with respect to distributions of wealth, goods, and services (Olsaretti 2018). However, there is much debate surrounding what amounts to fairness. Is a just society one that provides for its members, allocating resources based on need, or is it one that allows for the greatest amount of personal freedom, even if that means that some members are radically better off than others? Furthermore, given that individuals begin at varying positions of social and economic status, should a society focus on meeting the needs of its disadvantaged members even if that results in an unequal distribution of goods, or should there be

as little governmental interference as possible?

It is tempting to see distributive justice as a theoretical moral concern. However, views on what constitute basic needs, what resources should be considered public versus private, and whether or not there should be restrictions on the free market have real, practical ramifications when considered by governing bodies. Given this, it is important to keep in mind the role that principles of distributive justice play in the ideologies discussed below.

Conservatism

Conservativism is a political theory that favors institutions and practices that have demonstrated their value over time and provided sufficient evidence that they are worth preserving and promoting. Conservatism sees the role of government as serving society rather than controlling it and advocates gradual change in the social order, if and when necessary.

Edmund Burke and the French Revolution

Modern conservatism begins with the 18th-century Irish political theorist Edmund Burke (1729–1797), who opposed the French Revolution and whose *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) served as an inspiration for the development of a conservative political philosophy (Viereck et al. 2021). Shocked by the violence of the French Revolution, Burke advocated against radical revolution that destroyed functioning institutions that, though flawed, served a purpose. However, Burke supported the American Revolution because the colonists had already established political institutions, such as courts and administrations, and were taking the next gradual step: asking Britain to let them run these institutions on their own.

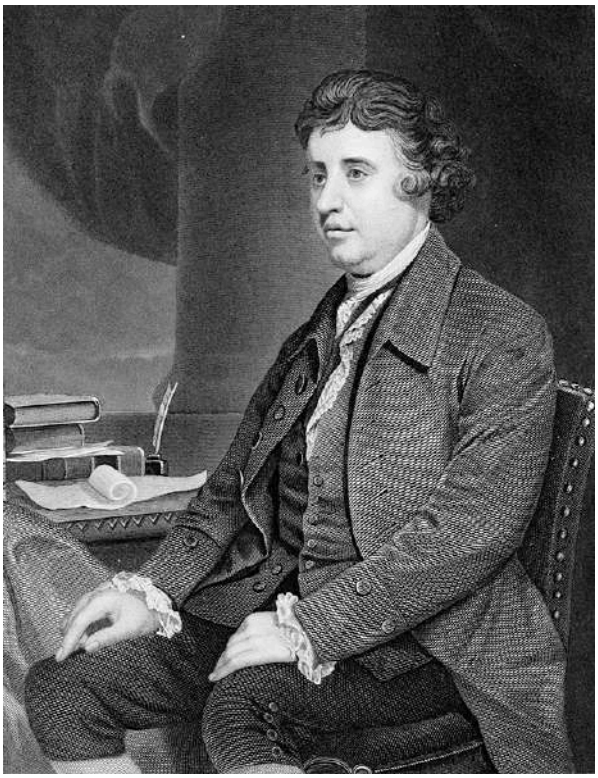

FIGURE 11.7 The Irish political thinker Edmund Burke is credited with developing the theories that form the basis of modern conservatism. (credit: "Edmund Burke" by Duyckinick, Evert A. Portrait Gallery of Eminent Men and Women in Europe and America. New York: Johnson, Wilson & Company, 1873. p. 159/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Fundamental Principles

Conservatives such as Burke are not opposed to reform, but they are wary of challenges to existing systems

that have generally held up well. They believe that any sudden change is likely to lead to instability and greater insecurity. Moreover, conservatives are not against redistribution of resources, especially when it serves to alleviate severe poverty. However, they believe that such actions are best carried out at a local level (as opposed to a state or national level) by those who understand the needs of the individual community. Finally, conservatives are staunch supporters of property rights and oppose any system of reform that challenges them. Property rights serve as a check on governmental power and are seen as an essential part of a stable society (Moseley n.d.). As such, conservatism aligns with some principles of liberalism.

Conservatism maintains that human nature is fundamentally flawed and that we are driven more by selfish desires than by empathy and concern for others. Therefore, it is the job of social institutions such as church and school to teach self-discipline, and it is the job of the government to protect the established, fundamental values of society. Along with this rather Hobbesian view of humankind and belief in the preservation of historical traditions, conservatives believe that weaknesses in institutions and morals will become apparent over time and that they will either be forced to evolve, be discarded, or be gradually reformed (Moseley n.d.).

Liberalism

Liberalism in political philosophy does not have the same meaning as the word *liberal* in popular American discourse. For Americans, *liberal* means someone who believes in representative democracy and is politically left of center. For example, liberals generally favor regulating the activities of corporations and providing social welfare programs for the working and middle classes. Liberalism as a political philosophy, however, has quite a different emphasis.

Fundamental Principle of Liberty

British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) expresses the fundamental principles of liberalism in his work *On Liberty* (1859), arguing for limited government on the grounds of utility. His interest is in "Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (Mill [1869] 2018). In this regard, he defends "one very simple principle," which is the minimizing of government interference in people's lives:

> The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. . . . The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. (Mill [1869] 2018)

In Mill's view, real freedom is when people are able to pursue their own individual idea of "the good" in a manner they see fit. Mill's claim is at the heart of most variants of liberalism.

Positive and Negative Liberty

We are at liberty when we are neither constrained to act nor obligated to refrain from acting in a certain way. At least since Isaiah Berlin's (1905–1997) "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), this sort of liberty has been called **negative liberty**. Berlin, a British political theorist, suggests that negative liberty is "the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others" (Berlin 1969, 122). Negative liberty in the political realm often refers to the absence of government control over the lives of individuals, or in what we are reasonably able to do without interference. Conversely, Berlin thinks of positive liberty as "the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master" (131). We want our life decisions to depend on ourselves and not on external forces. "I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will," says Berlin (131). The ability to participate in democratic institutions, for example, is a form of positive liberty.

The Welfare State and Social Justice

Some theorists hold that negative liberty has limits when it comes to how much liberty, in practice, a person has at their disposal. The theory of justice that sees individuals as having claims on resources and care from others is often called *welfare liberalism*. Such theorists are not in favor of limited government and believe that

the well-being of citizens must be a vital component of our agreement to obey a government. American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) famously makes this argument in his seminal book *A Theory of Justice* (1971), in which he attempts to articulate an account of fairness that satisfies our intuition that human freedom and social welfare are both important.

Rawls begins with the idea that society is a system of cooperation for mutual advantage. Given the fact of today's pluralistic societies, people reasonably disagree about many important issues, which means we must find a way to live peaceably together with our differences and collectively determine our political institutions. In addition, Rawls believes that there are deep inequalities embedded in any basic social structure, which result from the fact that we are all born into different positions and have different expectations of life, largely determined by the political, economic, and social circumstances that attend those positions. Therefore, Rawls says, we must find a way to distance ourselves from our own particular concepts of such ideas as justice, the good, and religion and begin with relatively uncontroversial facts about human psychology and economics. We should then imagine ourselves in an "original position" behind the "**veil of ignorance**"; that is, we should imagine we do not know any facts about our personal circumstances, such as our economic status, our access to education and health services, or whether we have any talents or abilities that would be beneficial to us (Rawls 1999, 11). We also remain ignorant of any social factors such as our gender, race, class, and so forth. Because Rawls assumes that no one wants to live in a society in which they are disadvantaged, operating from this position offers the greatest chance of arranging a society in a way that is as fair and equitable as possible. For instance, we would not support a system that forbade all left-handed individuals from voting because we ourselves might fall into that group.

Rawls argues that two major principles should govern society. First, the "liberty principle" states that each person has an equal right to the same basic, adequate liberties. Basic liberties are liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom to hold property, and freedom of assembly. Second, the "difference principle" states that any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions: (1) they must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of "fair equality of opportunity," and (2) they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. Note that Rawls is *not* advocating for an equal distribution of goods or advantages; rather, he says that any distribution of goods or power that *is not equal* can further disadvantage already disadvantaged individuals. His goal is to create a society that seeks to address inherent structural inequalities as well as possible (Rawls 1999, 13).

Egalitarianism

Rawls's theory of justice has much in common with egalitarian theories. The term **egalitarianism** refers to a broad family of views that gives primary place to equality. The root *egal* (from the French) means "equal." Egalitarian theories assert that all individuals should enjoy equal status and moral worth and that any legitimate system of government should reflect this value. More specifically, egalitarian theories do not argue that all individuals should be treated exactly the same; rather, they insist that individuals are all deserving of rights, including civil, social, and political rights.

Some theorists argue that equality of opportunity for welfare, meaning equality of opportunity to obtain resources, is the most important type of equality. In addition to resources, equality of opportunity includes a consideration of how individuals have acquired certain advantages. For example, nepotism (giving opportunities based on familial connections) and biases based on personal traits such as gender or race interfere with an individual's ability to compete for resources. Any society that seeks a truly level playing field needs to contend with these issues.

One way to examine equality is to look at what individuals are able to do. The Indian economist Amartya Sen popularized a framework now known as the *capability approach*, which emphasizes the importance of providing resources to match individual need. This approach creates opportunities for each person to pursue what they need to live a flourishing life. An example of the capability approach is basic income, in which a city, state, or country might combat poverty by awarding everyone below a certain income level $1,000 per month.

FIGURE 11.8 Amartya Sen, an Indian philosopher and economist and winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize, with India's 13th prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, in 2008. (credit: "The Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh with Prof. Amartya Sen at a Meeting with the Members of Nalanda Mentor Group, in New Delhi on August 13, 2008" by Prime Minister's Office, Government of India/Wikimedia Commons, GODL-India)

The capability approach advocates "treating each person as an end" and "focus[ing] on choice and freedom rather than achievements" (Robeyns and Byskov 2021). According to American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947), the capability approach would improve both justice outcomes and quality of life. She argues that a certain number of resources are necessary to enjoy a basic set of positive capabilities that all humans possess. Thus, each individual should be provided with those resources so that their life is not "so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being" (Nussbaum 2000, 72). What is beneficial about the capability approach is that it recognizes and respects the diverse needs of individuals based on different experiences and circumstances.

Listen to philosopher Martha Nussbaum discuss how the capabilities approach aids in creating a positive quality of life.

VIDEO

Martha Nussbaum

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Socialism

Rather than look to the individual, the often confused triad of socialism, Marxism, and communism examines inequality from an economic perspective. While socialism and communism both seek to address inequalities in goods and resources, socialism says that goods and resources should be owned and managed by the public and allocated based on the needs of the community rather than controlled solely by the state. A socialist system allows for the ownership of private property while relegating most control over basic resources to the government. Sometimes, as with democratic socialism, this is done through the democratic process, with the result that public resources, such as national parks, libraries, and welfare services, are controlled by a

government of elected representatives.

VIDEO

Concepts of Socialism

Click to view content (https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/11-4-political-ideologies)

Critique of Capital

While what are commonly called "Marxist ideals" did not originate solely with Karl Marx, he is responsible for coauthoring perhaps the most famous treatise criticizing capitalism, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and laying out a vision of a yet-unrealized true communist society. As such, it is important to examine his ideas in more detail.

Marx is critical of the private accumulation of **capital**, which he defines as money and commodities. Stockpiling of capital allows for private accumulation of power. Marx holds that the value of an object is determined by the socially necessary amount of labor used in the production of that object. In a capitalist system, labor is also a commodity, and the worker exchanges their work for a subsistence wage. In Marx's view, workers' labor in fact creates surplus value, for which they are not paid and which is claimed by the capitalist. Thus, the worker does not receive full value for their labor.

Alienation

Marx identifies several kinds of **alienation** that result from the commodification of labor. To illustrate this, imagine some factory workers who have recently moved to a large city. Prior to the move, they lived in a small village, where they worked as furniture makers. They were responsible for each stage of the production, from imagining the design to obtaining the materials and creating the product. They sold the product and kept the profits of their labor. Now, however, they work on an assembly line, where they are responsible for producing a small part of an overall product. They are alienated both from the product and from their own productive nature because they have no hand in the product's design and are involved in only a small part of its construction. They begin to see their labor, and by extension themselves, as a commodity to be sold.

The result of selling their labor is that they begin to see others as commodities as well. They begin to identify people not by who they are but by what they have accumulated and their worth as a product. In this way, they become alienated from themselves and from others, seeing them always as potential competition. For Marx, this leads to a sense of despair that is filled with material goods, thus solidifying the worker in their dependence on the capitalist system.

Anarchism

While the idea of negative liberty decries unnecessary government intervention in people's lives, **anarchism** literally means "no ruler" or "no government." The absence of a political authority conjures an image of the state of nature imagined by Thomas Hobbes—that is, a state of chaos. Anarchists, however, believe that disorder comes from government. According to this view, rational individuals mostly desire to live peaceful lives, free of government intervention, and this desire naturally leads them to create societies and institutions built on the principles of self-governance.

Motivations for Anarchism

One defense of anarchism is that governments do things that would be impermissible for private individuals. French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) observes that governments monitor citizens' activities and attempt to control their behavior through force. The more technology governments have, the greater their attempts to control people. Proudhon ([1849] 2012) observes that such treatment is against human dignity.

Proudhonian anarchists are aware of the argument that people may have consented to give up some of their

power to the government (as people do in a representative democracy, for example), which means that they must accept the treatment they receive. Yet Proudhon would deny that there is any example in history of a just government. Lysander Spooner (1808–1887), the 19th-century anarchist, says that all governments have come into existence through force and maintain their existence through force (Spooner 1870). Thus, some defend anarchism on the grounds that governments violate human rights.

Limits of Anarchism

Criticisms of anarchy are often twofold. The first is that without an organized police force, society would be unable to control outbreaks of violence. A related concern is that without a judicial system to arbitrate disputes and mete out justice, any resolution would be arbitrary. Anarchists, on the other hand, claim that most incidents of violence are the result of socioeconomic imbalances that would be resolved if the government were dismantled. Social anarchism, for instance, points to community involvement and mutual exchange of goods and services as a solution (Fiala 2021).

Yet some people associate anarchism with political violence, and in fact, some anarchists see violence as an unavoidable result of clashes with a violent and oppressive government. One of the most famous anarchists, Emma Goldman (1869–1940), wrote in her essay "The Psychology of Political Violence," "Such acts are the violent recoil from violence, whether aggressive or repressive; they are the last desperate struggle of outraged and exasperated human nature for breathing space and life" (1917). However, many anarchists favor nonviolent tactics and civil disobedience, such as protests and the creation of autonomous zones, as opposed to political violence (Fiala 2018).

FIGURE 11.9 Born in Lithuania in 1869, Emma Goldman experienced anti-Semitic persecution before moving to the United States at age 16 and becoming a factory worker. She was quickly introduced to the anarchist movement and became a prolific writer and passionate speaker advocating the movement's principles. (credit: "Emma Goldman on a Street Car, Library of Congress)

Anarchism and Feminism

Within anarchism, anarcha-feminism seeks to fight against gendered concepts that create inequity.

Traditional gender roles only serve to cement unequal power distribution and further the class divide. Particularly, traditional concepts of women's role in the domestic sphere mirror the depersonalization of the worker, with the woman seen as an extension of the home and domestic labor, rather than an independent autonomous person. It is worth noting that anarcha-feminism is in direct opposition to Proudhon, who believed that family was an essential aspect of society and that the traditional role of women within the family was necessary for its success (Proudhon 1875).

The author and poet bell hooks believes that the concerns driving anarchism can provide a motivation for current social action. She notes that the gaps between the rich and the poor are widening in the United States and that because of the "feminization of poverty" (by which she means the inequality in living standards due to gender pay disparity), a grassroots radical feminist movement is needed "that can build on the strength of the past, including the positive gains generated by reforms, while offering meaningful interrogation of existing feminist theory that was simply wrongminded while offering us new strategies" (hooks 2000, 43). She sees such a "visionary movement" (43) as grounded in the real-life conditions experienced by working-class and impoverished women.

Feminists historically have had to fight to make space for themselves within anarchist movements. The Spanish female collective Mujeres Libres formed during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) in reaction to what they saw as a dismissal of women's issues by the anarchist movement. Members of Mujeres Libres sought to support female activists and improve the lives of working-class women through literacy drives, employment programs, and child care facilities in both neighborhoods and factories (Ackelsberg 1985). These and other initiatives that focused on creating opportunities for women helped develop a sense of social engagement and foster a desire for social change.

FIGURE 11.10 Lucía Sánchez Saornil, pictured here in 1933, was a Spanish anarchist and cofounder of Mujeres Libres. (credit: "Lucía Sánchez Saornil in 1933" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Table 11.2 summarizes the political ideologies discussed in this chapter.

Political Ideology	Description	Key Concerns
Conservatism	Favors institutions and practices that have demonstrated their value over time	Favors action at the local level, supports property rights, believes in the importance of self-discipline, sees the role of government as protecting the fundamental values of society
Liberalism	Favors limited government on the grounds of utility (different from current meaning of “liberalism” in the United States)	Attempts to maximize individual liberty, including both negative liberty (the absence of government control) and positive liberty (people’s power to control their own lives)
Egalitarianism	Gives primary place to equality	Aims to guarantee equal rights and equal opportunities to all, but not necessarily equal outcomes
Socialism	Favors public ownership and management of goods and resources	Typically allows for the ownership of private property, but gives most control over basic resources to the government
Anarchism	“No ruler” or “no government”; instead of a central government, sees people as capable of governing themselves	Believes that government is the cause of, rather than the solution to, most problems; views human nature as rational and peaceful

TABLE 11.2 Political Ideologies

Summary

11.1 Historical Perspectives on Government

Early political philosophers were concerned with ideas of justice and how best to ensure the most virtuous city. In Plato's imagined city, the most just city is one in which each member of society occupies the social role they are the best equipped for based on their talents. The city is governed by guardians, who are trained from infancy to protect the needs of the society, with the wisest and most virtuous of these becoming philosopher-kings, the natural rulers. Al-Farabi borrows much from Plato but considers those best able to rule to be determined by heaven. Al-Farabi's supreme ruler is the founder of the city—not an historical founder, but rather one who possesses both practical and theoretical knowledge and is not bound by any precedent or prior authority. The Mohists, in turn, think that we must have leaders that display virtues so that we may emulate them and become virtuous ourselves. The Mohists believed that individuals were essentially good and wanted to do what was morally right, but they often lacked an understanding of moral norms.

11.2 Forms of Government

Whereas Plato and Al-Farabi believed that good government could be achieved by having a virtuous leader, philosophers and laypeople have advanced other structures of government that they feel might better accomplish this purpose. Monarchies placed political decisions in the hands of a ruler who was chosen by God and so must be virtuous. Ruling authority in an aristocracy is in the hands of a small number of individuals considered to be elite members of society. However, ideas of representative government arose as class systems changed and social contract theory became popular. Later, totalitarian governments emerged as the new ideologies of communism and fascism sparked revolutions in the 20th century.

11.3 Political Legitimacy and Duty

The concept of political legitimacy grounds the authority of a political system. This is important because it is difficult to defend the right to rule if a system of government is not accepted by the people. The sociologist Max Weber identifies three sources of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. If we accept the legitimacy of a political system, then one must consider what obligations exist between the state and its citizens—and what avenues exist if these obligations are not met. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and other members of the civil rights movement recognized the legitimacy of the United States government but felt it was not fulfilling its obligations to all of its citizens equally.

11.4 Political Ideologies

Political ideology refers to beliefs about the ways in which society should be governed. Generally, this includes beliefs about what rights and responsibilities individuals have as well as how goods and resources should be distributed. Often, individuals will hold similar views in some respects, and likewise, many ideologies have features in common. This can make it difficult to create sharp distinctions between them. However, because ideological beliefs influence the actions of those who hold positions of authority in a society, it is important to attempt to understand their major underlying features. Some of the most common ideologies fall under the umbrellas of egalitarianism and conservatism, including liberalism, socialism, and anarchism, among others.

Key Terms

Ahimsa a foundational principle in Indian philosophy to refrain from harming oneself or others.
Alienation in Marxism, the estrangement of workers from their work and from themselves due to capitalist exploitation.
Anarchism a state of no governance or political oversight.
Aristocracy a class of people considered to be elite members of society.
Capital money and commodities.
Democracy government either by elected representatives of the people or directly by the people themselves.
Divine rule a doctrine of political authority in which the legitimacy of the monarch or ruler is derived from the

will of the divine.

Egalitarianism the notion that all individuals enjoy equal status and moral worth and that any legitimate system of government should reflect this in its policies and procedures.

Legitimacy in governance, acceptance of one's right to rule by the people being ruled.

Mohism the philosophy of the Chinese philosopher Mozi or the teachings of the *Mozi*, a book thought to be a collection of writings by followers of Mozi's teachings.

Monarchy a system of rule by one individual, who usually inherits their position.

Natural law moral law naturally intuited by humankind, according to the rationality given to them by God.

Negative liberty a state in which one is neither constrained to act nor obligated to refrain from acting in a specific way.

Political philosophy the branch of philosophy that investigates concepts of justice and legitimacy as well as the relationships among political systems, governments, and the people.

Social contract an agreement among members of society to cooperate and allow some limits of their natural rights in exchange for protection and mutual benefits provided by government.

Totalitarianism a system of government that exercises complete control over its people in terms of both their personal and their public lives.

Veil of ignorance an imagined scenario in which a person deliberately remains unaware of any personal traits and does not know what social, political, or economic group they are in.

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Review Questions

11.1 Historical Perspectives on Government

1. What are the four virtues that Plato thinks the state should be founded upon?
2. What is the definition of a citizen, according to Aristotle?
3. Why was China's Warring States era also known as the "hundred schools of thought" period?
4. Why is Mohism considered one of the earliest forms of consequentialism?
5. What are some of the similarities between Plato's republic and Al-Farabi's cities of excellence?

11.2 Forms of Government

6. What is the difference between absolute and constitutional monarchy?
7. What led to the formation of constitutional monarchies?
8. How do ideas about social class or castes inform different forms of government?
9. What is the ultimate goal of totalitarian regimes, according to Hannah Arendt?

11.3 Political Legitimacy and Duty

10. What is the state of nature, according to Thomas Hobbes?
11. Identify Max Weber's three sources of legitimacy.
12. What is normative legitimacy?
13. What role does the concept of ahimsa play in politics, according to Gandhi?

11.4 Political Ideologies

14. What does John Stuart Mill consider to be real freedom?
15. What does negative liberty mean in the political sense?
16. What two principles does John Rawls say should govern society?
17. What is the focus of egalitarian movements?
18. Where do anarchists believe disorder comes from?
19. Why does Karl Marx believe workers are alienated from their labor?

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Contemporary Philosophies and Social Theories

12

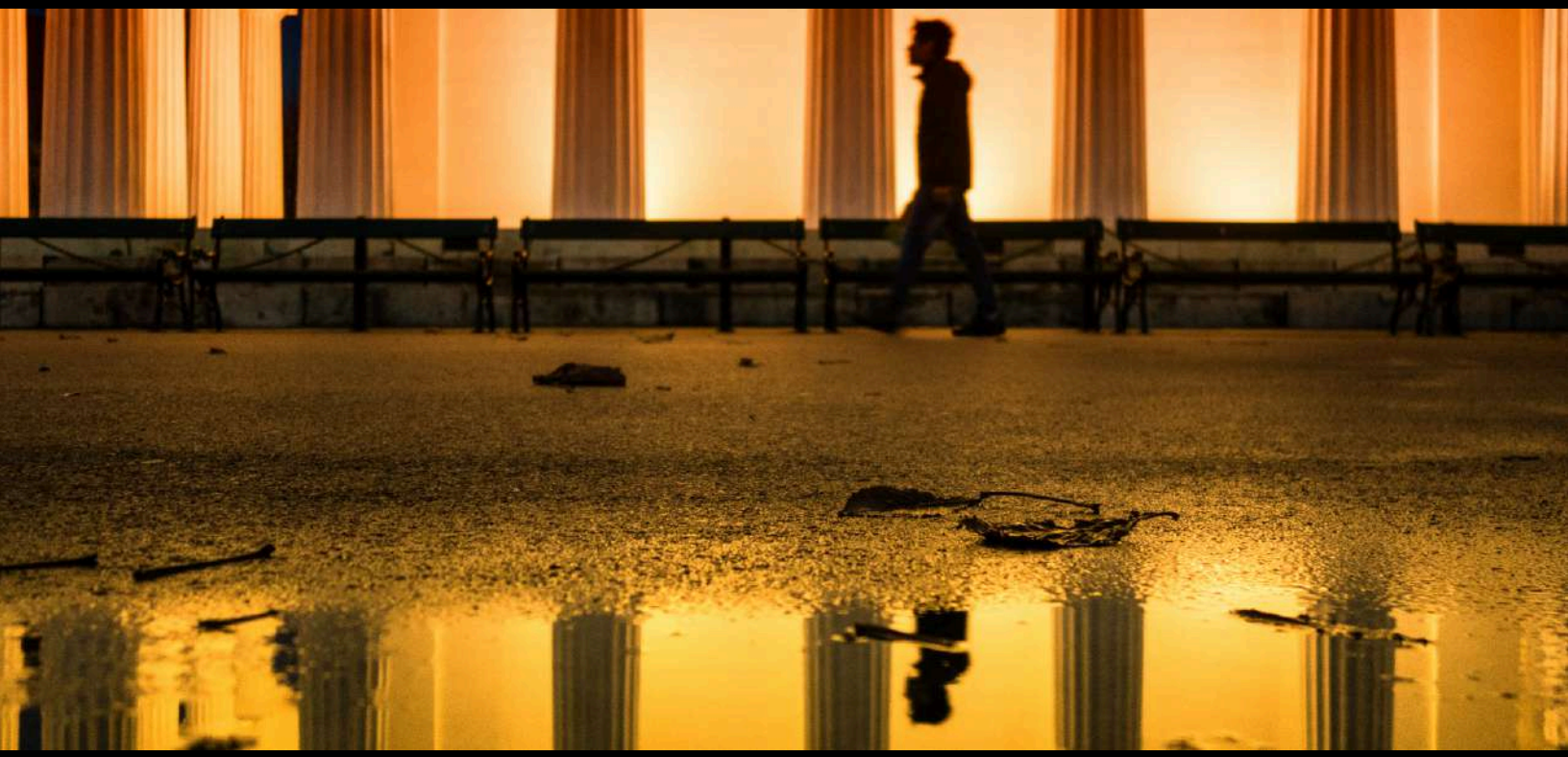

FIGURE 12.1 Contemporary philosophy has focused both on both practical questions such as how to encourage and measure human progress and engaged in more conceptual grappling with the nature of meaning itself. (credit: "Walking (flickrfriday)" by d26b73/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION The modern era has witnessed rapid change that improved the lives of many but also created new social problems. The 17th to 19th centuries included the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. During this period, great unrest occurred, with social contract theory spawning revolutions in Europe and the Americas. The emergence of capitalism on the ruins of feudalism fueled the rise of a low-paid urban labor force and a ballooning of numerous related social ills, such as poverty and crime.

Philosophers around the world and throughout history—including Buddha, Plato, and Confucius—have proposed systems of thought to address the social problems of their age. Three major philosophical movements arose to address the challenges of the modern era. In Europe, the Enlightenment—often dated from 1685 to 1815 and also called the Age of Reason—inspired societies to turn to reason, science, and

technology to achieve better lives for individuals and steady progress for the human race. New fields of social science arose, among them sociology, as a means of impartially studying and presenting solutions to social problems. New institutions were developed to implement these solutions, many of which still exist today—among them democratic government, national banks and lending programs, and a wide array of nonprofit organizations to serve those in need.

The economic progress of this era relied on the system of capitalism, which many thinkers in the early 19th century blamed for producing the bulk of human suffering they witnessed. These thinkers increasingly embraced a type of socialism called Marxism, which advocated for a communist revolution that placed the working class in control of the government and economy. Marxist ideology predicted that communist revolutions would inevitably take place as capitalism advanced within the industrializing world and that these revolutions would create a society devoid of major social problems. Neither of these predictions were realized. Instead, Russia, China, and many countries in Africa, Asia, and South America underwent communist and socialist revolutions but failed to achieve the economic or political equality that Marx had envisioned.

Marxist theorists began rejecting both the inevitability of revolution and the Enlightenment belief that the pursuit of knowledge would lead to progress. Instead, they viewed knowledge as reflective of systems of power. They argued that philosophers must take on a new role. Rather than be impartial observers, philosophers must change the way people engage in public discourse in order to cast light on oppression and ultimately accomplish Marx's goal of an equal society. This branch of philosophy became known as **critical theory**. Currently, politicians, school board members, teachers, and parents—among others—are active in debates about the inclusion of critical race theory in educational curriculums.

This chapter examines the philosophies of Enlightenment social theory, Marxist theory, and critical theory that inform so much of the way we live our lives today.

12.1 Enlightenment Social Theory

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Evaluate Enlightenment ideas of progress.
- Describe positivism.
- Outline the emergence of empirical sociology as a means of solving social problems.

Enlightenment thinkers proposed that human reason coupled with empirical study of the physical world would lead to progress—namely, the advancement of science and the improvement of the human condition. While time-, labor-, and life-saving scientific advances benefited many, the economic developments of the era exacerbated inequality and pushed many others into poverty. Concerns also grew about the power of governments and other institutions and the role of the individual in increasingly complex and interconnected economic and social systems. Political theorists such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) proposed social contract theory, which spoke to the protection of individual freedoms. And new fields emerged to study and attempt to address the social problems that were developing.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on political theory examines social contract theories that addressed the protection of individual freedoms.

Rationalism and Empiricism

Enlightenment thinkers proposed that the knowledge needed to improve social conditions could be gathered through rationalism, which regards reason as the source of most knowledge, and empiricism, which relies upon the evidence provided by experiments. The French thinker René Descartes (1596–1650) argued that true

knowledge could be acquired through reason alone, without relying on experience. Descartes's famous quote "I think therefore I am" insists that we know what we know due to abstract reason. For example, knowing that one plus one equals two is a function of reason rather than personal experience.

Other Enlightenment thinkers, including the English philosophers Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and John Locke (1632–1704), believed that knowledge could be gained only through empirical methods, including direct and indirect observation and experience. According to these thinkers, we make deductions from observations that suggest patterns or connection. These deductions can then be tested by systematically observing further phenomena and recording and analyzing data surrounding these phenomena. The scientific method is an empirical method solidified during the Enlightenment period that has become the standard way of conducting any type of objective research.

While rationalism and empiricism seem to be making opposing claims about truth, each has value, and the two can work together. The technological advances of the last 200 years—such as the launching of astronauts into space; the invention of radio, television, and the internet; and the eradication of diseases such as polio—can be said to be the result of both rationalism and empiricism.

CONNECTIONS

To learn more about the ideas of Descartes and the empiricists, visit the chapter on epistemology and the chapter on logic and reason.

Kant and Ethical Progress

The German Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) proposed that reason alone could guide individuals to identify ethical codes that would result in an improved society. These codes, which he called categorical imperatives, could be derived by determining which rules for ethical behavior we might wish to apply to everyone without exception.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on normative moral theories digs deeper into Kant's ethical theory.

Kant believe that applying reason in this way could usher humanity toward a moral society in which each individual would enjoy the greatest possible freedom. However, Kant also believed that this work of reasoning out a moral code could not be accomplished by individuals but must be undertaken by entire societies. Nor could the work be accomplished in one generation; instead, it may take centuries of trial, reflection, and education. Yet, through this pursuit, societies would progress with each generation, ultimately reaching a more perfect moral code and a more ideal society (Dupré 1998).

Comte's Positivism

The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) crafted a social theory with the goal of pushing humanity forward toward a more peaceful society—one that could weather the storms of the political revolutions that he experienced in his youth. Considered the first philosopher of science, Comte analyzed the development of the different branches of science that existed in his time. Based on this work, he proposed the law of three stages for the development of societies. In the first stage, individuals attributed the events of life to supernatural forces. In the second stage, individuals recognized that human efforts and natural forces were largely responsible for many events while still acknowledging the power of supernatural forces. In the third stage, individuals shift from focusing on causation to the scientific study of the natural world, human society, and history. In this third stage, Comte believed that humanity would reject religion and focus only on laws or postulates that can be proven. Comte called this third stage **positivism**.

FIGURE 12.2 Auguste Comte believed that society could be studied empirically and that this study could result in human progress. (credit: "Auguste Comte" by Maison d'Auguste Comte/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Grounded in this positivist approach, Comte proposed the establishment of a science of society, which he called sociology. He believed that society, like an organism in nature, could be studied empirically and that this study could result in human progress. Comte's conception of sociology as a field of study remained in the theoretical realm. A few decades after he first proposed it, however, his theoretical ideas for a new discipline crossed the Atlantic Ocean and found a home in universities in the United States. Here great minds—such as W. E. B. Du Bois, discussed in the next section—established sociology as a practical discipline that could inform the policies and programs of governments and institutions.

Comte believed that humanity would struggle to transition to positivism, as religions provided comforting and meaningful structure and rituals. As a result, Comte founded his own church in 1849, which has as its theoretical legacy the secular humanism of today.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Comte struggled with mental health and spent much of his later years in psychiatric hospitals. During this time, he established the structure and rituals for his church. Watch Dr. Bart van Heerikhuizen (https://openstax.org/r/ComtesReligionofHumanity) from the University of Amsterdam discuss Comte's journey and whether religions are necessary to stabilize society. Then consider how religion serves society—and whether it is necessary in the modern era. Describe the type of church or alternative social institution you would establish to serve the needs of society in the age of science.

Du Bois and Empirical Sociology

W. E. B. Du Bois, a prominent American intellectual and civil rights activist, pioneered the use of empirical methods in the field of sociology. When Du Bois first engaged with sociology, the young field of study was largely theoretical. Du Bois criticized early sociologists for making broad generalizations about human

societies based on vague, personal impressions rather than first seeking to gather evidence (Westbrook 2018, 200). Du Bois set out to convert sociology into a scientific discipline.

After receiving his PhD from Harvard University in 1895, Du Bois came to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Here he conducted a complex investigation into the obstacles that African Americans faced in becoming self-supporting. Over 15 months, Du Bois conducted 2,500 door-to-door interviews, collecting data on demographics, education, literacy, occupation, health, membership in civic organizations, criminality, rates of alcoholism, income levels, home ownership rates, voting practices, and the integration of African Americans into the larger society. He compared his findings with data compiled by the US Census Bureau and other sources to gain more insight. For example, comparing his data regarding the occupations of people living in the Seventh Ward, an African American neighborhood, to 1890 census data on the occupations of people in the whole of Philadelphia, he found that a significantly greater percentage of African Americans were engaged in low-skilled, low-paying occupations. Du Bois's study and his subsequent book, entitled *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, became the first empirical analysis of racism in the United States.

FIGURE 12.3 W.E.B. Du Bois pioneered the use of empirical methods in the field of sociology. (credit: "W.E.B. Du Bois by James E. Purdy, 1907" by James E. Purdy National Portrait Gallery/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Today we take for granted our ability to find statistics such as the divorce rate, the crime rate, or the average salary for a job in the region where we live. However, the collection of this kind of data and its use as a tool to inform public policies aimed at addressing social problems is a product of Du Bois's determination to bring science to the study of social issues.

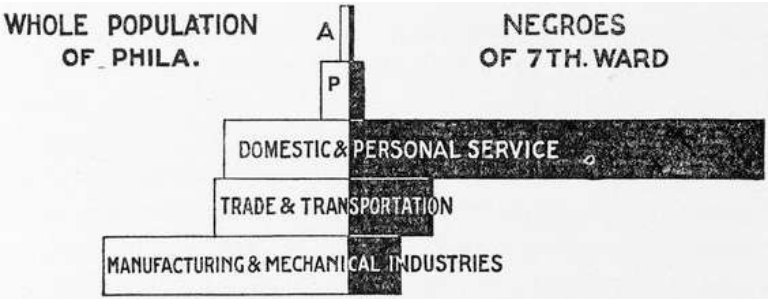

FIGURE 12.4 This bar graph from Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, published in 1899, illustrates his conclusion that African Americans living in the Seventh Ward were less likely to work in the skilled professions of manufacturing and mechanical industries and more likely to work in unskilled positions of domestic labor. This data-based approach to studying human experiences was revolutionary at the time. Note that at this time, the term *Negroes* was commonly used to describe Black Americans. (credit: *The Philadelphia Negro*, p. 109, by W. E. B. Du Bois, Google Books, Public Domain)

12.2 The Marxist Solution

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the dialectic method.
- Contrast the Hegelian and Marxian concepts of dialectic.
- Outline the stages of Marx's proletariat revolution.
- Describe how Maoism reframed Marxism as an anti-imperialist revolution.

Unlike Enlightenment social theory, Marxist theories did not try to solve specific social problems that arose from industrialization and urbanization. Rather, they advocated removing the economic system that they felt caused these problems—capitalism. When German philosophers Karl Marx and Frederick Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, they made a prediction: the workers would overthrow capitalism in the most advanced industrial nation, England. The natural forces of history, they argued, made this revolution inevitable. They derived their views of these historical forces from the work of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) on the **dialectic method**.

Hegel's Dialectic Method

Hegel argued that history itself was the movement created by the interaction between a thesis (an original state) and a force countering that original state (antithesis), resulting in a new and higher state (synthesis). This dialectic can be likened to a grade report: based on the original grades (the thesis), a student will ideally reflect on their performance and address areas of weakness (antithesis) to ultimately arrive at a higher understanding of the topics under study (synthesis).

Hegel argued that in various eras of history, Absolute Spirit—which might be understood in many ways, including God or the collective human consciousness—confronts its own essence and transitions to a higher state. Hegel saw this most clearly in the life of Jesus and the birth of Christianity. Hegel presents Jesus as a rational philosopher who reflects on and confronts Judaism—antithesis challenging thesis. The resurrection of Jesus following his crucifixion symbolizes an awakened consciousness both in the individual of Jesus and in humanity. Within this framework, the birth of Christianity following Jesus's resurrection is viewed as the synthesis, the higher state (Dale 2006).

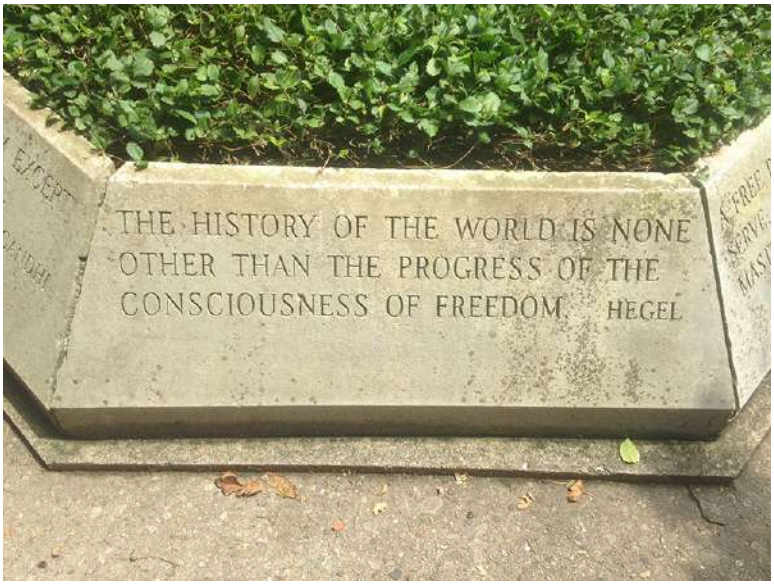

FIGURE 12.5 This quote from Hegel, carved into a public monument in Rocky Ripple, Indiana, captures his belief in the power of thoughts to change the world. (credit: "Hegel Quote" by Bart Everson/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Marx's Dialectical Materialism and the Proletariat Revolution

In contrast to Hegel's idealistic dialectic, Karl Marx (1818–1883) proposed a view of the dialectic called **dialectical materialism**. Dialectical materialism identities the contradictions within material, real-world phenomena as the driving force of change. Most important to Marx were the economic conflicts between social classes. *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) states, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels [1969] 2000, ch. 1). Marx and Engels note that in every epoch of history (as understood at the time) society has been divided into social orders and that tensions between these social orders determine the direction of history, rather than the realization of any abstract ideals. Specifically, they identified the colonization of the Americas and the rise of trade with India and China as the revolutionary forces that created and enriched the bourgeois class, ultimately resulting in the death of feudalism. Similarly, Marx regarded the clash of economic interests between the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (workers) as the contradiction that would bring down capitalism and give rise to a classless society (Marx and Engels [1969] 2000).

CONNECTIONS

For a deeper dive into Marx's views, visit the chapter on political philosophy.

Marx laid out a detailed plan for how the proletariat revolution would occur. Marx proposed the concept of surplus value as a contradictory force within capitalism. Surplus value was the profit the capitalists made above and beyond the wages of the workers. This profit strengthens the capitalists' monetarily and so gives them more power over the workers and a greater ability to exploit them. Marx viewed this surplus value as a key part of the "economic law of motion of modern society" that would inevitably lead to revolution (Marx [1954] 1999).

Despite there being competition among workers for jobs, Marx believed that conflict with their employers would bind them. As capitalism advanced, the workers would form into a class of proletariats, which would then form trade unions and political parties to represent its interests. As the revolution advanced, the most resolute members of the working-class political parties, those with the clearest understanding of the movement, would establish the communist party. The proletariat, led by the communists, would then "wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the

State" (Marx and Engels [1969] 2000, ch. 2). The communist party would need to rule society as "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and enact reforms that would lead to a classless society.

These developments did, in fact, materialize—but in Russia, not in England, as Marx had predicted. Marx had expected the revolution to begin in England, since it was the most industrial society, and to spread to other nations as their capitalist economies advanced to the same degree. The unfolding of actual events in a way contrary to Marx's predictions led Marxists and others to doubt the reliability of Marx's system of dialectical materialism. This doubt was compounded by the realizations that the Russian communist party was responsible for killing millions of farmers and dissidents and that some working-class parties and unions were turning to fascism as an alternative to communism. By the early to mid-20th century, opponents of the capitalist system were questioning orthodox Marxism as a method of realizing the ideal of a government by the working class.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Watch "Karl Marx on Alienation (https://openstax.org/r/KarlMarxonAlienation)" from the series *A History of Ideas*. The video examines Marx's claim that the alienation and oppression created by capitalism would fuel revolution in the working class. He called for the workers to revolt, as "they had nothing to lose but their chains."

Questions:

- Was Marx wrong about the marginalization occurring within and through a capitalistic economy? Using at least one credible source, offer an argument (based on your source) that either supports or refutes his claim. Does your argument resonate with your lived experience?
- Where was or is the revolution? Should we dismiss Marx (or at least his claim that alienation occurs through the oppression rendered by privately owned means of production) given the absence of a global revolution?

Revolutionary Movements of the 20th Century

During the first two decades of the 20th century, revolutions swept across the globe. Contrary to Marx's prediction, these did not occur in the most industrialized countries. Rather, the Ottoman Empire (in Turkey), the Russian Empire, and the Chinese empire all fell to coalitions of different groups, including advocates for representative government who embraced Enlightenment philosophies, socialists and communists implementing their versions of Marxism, and factions within the military that sought to empower their nations through modernization.

Lenin's Imperialism

In 1917, Russian revolutionary leader and Marxist theorist Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) published a pamphlet proposing to explain why communist revolutions were not occurring in the most advanced industrialized capitalist economies. Lenin suggested that capitalism had morphed into imperialism. Rather than continuing to squeeze their own working classes at home for profits, large national monopolies had gained access to both cheap raw material and labor and new markets in Africa, Asia, and South America. The result, Lenin argued, is that communist revolutions will take place in these subjugated nations rather than in the most industrialized countries (Lenin [1963] 2005).

Mao's Reframing

The military losses of the once-great Chinese empire to imperialist invasions over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries and the resulting humiliations played a major role in the Chinese revolution of 1911. Imperialist Japan's conquering of northern China provoked an on-and-off military alliance between Chinese democratic reformers and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong (1893–1976), that eventually deteriorated into civil war. Adopting Lenin and his predecessors' views of imperialism, Mao reframed the

Marxist revolution. Imperialist nations represented capitalists and the semifeudal, colonial, and semicolonial states that they subjugated represented the proletariat. The Chinese revolution, Mao argued, was part of a global revolution against capitalism that would see subjugated nations throw off imperialist chains and establish Marx's vision (Mao [1966] 2004).

Mao's reframing of the Marxist revolution has profoundly impacted the course of history. Anti-imperialist, socialist groups in Africa, Asia, and South America helped their countries achieve independence. Often displacing other nationalist groups that supported revolution, they succeeded at one period in establishing a large network of small socialist states. Today, as workers in industrialized nations have failed to embrace communism, Marxists largely envision their battle to be against what they view as modern-day imperialist nations.

Unlike Russia and industrialized nations, China lacked an organized working class that might provide the Communist Party with the numbers and material support needed to launch a revolution. As a result, Mao addressed his rhetoric not only to the proletariat proper but to the peasantry as well. He defined a different class struggle—one between the peasants and the landlord class. "The ruthless economic exploitation and political oppression of the peasants by the landlord class forced them into numerous uprisings against its rule," Mao noted in the Little Red Book—a selection of Mao's quotes first published in 1964 that all individuals were strongly encouraged to own and study (Mao [1966] 2000, ch. 2). Mao extended the revolutionary class even further to include members of the intelligentsia and the petty bourgeoisie, a term describing those managing small-scale commercial undertakings. Mao urged all these people to join the peasants and the proletariat and become "saviors of the people" by ousting the Japanese imperialists and establishing a new democracy based on Marxist principles. Mao even extended membership in the revolutionary class to members of the bourgeoisie who held strong nationalist, anti-imperialist views: "Being a bourgeoisie in a colonial and semi-colonial country and oppressed by imperialism, the Chinese national bourgeoisie retains a certain revolutionary quality" (Mao [1966] 2004, § 5).

Mao's reframing of the proletariat afforded Marxist movements far greater flexibility in choosing supporters and defining their enemies. Like Mao's reenvisioning of the Marxist revolution, this shift enabled the spread of Marxism within the less-industrialized world.

FIGURE 12.6 Mao's reframing of Marxist ideology inspired not only the Chinese people but also those seeking to establish governments and economies founded on Marx's ideals in other parts of the world. (credit: "Mao Statue" by Philip Jägenstedt/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Cultural Revolution and Reeducation

Mao identified the transformation of China from a feudal monarchy to a representative democratic system to a Marxist democracy as a series of cultural revolutions. Despite Mao's highly inclusive definition of the revolutionary element, he strongly emphasized the primacy of the proletariat and the Communist Party. In discussing the new democracy, Mao explained, "This culture can be led only by the culture and ideology of the proletariat, by the ideology of communism, and not by the culture and ideology of any other class" (Mao [1966] 2004, § 12). Mao had galvanized the support of many groups to win control of China. Now, Mao needed a mechanism to maintain the primacy of the Communist Party and communist control of the nation once imperialist Japan had been evicted from northern China.

Mao found his mechanism with a method he called **self-criticism**. Mao warned that the party must not become complacent after achieving success. The minds of comrades, Mao explained, gather dust and must be washed from time to time. Engaging in regular self-criticism meant that the party might avoid mistakes and respond quickly and effectively to setbacks. A deeper motivation for self-criticism, however, stemmed from the Communist Party's desire to establish and maintain control over the new society.

In theory, self-criticism would consist of groups of comrades sitting together, discussing their ideas, reporting on their dealings, and helping each other improve. Mao described how self-criticism should proceed: "If we have shortcomings, we are not afraid to have them pointed out and criticized, because we serve the people. Anyone, no matter who, may point out our shortcomings. If he is right, we will correct them. If what he proposes will benefit the people, we will act upon it" (Mao [1966] 2000, ch. 27).

In practice, as early as the 1930s, self-criticism sessions turned from small groups that shamed individuals into public events in which "class enemies" were denounced, humiliated, and beaten, often by people whom they were close to—such as family members, students, or friends. Indeed, Mao recognized these practices as essential to the revolutionary movement: "A well-disciplined Party armed with the theory of Marxism-Leninism, using the method of self-criticism and linked with the masses of the people; an army under the leadership of such a Party; a united front of all revolutionary classes and all revolutionary groups under the leadership of such a Party—these are the three main weapons with which we have defeated the enemy" (Mao [1966] 2000, ch. 1). Mao's attempts to reeducate his people culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1977), during which mobs and militias murdered somewhere between hundreds of thousands to millions of citizens who were deemed class enemies.

Whereas in practice, self-criticism in China resulted in brutality and repression, the idea that communication and self-examination can serve as a tool of liberation has continued to develop.

12.3 Continental Philosophy's Challenge to Enlightenment Theories

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of *hermeneutics*.
- Contrast meaning as expressed through historicity and meaning as expressed through objective models.
- Articulate phenomenology's contributions to questions about the nature of reality.
- Describe the basis for ethical action identified by phenomenology.
- Articulate the undertanding of reality proposed by existentialism.
- Describe Ricoeur's narrative understanding of the self and society.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, scholars began to challenge both empiricism and rationalism. In particular, scholarship in the disciplines of hermeneutics and phenomenology questioned what we can know and how we should approach the acquisition of knowledge. Though these fields did not address social issues, they informed critical theory, which provided a new perspective on why Enlightenment social theory may not be enough to solve social problems. This section examines these ideas that lay the groundwork for critical theory.

Hermeneutics

The area of philosophy that deals with the nature of objective and subjective meaning in relation to written texts is called **hermeneutics**. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. When engaged in hermeneutics, we are asking questions such as author's intent, how the audience interprets the text in question, the assumptions that fuel the reader to make the conclusions they come to, etc. Hermeneutics is of great importance to this chapter as it deals with the possibilities of seeing a thing from not just one perspective but several. One of the key ideas of hermeneutics is the suggestion that truth is relative to perspective and is not fixed.

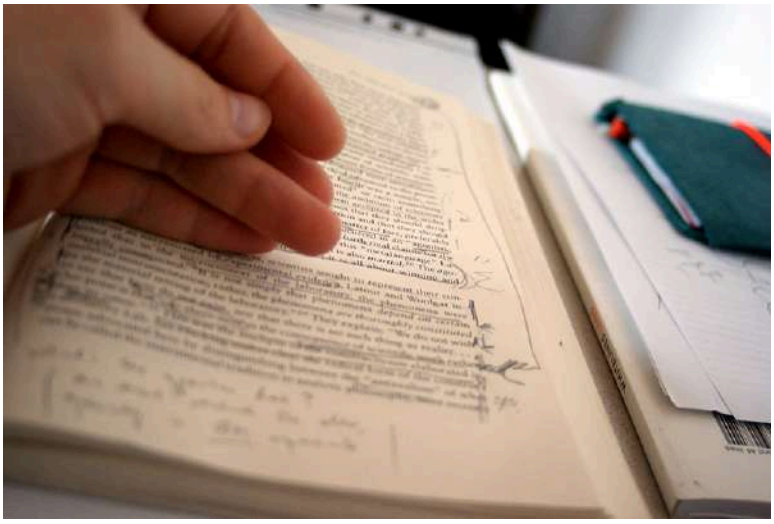

FIGURE 12.7 Hermeneutics challenges the idea that a text "means" just one thing, pointing instead to the relationship between text and reader as creating a diversity of possible meanings. (credit: "How My Professors Annotate Their Books" by Michael Pollak/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Historicity

Historicity is the philosophical view that everything that we encounter gains its meaning through the temporal events that surround its introduction to and maintenance in the world. In this view, both the author and the text produced by the author are products of history. Historicity asserts that there is no such thing as unmediated meaning; no textual claim stands apart from the events in time that give rise to it. Hermeneutics took up the concerns of historicity when it engaged the question of whether the construction of a text could possibly reveal more about the meaning than the author intended. For example, the analysis of a Charles Dickens novel usually focuses on the struggle of Victorian society to come to terms with the inhumane conditions brought about by the industrial revolution in England. Dickens himself was forced to work in a boot-blacking factory at a young age. Yet his writing communicates ideas that he was not necessarily aware of. His first edition of *Oliver Twist* presented the villain Fagin using anti-Semitic stereotypes. When an acquaintance made him aware of this, Dickens initially denied it, but the subsequent edition replaced many instances of the term *the Jew* with the name *Fagin* (Meyer 2005).

Reception and Interpretation

If hermeneutics is the art of understanding, then it follows that authentic communication is a discussion between what is transmitted by the text and what the audience receives. Reception includes not just what is heard or read but what is perceived. For example, the biblical book of Revelations has caused hundreds of years of fierce battles over its proper interpretation. Some readers hold that the events spoken of within the text will literally happen. Others approach it with a solely historical mindset, viewing it as furnishing a message of hope to an oppressed community during a specific time in the past. And some view it as expressing allegorical ideas about the processes of change and growth. Which reading is correct? According to hermeneutics-based biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), one must have "a living relationship" with

the text one wants to understand. Stated differently, one must engage the historical, literary, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and political background within which the text was written to fully grasp its significance.

Hermeneutics rejects both the absolute power of rational thought propagated by Descartes and the empiricism promoted by other Enlightenment thinkers. In fact, hermeneutics challenges the basic idea of things having one absolute meaning. Instead, meaning is understood as being derived not from an objective source but from the reader. In doing so, hermeneutics regards the knowledge gained from objective investigations (such as scientific experiments) as one of many possible viewpoints.

Ricoeur's Narrative Accounts of Self and Society

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) held that there was nothing that a text says by itself. Perhaps more clearly, he argued that any text is only capable of saying what we say it says. What someone does when they "understand" a literary work or the words of another person in conversation is to create meaning based on the available words. Even if the author of a text were with us to interpret every word, we still could not arrive at "the" meaning of the text, since it is doubtful that we could ever experience the literary work from the same context as the writer (Gill 2019). **Discourse** is the name Ricoeur assigned to the process of making meaning out of the texts and dialogues that have been presented to us. As opposed to the identification of things in the natural sciences, a process limited in possible meanings, discourse possesses endless interpretative possibilities.

In the later part of Ricouer's career, he switched his focus from symbols to metaphor and narrative. For Ricouer, a metaphor is not simply the exchange of one word for another. Rather, a metaphor is a way of saying that which is in some sense unsayable. There is something that radiates beyond the metaphor to the point that the substituted whole is beyond the sum of its parts. By "narrative," Ricoeur meant not stories themselves but the norms structuring how stories are told and received (Ricoeur 1991, 8, 10). In this perspective, there is no pure narrative unmediated by the reader's perspective.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, very generally, can be defined as the study of how an individual encounters the world through first-person experience. One can dive deeper to identify several areas of inquiry within phenomenology, such as the nature of experience, the use of symbols to convey experience, objective vs. subjective experience, the connection between experience and values, and the experiential importance of religious ideas. Phenomenology argues that the starting point of philosophical reflection must be the realm of experience and not the realm of abstract ideas. Instead of starting with the purely mental idea of a thing, phenomenology suggests that we reflect on how the experience of a thing affects us. For example, a phenomenological approach would encounter a chair from the perspective of the purpose it is serving at that particular moment (perhaps it's being used as a table) and not what the idea of "chair" may indicate. Phenomenology tasks us with working toward an understanding of various types of experiences involving the thing in question.

Phenomenology and Reality

Phenomenology was largely developed by French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl argued that when one begins the phenomenological investigation, one must suspend the temptation to assert that an object is in essence what it appears to be. Rather, Husserl advocated that we focus on how the thing appears to *us*. Husserl thus provided the foundation of the phenomenological project: the relinquishing of assumptions about the objects of experience.

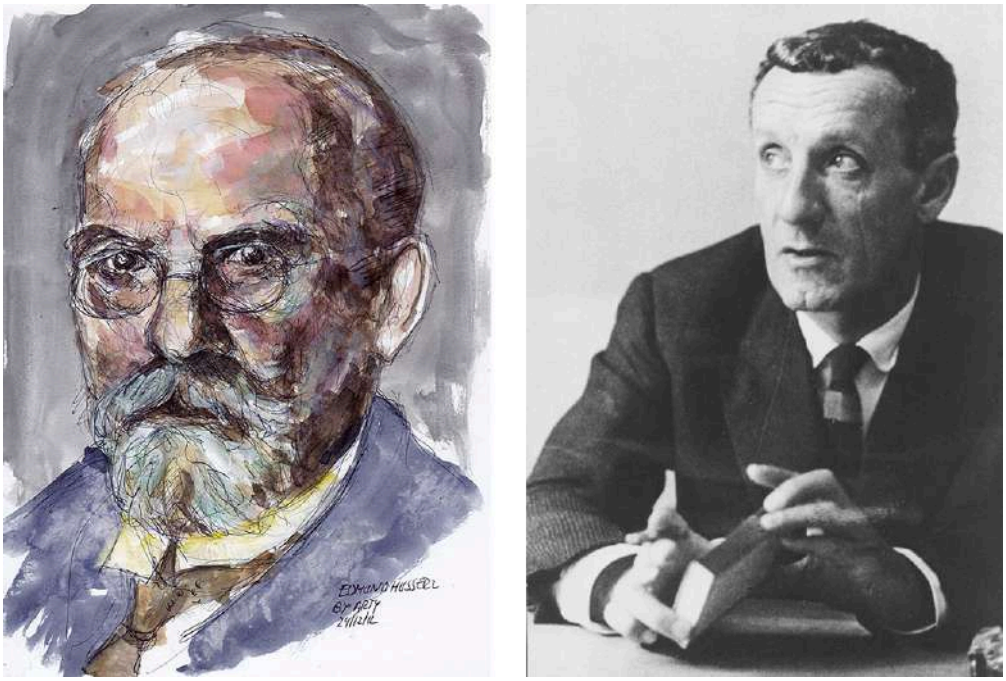

FIGURE 12.8 Edmund Husserl (left) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (right) each made important contributions to phenomenology. (left credit: "Edmund Husserl for PIFAL" by Arturo Espinoza/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; right credit: "Maurice Merleau-Ponty" by philosophical-investigations.org/Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Merleau-Ponty further rejected Descartes's distinction between the mind and the body. Merleau-Ponty argued that we cannot separate perception or consciousness from the body, as we perceive the outside world *through* our bodies. The body structures our perception. For example, Merleau-Ponty pointed to psychological studies of phenomena such as phantom-limb syndrome and hallucinations to show that the body mediates our perception of the outside world (Merleau-Ponty 2012).

Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) brand of phenomenology, focusing on the nature of human being (what he referred to as "*Dasein*"), argued that being by necessity has to occur in the world, as being cannot manifest without a world. This view challenged attempts to discover the nature of being in the realm of theory and ideas. Heidegger proposed that abstract ideas don't reveal much about being since they are not in the world. If we want to analyze the nature of being, we must not focus on individual instances of beings and our external assumptions about them, but rather examine the world, the realm in which being itself occurs. For Heidegger, what gives rise to the experience of being is more revealing than an investigation of things (Smith 2013).

For example, this view would privilege experiences from everyday life, such as driving to the store or greeting a neighbor on the sidewalk, as more informative on the nature of being than abstract philosophical reflections on transportation or neighborly interactions. As another example, consider the difference between music that aligns with standards of music theory and that which does not. In the case of the former, a song is good because it follows abstract ideas of harmony, uniform time signatures, etc. In the case of the latter, a song may break some or all the rules of music theory but still present a phenomenological reality of experiences of joy, pain, angst, or anger. In fact, Heidegger was very interested in works of art and their function to authentically imitate life as it is and not as abstract concepts say it should be.

Phenomenology and Ethics

There is a strong connection between ethics and phenomenology. The phenomenological vantage point of reflecting on experience engenders a sense of wonder. Some philosophers would assert that ethics has this sort of awe-inspiring quality; we do the "right" action because it compels us. From a phenomenological perspective, the ethical response, like all experience, cannot be reduced to biological, chemical, or logical

reasons. That which persuades us to do something we are convinced of to be "good" or "right" makes a claim that transcends either of these. In other words, there is a difference between someone not causing unnecessary harm to another merely because the law prohibits it and a person who has truly been persuaded by the phenomenological presentation of another human that they matter greatly and should not be harmed unnecessarily.

Phenomenology deeply engages the questions of ethics by investigation of the nature of immediate human experience. Allowing oneself to be authentically confronted with the suffering of other humans can cause us to want to fight for those who are suffering, even when abstract conceptual ethics might indicate that this is not our responsibility. For example, a person is not required by any abstract legal or ethical mandate to give one of their kidneys to a stranger. But when they are confronted phenomenologically with the suffering experience of the person who needs the kidney, they may be moved to donate their kidney even though they do not have to.

Existentialism

Existentialism can be defined as the philosophical focus on the human situation, including discussions of human freedom, the making of meaning, and reflections on the relevance of the human sciences and religion. Existentialism's phenomenological roots along with an emphasis on human freedom provides its foundation. In the existentialist view, the world of experience and meaning is created from the ground up, rather than moving from the abstract realm into the world. This reversal is the basis of human freedom: if humans create the overarching structures of society, then these structures lack the transcendent foundation that would qualify them for objectivity. In other words, if humans created all of the ideas many take to be pre-existent and necessary to our world, then these ideas are obviously not pre-existent and are not necessary. If these structures aren't more or less fixed in the way that the law of gravity is, then we can change them as needed. Existentialism is grounded in the belief in human freedom. The world does not cause an individual's actions, as the world and the individual are one, hence the individual is free. From human freedom comes the responsibility to engage the world and shape it as one sees fit to.

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Would you define yourself as an existentialist? Why or why not? Give a detailed answer that includes the strengths or weaknesses of existentialism and how it is relevant to the world in which you live.

12.4 The Frankfurt School

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the main goal of critical theory as developed by the Frankfurt School.
- Describe the Frankfurt School's revision of Enlightenment and Marxist ideas.
- Evaluate communicative action as a tool for liberation.
- Explain how critical theory is messianic.

What we know as critical theory emerged from the work of a group of early 20th-century Marxist German philosophers and social theorists at the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany—a group that came to be known as the **Frankfurt School**. It arose within the turbulent political environment of the socialist revolutions of the early 20th century and the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany.

Following World War I, the socialist 1918–19 November Revolution dethroned the existing monarchy in Germany, replacing it with a parliamentary system that was later known as the Weimar Republic. Felix Weil (1898–1975), who would go on to provide the financial backing for what would become the Frankfurt School, was on the front lines of the revolution, serving in the Frankfurt Workers' and Soldiers' Council. The son of a wealthy entrepreneur, Weil aligned himself with philosophers, artists, and others who had been shifted to the

left by the experiences of WWI and by other socialists. In 1923, Weil helped establish what was known as "Marxist Study Week," a gathering of left-leaning thinkers, many of whom would later be affiliated with the Institute for Social Research. Although the Institute for Social Research was founded in 1924, it was under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, who became director in 1930, that the institute began to focus on practical responses to social oppression (Horkheimer [1972] 1992).

In 1933, in response to the rise of the Nazi regime, the institute moved from Frankfurt to Geneva, Switzerland (Löwenthal 1981). From Geneva, the institute relocated to New York City, where it was made a part of Columbia University. It was while the institute was part of Columbia that the Frankfurt School gained notice and prestige, with its research methods gaining acceptance among other academics. After the end of World War II, some of the Frankfurt School intellectuals returned to West Germany while others remained in the United States. A full return of the institute to Frankfurt occurred in the 1950s (Held 1980).

The Formation of a Critical Theory

Although the Frankfurt School did not articulate one singular view, one identifying mark of its critical theory was a push toward emancipating humanity from the multitude of forces viewed as enslaving it. Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) argued that a plausible critical theory must do several things: explain the ills of society, identify the means by which change can occur, provide a rubric for critique, and articulate reasonable goals (Horkheimer [1972] 1992). The Frankfurt School not only sought to free those oppressed through cultural, economic, and political structures but also sought to free philosophical theory from the chains of oppressive ideologies. The members of the Frankfurt School critiqued Enlightenment thought, revised key Marxist concepts, and proposed new strategies pertaining to how social change can be accomplished.

FIGURE 12.9 Max Horkheimer is recognized as the founder of the Frankfurt School. (credit: "Max Horkheimer for PIFAL" by Arturo Espinosa/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Critique of the Enlightenment Concept of Knowledge

The Frankfurt School was critical of the Enlightenment view of true knowledge as conceptual, hence separate from the world. Drawing on the work of other branches of philosophy that had arisen in continental Europe

during the 19th and 20th centuries—in particular, phenomenology and hermeneutics—the school focused on how the context within which we experience a phenomenon or observe an object can change our interpretation of its meaning. The Frankfurt School rejected the Enlightenment's faith in the ability of reason to lay bare the secrets of the universe. For these thinkers, knowledge did not consist of absolute "facts" but instead an awareness of the structures of our social world that shape what we believe to be facts (Corradetti 2021).

While many philosophical systems revolved around abstract ideas made popular by the Enlightenment, the critical theory developed at the Frankfurt School attempted to engage the world as it was and not as philosophical frameworks painted it to be. The theorists of the Frankfurt School asserted that philosophical ideas are not abstract concepts. Rather, the ideas that structure the world as we live in it are the result of social, political, cultural, and religious forces and are therefore lived issues. Moreover, to the degree that these forces are oppressive, so are the accepted beliefs or knowledge generated by these forces. The purpose of true knowledge is thus to inform us on how the social world can be liberated from marginalizing and oppressive concepts (Corradetti 2021).

Horkheimer's Rejection of the Primacy of Reason

The Enlightenment had established a hierarchical relationship between philosophy—and by extension reason—and science. Kant had positioned reason itself as the key to understanding science and to making sense of how scientific discoveries fit into the overall framework of knowledge. According to the Kantian view, proper philosophical reflection was based in reason. Horkheimer rejected this prioritization of reason. He asserted that the objects of scientific reflection were shaped and determined through context (Horkheimer [1972] 1992). Horkheimer and others criticized Kant and Enlightenment philosophy as abstract, irrelevant, or in the worst case, enabling the oppression that occurred since Kant's time. Instead, the Frankfurt School offered a focus on how philosophy could be used to make a practical difference within that world.

Benjamin's Disruption of the Status Quo

A common denominator among the multiplicity of ideas within the Frankfurt School could arguably be what German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) called the "messianic." By this, he meant a disruption within the status quo that eventually responds in various ways to the oppression occurring in a society (Horkheimer [1972] 1992). Jewish and Judeo-Christian theology prophesies a messianic redeemer who will eventually bring peace to an unstable world. Benjamin adapted the term to indicate a conceptual resistance to hegemonic systems (another term for the power structures of the status quo). This resistance is not part of and does not flow from linear history but rather interrupts it. Benjamin understood systems such as capitalism to be linear pathways of history that the messianic impulse interrupts, thus bringing forth a reality that does not flow from past to present but always is. Benjamin held that such a disruption of linear time disrupts systems of power by creating a classless moment (Khatib 2013).

One example of Benjamin's idea of the messianic would be the eradication of the socially constructed hierarchy of race. Disrupting this concept would presumably result in a society devoid of the stratification that is connected to notions of race. The difficulty with this idea is that messianic moments within human societies don't seem to last. With the messianic deconstruction of one status quo (such as race) arises another construction that eventually takes the place of the former as the status quo (such as class).

FIGURE 12.10 Walter Benjamin was an early member of the Frankfurt School. He started as a literary critic but contributed profoundly original ideas to the school. (credit: "Walter Benjamin for PIFAL" by Artruro Espinoza/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The Revision of the Marxist Dialectic

The Frankfurt School amended the dialectical method to address what they saw as the shortcomings of Marx's belief that the progression of the world from capitalism to socialism was inevitable. As we can see now, a socialist future has yet to be the inevitable end point of all capitalist societies. In the hands of Frankfurt School theorists, the dialectical method became not a forecast for humanity's future, but a "down and dirty" understanding of the arbitrariness of the social situation in any given era (Horkheimer [1972] 1992). This understanding indicated that what is to come must be shaped in a real way by intentional action, as opposed to theoretical reflection. While utilizing elements of Marxist philosophies, many Frankfurt School thinkers held that social transformation was not inevitable but needed to be worked toward in conscious ways.

Jürgen Habermas's Communicative Action

The Frankfurt School sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) is the most prolific figure associated with the Frankfurt School, producing work touching on a variety of topics in social life (Bronner 2011). Habermas took Max Horkheimer's place as the chair in sociology and philosophy at the Institute for Social Research in 1964.

A prized possession of many societies is a democratic right to free speech; this right was championed by Habermas. As articulated by Habermas, the emancipation of a society is fueled by more than the mere act of people saying what they feel. Rather, people must say what they feel in a public forum in which their ideas can be challenged—in a forum through which people debate freely and thus sharpen their ideas. Habermas viewed this sort of open discussion as having the potential to shape and transform how political systems are run. Habermas calls this sort of pressure by dialogue **communicative action**.

The foundation upon which communicative action rests is the ground of language. Communicative action views language not as an unchanging system that will always produce certain conclusions but as a process of

discovery that is most effective when the ideas we hold most dear are put to intense scrutiny. Language becomes the process by which humans create and agree upon the norms that are most important to them (Bronner 2011).

Habermas viewed communicative action as taking place in the public sphere. The public sphere refers both to the spaces in which people discuss the issues of the day and the collective conceptual realm of people involved in such discussions. The public sphere is a realm outside of nation and state politics where people can be persuaded to engage in some sort of political action (Asen 1999). Habermas contrasts the public sphere with the private sphere, which is the realm where the mechanisms that perpetuate society reside, such as the organizations and enterprises responsible for the production of commodities within an economy (Habermas 1989, 30).

Modern-day examples of the public sphere might be social media platforms or coffeehouses. The hip-hop element of rap is another type of public sphere, with rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy famously stating that rap is the "CNN" of Black America. Public sphere theory asserts that the best governments are the ones that take heed of the communicative action that takes place in the public sphere (Benhabib 1992).

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Inspired by Frankfurt School thinkers, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1921–1997) made key contributions to a school of thought known as the **critical pedagogy** movement. Freire asserted that the education provided to people living in the postcolonized world wasn't adequate for emancipation. Freire argued that the type of education needed would move toward a deconstruction of the means by which knowledge production is structured and disseminated in a colonial society. Similar to Habermas's communicative action, Freire affirmed that authentic communication must occur between teacher and student for true education to take place. True education involves asking "why" questions of the most foundational aspects of the society. This challenging of assumptions prompts the student to consider whether the foundational aspects of a society are actually beneficial or are simply accepted as normal and natural since things have "always" been this way. For Freire, you are only authentically human when you live a life that practices free critical reflection, which leads to emancipation (Freire [2000] 2012). In other words, emancipated humans not only think for themselves but also question the very ways in which society says we should think.

12.5 Postmodernism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Outline the main tenets of postmodernism.
- Analyze structuralist theories in psychology and linguistics.
- Evaluate the post-structuralist response to structuralism.
- Explain concepts central to the thought of Derrida, Nietzsche, and Foucault.

Many modern scholars embraced the idea that the world operates according to a set of overarching universal structures. This view proposes that as we continue to progress in terms of technological, scientific, intellectual, and social advancements, we come closer to discovering universal truths about these structures. This view of progression toward truth gave rise to a school of thought known as structuralism, which is pervasive in many academic fields of study, as discussed below. **Postmodernism** departs from this way of thinking in rejecting these ideas and contending that there exists no one reality that we can be certain of and no absolute truth.

Structuralism and Post-structuralism

The philosophical battle over whether there is one nonnegotiable reality took shape in conversations around **structuralism** and post-structuralism. Structuralists historically looked to verbal language and mathematics to show that symbols cannot refer to just anything we want them to refer to. For example, most people would

say it is ridiculous to use the word *car* to refer to a dog. Rather, language and mathematics are universal systems of communication emerging from a universal structure of things. This claim sounds similar to Platonic idealism, in which the structures that ground our world are understood as intangible "forms."

CONNECTIONS

You can learn more about Plato's concept of forms in the chapter on metaphysics.

Post-structuralists argue that universal structures are abstract ideas that cannot be proven to exist. They contend that structuralists are mistaken in their understanding of the internal workings of language—or any system—as unmediated (or not influenced by the outside world). This mistake, they argue, had misled people into believing in a universal structure of things. **Post-structuralism** suggests that the meaning of things is in perpetual authorship, or is always being created and recreated. Post-structuralists dispute the claim that any universal system of relations exists. Rather, they argue that anything presented as a universal system is in fact the product of human imaginations and almost certainly reinforced by the power dynamics of a society.

One clear example of the post-structuralist critique of structuralism can be found in the debate over psychoanalysis.

Freud's Structuralism in Psychology

The theory of **psychoanalysis** is based on the idea that all humans have suppressed elements of their unconscious minds and that these elements will liberate them if they are confronted. This idea was proposed and developed by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). For Freud, psychoanalysis was not only a theory but also a method, which he used to free his patients from challenges such as depression and anxiety. In Freud's early thinking, the "unconscious" was defined as the realm in which feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that exist outside of consciousness reside. These elements of the unconscious were understood to set the stage for conscious experience and influence the human automatically (Westen 1999). Freud later abandoned the use of the word *unconscious* (Carlson et al. 2010, 453), shifting instead to three separate terms: *id*, referring to human instincts; *superego*, indicating the enforcer of societal conventions such as cultural norms and ethics (Schacter, Gilbert, and Wegner 2011, 481); and *ego*, describing the conscious part of human thought. With these three terms, Freud proposed a universal structure of the mind.

Post-structuralist and Feminist Critiques of Psychoanalysis

Post-structuralists point out that Freud's ideas about psychoanalysis and universal structures of the mind cannot be proven. The subconscious foundations on which psychoanalysis is grounded simply cannot be observed. Some have argued that there is no substantive difference between the claims of psychoanalysts and those of shamans or other practitioners of methods of healing not grounded in empirical methods (Torrey 1986). French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and French psychoanalyst Felix Guattari (1930–1992) took an even harsher approach, presenting psychoanalysis as a means of reinforcing oppressive state control.

Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray (b. 1930) and others have criticized Freud's ideas from a feminist perspective, accusing psychoanalysts of excluding women from their theories. In this view, psychoanalysis is based on a patriarchal understanding. Those taking this view point out that Freud made a number of patriarchal claims, including that sexuality and subjectivity are inseparably connected, and that he viewed women as problematic throughout his life (Zakin 2011). Yet many psychoanalytic feminists express a critical appreciation for Freud, utilizing what they find valuable in his theories and ignoring other aspects.

Ferdinand de Saussure and the Structure of Linguistics

Along with US pragmatist C. S. Pierce (1839–1914), Swiss philosopher, linguist, and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was responsible for creating a system of linguistic analysis known as **semiotics**. Semiotics is an analysis of how meaning is created through symbols, both linguistic and nonlinguistic. One of

the foundational tenets of Saussure's linguistic theory is the idea that language has both an abstract (*langue*) component and an experiential (*parole*) component, what we hear or see when it is used every day. A word alludes to an intangible essence represented by a sound or collection of visible symbols (Fendler 2010). This audible or visual expression has a distinct life from that which it represents. Language is a system that functions according to certain rules, which allow for some things but not others. For example, we can't say a person is walking and standing still at the same time (Nöth 1990). As an audible or visual expression, however, language is also a product of society. For example, the word *dope*, which conventionally meant narcotics, has also come to signify something that is well-done. Saussure held that there were structural laws that define how linguistic signification operated; the semiotics of Saussure and Pierce were the means of discovering these laws. Semiotics became a cornerstone of structuralism.

Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn

Structuralism was accompanied by what is known in philosophy as the **linguistic turn**. The term *linguistic turn* comes from Austrian philosopher Gustav Bergmann (1906–1987). It refers to philosophical movements in the Anglophone world starting in the early 20th century that privileged verifiable statements over statements that could not be verified. Since the statement "I can see clearly now" could be verified by a vision test, it would have more value than the statement "God exists," which is not verifiable (Rorty 1991, 50).

The view that language has internal continuity was championed by the early work of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) but rejected in his later work. In later works, such as *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein concludes that language is verifiable only within its particular context. For example, the claim "God exists" may not be verifiable for an adherent of analytic philosophy (a term for the branch of philosophy concerned with statements that can be proved to be logically possible through analysis). However, the claim might be verifiable for a person who has had an experience with a particular deity or deities, as their very experience is the proof.

Key Post-structuralist Ideas about Self and Text

Associated with the thought of French philosophers Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), and Roland Barthes (1915–1980) and US philosophers Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Judith Butler (b. 1956), among others, post-structuralism proposes new ideas about our understanding of the self and our interpretations of texts. Post-structuralism proposes that there is no such thing as a preexistent human "self" outside of its construction by society; what we call the "self" is a confluence of geographical region of birth, upbringing, social pressure, political issues, and other situational circumstances. For the post-structuralist, however, there is an experiencing entity perpetually in process, and that experiencing entity cannot be constricted to the boundaries of what we think of as the "self." Similarly emphasizing context, post-structuralists argue that the meaning intended by the author of a text is secondary to the meaning that the audience derives from their encounter with the text and that a variety of interpretations of a text are needed, even if the interpretations that are generated are conflicting.

Deconstruction

Closely related to post-structuralism is **deconstruction**. Accredited to Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), deconstruction aims to analyze a text to discover that which made it what it was. Derrida rejected the structuralist approach to textual analysis. In the structuralist framework, there was a focus on how a text fits into a larger framework of linguistic meaning and signifying (Barry 2002, 40). Derrida, among others, held that these structures were as arbitrary as other facets of language, such as the arbitrary decision to use "tree" to refer to a large plant with a bark, trunk, and leaves when we could have called it a "cell phone" and have procured the same symbolic use (Thiselton 2009). Derrida asserted that texts do not have a definitive meaning but rather that there are several possible and plausible interpretations. His argument was based on the assertion that interpretation could not occur in isolation. While Derrida did not assert that all meanings were acceptable, he did question why certain interpretations were held as more correct than others

(Thiselton 2009).

FIGURE 12.11 This painting of Jacques Derrida on a building in France speaks to his continued importance to contemporary thinkers. (credit: "Jacques Derrida, Painted Portrait _DDC3327" by thierry ehrmann/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Watch "Philosophy: Jacques Derrida (https://openstax.org/r/JacquesDerrida)" from the series *The School of Life*.

Deconstruction is defined in the video (at the 2:54 mark) as "the dismantling [of] our excessive loyalty to any idea and learning to see the aspects of the truth that might be buried in its opposite." At the 3:47 mark, the narrator notes that one of the most important ideas forwarded by Derrida was "once we begin to examine it closely, almost all of our thinking is riddled with a false, that is, unjustified and unhelpful, privileging of one thing over another." The narrator offers several examples: speech over writing, reason over passion, men over women, etc. According to Derrida, this unquestioned privileging prevents us from seeing the supposedly lesser part of the equation.

Questions:

- Can you deconstruct an idea that, to this point, you have simply accepted as correct?
- What are the merits of what Derrida called the opposing or underprivileged counterparts of this idea?
- Why do you think the underprivileged meanings have been overlooked?

Deconstruction is Auto-deconstruction

Derrida observed that social relations, which have come about through centuries of human evolution, assign meanings to things and our experience of things (Derrida 1997). Deconstruction hinged on what Derrida called "différance," the separation between the ways a thing can be conceptualized and the ways a thing can be experienced. For example, the experience that we name the "human" is not fully containable through our attempts to define the concept. However, in our reference to the many competing notions of "human," we have (perhaps unknowingly) artificially demarcated the experience, creating the appearance of the "human" as something with an essential identity.

To deconstruct a concept is to strip meaning from its supporting layers in order to make clear its complexity and instability. Derrida's idea of différance is an integral part of "auto-deconstruction," or the process by which deconstruction happens automatically (without intentional philosophical reflection). Auto-deconstruction is always present, but the human is not always attuned to see how things we see as definitive are deconstructing right before us. Auto-deconstruction could be thought of in terms of something as simple as the elements that constitute a chair. If we think about how the chair is made up, we might begin to lose sight of the idea of "chair"

and begin to see it in terms of color, material, height, length, width, contrast to other objects in the room in which it resides, etc. Whether or not we focus on the confluence of things that make up the event of the chair, this tension of différance is what provides the perception of "chair" (Derrida 1997).

Ethics in Post-structuralism

Nietzsche's Genealogy

When German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) famously declared that "God is dead," he rejected God as a basis for morality and asserted that there is no longer (and never was) any ground for morality other than the human. The removal of the notion of sure foundations for ethical behavior and human meaning can stir a sense of anxiety, a fear of living without a place of certainty (Warnock 1978). This fear and anxiety inform the existential notion of the "absurd," which is simply another way of stating that the only meaning the world has is the meaning that we give it (Crowell 2003). In this motion away from objective assertions of truth, one comes to what Nietzsche calls "the abyss," or the world without the absolute logical structures and norms that provide meaning. The abyss is the world where nothing has universal meaning; instead, everything that was once previously determined and agreed upon is subject to individual human interpretation. Without the structures of fixed ethical mandates, the world can seem a perpetual abyss of meaninglessness.

Although Nietzsche lived prior to Derrida, he engaged in a type of deconstruction that he referred to as genealogy. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche traces the meaning of present morals to their historical origins. For example, Nietzsche argued that the concepts we refer to as "good" and "evil" were formed in history through the linguistic transformation of the terms "nobility" and "underclass" (Nietzsche 2007, 147–148). Nietzsche held that the upper classes at one time were thought to be "noble," having characteristics that the lower classes were envious or and would want to emulate. Therefore, "noble" was considered not an ethical "good" but a practical "good." A person simply had a better life if they were part of the ruling class. Over time, the concept of "noble" took on a more ideal meaning, and the practical characteristics (e.g., reputation, access to resources, influence, etc.) became abstract virtues. Because the lower classes were envious of the upper classes, they found a theoretical framework to subvert the power of the nobility: Judeo-Christian philosophy. In Judeo-Christian philosophy, the "good" is no longer just a synonym for the nobility but a spiritual virtue and is represented by powerlessness. "Evil" is represented by strength and is a spiritual vice. Nietzsche views this reversal as one of the most tragic and dangerous tricks to happen to the human species. In his view, this system of created morality allows the weak to stifle the power of the strong and slow the progress of humanity.

FIGURE 12.12 This public statue of Friedrich Nietzsche in Naumburg, Germany expresses both his approach to life

and contemporary engagement with his ideas. (credit: "Friedrich Nietzsche Statue - Naumberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany" by Glen Bowman/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Foucault on Power and Knowledge

For French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), "power" at the base level is the impetus that urges one to commit any action (Lynch 2011, 19). Foucault claimed that power has been misunderstood; it has traditionally been understood as residing in a person or group, but it really is a network that exists everywhere. Because power is inescapable, everyone participates in it, with some winning and others losing.

Foucault contended that power affects the production of knowledge. He argued that Nietzsche's process of genealogy exposed the shameful origins of practices and ideas that some societies have come to hold as "natural" and "metaphysically structural," such as the inferiority of woman or the justification of slavery. For Foucault, these and other systems aren't just the way things are but are the way things have been developed to be by the powerful, for their own benefit. The disruptions promoted by critical theory are viewed as insurrections against accepted histories—disruptions that largely deal with a reimagining of how we know what we know—and understood as a weapon against oppression.

Political Movements Informed by Critical Theory

Although critical theory can seem highly abstract, it has inspired and informed concrete political movements in the 20th and 21st centuries. This section examines two of these, critical race theory and radical democracy.

Critical Race Theory

One of the most controversial applications of critical theory concerns its study of race. **Critical race theory** approaches the concept of race as a social construct and examines how race has been defined by the power structure. Within this understanding, "Whiteness" is viewed as an invented concept that institutionalizes racism and needs to be dismantled. Critical race theorists trace the idea of "Whiteness" to the late 15th century, when it began to be used to justify the dehumanization and restructuring of civilizations in the Americas by Britain, Spain, France, Germany, and Belgium. As these colonizing nations established new societies on these continents, racism was built into their institutions. Thus, for example, critical race theorists argue that racism not as an anomaly but a characteristic of the American legal system. Ian Haney López's *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* argued that racial norms in the United States are background assumptions that are legally supported and that impact the success of those socially defined by them. Critical race theory views the institutions of our society as replicating racial inequality.

The idea of institutionalized racism is not unique to critical race theory. Empirical studies, such as those carried out by W. E. B. Du Bois, have outlined the structure of institutionalized racism within communities. Critical race theories are unique in that they do not see policies that arise from these empirical studies as a solution because these policies, they argue, arise within a power structure that determines what we accept as knowledge. Instead, critical race theorists, like other branches of critical theory, turn to the philosopher, the teacher, or the student to relinquish their role as neutral observers and challenge the power structure and social institutions through dialog. Critics of this approach—and other critical theory approaches to education—worry that these programs seek to indoctrinate students in a manner that bears too close a resemblance to Maoist "self-criticism" campaigns.

Radical Democracy

"Radical democracy" can be defined as a mode of thought that allows for political difference to remain in tension and challenges both liberal and conservative ideas about government and society. According to radical democracy, the expectation of uniform belief among a society or portion of a society is opposed to the expressed and implied tenets of democracy (Kahn and Kellner 2007). If one wants freedom and equality, then disparate opinions must be allowed in the marketplace of ideas.

One strand of radical democracy is associated with Habermas's notion of deliberation as found in

communicative action. Habermas argued for deliberation, not the normalizing of ideas through peer pressure and governmental influence, as a way in which ideological conflicts can be solved. Though Habermas admitted that different contexts will quite naturally disagree over important matters, the process of deliberation was viewed as making fruitful dialogue between those with opposing viewpoints possible (Olson [2011] 2014). Another type of radical democracy drew heavily on Marxist thought, asserting that radical democracy should not be based on the rational conclusions of individuals but grounded in the needs of the community.

Summary

12.1 Enlightenment Social Theory

Enlightenment thinkers proposed that human reason, coupled with empirical study of the physical world, would lead to progress—the advancement of science and the improvement of the human condition. Kant proposed that reason alone could guide individuals to identify ethical codes. The application of reason, in this way, would usher the human race toward a moral society in which each individual could enjoy the greatest freedom. However, this work of reasoning out the moral code could not be carried out by individuals but societies over a period of generations. Comte proposed the establishment of a science of society, which he called sociology. He believed that society, like an organism in nature, could be studied empirically. In this way, social problems could be addressed, and the human race could progress.

12.2 The Marxist Solution

Unlike Enlightenment social theorists, Marxist theorists did not try to solve social problems that arose from industrialization and urbanization. Rather, they worked toward removing the economic system that they felt caused these problems, capitalism. Marx proposed an alternative to the Hegelian dialectic, called dialectical materialism. He looked to the contradictions within material, real-world phenomena as the driving force of change. Marx regarded alienation and the clash of economic interests between the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and the proletariat (workers) as the contradiction that would bring down capitalism and give rise to a classless society.

12.3 Continental Philosophy's Challenge to Enlightenment Theories

In the section dedicated to hermeneutics, or the exploration of meaning as it flows from interpreting written texts, critical theory's stressing of context was continued. The section examined the notion of historicity or the claim that meaning is not somehow prior to reading a text (perhaps in the mind of the writer) but that meaning is somehow related to and generated from both the introduction of a text and the maintenance of that same text. Meaning may indeed by plural. Ricoeur went so far as to assert that the text does not say anything in and of itself. The text articulates what we as the interpreter generate. Thus, interpretation results in endless possibilities.

12.4 The Frankfurt School

While critical theory encompasses multiple perspectives, the origin of the approach is traced to Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923. There were several commonalities among Frankfurt School thinkers. Most adopted tenets from Karl Marx's philosophy. Critical theorists sought to build upon Marx's call to free humanity from oppressive economic and cultural forces. As noted by Max Horkheimer, a plausible critical theory must explain the ills of society, identify the means by which change can occur, and give a rubric for critique and articulate reasonable goals.

Equally as important to critical theory was the liberating of philosophy itself from what was perceived as the limiting boundaries as set by the key thinkers during the Enlightenment. Critical theory dethroned the prioritization of reason and replaced it with a reciprocal acknowledgment of the importance of context and reason. Hegel's core concept of dialectical movement was also revised from an inevitable forecasting of predetermined events to a tool used to gain insight into specific historical contexts. Habermas's notion of communicative action illustrates how critical theory has stressed context over objective reasoning when searching for meaning.

12.5 Postmodernism

Within the postmodernism perspective, there is no absolute truth, and there are multiple right ways of belief. The postmodern view challenges the intellectual faith born in modernity that humanity might someday come closer to discovering universal truths.

The tension between structuralism and post-structuralism parallels the tension between modernity and postmodernity. Ferdinand de Saussure advanced a theory in which meaning was embedded within a linguistic structure but the meaning itself is expressed through multiple mechanisms. With the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy, a challenge to the existence of universal systems (structures) was launched. As noted, three post-structuralist themes were: 1) the self itself is not static but a confluence of various forces, 2) the meaning of the author was secondary to the meaning derived from the audience, and 3) interpretations, even if conflicting, were necessarily plural. Derrida's notion of deconstruction, of the need to consider the meaning accepted and the meaning obscured, followed intellectually from post-structuralism. If we deconstruct meaning, we work toward understanding the greater reasons surrounding why some interpretations were privileged and others rejected.

A "genealogy" is the historical map that traces the past origins of present meanings. Nietzsche and his radical historicism used genealogies to draw meanings in a world thought of a void of objective meanings. Michel Foucault argued that tracing genealogies can help us expose shameful origins of practices and ideologies that foster oppression. Foucault sought to expose when power was used to oppress and when it was used to harm. Knowledge, argued Foucault, once freed from oppressive conventions, ought to be used to develop the self.

Key Terms

Communicative action a term coined by Jürgen Habermas to refer to open discussion within a public forum, with the potential to change political systems and societies.

Critical pedagogy the application of the insights of critical theory to pedagogy; the belief that all education should be in service of disrupting oppressive systems of power in all their forms.

Critical race theory approaches the concept of race as a social construct and examines how race has been defined by the power structure.

Critical theory any method of assessing and challenging the power structures of societies; also refers to the various theoretical approaches to assessing and challenging power structures associated with the Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt School).

Deconstruction a method of connecting the meaning of a text to the social forces at play in its creation; a strategy for analyzing the ways in which humans create objects and essential ideas where they don't naturally exist.

Dialectic method Hegel's understanding of history as a movement created by the interaction between a thesis (an original state) and a force countering that original state (antithesis), resulting in a new and higher state (synthesis).

Dialectical materialism a revision of Hegel's dialectic method proposed by Karl Marx, which identities the contradictions within material, real-world phenomena as the driving force of historical change.

Discourse the process of making meaning out of texts and dialogues.

Frankfurt School another name for the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt; also refers to an amalgam of thinkers affiliated with the Institute for Social Research.

Hermeneutics the study and theory of interpretation of texts, including not only a linguistic analysis but also a background investigation into how the context that gives birth to a text affects how it can and should be interpreted.

Historicity the process of verification of the events said to be historical.

Linguistic turn a term used to signify a movement beginning in the early 20th century focusing on the philosophical value of verifiable, logically consistent statements as providing objective information about the universe; associated with analytic philosophy.

Phenomenology the first-person study of how the "phenomena" of the world impact the consciousness, in contrast and response to philosophical schools of thought that start philosophical reflection with the realm of ideas.

Positivism the third stage for the development of societies proposed by August Comte, in which people reject religion and focus only on things that can be proven.

Post-structuralism views supporting the idea that the world cannot be interpreted through preexisting structures because there are no such existing structures; the idea that the universe is a confluence of forces that are given different meanings by human and nonhuman agents over time.

Postmodernism the philosophical perspective that there is no absolute truth to the universe, leaving no grand objective narratives to categorize and structure the world (as in modernism) but everything to individual interpretation; the idea that truth is perspective.

Psychoanalysis the attempt to cure mental illnesses by uncovering the unconscious elements that are said to be the foundation of human behavior.

Self-criticism term for a method of public self-analysis proposed by Mao Tse-Tung as a means to achieve personal and societal improvement.

Semiotics an analysis of how meaning is created through symbols, both linguistic and nonlinguistic.

Structuralism the belief that the universe has a certain objective structure to it and that language indicates this structure; the belief that in order to understand individual parts of the universe, one must understand their place in the overarching structure of things.

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Review Questions

12.1 Enlightenment Social Theory

1. How did Enlightenment thinkers propose that societies would accumulate knowledge?
2. What role did reason play in Kant's belief in ethical progress?

12.2 The Marxist Solution

3. How did Marx feel that the social problems of industrialization and urbanization should be addressed?

12.3 Continental Philosophy's Challenge to Enlightenment Theories

4. What is hermeneutics?
5. What is meant by historicity?
6. What did philosopher Paul Ricoeur mean by "discourse?"?

12.4 The Frankfurt School

7. According to Max Horkheimer, what are the three distinguishing marks of a plausible critical theory?
8. In what way did critical theory reject Kant?
9. How did Habermas define communicative action?

12.5 Postmodernism

10. How does postmodernity differ from modernity?
11. Was Ferdinand de Saussure a structuralist or a post-structuralist? Why did you answer as you did?

12. What did Jacques Derrida mean by “deconstruction”?

13. On what grounds has psychoanalysis been criticized?

14. What is meant by the term *genealogy* as used by Foucault?

15. What was the importance of genealogy for Foucault?

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