

# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

*Dear Friends, Gary here to write a short intro to the philosophy packet. Originally, we planned for Kylie to create the packet, but she changed jobs and found herself unable to create the time and space needed to create the packet. Lucky us, Ethan a student at Cornell heard about our predicament and stepped forward and offered to write something. He is so passionate about philosophy, and he has at least two more years at the university.*

*My hope is that he will receive feedback from all of you on this packet which will help guide him on the next packet as we all explore the heady world of philosophy. Trying to make sense of this world, and especially trying to understand spiritual and emotional well being while faced with all the challenges of life has left man scratching his head and pondering. Ethan leads us through a historical tour of the development of some of this philosophical thought.*

*He writes in a clear and understandable format, but the subject is dense and nuanced so please consider reading it more than one time. Take your time and see if you can understand the concepts he described. Feel free to send any questions to Attn Ethan. As you can see there are questions for you to consider throughout the packet and please consider writing down answers and sharing them with us.. If you send us answers to at least 9 of the 27 questions Ethan poses, you will receive the compilation packet of the most interesting responses, that I am asking Ethan to create this fall after we have received all your responses. Deadline for responding is Sept 1. Of course you can answer as many of the questions as you like. No need to stop at 9.*

*Please let us know what you think of this packet and keep sending your suggestions for future distance learning packets.*

*We are all one-Gary*

## Foreword

Dear fellow students of philosophy,

The Greek word *philosophia*, from which our term “philosophy” is derived, translates to “love of wisdom.” This name for our field has always bothered me a little bit. Do philosophers really love wisdom more than anyone else? I’m not so sure about that. Everyone loves wisdom. I think philosophers have more than just a passion for wisdom. I think philosophers have an obsession with it.

That’s certainly what it is for me: an obsession. I first encountered philosophy as a teenager, at a time when I felt a particular craving for deeper insight and stronger guiding principles. Studying philosophy helped me to find what I was looking for, but the more I studied, the more insatiable my craving became. Every answer I found raised so many more questions, and I needed those questions answered. Now I am pursuing a college major in philosophy, not because it is practical or lucrative, but because I feel an all-consuming need to do it. I hope that in reading some of what I have learned in my studies of this field, you may be able to find some of the answers you’ve been craving.

The first two excellent issues of this series, written by my predecessor Kylie, were organized into subsections about certain philosophical topics. I chose to organize this third issue a little bit differently. This pamphlet is divided into several subsections (organized mostly chronologically) in which I discuss some of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy and explain some of their most influential ideas. As in the previous issues, each section will be followed by a few discussion questions which I encourage you to consider. Please remember

although such a class would go into much more detail than I am able to here.

that the philosophers you will read about in this pamphlet are just like you: curious people looking for answers. That means that you have just as much a right to tackle philosophical questions as they do.

Happy searching!  
Ethan

## Introduction

The first step towards becoming a great philosopher is becoming a great historian of philosophy. Philosophy is an unfinished project, and all philosophers build on the theories and ideas of those who came before them. If every philosopher had to start the project of Philosophy from scratch, we would never get anywhere. Instead, the history of philosophy has created a dialogue consisting of countless people, living and dead, who have built upon, criticized, and combined each other's work. With every voice added to this dialogue, we all get closer to the truth.

The following is a brief outline of the history of Western philosophy, including some of this philosophical tradition's most important figures and some of their most influential ideas. It must be remembered that the Western philosophical tradition is but one of many dialogues. I have chosen to write about Western philosophy here mostly because it is the tradition that I am most familiar with, since Western philosophy is the subject most commonly taught in American philosophy classrooms. This does not mean that Western philosophy is the best philosophy, just that it is (possibly) the most easily accessible philosophy in the United States.

The history of Western philosophy is so vast that it would be impossible to fully represent it in one short pamphlet. Entire books have been written on this subject, and even they do not contain the totality of this 2,500-year-long dialogue. What is possible, though, is to introduce some of the key philosophers and theories. This is the sort of material that you might come across in an introductory philosophy class,

Western philosophy can be generally divided into three eras: premodern philosophy, modern philosophy, and postmodern philosophy. Premodern philosophy in the Western tradition is usually said to have begun in Ancient Greece in about the year 500 BC. Modernist philosophy began around the year 1600 AD in France as a part of the broader cultural movements called the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The postmodernist movement began around the 1950's or so, shortly following World War II.

These three eras of philosophy are mainly different in where they begin in their searches for truth. Premodern philosophy generally begins with assumptions about *ontology* (the field that studies what sorts of things exist, especially things that exist beyond what we can see and touch). Modernist philosophy generally begins with assumptions about *epistemology* (the field that studies what we can know and how we can know it). Postmodernist philosophy generally begins with *ethics* (the field that studies what sorts of things are right and wrong). These three approaches can be quite different, but it is my hope that you will find all of them valuable in their own ways.

## Premodern Philosophy

### *The Milesians*

The Western philosophical tradition began in the Ancient Greek town of Miletus in the 6th Century BC, over 2,500 years ago. The first philosopher of this tradition was *Thales of Miletus* (c. 624/623 – c. 548/545 BC). As with most premodern philosophy, Thales's ideas begin with an assumption about ontology: be believed that all things were made of water. He saw that water surrounded his land and fell from the sky. If he poked a hole in a tree, he saw that sticky water would come out, and if he poked a hole in an animal, red water would come out.

No matter where he looked, Thales saw water, so he believed that water was the single matter that

composed everything. Everything was just water in different shapes. Thales had no real evidence for this claim because the premodern philosophers didn't really care about evidence. For these premodernists, everything started with ontological assumptions, so they were mostly happy to make guesses about the nature of reality and call their guesses the truth. The interesting part is how these philosophers built off their guesses to create coherent ideologies.

Many early philosophers agreed with Thales that everything was made of the same substance, although they did not all agree that this substance was water. One such philosopher was *Democritus of Abdera* (c. 460 – c. 370 BC), who argued that everything was actually made of little particles called atoms, which could not be divided. According to Democritus, the reason why different materials look and feel different is because the atoms that compose them form together into different shapes. It should be noted that the things we call “atoms” today are not exactly what Democritus theorized about: real atoms are not identical (different substances have different atoms) and they can be divided into smaller pieces (like protons, neutrons, electrons, and quarks). Still, Democritus's atomic theory gave scientists the idea to look for real atoms.

Another philosopher who agreed that everything was made of the same substance was *Heraclitus of Ephesus* (c. 535 – c. 475 BC), who believed that everything was made of fire. Since fire is always moving and changing, Heraclitus believed that all things are altogether chaotic and disordered. Because he believed the universe to be fundamentally chaotic, Heraclitus argued that it does not follow any rules, so we cannot use pure reason to learn the truth about it. Therefore, Heraclitus argued that the best way to learn the truth about the universe was through our sensory experience. The philosophers who followed this chaotic ideology were called the *Milesians*.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. Do you think it is possible that everything could be made from the same substance? If so, what sort of substance might that be?

2. Even though Democritus was wrong about what atoms are exactly, do you think his atomic theory was still valuable? Were we able to learn anything from Democritus's ideas about atoms?
3. Do you think we should take these philosophical ideas seriously even though the philosophers provided no evidence to support them? Or do you think philosophers need evidence before they make claims about the nature of the universe?

### ***The Eleatics***

Not all of the early Greek philosophers agreed with the Milesians that everything is chaotic and always changing. Some philosophers believed that the universe generally stays the same. In fact, the philosopher *Parmenides of Elea* (c. 515 – c. 450 BC) believed that the universe never changes, and that change itself is impossible, a notion that started the chain of argumentation which formed the basis of a new philosophical school.

Parmenides's philosophy is rooted in the idea that nothing can come into existence from nonexistence. That is to say that it is impossible for something to be created from nothing. According to Parmenides, this means that everything that is always was and always will be, and nothing can ever actually be created or destroyed. Importantly, Parmenides thought that this applies to time as well. A period in time, like the past, present, or future, cannot be created or destroyed, which means that the past cannot be destroyed to create the present, and the present cannot be destroyed to create the future. This means that there really is no such thing as moving time. Since the idea of change requires that there be moving time (because things can only change over time), Parmenides believed that change was impossible.

One of Parmenides's greatest students was *Zeno of Elea* (c. 495 – c. 430 BC), who agreed with Parmenides that change is impossible. Zeno is mostly remembered for creating a number of logical paradoxes, in which he used logic to show that our

intuitive beliefs about change and time are false. The most famous of these arguments are the Achilles Paradox and the Arrow Paradox, in which Zeno attempts to show that the way in which we naturally comprehend motion is flawed.

The Achilles Paradox is as follows: Achilles was a warrior from Greek mythology who was famous for his speed. Let's imagine that Achilles is running a footrace against a turtle. The turtle moves very slowly, but it is given a head start. After Achilles starts running, he must catch up with the turtle, who is ahead of him. In order to catch up with the turtle, Achilles must first run half the distance between himself and the turtle. After he has done this, the turtle has moved slightly further ahead, and Achilles must again run half the distance between himself and the turtle. Now the turtle again has moved slightly further ahead, and so on and so forth. Every time Achilles runs half the distance between himself and the turtle, the turtle has moved forward and increased the distance. Logically then, Achilles should never be able to reach the turtle. And yet, we would observe that if Achilles is faster than the turtle, he will eventually catch up with it. These two beliefs are incompatible.

The Arrow Paradox is as follows: Imagine an arrow that has been shot from a bow. The arrow is flying through the air. Then look at any moment in time while the arrow is flying. For instance, imagine that you took a photograph of the arrow while it was in the air. At any given moment in time, the arrow will not be moving. At every instant, the arrow is simply suspended in the air. Since the arrow will not be moving when any moment is taken on its own, and since time is simply a collection of moments, we should never see the arrow move. And yet, we would observe that if we shoot an arrow from a bow, the arrow will move through the air. These two beliefs are incompatible.

According to Zeno, these paradoxes show that our sensory experience is unreliable. We experience Achilles overtaking the turtle and we experience the arrow flying through the air, but logic tells us that neither of these things should be possible. Thus, Zeno argues that we cannot trust our senses to inform us of

the truth. Everything that we see, hear, or feel might not really exist. What we can trust, according to Zeno, is our ability to reason logically. Logic, says Zeno, is the only path to truth.

Early Greek philosophers like Parmenides and Zeno who emphasized continuity over change and reason instead of experience are known as the *Eleatics*. They and the Milesians formed the two main philosophical schools of thought prior to Socrates (who we will be discussing next). The Milesians and the Eleatics' competing views on how to find truth, through sensory experience or through logical reasoning, forms the beginning of one of the greatest debates in all of Western philosophy, which remains unresolved to this day. Although not many people today believe much of what the Milesians and Eleatics taught, their ideas have had a significant influence on the development of the philosophies that followed theirs.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you think that things tend to change, or do you think they tend to stay the same? Or could the truth be some combination of the two?
2. Do you think Zeno's paradoxes show that motion as we understand it is impossible, or do you think Zeno's reasoning is flawed? If there are errors in Zeno's reasoning, what do you think they might be?
3. Do you think we should trust our senses even when what we see does not make logical sense? Or our rational judgment even when it contradicts what we see?

### **The Socratics**

The philosophers from the Milesian and Eleatic schools whom we have discussed previously were all called Presocratics because they came before the philosopher *Socrates of Athens* (c. 470–399 BC). It is with Socrates that the Western philosophical tradition truly comes into its own. Ironically, however, very little is known about what Socrates himself actually taught because he never wrote anything down. Socrates's teachings are preserved by two of his students, Plato and

Xenophon, and neither of their accounts are particularly reliable (Plato is unreliable because his stories about Socrates are mostly fiction, and Xenophon is unreliable because he didn't really understand what Socrates taught).

What we can surmise about Socrates is that he added a new dimension to the Western tradition of philosophical inquiry. While the Presocratics were mostly interested in the universe's physical makeup (think of Democritus speculating about atoms or Zeno studying motion), Socrates was more interested in some of the more abstract properties of reality, like goodness and justice. Socrates was also a gifted teacher, having pioneered an educational strategy called the "Socratic method," in which the teacher asks for a student's opinion on a philosophical matter, and then questions the student to reveal logical inconsistencies so as to eventually reach the truth. Socrates's methods and ideas were very controversial, so much so that the Athenian government eventually executed him for espousing his unorthodox beliefs.

Socrates's legacy was carried on by his greatest student, *Plato of Athens* (428/427–348/347 BC), who is perhaps the most influential figure in all of Western philosophy. In fact, it has been said that the entire Western philosophical tradition can be best understood as a series of footnotes to Plato. The primary means by which Plato presented his ideas were in "Socratic dialogues," in which Plato would write about fictional conversations between Socrates and various students and adversaries, in which Socrates would use the Socratic method to question other people's beliefs and try to find the truth. For this reason, it is difficult to know where Socrates's philosophy ends and Plato's begins. It is generally understood that Plato's Socratic dialogues are works of fiction that he used to present his own philosophical beliefs, but it is not clear exactly how much of what the Socrates character says in these dialogues matches with what the real Socrates taught.

The key philosophical idea found within Plato's Socratic dialogues is the concept that Plato called Forms. According to Plato, the physical world

as we see it is composed of imperfect shadows of the metaphysical world (meaning the world that exists beyond what is physical). Plato believed that all types of things that exist within the physical world have a perfect and unchanging Form that exists only in the metaphysical world. Take a chair for example. There are many different types of chairs (armchairs, office chairs, folding chairs, etc.), but all of these chairs share certain characteristics that make them a chair. Plato argued that any of these chairs is an imperfect and changeable reflection of the one perfect Form of a chair that exists in the metaphysical World of Forms. While we can perceive physical chairs with our senses, we can only perceive the Form of a chair through our rational thought. Plato's Theory of Forms represents something of a middle ground between the Milesian and the Eleatic philosophies. While Plato thought that the physical world was always changing and that the truth about it could be learned through sensory experience (like the Milesians believed), he also thought that the metaphysical World of Forms was unchanging and could only be understood through rationality (like the Eleatics believed).

Plato explained his Theory of Forms with a famous metaphor called the Allegory of the Cave: Imagine a group of people who have lived their entire lives imprisoned inside a cave, never having seen the outside world. This cave is completely dark, except for an opening at the top where sunlight shines through. Things outside of the cave cast shadows into the cave through this opening, but these shadows are the only things the people in the cave have ever seen. Without ever having seen the world outside the cave, these people would believe that these shadows are the only things that exist, and that there is nothing casting them. According to Plato, we are like the people in the cave because we experience only the physical world and are oblivious to the World of Forms, which is like the world outside the cave. The World of Forms is more real than the physical world, and yet we ignorantly believe that reality is only physical. Plato argued that the job of philosophy is to help us perceive the World of Forms, which is to metaphorically free us from the cave.

Plato applied the Theory of Forms to the questions about the nature of Goodness and Justice posed by Socrates. According to Plato, when we ask questions about what is good or just, we are actually asking about a Form called the Good. The main work in which Plato discusses these issues is a Socratic dialogue called *Republic*. In this dialogue, Plato argues that a moral person, one who is best able to comprehend the Good, is someone with a well-organized soul. According to Plato, the soul is divided into three parts: the appetitive part (which makes us feel physical pleasure and pain), the emotional part (which makes us feel emotions like happiness and sadness), and the rational part (which gives us our ability to think and reason). Plato argues that a person with a well-organized soul will understand that the rational part of the soul is the most important and the appetitive part is the least important. Thus, according to Plato, a moral person is someone who uses the rational part of their soul to understand the Good, and who does not allow their emotional or appetitive desires to interfere with their rational desires. Plato uses a well-organized state as a metaphor for a well-organized soul, which is why this dialogue is called *Republic*.

Plato's philosophy was much more widely accepted than Socrates's, and Plato was able to teach many students through his Academy, which formed the template for the modern day university. The Academy's most famous student was *Aristotle of Stagira* (384–322 BC), who along with Plato is considered one of the two most important Western philosophers. Aristotle's philosophy is largely based on Plato's, but is different in some key respects.

Perhaps the biggest difference between Plato and Aristotle is how they understand Forms. Aristotle believed that Plato's Forms exist, but he had a different interpretation of how they work. According to Aristotle, Forms do not exist in some metaphysical realm separate from reality, but are part of physical reality itself. Let's return to the chair example from earlier. There are various types of chairs, but all of them share certain characteristics that make them chairs. According to Aristotle, the Form of a chair is that set of characteristics that unite all chairs and

without which something would not be a chair. To Aristotle, a Form is not some perfect, unchanging thing that exists abstractly, but a set of characteristics that make something what it is. Aristotle's Forms exist physically and concretely, and can be understood through our sensory experiences. For this reason, much of Aristotle's work goes beyond philosophy and deals explicitly with the physical sciences, such as biology, physics, and meteorology. Most of Aristotle's scientific beliefs were eventually disproven, but his work was an important stepping stone in the development of science as an academic discipline.

Aristotle's more concrete idea of a Form also motivates his moral views. Unlike Plato, whose morality was concerned with the comprehension of the Forms of the Good, Aristotle's morality emphasizes the act of habitually representing the Forms of virtues in one's actions. This type of moral theory is called *Virtue Ethics*. Aristotle thought that to behave morally is to act in accordance with certain virtues such as courage, modesty, and temperance. Aristotle wrote extensively about the nature of virtue, and acting virtuously means balancing between too little and too much of a certain quality.

Take, for example, the virtue of courage. If someone has too much fear, then they are a coward, but if they have too little fear, then they are a fool. Being courageous means experiencing the midway point between the vices of cowardliness and foolhardiness. The same can be said of the virtues of modesty and temperance. Someone with too much pride is arrogant, and someone with too little is shameful. The virtuous balance between the vices of arrogance and shame is modesty. Similarly, someone with too much self-control is indecisive, and someone with too little is impulsive. The virtuous balance between the vices of indecision and impulsivity is temperance. This idea, that a virtue exists as a medium between two vices, is called the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

After Plato's death, Aristotle would go on to found his own school, the Lyceum, which competed with Plato's Academy and taught Aristotle's philosophy. This divide between the Academy and the

Lyceum would eventually give rise to a further divide within philosophy between *Platonists*, who followed the ideology of Plato, and *Aristotelians*, who followed the ideology of Aristotle. Platonists generally emphasized the metaphysical world in their philosophy and believed that the best way to learn the truth was through logic and reason. Aristotelians, on the other hand, generally emphasized the physical world in their philosophy and believed that the best way to learn the truth was through sensory experience. The general disagreement between the Platonists and Aristotelians was not at all unlike the one between the Milesians and the Eleatics.

*Discussion Questions:*

- 4 Do you think Forms are something that could really exist, either abstractly or physically? Are there any better ways to explain why we understand some objects to be the same type of thing?
- 5 What do you think about Plato's argument about the three parts of the soul? Are there any other parts of the soul that Plato didn't think of? Do you agree with Plato about which parts are the most and least important?
- 6 Do you think Aristotle is right that a virtue exists between two vices? Do you agree that behaving morally and behaving virtuously are the same thing? Can you think of a way for someone to behave virtuously in a way that is not moral?

***Medieval Platonists and Aristotelians***

Plato and Aristotle dominated the philosophical conversation in the era following their deaths. There were other significant philosophers in the later Greek period and subsequent Roman period, most notably the Epicureans, who followed Epicurus of Samos, and the Stoics, who included Zeno of Citium (not to be confused with Zeno of Elea) and Lucius Annaeus Seneca. These philosophers are all very interesting and worth learning about, but they were not nearly as influential to the broader philosophical dialogue as Plato and Aristotle, who were both still widely read even after the fall of the Classical Greek civilization. People's beliefs and

culture changed significantly over the many years before the beginning of modern philosophy, though, so the main project of philosophy in the Middle Ages was to adapt the ideologies of Plato and Aristotle so that they were compatible with medieval people's religions.

Among the first to adapt Ancient Greek philosophy to medieval religion was the Algerian Roman philosopher *Augustine of Hippo* (354–430 AD), who adapted Plato's work to Christianity. Augustine and other Christian Platonists found that Plato's division between the physical world and the metaphysical world was applicable to Christian ideas about the division between Heaven and Earth, and that the way Plato described the Form of the Good as a perfect and unchanging entity existing outside of time and space was also a useful way to explain God.

Christian Platonists also used Platonic ideas of perfect abstract entities to justify their belief in God. In what is called the Ontological Argument, Medieval theists argued that God must exist by definition. The Ontological Argument can be restated as follows: A good thing that exists is better than a good thing that does not exist, and since God is by definition the greatest of all things, God must exist by definition because a good thing that does not exist cannot be greater than a good thing that does exist. This argument remains popular to this day, although critics maintain that it does not prove the existence of God because creating a definition of a thing that entails its existence does not mean it necessarily exists. For instance, critics point to the fact that I could define a unicorn as the greatest type of horse, and since an existent unicorn is greater than a nonexistent unicorn, I could say that a unicorn must exist based on the logic of the Ontological Argument.

Due to the influence of Augustine and other early medieval Platonists, Plato became much more widely read than Aristotle in early medieval Europe. Aristotle's works began to fall into obscurity in Europe, and much of what he wrote was lost. Most of what we do have of Aristotle's writings was preserved by Islamic philosophers, particularly those of the Falsafa school ("falsafa" translates to "philosophy" from

Arabic) from the Persian Empire. The philosophers of the Falsafa school, arguably the most notable of whom was *Ibn Sina* (980–1037), found Aristotle compelling largely because of his focus on the physical world, which contrasted Plato's focus on the metaphysical world. Aristotelian ideas about Forms existing within physical objects connected well with Islamic ideas about God being an integral and ever-present aspect of the world. Medieval Islamic Aristotelians also valued Aristotle's scientific works, as these philosophers considered the world and its scientific laws to be creations of God, and saw studying the sciences as a way of studying God's creation, and thus better understanding God.

One of Ibn Sina's most influential arguments, called the Proof of the Truthful, uses the existence of the physical world as proof of the existence of God. The Proof of the Truthful is essentially an argument about cause and effect: Ibn Sina argued that all things are either necessarily existent (meaning they have to exist no matter what) or contingently existent (meaning that they can only exist as a result of other things existing). It is impossible for everything that exists to be contingent because if everything that exists required a cause to exist, then there would be no cause for anything to exist in the first place. In order for anything to exist, something must necessarily exist in the first place, which can then cause contingent things to exist. There must ultimately be a cause before there can be effects, or to put this idea into religious language, a creator of all things. Ibn Sina identified this creator as God.

Ibn Sina and the other philosophers of the Falsafa school caused a renewed interest in the works of Aristotle. The Falsafa school's Aristotelian arguments about religion eventually made their way to Europe, and sparked the emergence of Christian Aristotelianism, which began with the Italian philosopher *Thomas Aquinas* (1225–1274). Aquinas strived to adapt the works of Aristotle to Christian theology, and was heavily influenced by the Islamic Aristotelians of the Falsafa school. In fact, one of Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God, the Prime Mover Argument, is extremely similar to Ibn Sina's Proof of the Truthful: Aquinas observed that

everything that moves must be moved by something, and supposed that there must have at some point been a Prime Mover, or an Unmoved Mover, which started this chain of movement. Aquinas identified this Prime Mover as God. This idea of God as the mover and shaper of all things impacted Aquinas's ethical views. According to Aquinas, not only did God create the universe, but God also imbued it with certain moral truths. Aquinas argued in favor of a moral realism similar to Aristotle's virtue ethics in which morality is an intrinsic part of the universe, and therefore an intrinsic part of us that we can access if we allow God to guide us. This ethical doctrine, called Natural Law, has remained extremely influential to this day, especially in certain corners of the legal world. Many modern day jurists (mostly conservatives) espouse a legal philosophy called Natural Law Jurisprudence, in which it is argued that all laws created by a state are ultimately subservient to the pre-existing moral laws built into the universe, and that the laws we make to govern ourselves must conform to these higher laws.

Although the majority of medieval philosophy, being derivative of the works of Plato and Aristotle, was not as original as the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, this era of philosophical thought is still important. Medieval philosophers kept the discipline of philosophy alive in a period of time when the majority of people were illiterate and uneducated, and when disease and violence ran rampant across the Western world. Without the philosophers of this era to preserve and develop the works of their ancient predecessors, philosophy could have died with the Ancient Greeks. It is largely thanks to people continuing to interact with Ancient Greek philosophy in medieval times that we still have that philosophy, and a discipline of philosophy in general, to study today.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 7 What do you think Plato and Aristotle would have thought about medieval Platonists and Aristotelians? Would they have agreed with medieval thinkers' interpretations of their work?
- 8 A great deal of medieval philosophy was focused on proving the existence of God. Do you find any of the attempts at proofs



discussed in this section convincing? Can you find any logical flaws in the arguments?

- 9 Do you think there is a place for reason and philosophical inquiry in religion? Or do you think that people's religious beliefs should be based on faith alone?

## Modern Philosophy

### *The Rationalists*

The 1600's were an interesting time in European history. The chaos and death that was so ever-present in the medieval era was finally starting to subside. People were not only recovering the wonders of the past Greek and Roman civilizations, but also making new scientific, artistic, and intellectual advances of their own. This shift in culture, called the Renaissance, was accompanied by a shift in philosophy, called the Enlightenment. The biggest change in philosophy that occurred at this time was the move away from ideologies rooted in ontology, and the move towards ideologies rooted in epistemology. People became less interested in making unfounded assumptions about the nature of the universe, and more interested in studying how and what we are able to know in the first place. This trend in philosophy is called the Epistemic Shift.

Perhaps the thinker who best represented this shift in reasoning was French philosopher *René Descartes* (1596–1650), who is widely regarded as the founder of modern philosophy. Descartes's main philosophical interest was in proving that the things we see and experience exist at all. Perhaps because of some sort of existential crisis, Descartes was deeply mistrustful of his own senses because he understood that our senses can be fooled. For example, when traveling in the heat of a desert, many people have experienced seeing mirages (images of things that are not really there) as a result of the strain that the heat puts on their minds. According to Descartes, this fact that our senses are capable of misrepresenting the world to us means that we should be skeptical of them as a matter of principle, a view known as Cartesian Skepticism.

Descartes believed that since our senses are capable of lying to us, we cannot trust that our senses ever tell us the truth. Descartes wondered if anything that we see or experience is real at all, since all of our experience of the world comes from our senses, and he wrote extensively about his fear that an evil demon could have been controlling everything he experienced with his senses, and everything around him could be an illusion. Descartes's doubt became so great that he began to wonder if he even existed at all. However, Descartes soon realized that he must exist because he could experience his own thoughts. Our internal thoughts are different from the world around us because we do not use our senses to experience them. Thus, even if our senses do lie to us, that does not affect how we experience our thoughts. Descartes realized that his thoughts must be real because he experienced them independently of his senses, and if his thoughts were real, then he himself must be real in order to think those thoughts. This led Descartes to famously declare, "I think, therefore I am."

This proof of his own existence did not remove the rest of Descartes's doubts about reality, though. Even though he had proven to himself that he existed, he had not proven to himself that anyone or anything else existed. Anything external to himself was only accessible to him through his senses, which we did not entirely trust. Eventually, what relieved Descartes of his doubts was his religious faith. Descartes was a devout Christian who was very convinced by logical proof for the existence of God like those formulated by the medieval philosophers discussed previously. He held an unwavering belief in the Christian God, whom he considered all-powerful and all-good. Descartes decided that an all-powerful and all-good God would not allow an evil demon or anything else to deceive his senses to the scale he feared, and that just as he trusted in the existence of this God, he felt he could trust that his senses were mostly reliable. Descartes believed that God was too powerful and too good to allow him to be deceived.

Descartes is a particularly vital figure to the development of Western philosophy because of his focus on the nature of knowledge and how we know

things, and his general unwillingness to make baseless assumptions about what is real. Contrast Descartes's philosophy with that of his premodern precursors, like Heraclitus or Plato. Philosophers like these two were perfectly willing to assume certain ontological truths as the starting points of their ideologies, like that everything is made of fire or everything has a Form. The premodern philosophers used an ontological basis to form their ideologies. Heraclitus said that because everything is made of fire, it is always changing, so our epistemology must be based on what we can see happening at any given time. Plato said that everything we see is a less real shadow of an unchanging Form, so our epistemology must not be based on what we can see, but on our ability to reason about the truth. These philosophers' epistemologies are consequences of their ontologies.

Descartes, on the other hand, starts his ideology with an epistemology. Before he believes a truth about the universe, he must first rationally justify it. Descartes did not assume that anything was real until he had proven it to his satisfaction. This change is what is meant by the Epistemic Shift, and it forms the basis for modern philosophy, which seeks to prove things and not assume them. With his focus on rational proof and emphasis on logical rather than experiential evidence, Descartes reinvented philosophy by creating his own new system of thought known as *Rationalism*. For his unprecedented and unique contribution to the intellectual dialogue, Descartes became arguably the most important and influential philosopher since Plato and Aristotle.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 10 Do you ever doubt that what you see and experience is real? Do you think that Descartes's distrust of his senses is reasonable? Are you convinced by his justification for his own existence?
- 11 Some have criticized Descartes for accepting the existence of God as proof that our senses are generally reliable because the existence of the God Descartes believed in may not be provable. Do you think Descartes successfully proved that our senses are reliable by appealing to his religious beliefs? Are there

any other ways you can think of to justify the reliability of our senses?

- 12 What do you think should come first, ontology or epistemology? Do you appreciate that Descartes tried to prove things before accepting them as truth, or do we need to assume things about the universe before we can decide the methods by which we prove things? Or should something else entirely serve as the basis for our philosophy?

### ***The Empiricists***

At this point, it is easy to see a pattern emerging in the history of philosophy: There is a sort of push and pull between ideologies that emphasize rational thought as the source of knowledge and those that emphasize sense experience as the source of knowledge. Rationalism fits firmly into the former category, as Descartes and his followers were inclined to distrust their sensory experiences unless they could justify trusting their senses with a rational argument. So naturally, there was a strong reaction against Descartes and Rationalist philosophy among philosophers who are now called *Empiricists*. This philosophy originated in Britain and was largely inspired by the works of English philosopher and natural scientist Francis Bacon, who pioneered the scientific method of experimentation and observation.

The first true Empiricist in the sense that the word is used in the context of philosophy was English philosopher *John Locke* (1632–1704). Locke's epistemology is based on the idea that when a person is born, their mind is a blank slate, or "tabula rasa" in Latin. This is to say that when a person is born, they do not immediately have any knowledge or rationality. According to Locke, these properties are developed over time by exposure to lived sensory experience. Locke's philosophy strongly contradicts Descartes's idea that we must use our rationality to verify our sense experience. Rather, Locke argues that our rationality is a product of our sense experience, and not an innate and perfect means of determining the truth. Thus, Locke and the subsequent Empiricist philosophers emphasized sense experience rather than rationality as the proper epistemology.

Locke's idea of the "tabula rasa" led to the development of Locke's extremely influential political philosophy. Locke reacted strongly against prior philosophers like fellow Englishman Thomas Hobbes, who argued that because people are naturally animalistic and possess dangerous and destructive instincts, we need strong authoritarian government to keep us under control. Locke instead argued that because people are born as blank slates, these conceptions of people as naturally evil or violent are not accurate. Therefore, Locke argued in favor of a system of government that, rather than controlling people, defended people's individual rights, especially the rights to "life, liberty, and property." This idea of government became very popular during the Enlightenment and was one of the biggest reasons for the series of revolutions across the Western world that followed this period, many of which sought to end or limit the powers of authoritarian governments led by royalty. The American Revolution in particular was strongly influenced by Lockian political philosophy, and Thomas Jefferson even indirectly referenced Locke in the American Declaration of Independence, writing that a just government must defend its citizens' unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Although Locke's political philosophy was probably his most important contribution to history in general, Locke's Empiricist epistemology focusing on sense experience is possibly more influential to the history of philosophical discourse. Another Empiricist who followed in Locke's footsteps was Scottish philosopher *David Hume* (1711–1776). Hume agreed with Locke that the mind is a blank slate until influenced by sense experience, and he used this concept as the basis for his own epistemology.

In Hume's epistemology, there is a distinction drawn between two types of things that exist in the mind: impressions and ideas. According to Hume, physical objects that exist in the world create impressions on the mind through our senses. In the same way that a person's foot can make a footprint in the sand, a physical object leaves a lasting trace on our minds after we observe it. Hume argued that

because physical objects make these impressions on our minds from outside our minds, we can be confident that they really exist and are not delusions. Ideas, however, originate from inside the mind and do not exist in the physical world, which means we cannot be confident that they really exist as part of the world.

A key example that Hume wrote about which illustrates the divide between impressions and ideas is the idea of causality. According to Hume, physical events in the world cause impressions, so for instance, the event of a bowling ball hitting a bowling pin and the separate event of the bowling pin falling down both create impressions when we observe them. However, when we connect these two events by saying that the bowling ball hitting the bowling pin caused the bowling pin to fall down, we are creating an idea in our mind, which is not an impression. Since the idea that the ball caused the pin to fall originates inside our mind and not from the outside world, it cannot be assumed that this concept of causality really exists as part of the physical mechanics of the world. This led Hume to develop a concept of time called a Humean Tapestry, in which all points in time are completely causally independent of one another and the actions that occur within one moment in this tapestry simply exist without direct connection to anything that exists in another. Hume saw time similarly to Zeno of Elea as a collection of moments that simply exist, and not as something that moves or flows. This controversial claim is a key concept that has influenced the philosophy of time.

The distinction Hume drew between impressions and ideas also affected his views on morality. Hume argued that our moral beliefs cannot be impressions because they are not physical things we can observe. We cannot observe with our senses that, for example, lying is morally wrong, but rather, this is a belief we hold based on our values and ideals. This means that morality is an idea and therefore not something that necessarily exists as a part of the world itself, directly contradicting Aquinas's theory of Natural Law. To put it in Hume's terms, "is does not imply ought." This idea, called the is-ought problem or Hume's Law, is extremely influential to moral philosophy because it means that we cannot use the

state of the physical world to justify our notions about what is or is not morally permissible. We cannot say that stealing is morally permissible because people steal, or that levitating is morally impermissible because people do not levitate. Our morality, per Hume's law, must be independent of our observations about the world. Importantly, Hume's Law does not tell us that morality does not exist, simply that it cannot be assumed to exist as a component of the physical world. Hume's Law leaves open the possibility that morality exists as a force outside the world, like Plato's Form of the Good or like a contract between people. Hume was not opposed to morality, he simply did not think that it could be studied like a scientific discipline the way things in the physical world can be.

An Empiricist who tried to explain an ethical system that could exist independently of any objective moral dimension of the world was English philosopher *John Stuart Mill* (1806–1873), who was a pioneer of a type of ethics called utilitarianism. Mill did not invent utilitarianism (that credit goes to Jeremy Bentham), but he was arguably the most important figure in developing and popularizing it. Utilitarianism falls under the broader ethical system called consequentialism, in which an action is considered right or wrong based on its results. This can be contrasted with the system called deontology, in which actions themselves are considered right or wrong regardless of their results (we will be discussing an example of a deontological moral theory in the next section, which covers Kantian ethics). As an example of how these systems work differently, let's look at a famous ethical dilemma called the Trolley Problem: Imagine that five people are tied to some trolley tracks and it will be impossible to free them before the trolley reaches them. If the trolley reaches these people, they will be killed. However, you are within reach of a lever that you can pull which will divert the oncoming trolley onto another track, thus saving these five people. However, there is one person who is tied to this other track, and if you pull the lever, the trolley will run over this one person, killing the one person instead of the other five. A consequentialist might say that the right thing to do would be to pull this lever because doing so saves five lives at the expense of one life, meaning that if you pull the lever, four more people survive than

if you do not pull the lever. A deontologist, though, might argue that the right thing to do is not to pull the lever because if you pull the lever, then your action directly causes one person's death which is morally wrong. This deontologist might say that it is better not to pull the lever because even if the five people on the track die, you are not the one responsible for their deaths. This is an oversimplified explanation, as there are many different types of consequentialism and deontology who might give different or more nuanced answers to this ethical question. However, the two contrasting answers provided here are illustrative of the differences in approach between the two systems.

Utilitarianism, the ethical system that Mill supported, is a specific type of consequentialism in which the rightness or wrongness of an action is evaluated based on the collective good or bad that all people experience as a result of that action. Mill argued that an act is good if it causes more people more pleasure and causes less people less pain. This maxim sounds reasonable on the surface, but it can lead to some dark consequences because it can mean that it can be morally justified to cause a person pain in order to give more people more pleasure. For example, some utilitarians would argue that it would be morally correct to hurt one person if it made one hundred people laugh. This distasteful implication has led subsequent utilitarian philosophers to modify Mill's theory and propose a something called rule utilitarianism, which adds rules against causing unnecessary pain to the utilitarian maxim. There are many varieties of utilitarianism, but all of them agree to the central tenet that it is right to cause more good than harm and wrong to cause more harm than good. This ethical system is appealing to Humean Empiricists because it does not rely on any sort of Form of the Good or virtue that exists simply as an idea. Rather, it is rooted in human experience and the real human consequences of our actions.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 13 Do you think that we really are born with minds that are like blank slates? Are there certain things that you think we are born knowing? Are there certain things that we can be sure we are not born knowing?

- 14 Do you think physical objects make impressions on our minds? If so, do you think this proves that physical objects really exist? Do you think things like ideas might really exist, even if they do not exist within the physical world?
- 15 Do you think certain actions are right because they have good consequences or because they are good in-and-of themselves? If you were faced with a situation like the Trolley Problem, how would you react to it? Can you think of any good reasons why someone might have the opposite reaction?

### **The Idealists**

It would seem that the differing epistemologies of the Rationalists and the Empiricists create an inseparable divide between these two schools of thought. However, just as Plato came along to find a middle ground between the Milesians and the Eleatics, there came a German philosopher named *Immanuel Kant* (1724–1804) who sought to do the same for the Rationalists and the Empiricists.

Kant's epistemology is rooted in the distinction between the noumenal (that which exists in the real world) and the phenomenal (that which exists in the mind). To Kant, the phenomenal is akin to Hume's concept of impressions. Kant agreed with Hume that we only have access to the real world through our sense experience, and that we can only understand entities based on how they exist in our minds. This meant that regarding the noumenal, which is composed of "things-in-themselves," or things as they exist independent of our perception, Kant adopted a policy of general skepticism similar to that of Descartes. However, what separates Kant from Descartes is a concept that Kant called the transcendental. According to Kant, the transcendental is a mechanism within the mind that translates the noumenal world into our phenomenal perception, which allows the phenomenal to be rooted in the noumenal. This means that even if the noumenal things-in-themselves are not accessible to us, the logic governing our phenomenal representations of the noumenal allows people to have a shared

understanding of the noumenal, which gives us a practical notion of truth that we can all take for granted as common ground. In this sense, Kant is not interested in an epistemologically justified truth so much as a practical truth that can serve as a basis for our shared beliefs.

This idea of a practical universality motivates the system of ethics that Kant developed. Kant argued that an action can be considered morally permissible if it can be universalized. That is to say that any action can be considered good if doing the same thing in any situation is always good; Kant calls these types of actions Categorical Imperatives. In this sense, Kant's moral philosophy, typically called Kantianism, is a form of deontology because Kant evaluates the inherent rightness or wrongness of actions themselves rather than their consequences.

Kant believed that the first way to tell whether or not an action could be universalized is by evaluating whether or not universalizing that action is logically coherent. A famous example of an action that Kant argued could not be coherently universalized is lying. According to Kant, lying cannot be universalized because if everyone lied all the time, then there would be no such thing as the truth, since all statements would be untrue. This would mean that without a concept of the truth to misrepresent, it would actually be impossible to tell a lie. Thus, universalizing the action of lying is incoherent because it would make the concept of a lie impossible. This prompted Kant to believe that the alternative to lying, telling the truth, is a Categorical Imperative that must be universalized. Kant also had a second, more subjective way to test whether or not an action is a Categorical Imperative: He simply asked if we would desire this action to be universalized. For example, Kant argued that it is categorically wrong to kill in any situation because the alternative would be to universalize killing, which would mean that anyone could be killed at any time. This is why philosophers like Kant would argue that it is wrong to pull the lever in the Trolley Problem: Pulling the lever means killing someone, and if we endorse that action in any situation, then we are endorsing it in all situations. Unfortunately, like utilitarianism, Kantianism can have some dark consequences. For example, Kant's Categorical

Imperative to tell the truth means that it is never morally acceptable to lie in any situation, even when doing so is necessary to save someone's life. The same can be said of Kant's Categorical Imperatives against things like stealing or breaking promises. These things cannot be endorsed universally, but it becomes difficult to argue that it is a grave moral wrong to, for example, steal a loaf of bread to feed a starving child. However, Kantian ethics do not allow for any wiggle room. To Kant, things are always right or they are always wrong.

All of this being said, there is one aspect of Kant's moral philosophy that has remained popular, and that is the idea that one never ought to use a person as a "mere means" to an end, and that people must be always treated as "ends in themselves." In Kantian terminology, an "end" refers to the goal of an action, and a "means" refers to something used to accomplish that goal. Kant argued that a person must never be used simply as a means, having their human dignity violated to accomplish some goal. Rather, we must understand that treating each other ethically should itself be our goal. Even when Kant's philosophy can become dark or convoluted, this central tenet is one deserving of our respect.

Both Kant's epistemology and his ethics were extremely influential, especially in Germany, where a school of philosophy called *Idealism* developed out of Kant's works. Perhaps the most influential of the German Idealists who followed Kant was philosopher *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770–1831). Hegel agreed with Kant that the noumenal world is inaccessible to us, but he had a different take on how the transcendental translated the noumenal into the phenomenal. According to Hegel, the practical universality that Kant believed in is not some automatic consequence of the transcendental, but rather, it is only achieved through a long process of debate that takes place over several generations. According to Hegel, every generation of people has a certain set of beliefs, which Hegel calls a thesis. This thesis represents that generation's rational understanding of the world, but it is not perfect. In fact, the job of the next generation, in Hegel's view, is to point out the flaws in the first generation's thesis and

rebel against it with an antithesis. It is then the subsequent third generation's job to rebel against the second generation's antithesis by combining the best parts of the thesis and the antithesis to create a synthesis. This synthesis becomes the new generation's thesis, and the generation that follows begins the repeat of this process by rebelling against this new thesis and creating a new antithesis. Hegel believed that this process has occurred many times in the past and will continue to occur well into the future. Each time it occurs, we get closer and closer to the truth. For this reason, Hegel believed that we can justifiably make philosophical claims about the noumenal, but we must understand that our philosophical beliefs are simply one stage in this process of ideological evolution, which Hegel called the rational dialectic. We must understand on principle that while our ideologies may perhaps represent the best philosophical systems humanity has created so far, they will eventually be replaced by something better.

Hegel argued that the first thesis was religion, which he thought of as the irrational sets of beliefs that people held before the advent of philosophy. This meant to Hegel that the first antithesis, which liberated people from the irrationality of religion, was the objective philosophical study of ethics. However, Hegel viewed ethics as deficient because it is merely rational, and lacks the sort of enchantment that goes along with religious beliefs. Hegel argued that the final result of the rational dialectic will be the aesthetic, a state of pure bliss. According to Hegel, at the end of this long process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, all people will have achieved perfect rational understanding of all things, and the noumenal and the phenomenal will be identical. All people will think in the same way and we will all live together in the peace and harmony of pure philosophical understanding.

Hegel's work spawned a large following. Fellow German philosopher *Karl Marx* (1818–1883) was particularly inspired by Hegel's vision of a future in which all people are unified by common belief, and created a political system called Communism that he believed would achieve this utopia. Even though the various states that have adopted Communism as a

political system have been so far unable to achieve anything resembling a Hegel's utopia, the Hegelian roots of Marxist ideology demonstrate the immense impact that philosophy can have on the world. Marx is not the only philosopher who based their own ideology on Hegel's works, but Marx is undoubtedly the Hegelian whose works had the biggest effect on world politics. Hegel and John Locke share the uncommon honor among philosophers of having states organize their governments based on their philosophies. Thus, because of Marx, Hegel is one of the most influential thinkers who ever lived, for good or for ill.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 16 What do you think about Kant's idea of the noumenal and the phenomenal? Do you agree that we are only able to access the phenomenal and that we are unable to understand the noumenal things-in-themselves? Do you think that this distinction between what is real and what we can perceive allows Kantian epistemology to synthesize the views of the Rationalists and the Empiricists, or does this simply fortify the tension between epistemologies based on reason and those based on sense experience?
- 17 Do you agree with Kant that certain actions are always right or always wrong regardless of the situation? Can you think of any actions that are right in some situations but wrong in others?
- 18 Do you think Hegel's rational dialectic is a realistic representation of how human thought evolves? Is it really as simple as the thesis, antithesis, synthesis model that Hegel proposed, or are there complications that Hegel did not consider? Do you agree with Hegel that the noumenal and the phenomenal will eventually be identical, or do you think we are incapable of ever fully understanding the world as it exists independent of our minds?

#### ***The Existentialists***

Although Hegel's philosophy was hugely popular in certain circles, it was also very controversial. One thinker who particularly disagreed

with Hegel was Danish philosopher *Søren Kierkegaard* (1813–1855), who is generally considered to be the first *Existentialist* philosopher. According to Kierkegaard, Hegel's idea of the trajectory of the rational dialectic is actually the opposite of how a should evolve over the course of their life. Rather than accepting Hegel's idea of religion and the thesis, ethics and the antithesis, and aesthetics as the synthesis, Kierkegaard argued that aesthetics was actually the first thesis, antithesized by ethics, with a final synthesis of religion. According to Kierkegaard, religion is not humanity's original or most primitive state. Rather, that title goes to aesthetics. Kierkegaard took the state of aesthetic bliss described by Hegel as the state of an infant basking in the joy of a newly discovered earth. Kierkegaard also believed that some people never grow out of this state, and counted enthusiasts of the arts and hedonists as examples of adults who never left aesthetic pursuits behind. Kierkegaard argued that it is necessary for a thoughtful person to transcend the aesthetic into the ethical, and consider the rightness and wrongness of the world into which we are born. According to Kierkegaard, true ethical understanding cannot come from pure reason, and must have a basis in religious faith, which leads to his claim that a fully-realized human being must eventually combine their aesthetic appreciation for the world with a steadfast moral compass. Kierkegaard believed that this combination could only be found in religion. Notably, Kierkegaard did not follow in the footsteps of his medieval predecessors by trying to rationally justify his religious beliefs. Rather, Kierkegaard believed that we must all take what he called a "leap of faith," and trust in religion in order to live the fully-realized lives that we all need.

Kierkegaard's concerns with the nature of the individual and the steps towards becoming fully realized as a person inspired many philosophers who followed him. Among these was German philosopher *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1844–1900), who created his own idea of a fully-realized person whom he called the *Übermensch* (a German word that loosely translates to "overman" or "superman"). Nietzsche's philosophy is heavily rooted in Hume's arguments against the existence of an ethical dimension to the physical

world. Nietzsche agreed with Hume on this point, but saw this absence of morality as a problem that humanity must overcome. According to Nietzsche, his problem is an inevitable consequence of human rationality. Nietzsche had a deep appreciation for religious faith such as the one displayed by Kierkegaard, but considered such faith untenable in the age of reason. Nietzsche thought that science and rationality had shown religion to be mere superstition, leading him to remark sadly, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed Him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murders of all murderers?" Because of this supposed death of God, Nietzsche considered religious faith to be an inadequate source for moral truths.

Nietzsche considered the forms of morality espoused by institutions like governments and organized religious groups to be socially constructed and not based on anything that actually exists in the world. He considered these moralities to be a form of oppression, as they limit what people can do without any sort of legitimate justification. According to Nietzsche, in order to become the fully-realized *Übermensch*, a person must free themselves from the false moralities impressed upon us by society. However, it must be understood that Nietzsche did not believe that we ought to have no morality for ourselves. On the contrary, Nietzsche argued that we must have personal moral codes and that a world without morality is a terrifying prospect that we must avoid. What Nietzsche meant when he said that we must free ourselves from oppressive moralities is that we must create our own morality to follow ourselves, and not blindly subscribe to some morality that was forced upon us. That, according to Nietzsche, is what it means to be the *Übermensch*: to live freely and independently by our own moral beliefs.

Unfortunately, Nietzsche's ideas have a long history of being misinterpreted, sometimes deliberately. After Nietzsche died, his sister, who was a phantical supporter of the Nazi party, created an interpretation of Nietzsche's work to suit the Nazi agenda in which the idea of the *Übermensch* referred not to a person who had forged their own moral path, but to a person of supposedly superior genetics. This

interpretation has no basis whatsoever in Nietzsche's writings, but its prevalence has left a blotch on Nietzsche's philosophy that it has never fully overcome. Many people have also misunderstood Nietzsche's arguments about morality, and say that Nietzsche believed that we ought to believe in nothing and have no morality. This, of course, is complete nonsense, as Nietzsche's entire concept of self-realization is rooted in the development of personal morality. Hopefully, what is written here will help clear some of these misconceptions.

Existentialist philosophy remains popular to this day, although it has changed considerably since the times of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. A new modern Existentialism emerged around the middle of the 20th century, and was popularized by French philosopher *Jean-Paul Sartre* (1905–1980), who is often called the Father of Modern Existentialism. Sartre continued the Existentialists' search for a fully-realized self by discussing the meaning of life. According to Sartre, our questions about what the meaning of life could be are easy to answer: Sartre argued that there is no meaning of life. This is to say that we are not born with any specific purpose or reason, we simply exist for a few brief decades in a universe that neither notices nor cares about us. Any search for an objective meaning built into our lives is, to Sartre, a useless endeavor. However, this does not mean that we cannot find meaning in our lives. Much as Nietzsche argued that we must create our own moralities for ourselves, Sartre argued that we must create our own meanings for ourselves. This, according to Sartre, is how one becomes a fully-realized human being. We must find meaning for ourselves in a meaningless universe. Sartre summed up this idea in a quote that has become something of a motto for Existentialists: "Existence precedes essence." That is to say that we do not exist with any preconceived essence or meaning, but must develop them for ourselves.

Sartre's friend and fellow Existentialist, French-Algerian novelist and philosopher *Albert Camus* (1913–1960), took Sartre's modern form of Existentialism in his own unique direction, creating a philosophy he called Absurdism. According to Camus,



Sartre is correct that we exist in a meaningless universe, but Camus disagreed that the way to become a fully-realized human being was by creating meaning for ourselves. According to Camus, the fact that there is no intrinsic meaning of life means that any sort of meaning we ascribe to our lives is precarious and potentially impermanent. Anything in which we might find meaning might not last. Many people find meaning in some aspect of their life, but what will happen if we somehow that aspect disappears? If someone placed the meaning of their life in their artistic pursuit of painting, what will happen to them if they lose the ability to use their hands? If someone places the meaning of their life in their relationship with a loved one, what will happen if that loved one dies? Camus argued that we cannot safely place the meanings of our lives in such dangerous places when there is no way of knowing what might happen in this chaotic world.

According to Camus, the only way to be a fully-realized person is to accept and enjoy the absurdity of existing in a meaningless universe, and to live in defiance of that absurdity. Camus articulates this view in a famous essay called *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he compares the human condition to the state of Sisyphus, a character from Greek mythology who was condemned by the Greek Gods to an eternal punishment in the afterlife. In the mythology, Sisyphus is forced to spend all of eternity rolling a massive boulder up a mountain unable to ever reach the top. Whenever Sisyphus approaches the top of the mountain, the boulder slips from his hands and rolls all the way to the bottom, where Sisyphus must resume his hopeless task. The Ancient Greeks who invented this myth saw Sisyphus as a tortured figure, but Camus insisted that we must understand Sisyphus to be happy. Like us, Sisyphus is trapped performing meaningless tasks without any possibility of reward or purpose. If we are to be happy with our own lives, we must imagine Sisyphus definitely laughing at those who condemned him and enjoying the amusing absurdity of his meaningless existence. We, like Sisyphus, must try to be happy with the existence in which we find ourselves.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

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- 19 Do you agree with Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's rational dialectic? Do you think the fully-realized person experiences aesthetic bliss or religious enlightenment, or some other state else entirely? Do you think Kierkegaard is right that we need to make a "leap of faith" and believe in religion without any evidence?
- 20 What do you think of Nietzsche's claim that morality is a social construct? If this is true, does it mean that we should have no morality, or is Nietzsche correct that we must create our own for ourselves? Do you have your own moral code that you follow?
- 21 Do you think there is a simple objective meaning of life? If so, what do you think it might be? If not, do you think we should try to create meaning for ourselves like Sartre suggested, or should we embrace the absurdity of the universe like Camus suggested? Do you have any of your own strategies of finding meaning or peace in your own life?

#### ***The Analytics***

The Idealism and Existentialism that was discussed in the previous two sections represent some of the major ideological trends in what is generally called Continental philosophy, meaning that it comes from countries like France and Germany on the mainland European continent. While Continental philosophy is widely popular today, it is not the only type of philosophy in the contemporary Western dialogue. A separate type of called *Analytic philosophy* emerged in England in the early 20th century, and is currently the dominant philosophical method in the English-speaking world.

Analytic philosophy began as something of a criticism of Continental philosophy. According to early proponents, Continental philosophy, especially Idealism and Existentialism, abandoned the rigorous focus on epistemology that characterizes modern philosophy and separates it from the wild speculation seen in premodern philosophy. The new Analytic method, which focuses on formal logic and often involves mathematics, was developed to reinstate rigorous epistemology into the Western philosophical

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tradition. It must be noted that Analytic philosophy is not a movement or school united by shared beliefs like the ones discussed previously, but rather an alternative method of philosophical inquiry. A figure who strongly represented this method was English philosopher *Bertrand Russell* (1872–1970), who wrote extensively about how what we claim to know must be justified by formal logic. It is impossible to explain the entirety of what formal logic is here (it takes years to learn all of the complexities), but essentially, formal logic is how a philosophical argument can be broken down into its simplest form. For example, if I were to say “If it rains today, then there will not be a baseball game,” that could be represented in formal logic as “ $A \rightarrow \neg B$ ,” which is to say, “if A then not B.” All sorts of statements can be represented in formal logic; it is all about removing tricks or unnecessary vagueness from our language so that we can see arguments as clearly as possible. According to Analytic philosophers like Russell, if we cannot prove something with formal logic, then it is a sign that our arguments about that thing were rooted in some sort of trickery or vagery, and were therefore not reasonable. Anything we actually know can be represented with the clear language of logic. Russell took this belief to the extreme, even writing a 500-page book trying to prove with formal logic that one plus one equals two, which he eventually succeeded in doing.

Russell’s student, Austrian-British philosopher *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (1889–1951) also wrote extensively about the role of language in our philosophy. One of the major themes in Wittgenstein’s work is the idea that when we use imprecise language we are playing what Wittgenstein called a “language game.” For example, think of when someone says something like, “Can you pass the salt?” Taken literally, this is a question asking about someone’s ability to pass the salt, but in the context of the rules of our language game, it is actually a request for someone to pass the salt. To Wittgenstein, our communication is not generally based on the actual meaning of what we say, but rather, it is based on a complex set of rules that define the language game we play in which we attempt to represent our thoughts to others.

This view of communication as a language game led Wittgenstein to be skeptical of most philosophical investigation into ontology. According to Wittgenstein, the fact that language games form the basis of our communication must mean that they also form the basis of our philosophy. In this sense, we cannot think of our ontologies as explanations for the construction of the word, but rather as collections of facts that form a picture. These facts, though, are rooted in imprecise definitions, which we use in our language games. This is problematic when we discuss abstract entities because our definitions are directly rooted in the physical and observable things that exist in the world, and do not perfectly apply to the abstract world, making our explanations of the metaphysical world inherently unreliable.

This idea of abstract objects being unrepresentable in our language games was built upon by American philosophy *Willard Van Orman Quine* (1908–2000), who argued that a definition rooted in formal logic is a necessary property for an entity to exist at all. According to Quine, in order for an entity to exist, it must possess an identity. This statement is a criticism of ontologies that posit the existence of purely theoretical entities. The example that Quine described was the theoretical “man in the doorway.” This man is entirely theoretical, so much so that nothing can be said about him besides the fact that he exists in the doorway. This is not sufficient to give this man an identity because there is so much about him that is undefined. Without any sort of identifiable properties for us to point to, how can we justifiably argue that this man exists? According to Quine, the only way to establish that something has the identity required to exist is to avoid the language game and represent the entity clearly with formal logic.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 22 Do you think using formal logic improves our ability to make a philosophical argument? Is the clarity gained by avoiding the vagueness of language altogether positive, or is something lost when we reduce all of our beliefs to symbols and formulas?
- 23 Do you agree with Wittgenstein that we cannot sufficiently define abstract entities because

our definitions are concrete? Is there any way we can use language to explain things that do not really exist in the physical world?

- 24 What do you think of Quine's idea that no entity can exist without identity? Do you think theoretical entities like the man in the doorway could really exist abstractly, or does the man need more of an identity to exist? Do you think abstract entities actually exist at all, or do only physical things actually exist?

## Postmodern Philosophy

### *The Postmodernists*

Despite what its name may suggest, modern philosophy does not represent any sort of end point for the discipline. While many philosophers active today can be considered modernists, a new method of philosophy has emerged over the course of the past eighty years or so. This new philosophical method, typically called *postmodernism*, seeks to improve upon modern philosophy by deconstructing and refuting the narratives of modernity that deceive or oppress people. In this sense, in the same way that modernism places epistemology as the starting point for philosophical speculation, postmodernism awards this place to ethics. Postmodernists are generally willing to rely on intuitive beliefs about how people's rights and how they ought to be treated to gather what sort of universe can exist that makes these beliefs true. The history of postmodernism is not nearly as long as the histories of premodernism and modernism, so it is much more difficult to point out the postmodern philosophies that have been especially influential to the discipline in the long run, which makes it infeasible to discuss how the dialogue of postmodernism evolved. However, it is feasible to point out some of the post popular and important postmodernists and their philosophies:

One of the earlier postmodernists was French philosopher *Michel Foucault* (1926–1984), who sought to explain and dissect the structures of power in our society that cause oppression and discrimination. According to Foucault, power resides not in individual people, but in institutions that possess

the ability to control information. According to Foucault, when an institution can control the information that people can access, that institution then has the ability to create its own version of history in which certain things are normal or traditional. In doing so, the institution creates the code by which people must live. Foucault argued that the best way to combat powerful institutions is through education. If a population is educated about the truth of the world, then that population is less susceptible to the false histories created by institutions, and therefore able to break free from these institutions' control.

Another postmodernist who dealt with the idea of powerful institutions was French West Indian philosopher *Frantz Fanon* (1925–1961). Fanon was one of the most important figures in the philosophy of postcolonialism, and he is best known for his arguments about the impact of colonialism on the people who are colonized. According to Fanon, colonialism not only exploits colonized peoples, but also deprives colonized peoples of the basic human right to create an ethical code rooted in their own cultural history. A colonizing force imposes their own culture onto those who are colonized, and uses force to convert colonized peoples to the practices and ideologies that they imported into the colonies. Thus, to Fanon, colonization goes beyond oppression, and represents the fundamental removal of colonized people's basic human dignity. According to Fanon, the only way to restore this dignity is to examine and systematically recontextualize the colonial moralities imposed upon the colonized. These ideologies must be understood to only represent an imported truth, and not a universal truth. Fanon supported the revival of precolonial cultural practices as a form of reclaiming that which was stolen by colonizers and as a means of renewing colonized people's abilities to construct their own moralities and restore their human dignity.

Human dignity is also a major theme in the work of American philosopher *Judith Butler* (1956– ), who writes extensively about the roles of gender and sexuality in our society. Butler argues that binary male/female gender and heterosexuality are not norms of behavior in mainstream society because of some property of the universe, but because society

created those norms to begin with. According to Butler, people are programmed from birth by society regarding certain ways of acting based on the gender they were assigned at birth. Traditional society makes it so that certain behaviors are characteristically masculine or feminine. One such characteristic is romantic partnership with the opposite sex. Butler rejects these norms as representing anything more than societal precedent enforced by oppressive practices that delegitimize alternative expressions of oneself. Butler argues that in order for someone to exist with freedom and dignity, one must be able to live outside of these social norms if one so desires. One ought to live in accordance with one's authentic sense of self, and not conform to a certain perception of how one should be created by society.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

- 25 Do you agree with Foucault that power comes from the ability to control information? Can you think of any examples in recent history in which a certain narrative or interpretation of the truth was created by an institution to convince people to do certain things? How does what someone believes about what is true influence how they act? How do you think your understanding of the truth affects what you do? Do you ever wonder if your truth is the real truth?
- 26 What do you think are some of the most profound effects of colonization on the people who are colonized? Do you think Fanon was right that being colonized steals a person's dignity? Is Fanon correct that colonized people ought to understand their cultures' practices prior to colonization? Do you think that doing so helps a person to live with dignity?
- 27 What do you think about Butler's arguments about binary gender and heteronormativity as social constructs? Do you think society's ideas of how someone assigned a certain gender at birth affect how that person acts over the course of their life? Can you think of any things that you do just because they are expected of people with your gender identity? If so, do you ever want to rebel against these expectations?

## **Conclusion**

I am deeply honored that you have taken the time to read through this pamphlet. I hope there were aspects of it that you found interesting or illuminating. I want to reiterate that what you have just read only begins to scratch the surface of what the discipline of philosophy has to offer. There were many great Western philosophers I was unable to cover here, whom I encourage you to research. The Stoics and the Epicureans in particular come to mind. In addition, it is regrettable that this pamphlet does not cover any non-Western philosophy. I strongly encourage you to look into some other philosophical dialogues, such as Taoism and Buddhism from Eastern philosophy.

If you would like to learn more about the philosophies you have read about here, I have a few reading recommendations: Plato's dialogue *Apology*, in which he recounts the speech Socrates gave to the Athenian court before being sentenced to death, is a must read. I would also highly recommend a number of Existentialist writings, in particular *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Jean-Paul Sartre, in which he provides an introduction to his ideas, as well as Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*, a work of fiction that illustrates the philosophy of Absurdism. If you have access to YouTube, I also suggest watching some of the videos of philosophy by the educational channel CrashCourse, which is how I started my own journey. No matter where your path takes you, I wish you luck as you seek to unravel the mysteries of existence!

“Every man is a creature of the age in which he lives and few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time.”

**Voltaire**

“The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free.”

**Baruch Spinoza**