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The Meaning of Life: Perspectives from the World’s Great Intellectual Traditions

Course Guidebook

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The Meaning of Life: Perspectives from the World’s Great Intellectual Traditions

Scope:

This course explores answers to the question “What is the meaning of life?” from a wide range of intellectual traditions and across a vast historical sweep. It also introduces a number of profound texts to foster an appreciation of the diversity of approaches to this central question.

The exploration begins with the Bhagavad-Gītā, a classic of Hindu thought that is actually an episode from the great Indian epic Mahābhārata. The hero in the Gītā, Arjuna, finds himself on the eve of a battle in which he must lead his army against one led by many of his near relatives. The text counsels a life of action pursued with a certain kind of impersonal detachment in the context of a devotional attitude that allows one to understand one’s role in the universe.

We then turn to ancient Greece, reading Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle’s answer to our question contrasts dramatically with that offered by the Gītā, locating happiness in the cultivation of a set of mundane virtues, such as courage, honesty, generosity, temperance, and the like, in the context of friendship and civic life. Aristotle develops a subtle moral psychology that paints an unusually detailed picture of the many dimensions of a meaningful life when understood from the human, as opposed to the cosmic, perspective.

A third approach is represented by the austere vision presented in the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. Here, the puzzle regarding whether life can have any meaning is posed in the context of the possibility of divine indifference and a fundamentally cruel universe.

We then turn to the work of Lucretius and Marcus Aurelius, two influential Roman thinkers, both of whom meditate extensively on the problem with which we started: How can anything as fleeting and small as a human life mean anything in the grand scheme of things? Each focuses his meditation
on the consequent significance of death and impermanence, making direct contact with each of the three traditions with which we began.

The fourth ancient approach we consider emerges from classical China. We begin with an exploration of *The Analects*, in which Confucius (Kongfuzi) develops an account of human perfection in terms of careful social cultivation in the context of social relations. We will see this view challenged by Daoism, grounded in the Daodejing and the *Zhuangzi*, in which meaning is to be found by harmonizing one’s life with the fundamental structure of the universe. This requires not action or cultivation, as is suggested by the Confucian or Aristotelian approaches, but rather, a studied inaction and spontaneity.

The final ancient approach we consider is that of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, the account of moral development and the goal of human life articulated by the 9th-century Indian philosopher Śāntideva. We will then explore the ways that Indian Buddhism and Chinese Daoist thought merge in the Zen tradition of China and Japan.

At this point, our attention shifts to modernity; we will discuss Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *Treatise of Human Nature*; Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?”; and Mill’s *On Liberty*. We’ll explore the view that the meaningful life is that lived autonomously, with active engagement in the public sphere, involving the free exercise of one’s rights to thought and to speech, unfettered by religion or law.

Poignant critiques of this individualist, libertarian vision of modernity are offered by Tolstoy and Nietzsche. Tolstoy argues that modernity eviscerates life of spiritual values and interpersonal relations. Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, argues that the central underpinnings of modernity are simply erroneous and defends a radically different view of the meaning of life.

The final section of the course looks at recent approaches to the meaning of life and their relation to those explored earlier. We consider Gandhi’s concept of *satyāgraha*, or insistence on the truth, a challenging account of the demands of human existence, grounded simultaneously in the Gītā, in Buddhist principles, and in a modernist conception of individual dignity.
We then turn to the Lakota philosopher Lame Deer, who sees human life as gaining its meaning from a complex relation to the natural world in the context of which it is lived. We finish with the perspective of the 14th Dalai Lama, who integrates the views of Śāntideva with those of European modernity, defending an account of the meaningful life in the modern world that takes seriously such modern values as human rights, liberty, and a secular order but demanding the cultivation of compassion.

Although we may not conclude by answering the question of the meaning of life once and for all, we will find that our attempt to answer it in conversation with this array of scholars will yield rich insight and an appreciation for the value of addressing profound questions with intellectual rigor and seriousness of purpose. ■
We might say that anything biologically, psychologically, spiritually different from us—however different it may be, if it’s morally like us, that’s the kind of thing whose life is significant.

Before we ask “What is the meaning of life?” we need to ask a prior question: What do we mean by the phrase “the meaning of life”? The word “meaning” itself has at least three meanings: its linguistic or semantic definition, an indicative meaning, and its meaning in the sense of significance. It’s this third meaning that we’re looking for when we ask about the meaning of life.

All of these definitions of “meaning” have a sense of one thing pointing to or indicating something outside or beyond. In general, when we ask, “What is the meaning of life?” we’re asking: What is it beyond our existence that gives our lives significance? Again, there’s a prior question here: Does life have meaning in the first place? The answer might be no, or it might be that some lives have more meaning than others. If that’s the case, then we can ask: What makes a life worth living? What makes some lives more meaningful than others?

Here’s another question: What raises the question of the meaning of life in the first place? One answer might be that humans seem to be fundamentally aware of our finitude in a vast and infinite universe; that is, we are a very small, limited, and ephemeral phenomenon in a universe that goes far beyond us.

Yet another question we need to explore is: What is it that makes us characteristically human in the respect that is relevant to asking about the meaning of our lives? If the answer here is biological, then to be human might mean to have a certain kind of DNA or certain organs, such as the prefrontal cortex. If the answer is psychological, then our humanness might derive from how we think, our ability to reason, and so on. The answer might also be found in our spirituality or morality.
Many people would say that a life is meaningful only to the extent that a person is able to do something with it. If we’re biological animals made of flesh and blood in a deterministic universe, it may be that everything we do and everything that happens to us is completely causally determined. Or it might be that we’re free and have free will. In either case, our lives might be meaningful or meaningless, but the sense of meaning is very different. It might also be true that we can find a middle path: Certain things about us may be determined, but certain things are free. Perhaps the meaning lies in the places where we make choices.

We’ve been presuming so far that there might be a single right answer to our original question about the meaning of life. But there may be many different answers to this question that vary over time and across cultures. We also need to ask: What would “count” as an answer to the question of the meaning of life? Perhaps the answer would be some account of our relationship to the universe or, perhaps, a sense of our relationship to a divinity or to the lives of others.

The beauty of “doing” philosophy is that we don’t have to make yes-or-no choices.

We need to consider two dimensions when we pose the question of the meaning of life: the personal dimension and the collective, or relational, dimension. In the personal dimension, our question reads like this: If I think of myself as an individual worrying about my own life, in what does the meaning of my life consist? It might be that a meaningful life for me is a life of reason, a life of faith, or a life led as a member of society. In the collective dimension, we need to understand our relationships to others and to the broader world in order to answer the question. Are we primarily independent agents in voluntary association with one another, or is it inappropriate to think of ourselves as individuals apart from society?

All of these possibilities will be open for us in this course, and the beauty of “doing” philosophy is that we don’t have to make yes-or-no choices. We can draw insight, inspiration, and understanding from a vast number of perspectives, emerging from traditions around the globe. Part of what you will learn in this course is how to read the varying texts in these global traditions.
traditions. By the end of the course, I hope you will see that some of the ideas from the most distant cultures seem the most familiar to you and some ideas that are close to home may be unusual and difficult to grapple with. Perhaps these contrasts will broaden your horizons to wisdom from “exotic” sources and bring to the surface currents in your own thinking of which you were unaware.

**Suggested Reading**


Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

**Study Questions**

1. What are the various senses of “meaning,” and how are they related?

2. What are the various contexts in terms of which we can understand our own lives and our humanity? How are they connected to one another?
The Bhagavad-Gītā—Choice and Daily Life
Lecture 2

The central insight we want to draw from this text is that we live a life in which we are constantly making poignant, important choices, existential choices. If we don’t understand how to make those choices, there’s no way of making meaning out of that life.

The Bhagavad-Gītā is one section of the Mahābhārata, the great epic of India composed by multiple authors between about 400 B.C. and 400 C.E. The Bhagavad-Gītā itself was composed around the year 100 C.E. and remains an extraordinarily important text in Hindu moral life.

The tone of the Bhagavad-Gītā is set by an opening question posed to the great seer Sanjaya, who is the narrator of most of the story. In chapter 1, Sanjaya takes us to an epic battlefield and tells us about the forces arrayed there against a hero, the general Arjuna. Arjuna is reluctant to fight, but fortunately, his charioteer is the deity Krishna, the embodiment of the godhead in Hindu theology. Krishna’s instruction to Arjuna constitutes the bulk of the text. Krishna explains to Arjuna the nature of discipline (yoga), the relationship between yoga and understanding, the notion of divinity and our relationship to the divine aspect of the universe, the importance of devotion, the nature of the world we live in and of personality, and the nature of faith.

The Mahābhārata begins with a struggle between two sets of cousins for the ancient, probably legendary kingdom of Kurukshetra. The battle fought by the two

Even though the Bhagavad-Gītā is an old text, it’s a text that has seeped into our own cultural context. There are a lot of ideas that seem very familiar even though they’re raised in unfamiliar contexts.
sides forms the context of the Bhagavad-Gītā, and it raises deep questions about honor, family duty, ritual duty, personal destiny, good and evil, and the order of the universe.

On a mythical level, the text gives us two armies poised to fight a significant battle; at stake is the rule of the kingdom. Allegorically, the Bhagavad-Gītā presents us with a battle between convention and higher duty, order and chaos, individual desire and an understanding of one’s place in the universe. It invites us to inquire how we can lead a life detached from narrow, egoistic desires. It is also a deeply personal text, the story of personal agony in the context of hard choices.

In Sanskrit, the word for one’s duty is svadharma, which may sometimes conflict with larger duties and generate existential choices in our lives.

In the opening verses, the leader of one side asks Sanjaya, the seer, to tell him what the two opposing forces did when they met “on the field of Sacred Duty.” The idea here is that every one of us does battle every day on that same field, the domain in which we must make moral choices in uncertain circumstances. As the two armies prepare to enter the battle, the general Arjuna, on the side of the Pandavas, asks his charioteer, Krishna, to take him to the center of the battlefield so that he can survey it. This is the moment of choice that constitutes the rest of the text. Arjuna is the representative of humanity; he stops with god in the middle of the conflict to consider his options before he makes a crucial choice about what to do with his life.

According to the text, “Arjuna saw them standing there: Fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and friends.” As a soldier, it is Arjuna’s duty to fight, but as a human being, he cannot wage war against those he loves. Notice that the conflict here is between caste duty and family duty. We, too, have duties peculiar to our roles or professions, and these duties structure a great deal of our lives. In Sanskrit, the word for one’s duty is svadharma, which may sometimes conflict with larger duties and generate existential choices in our lives.
Arjuna asks Krishna for counsel, and surprisingly, the god tells him to “rise to the fight.” Arjuna remains deeply torn between his duty as a warrior and his duty to his family, between the justice of his cause and the imperative to make peace. He must examine his own motives in making this decision. Is he motivated by greed or the quest for justice, by concern for the immediate context or for what is universally right? Most of our existential choices are just like this—genuine conflicts between important values. To fail to take these conflicts seriously is to act in bad faith.

Although few of us fight battles for kingdoms, our conflicts are not unlike Arjuna’s: We experience conflicting social roles or duties, uncertainty about what’s right and about our own motivations, and the need to act with much at stake. Thus, Arjuna’s problem is our problem, and the Bhagavad-Gītā is about us. The text presupposes that we are the authors of our own actions and that the idea of living a meaningful life is under our control. At the same time, we may make deep, existential choices thoughtlessly. Krishna tells Arjuna to focus on what is permanent, not ephemeral—the universe and the structure of enduring values, not the lives of the warriors. Arjuna should fight because fighting is what realizes the eternal value of justice and of svadharma, his duty as a warrior.

**Name to Know**

**Krishna:** An Indian manifestation of divinity.

**Important Terms**

**svadharma:** Duty, in Sanskrit.

**yoga:** Discipline or spiritual practice.

**Suggested Reading**

Easwaran, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gītā*.

Stoler-Miller, trans., *Bhagavad-Gītā: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War.*
**Study Questions**

1. Why is Arjuna in this predicament? How does his predicament relate to those we face daily?

2. What are the factors that make Arjuna’s choice so difficult? What are the reasons for fighting? What are the reasons for refraining? How is he to make this choice?

3. How does Krishna suggest that Arjuna think about this choice? In what ways is this approach foreign to the ways you think about choice? In what ways might it be illuminating?
This kind of serenity that we can achieve through this detachment requires discipline, which allows us to constrain ourselves, to focus on what’s important, to eliminate our being buffeted about from the sensory stuff happening around us.

In counseling Arjuna, Krishna introduces us to a transcendent view of duty, the idea that duty is more than just asking what is expected of us now. He advises Arjuna to face the fact that certain duties come to him by virtue of his station in life—his caste as a warrior. We can’t shirk our duties either—our roles, occupations, places in a family or organization—because the choice of how we lead our lives is often a choice about what our real duties are.

According to Krishna, there is much in our lives that we can’t control, but we can control our own actions. In making choices, we need to focus on actions and not worry about consequences, over which we have no control. Krishna says, “Perform actions firm in discipline, relinquishing attachment; be impartial to failure and success. This equanimity is called discipline.” Discipline is the giving up of attachment to the consequences of actions. We must also relinquish attachment to the senses because we lose our freedom when we subject our actions to sensory stimulation, that is, when we allow ourselves to be controlled by feelings of anger or desire. If we detach ourselves from those ephemeral causes and focus on duty, we gain discipline. Krishna further argues that joy and freedom come from shutting out the ephemeral and paying attention to what is transcendent.

The ideas of caste and svadharma are central to the Bhagavad-Gītā. Arjuna is a member of the warrior caste; thus, his svadharma is to fight. But note that svadharma isn’t the only kind of dharma in play here. Arjuna, like all of us, has a more general dharma: his duty as a family member and a citizen. Like Arjuna, we, too, find that our particular and our more general duties are sometimes in conflict and that these conflicts may present us with our hardest choices in life.
As we’ve said, the word “yoga” means a discipline, in particular, the kind of discipline that permits us to accomplish things. In Arjuna’s case, Krishna emphasizes that the yoga of action involves restraining ourselves from desire, which is engendered in us from outside contact with sensory objects. We free ourselves from those external influences through discipline. In fact, the central teaching of the Bhagavad-Gītā is that liberation—genuine human freedom—comes through discipline, not through release from discipline.

There are three kinds of discipline in the Bhagavad-Gītā, representing three aspects of life. These are *karma* yoga, the discipline of action; *jñāna* yoga, the discipline of knowledge; and *bhakti* yoga, the discipline of devotion. Arjuna wonders why Krishna is urging him to act, given that knowledge is more important than action. But Krishna reminds Arjuna that we live in a world where action is essential and where our choices are always between actions. Inaction is never a choice; the only choice is how to act wisely. To act wisely, we must take seriously our obligations to the world and think of our actions as something we do in virtue of those obligations. In other words, think of action as a sacrifice, a ritual, motivated by higher goals and duties, not by immediate results.

Action is one form of yoga, but it’s not enough to generate a fully meaningful life; the discipline of action must be supplemented by *jñāna* yoga, the discipline of knowledge, which allows us to act in meaningful ways. Without understanding, action is shallow; indeed, the point of action is to deepen our understanding of the world, to give us insight that allows us to continue to behave meaningfully. Knowledge enables us to make the right decisions, to understand what’s permanent as opposed to what’s ephemeral, and it allows us to cut off desires, which are always binding.

In the context of the Bhagavad-Gītā, the meaning of *bhakti* yoga, the yoga of devotion, is a surrendering of our own goals to the order of the cosmos. We must ask how we can give up our egocentric desires and align our individual goals with the goals of those around us and with the cosmos as a whole. Devotion requires a mindfulness of our place in the world and our relationship to the whole; it also requires a constant questioning of our motives. This mindfulness, in turn, requires knowledge, which is why *jñāna* yoga is the foundation of *bhakti* yoga.
It is these three kinds of yoga, building on one another, that allow a life of action to be an integrated and rational life. It’s also important to take from the Bhagavad-Gītā the idea of discipline as the key to freedom. To be free from discipline is to give up control of one’s life to ephemeral, external forces; true freedom comes from self-control, which is achieved only through discipline.

**Important Term**

dharma: A word with many meanings the root of which means “to hold.”

**Suggested Reading**

Easwaran, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*.
Stoler-Miller, trans., *Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War*.

**Study Questions**

1. What is svadharma? How is it conceived in ancient India? How can we think of it productively today in our own culture?

2. What are the three yogas? How can we take these ancient Indian concepts seriously in modern Western culture?

3. What is disinterested action? Why is freedom from desire so important in this text?
Even though the cosmos is vast, each life has its place, and that place is something that we need to recognize by recognizing our svadharma, by recognizing our connection to the larger whole, and by recognizing that whatever is significant about our lives derives from that place in the larger whole.

In the Bhagavad-Gītā’s account of the meaning of life, meaning is located on two axes: disinterested individual duty, and freedom and discipline. The Gītā urges us to attain a kind of freedom that allows us to make meaningful choices, not merely the freedom of following our desires. In fact, we must seek freedom from desire, because desire always involves forces exerted by external factors. True freedom is a freedom to set those factors aside and to act according to our better selves. This freedom is secured by the disciplines of action, knowledge, and devotion, specifically, disinterested action guided by reflective knowledge and devotion to what’s relevant about our action for the world as a whole.

The Gītā’s transcendent account of the meaning of life comes to us in the great theophany, the moment when Krishna reveals himself to be the universe embodied in a single being. He is identical to the universe and, therefore, identical to the divinity and the significance of the universe. Through this revelation, we see that our individual actions as human beings are connected to the cosmos as a whole and, hence, to divinity. Transcendent meaning is thus given to each action we perform, each thought we think, and each word we speak.

We can understand the divinity of the universe in two ways. On one level, when Krishna reveals himself to be the universe, he’s revealing a hidden spiritual dimension to the universe that is accessible to us only through the three disciplines. On a deeper level, Krishna is pointing out that the universe itself is already infused with a kind of spirituality and significance without looking any further. We only have to see it for what it is; then, we
can understand why our own being, our own actions, our own concerns are already significant.

Krishna says to Arjuna, “All creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them.” By this, he means that everything has a place in the universe, and it’s that location that gives it significance. The pieces gain their importance from the whole. We gain significance in our lives through our relationship to the whole, but it’s the whole that’s the source of meaning. Further, our significance derives not only from our relationship to what happens in the actual at the moment—not only to being—but also to nonbeing—in relationship to the past and the future. The earlier account of the meaning of life gets its grounding in this transcendental account, because by understanding that each of our lives has its place in this cosmic whole, we understand why each of those lives has significance.

Krishna then says, “Whatever you do, what you take, what you offer, what you give, what penances you perform, do as an offering to me, Arjuna.” The suggestion here is that we should act and think in consciousness of our role in the larger wholes of which we are a part: our families, our organizations, our universe. Those are the wholes that give our lives significance, and only by thinking of each action in relation to those can we make our lives more than minor, temporary distractions in the history of the universe.

Now comes the theophany itself, the fabulous poetic representation of what the realization of divinity is actually like. We’re told that when Krishna revealed himself, “Everywhere was boundless divinity containing all astonishing things. Arjuna saw all the universe and its many ways and parts standing as one in the body of the god of all gods.” The Gītā is asking us here to pay attention to the cosmos as a unified whole, in which each phenomenon is interdependent, each has its own kind of beauty, and each has an identity that transcends its own individuality. Each of our lives has a part in this vast cosmic order. Krishna reminds Arjuna that although he is paying attention
to particular warriors arrayed on a particular battlefield, whole planets are going to disappear. Our task is to find meaning in our lives in that context.

The Bhagavad-Gītā represents the universe as a vast, organic unity that is itself divine; it’s not something that stands between us and the divine. This isn’t a vision of a transcendent god and an immanent universe, a universe that is meaningless but gains its meaning from something beyond it. Instead, this is a vision of an individual life and an individual context in relation to a universe that is already divine, already transcendent, already a locus of meaning. Here, our lives, too, are already divine, and we recognize that meaning—the meaning of our lives—when we recognize that fact. It’s a message that encourages fully engaged action in the world.

### Important Term

**theophany**: Revelation of the deity.

### Suggested Reading

Easwaran, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*.
Stoler-Miller, trans., *Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War*.

### Study Questions

1. What does it mean to say that we are fundamentally in union with the universe? Can we give this a down-to-earth reading?

2. How does the realization of our unity with the universe suggest an inner divinity? How does this, in turn, confer meaning on our lives?
Aristotle on Life—The Big Picture
Lecture 5

One of the really lovely things about Aristotle’s place in our Western tradition is [that] he really inaugurates this tradition of active critique of one’s own teachers and generates this ideal that we have in the liberal arts tradition of academic debate, rather than simply parroting what one has been taught.

In India, we saw that the account of a meaningful life combined the transcendent and the immanent into a single whole. In the West, we’ll find two very different roots, Greek and Semitic, that come together as foundations for our culture. In this context, we might say that the Greek tradition focuses on the everyday dimension of the meaning of life, and the Hebrew Bible and the Semitic tradition give us the transcendent.

In this lecture and the next two, we’ll explore *The Nicomachean Ethics*; this text is a compilation of lecture notes written by Aristotle’s son and students. **Aristotle** himself was an aristocratic citizen of Athens. He studied with Plato and, after graduating from Plato’s Academy, became the tutor to Alexander the Great. He also taught at his own academy, called the Lyceum, in Athens. None of Aristotle’s own writings survives, but his ideas come down to us in the form of notes taken by his students. Aristotle rejected Plato’s theory of perfect forms, arguing that all knowledge is acquired and emphasizing the importance of sensory knowledge.

The Greek word *anima* is translated as “soul,” but a better translation might be “life principle.” For the Greeks, *anima* meant something that animates, something that gives life. Aristotle used the word to mean the principles or processes that make us different from rocks. He thought of human beings primarily as one sophisticated kind of animal, not as spiritual beings whose minds are in direct communion with Plato’s abstract forms. Aristotle argued that the anima has a number of different layers: vegetative, which is involved with growth and nutrition; appetitive, the layer that gives us appetites or desires; sensory, the aspect that allows us to see, hear, and so on; locomotive,
The part responsible for motor control; and rational, the part that enables us to use language and to reason and that is unique to human beings.

The central value for Aristotle is *eudaimonea*; the term is most often translated as “happiness,” but it really means “to live well” or “to flourish.” It’s not a property of a moment or an experience but an evaluative property of a life as a whole. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks the question: What is it to flourish as a human being, to lead a good life? Another important aspect of Aristotelian ethics is the idea that goodness is closely tied to function and that we understand something when we understand its function. Aristotle argues that to be a good thing of a particular kind is always to perform the function that things of that kind perform well.

Aristotle’s account of *eudaimonea* is interesting in its complexity and multidimensionality. He argues that the flourishing of people can be evaluated on three orthogonal dimensions. The first of these is the dimension of virtue or excellence (Greek: *arête*); think of this idea as the character that makes the thing of its kind good. The virtue of a doctor, for example, is skill in healing. The second dimension is practical wisdom (Greek: *phronesis*); this is the knowledge of how to do things, such as skill in deliberating that enables us to attain our goals. It’s not enough to have good intentions and a wonderful character; if we can’t bring
those things into productive action, then we can’t really flourish. The third dimension is moral strength, which involves both knowing the right thing to do and setting aside overriding desires that might prevent us from doing it. This is similar to the Gītā’s idea that we must free ourselves from desire in order to have genuine freedom. Aristotle argues that flourishing requires all three dimensions of character—virtue, practical wisdom, and moral strength—but it also requires a larger context that includes material goods and friendship.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with a kind of definition of “the good” as that at which something aims. Aristotle then points out that some of our activities have ends, such as cooking in order to produce food, and some don’t, such as playing music. Where there is a product beyond the activity, the activity is the goal and is more important than the product. He continues by telling us that there isn’t one idea of “good”; there are different goods corresponding to different activities and domains, and sometimes, these things are grouped together. In cases of hierarchical goods, the highest is the most important one, and the others are subordinate. The question then is: What is the highest good of all? What is it for the sake of which we do everything else?

Another important aspect of Aristotelian ethics is the idea that goodness is closely tied to function and that we understand something when we understand its function.

Name to Know

**Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.):** Aristotle was born in Stageira and moved to Athens in his youth, where he was a prominent aristocrat. He studied under Plato at the Academy. After Plato’s death, he traveled in present-day Turkey, conducting scientific research.
Important Terms

*arête*: Virtue or excellence.

*eudaimonea*: Human flourishing, a good life, often translated as “happiness.”

*phronesis*: Practical wisdom, the ability to deliberate wisely about how to accomplish one’s goals.

Suggested Reading


Study Questions

1. What is the difference between Plato’s and Aristotle’s approaches to the definition of a good life?

2. What is the relation between Aristotle’s conception of the soul and his conception of the good?

3. How does Aristotle’s approach to human good appear to differ from that of the Gītā?
That, of course, is what we’re looking for: that thing which is final in an unqualified sense, which is always chosen as an end in itself and never as a means to anything else.

As we saw in the last lecture, Aristotle argued that many of our actions are performed for the sake of some end, and in that case, the end of the action is more important than the action itself. He also pointed out that our actions are often grouped hierarchically, and when they are, the super-ordinate ends are more important than the subordinate ends. If the hierarchy were infinite, then all of our actions and our lives would be pointless, but Aristotle concludes that there must be a highest good.

He then points out that the sciences and the arts—all our enterprises of knowledge—are aimed at human good, and he argues that the collective good, the good of a group of people, is always better than the good of an individual. The science of collective good is politics, that is, the science of governing a group of people in their own interest. Thus, Aristotle argues, politics is the domain that orders and governs all the other arts and sciences. Politics is the master science, and the good at which politics aims—the end of politics—will be the highest good. What is that highest good?

In trying to determine the highest good, Aristotle begins with a kind of argument by elimination. Pleasure is not the highest good because it’s good even for lower animals; it’s not distinctive to human beings. Honor is not the highest good because it depends more on those who confer it than on those who receive it. Further, the reason we seek to attain honor is to confirm our idea of our own excellence; thus, if honor is good, excellence must be better. Excellence, however, is not the highest good, because it might be unmanifested and because you might possess excellence in one area of your life, but the rest of your life could be filled with misfortune. Wealth is not the highest good because it is always a means to something else. Aristotle also dismisses Plato’s idea that the good is an abstract concept because there
are different goods for different things. If we’re looking for the good for a human being, we need to know the function of a human being.

Again, Aristotle reminds us that the good may be one thing in medicine and another thing in military strategy. The highest good—the final good—must be the one thing for which everything else is done but which is not done for the sake of anything else. He concludes that the only thing that fits this description is *eudaimonea*, flourishing: “For we always choose happiness as an end in itself, and never for the sake of something else.” We choose other things—pleasure, honor, wealth, and so on—partly for ourselves and partly because we assume that through them we will be happy.

Another dimension that Aristotle examines along the route to arguing that happiness is the highest good is self-sufficiency, defined as “that which taken by itself makes life something desirable and deficient in nothing.” In other words, if something is self-sufficient, then if you’ve got it, you’ve got everything. You don’t need to add something to it to make it good. Again, only happiness fits this description. You might possess wealth or honor, for example, but still be unhappy. Happiness is self-sufficient in its ability to make life worth living, and it is the most desirable good: “… it is not counted as one good thing among many others.”

According to Aristotle, to know what happiness is, we must first determine the proper function of human beings. Returning to the idea of *anima*, he reminds us that the aspect of the soul that is unique to humans is rationality. When we’re trying to determine the function of something, we must look for the thing that that something specifically does. For humans, the answer is to act in accordance with reason. Aristotle says, “The function of man is an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle.” Further, the function of something is always the function of an excellent example of that thing. The function of a musician—however good or bad—is to play music.
well; the musician who plays badly is not fulfilling his or her function. Given that the best person is the person with the most virtue, then the function of a human being is rational activity in accordance with human virtue. Thus, to be happy is to lead a life fulfilling that function.

Suggested Reading


Study Questions

1. What is the structure of the function argument?

2. What is the difference between happiness in Aristotle’s sense (*eudaimonea*) and happiness as it is normally understood in contemporary culture?
Generosity is a mean between stinginess and profligacy. Dignity is a mean between self-deprecation and pomposity. ... Wittiness—a nice virtue to display at a dinner party—is a mean between boorishness and buffoonery, and we certainly know people who fail to hit that mean and land in each extreme.

At the end of our last lecture, we concluded that happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, but that leaves us with two questions: What is virtue, and how do we act in accordance with it?

Aristotle argues that virtue is something we acquire by habit. The word “habit” in Greek is ἔθικη, from which we get “ethics.” Thus, when Aristotle connects virtue and habit, he’s pointing out that virtue or goodness—ethics—is acquired by habituation. In support of this assertion, Aristotle offers the change, acquisition, and same causes arguments.

With the first two arguments, Aristotle shows that virtue is acquired by habituation, not by nature. With the same causes argument, he points out that it’s a characteristic of such domains as art and athletic performance that the same kind of thing that produces excellence in the domain can also destroy it. For example, if you practice building sloppy, shoddy houses, you will become a bad carpenter, but if you practice building houses carefully, you’ll become a good carpenter. The same is true of moral virtue. We acquire it by careful training, and if we behave well, we become good people.

These arguments give rise to a chicken-and-egg question: If we become virtuous by performing virtuous actions, how do we perform the virtuous actions? Wouldn’t we already be virtuous in that case? Aristotle says that we can tell whether a person possesses virtue because he or she takes pleasure in acting virtuously. Further, Aristotle draws a distinction between performing an act that happens to be in accordance with the rules and internalizing those rules and following them. In other words, it’s one thing to perform the occasional just or brave act, but it’s another thing to have developed a
character that makes those acts the kind that one spontaneously performs and in which one takes pleasure.

Next we ask: What is a virtue? According to Aristotle, a virtue is always a mean between two extreme vices. The reason for this is that any kind of excellence can be ruined either by excess or by defect; we can have too much of a trait or too little. It’s difficult to become a good person because it’s difficult to precisely hit the mean. Of course, for different people, the mean might also be different. Thus, achieving a virtue is a kind of art that requires judgment and expertise.

Virtue alone isn’t enough for happiness. What we’re looking for is activity in accordance with virtue, and activity requires choice, which in turn, requires wisdom. We might wonder, isn’t Aristotle’s practical wisdom just another virtue? The answer is no, because practical wisdom is not a mean; you can’t have too much of it. Further, practical wisdom can serve vice as well as virtue.

But virtue and practical wisdom aren’t enough for happiness either; we also need the dimension of moral strength. It’s possible to want to do the right thing and to work out exactly what the right thing is but still fail to do it because of temptation or because of an inability to face pain. That would be an example of moral weakness. Moral strength involves sticking to one’s resolve even though doing so may be difficult; it involves fortitude. Again, moral strength isn’t a virtue because it isn’t a mean, and like practical wisdom, it can serve vice or virtue.
As we’ve seen, eudaimonea requires virtue, practical wisdom, and moral strength—three internal characteristics. It also requires two types of external supports: material goods, such as sufficient wealth to supply your needs and to keep you healthy, and social goods, meaning membership in a society. For Aristotle, friendship—in a broad sense of connectedness to others—is absolutely essential to a meaningful life and is what holds societies and states together. Our mutual commitments give us reason to work for the common good and to contribute to our society.

For Aristotle, friendship—in a broad sense of connectedness to others—is absolutely essential to a meaningful life and is what holds societies and states together. Aristotle distinguishes three different kinds of friendships: those based on pleasure, on usefulness, and on the good. Pleasure friendships are generally found between young people, while utility friendships are found among middle-aged and older people. Both kinds of friendship are incidental to particular ends, and as a consequence, both are temporary matters. Neither conduces to virtue, although they still contribute to our flourishing. Friendship in the fullest sense, according to Aristotle, is virtue friendship, that between two people who are both good and who wish good to each other. Such friendship is slow to develop and long-lasting. It is the kind of friendship that makes our lives most meaningful and sustains our virtue and happiness.

Important Term

ēthikē/ethos: Behavior or conduct.

Suggested Reading


1. Why is virtue always a mean?

2. What is the difference between action in accordance with virtue and genuinely virtuous action?

3. Why are moral strength and practical wisdom not virtues?

4. What is the difference between action as understood by Aristotle and action as understood in the Gītā, and what are the similarities between these accounts?

5. Why are so many things beyond our control necessary for flourishing? How does this account differ from that of the Gītā?

6. What are the differences among pleasure, utility, and virtuous friendship? Why is the latter so important to real happiness?
Job’s Predicament—Life Is So Unfair

Lecture 8

There’s already a sense in which the book of Job is representing people not as free agents in the world but as kind of among the ... random catastrophes or benefits that can happen. This is not your ... standard representation of human agency. This isn’t Aristotle; this isn’t the Gītā.

In our examination of ancient views about the meaning of life, we’ve thus far visited India and classical Greece. As we’ve seen, the Gītā emphasized the importance of individual choice, existential situations, and an understanding of our relationship to the transcendent. It also argued for the need to detach ourselves from our immediate surroundings and conditions in order to free ourselves for thoughtful action. In contrast, Aristotle emphasized our connections to friends and associates and a set of virtues aimed not at a relationship to the transcendent but at enrichment of life in the temporal world. It’s useful to think of these two texts as providing complementary perspectives.

Before we begin our study of the book of Job, let’s pause to consider our approach to the texts we’ve been examining. Both the Bhagavad-Gītā and The Nicomachean Ethics are, in a sense, sacred texts in important spiritual traditions, but we didn’t adopt a religious attitude toward them. For our purposes, it’s a mistake to treat such texts as so sacred that we give up the right to interpret them and connect them to our own lives. We will take the same philosophical approach to the book of Job.

Job is a book of mysterious origins and authorship, probably well known in its standard form by about the 6th century B.C. The preface tells us that Job is both extremely virtuous and extremely rich. He’s so virtuous and rich, in fact, that Satan is prompted to question whether God has made it too easy for Job to be pious because he has been so blessed. Satan, acting as God’s “devil’s advocate,” urges God to put Job to the test. God, believing that Job will remain pious, agrees to allow Satan to wreak his havoc as long as he doesn’t hurt Job himself. As we know, Job is then subjected to various catastrophes that destroy his home and livestock and kill his children.
Of course, Job laments his losses, but he continues to praise God. Satan ups the ante, asking God to bring physical suffering to Job, and God agrees. Satan causes painful boils to appear on Job’s body. Job’s wife asks her husband, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die.” In effect, she’s saying that his years of piety have been meaningless. Job responds, “Let the day perish on which I was born. Why did I not die at birth?” but he still doesn’t relinquish his faith.

If our lives are so short and full of toil without reward, how can they be meaningful?

Next, Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to visit. They are certain that he must have done something to deserve his fate, and if he will only repent of his sins, God’s punishment will cease. Job tells them that he needs consolation from his friends, not rebuke—an Aristotelian point of view. Further, his friends are unable to tell him what he’s done wrong; they simply presume that he’s done something. Job says that misfortune isn’t necessarily our own fault.

Then Job launches into a series of questions: Is life meaningless? It seems that we work hard on earth in hopes of a reward, but we don’t always get that reward. Job acknowledges, too, that life is brief: “Remember that my life is but breath ….” If our lives are so short and full of toil without reward, how can they be meaningful? Finally, Job sees that life is unjust, and he asks God why he has become the target for suffering. Job challenges God: “For now I will lie down in the dust; And thou will seek me, but I will not be.” Bildad, hearing this, accuses Job of blasphemy: charging God with injustice. Again, Bildad tells Job that he must have done something to deserve his suffering, but Job says that justice is exactly the wrong metaphor for thinking about God because the parties involved are so unequal. Moreover, the world is full of injustice, and if God is in charge, then he’s responsible for it.

The third friend, Zophar, tells Job that he doesn’t necessarily understand anything about God, but he should accept that he has committed some sin and repent. We might think that this defense of blind piety is the moral of the story, but it’s not. Job tells his friends that they are arguing as if they are somehow channeling God and that none of their claims makes sense. The
real problem for Job—and for us—is to try to make sense of life in the face of these facts: that we are going to die after a life of suffering and that we’re stuck in a world that doesn’t seem to be organized by a just God. Given those circumstances, what is the meaning of life? ■

Suggested Reading

Job.


Scheindlin, *The Book of Job*.

Study Questions

1. Why does God take up the bet? What does this say about the nature of the deity as it is portrayed in this book?

2. Why are Job’s friends so sure that he must have done something to deserve his misfortune?
Job’s Challenge—Who Are We?
Lecture 9

What Job has done—the book of Job, that is—is to take the suffering of an individual and quickly universalize it.

We ended the last lecture with Job’s three friends arguing that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering, even though he doesn’t know what it is, and urging him to repent. But Job knows that the idea of divine justice makes no sense because justice implies a sense of equality, and we are not equal to God. Further, any reasonable person looking at what God has done would have to conclude that this is already a case of terrible injustice. Job has shown us that there’s nothing particular about himself; we are all Job. All of us lead lives that are short and full of suffering.

At this point, Job’s friends begin to argue that we might make sense of our brief, anguished lives in the context of an incomprehensible God and an incomprehensible universe. Eliphaz accuses Job of spinning out theories claiming to understand what’s going on, claiming even to understand that everything is incomprehensible; this is what Job is being punished for. Note the thematic shift here: Earlier, the discussion took for granted that Job’s suffering made some kind of sense; now it takes for granted that everything is incomprehensible. Bildad tells Job that he is compounding whatever his original sin might have been by refusing to accept the obvious explanation for his suffering. Job’s blasphemy is that he thinks he understands everything and knows that God is unjust.

Zophar attempts to console Job, telling him that his suffering will be temporary and that in the end, good will triumph. Job knows that life isn’t like this fairytale; we all inhabit the ash heap of reality, in which evil sometimes prospers and justice sometimes fails. If we’re going to find meaning in our lives, we have to find it in a world that is, in fact, imperfect and unjust.

Bildad argues that we are worthless, insignificant specks in the universe—“maggots and worms”—while God is great and majestic; thus, he has given
us exactly the universe we deserve. Job points out that this view is the real blasphemy. If we take for granted that God is just and good and can punish us when we deserve it, then saying that we are maggots who deserve terrible lives is saying that God, justly and benevolently, created a world of maggots just to torture them. That makes both our relationship to God and our lives totally meaningless.

At this point, a younger man, Elihu, enters. He urges Job to pay attention because God is trying to tell him something, but Job wonders how he’s supposed to interpret this message. If all his suffering itself is meaningless, then it must be that God is meaningless.

Elihu, however, has made the first profound point against Job. It may well be that things in the world are meaningless and we’re smart enough to see that they’re meaningless, or it may be that there is a larger pattern or message in what seems meaningless, and our perspective is too narrow for us to see it. Job may be blaming God or the universe for his own inability to understand.

Now God challenges all of the assembled men and, in doing so, challenges us, as well. We’re not just Job, but we’re the friends, too, because each of us has a certain amount of faith that everything will come out all right and that if we think hard enough, the universe is comprehensible. God now says that he is, in fact, totally incomprehensible and we shouldn’t even try to understand. He confirms the idea that justice is nonsense when we talk about the relationship between human beings and divinity and tells us that he doesn’t owe us any hidden purpose or justification for his actions because the universe isn’t organized around us. Job and his friends have taken for granted that the universe is organized to be comprehensible to us, to be a place where we can lead meaningful lives. But that is the most terrible hubris of all. In the end, we can’t necessarily make sense of our lives or of God.

The book of Job gives us a disturbing vision of the meaning of life, a vision of a vast universe, perhaps personified in a deity, in which we are very small
players. We might think that the universe is organized to reward and punish us, but the book of Job tells us that we’re not all that important; our lives are indeed ephemeral. There might be a divinity to the world, but whatever it is, it’s not about justice and it’s not about us. Life is not meaningless, but we may live our lives without ever knowing its meaning.

Suggested Reading

Job.


Scheindlin, *The Book of Job*.

Study Questions

1. Why is the fact that there is no justice in God’s actions not a problem?

2. Why does Job’s lament appear to be blasphemous? Why isn’t it?

3. What are the similarities and the differences between the vision of the relation of humans to the divine in the Gītā and in Job?
Anger, [Seneca] argues, is essentially freefall. You just lose control completely and you have no control over your actions, but if you want to act reasonably, you need control.

We begin this lecture with an outline of Stoicism, a philosophical school that arose in Greece and proved to be influential in Rome. The Stoics argued that all of our knowledge is based in sense perception but is amplified by reasoning. They further believed that the universe is an entirely physical thing—there’s no spiritual substance—but it is a rational place with its own kind of intelligence. It was designed by a deity, Zeus, who permeates the universe but is unconcerned with humans. Zeus is completely rational, while our rationality is a fragment of the divine rationality, and our freedom, hence, is limited. Aside from free, rational acts, the universe is entirely causally determined; it’s a mechanism. The only way we can transcend a mechanistic life is through rational action.

For the Stoics, humans are animals and are subject to emotions, but we can control our emotions if we exercise reason. A great deal of Stoicism is about gaining freedom from emotions—setting them aside—just as in the Gīṭā, we saw that freedom is gained by detaching ourselves from sense perception. Stoicism emphasized the idea that we have control over our internal lives—reason gives us that freedom—but because of the causal determination of the universe, the external world is outside of our control.

Stoicism agrees with Aristotle on the idea that our nature is fundamentally rational and social, that our passions are external, and that our moral life requires a rational control of them. With the Gīṭā, Stoicism shares the insight that the most important aspect of our nature is the part that we share with the divine. For the Gīṭā, that divinity was our ability to perform our svadharma and be in a kind of union with the cosmos. For the Stoics, the union is a rational one.
The Stoic philosopher Seneca was born about the time of Jesus, was educated in Rome, and became a Roman senator. His writing focuses on anger as a central case for analysis of emotion. Anger comes upon us as a passion, and it motivates outward action. According to Seneca, anger is disgusting, dangerous, and unnatural, but it provides us with a domain to practice self-control—to be skeptical about the causes of anger, to be reflective about our responses to it, and to rise above it. This will give us the possibility of leading a moderate, happy, and useful life—a meaningful life.

Another Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, offers some interesting contrasts with Seneca. Epictetus was a slave, and his thought is more reflective about the nature of life than Seneca’s. He argued that we live our lives in interdependence and that much of what happens to us is, thus, completely out of our control. For that reason, we should accept the external conditions we find, as well as the harms they cause us, with good cheer and dedicate ourselves to behaving rationally for the good of the whole. We should always bear in mind that finitude is the nature of human life and of reality; if we understand this, we will understand how to give our lives more meaning.

Epictetus tells us that if we view ourselves as independent entities, it will seem to be natural to be wealthy and to live to old age. But if we view...
ourselves as part of some whole, “then for the sake of that whole, it is incumbent on you to get sick at one point, at another to take a dangerous voyage … to die prematurely.”

Epictetus also emphasizes our social roles. Because we’re rational, we can understand the nature of life and live in harmony with it. We are citizens and family members with responsibilities to the community, our children, and our parents. Our identities are determined by these contexts, and it is what we do in these contexts that gives our lives meaning.

In a beautiful passage, Epictetus uses autumnal metaphors to address the subject of death. He writes of the harvesting of grain and the falling of leaves but says that neither of these is the end of something or something to lament; they are merely changes of certain conditions. When we die, we change from our current state to a different one, and the world around us changes from a state in which we’re present to a different state that doesn’t exist right now. We didn’t get to choose the transition from nonexistence to existence at our births, and we don’t get to choose the transition from existence to nonexistence at death, but that transition is not a great cosmic drama. There’s nothing different about it than the harvesting of grain.

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**Names to Know**

**Epictetus (55–135 C.E.):** A popular teacher and widely respected both as a Stoic philosopher and an orator.

**Seneca (c. 4-65 CE):** We know little of Seneca’s early life, although his was an influential family. One of his brothers was a proconsul, and Seneca himself became tutor to the emperor Nero.
Suggested Reading


Sellars, *Stoicism*.


Study Questions

1. Why do the Stoics believe that all emotions should be overcome? Why is none of the emotions positive?

2. In what respects do the Stoics build on Aristotle? In what ways do they diverge from him?

3. How does the Stoic vision of the divine and our relation to it differ from that in the book of Job?

4. Why is death so important for Epictetus?
Marcus Aurelius is urging us to take the long view, take the cosmic view. Think about the world as a whole. Almost everything that we obsess about in our lives, he says, is really very brief, very momentary, very local, hardly worthy of obsession, even death itself.

The Stoics emphasized the importance of controlling the emotions and leading a rational life in society. Epicurean philosophy, another Hellenistic tradition, focused on interdependence, causality, and human finitude and death.

Lucretius was probably the most influential of the Epicureans. He believed that the reason death causes so much difficulty for us is our fear of it, but unlike death itself, this fear is not inevitable. Lucretius points out that our lives are but short intervals bounded by infinite periods of our absence, and if the absence before our lives is not tragic, then the absence afterward shouldn’t be either. What becomes a problem is our anxiety about death, which can prevent us from experiencing all that is pleasurable in life and can lead us to try to preserve the illusion of youth or to artificially prolong our lives. Lucretius argues that if we think about death carefully and clearly, we will come to recognize that it is no great evil.

Marcus Aurelius was a serious student of both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. As emperor of Rome, he was a reluctant warrior, forced by circumstances beyond his control to wage nearly constant wars. The text we will address, Meditations, was his journal, written while he was in a military camp in northern Europe. From the Stoics, Marcus draws the conviction that there is a rational order to the universe, that humans are in a unity with the cosmos and, hence, that we are essentially rational. He also inherits the Stoic emphasis on controlling emotion and fulfilling one’s social roles and duties. The Epicurean themes he introduces are an emphasis on our finitude, a focus on the constant flux of reality, and a need to think rationally about death.
Marcus, like Seneca, is concerned about the issues of anger and attachment, and he reminds us that the unpleasantness in others that might lead us to anger is a fault in them, not an insult to us. He urges us to depersonalize; when things occur that seem to be aimed at us, we should realize that they are external events from which we can detach our emotions. This detachment applies to both aversive and beautiful things, because desire is just as irrational as anger.

In a passage on the naturalness of cooperation, Marcus writes that every day, we are guaranteed to meet people who are “interfering, ungracious, insolent … and antisocial,” but humans are “born to labor together …. To work against each other is therefore contrary to nature.” He asks us to disregard injury and, thus, dispense with anger. Further, he advises us to detach our judgment from the external. Irrationality arises when the judgment, not the external phenomenon, occurs. For Marcus, roasted meat should be viewed as just “the dead body of a bird or a pig”; a purple robe is merely “sheep’s wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish.” Such images “go to the heart of things” because they are completely neutral, objective, rational descriptions. They don’t require us to make positive judgments or to develop attachments, which can overcome our rational selves.

Marcus emphasizes the order of the universe and the need for self-control that entails. We should remember always that we are integral parts of a well-ordered universe, and the whole depends on the proper functioning of its parts. Our own individual happiness as parts of that whole also depends on the success of the whole. We owe it to ourselves, as well as to the universe, to act dependably, rationally, and cooperatively.

Following Lucretius, Marcus emphasizes that cessation of everything is natural and must be anticipated and accepted. Nothing, including ourselves, is really as important as we think it is; what’s important is to live rationally. Moreover, there is genuine beauty in finitude and impermanence. Value
can be created in this context, partly because when our moments are few, they become important. If we lived forever, no particular moment would be important. Further, the nature of things is to be constantly changing and in flux. If we try to stop time or stop change, we’re engaged in a futile fight against the nature of reality. Marcus tells us, “The cessation of each thing is no less the aim of nature than its birth or duration.”

Despite the world’s impermanence, Marcus argues that a rational life can be meaningful, and this meaning can be found in philosophy, that is, in reflective thought, acceptance of our finitude, and rationality. As we said, there is beauty to be found in signs of impermanence, and if we can come to appreciate the impermanence of human life, it, too, can be beautiful.

**Name to Know**

**Marcus Aurelius (121–160 C.E.):** Marcus Aurelius was the son of a wealthy, noble Roman family living in present-day Spain.

**Important Term**

**Epicurean:** A school of Greek and Roman philosophy following the teachings of Epicurus (4th–3rd century B.C.E.).

**Suggested Reading**


McLynn, *Marcus Aurelius: A Life*.

**Study Questions**

1. How does Marcus reconcile detachment with commitment to action?
2. According to Marcus, what is the role of reason in the good life?
3. Why are death and finitude possible sources of beauty and pleasure?
That’s the Confucian ideal of personal development and upbringing: polishing the human being like a gem.

It’s important for us today to develop an understanding of Chinese philosophical systems because China has emerged as a major world power and a major contributor to world culture, and as we’ll see, contemporary Chinese culture is still very true to its Confucian roots, both politically and socially.

The name Confucius is a Latinization of Kongfuzi or Kongzi, which is how Confucius is known in China. He lived in approximately the 5th century B.C.E., coeval with the Greek, Sanskritic, and Hebraic traditions that we have examined. This was a period of tremendous social and political ferment in China, with constant warring among the small feudal states of the region. Kongfuzi was a native of the state of Lu and seems to have come from a family of middle-class bureaucrats. He gathered around him a group of students, many of whom rose to high ranks in the civil service and propagated his views.

The text from which we know Kongfuzi’s philosophy is The Analects, or Teachings, compiled long after his death from the recollections of his students. It was clearly intended for an audience of Chinese aristocrats and public servants. The goal of the text is the characterization of what we might call a humane, cultured life.

The Analects relies on a particular set of key philosophical ideas, some of which may be unfamiliar to Western thinking. The first of these is ren, meaning humanity or warm-heartedness. The second is li, meaning ritual propriety or correctness, particularly in everyday personal interactions. The third idea here is de, meaning virtue or moral rectitude; this concept involves obeying the moral strictures of one’s society. Next is xiao, filial piety, respect for one’s elders and for authority. Next is tian, which refers to the nature or order of the universe. Finally, we have the notion of
wu-wei. This is sometimes translated as “non-action,” but we can also think of it as spontaneity or effortlessness, the kind of effortlessness we find in totally cultured professionalism.

The Confucian framework aims to cultivate individual excellence in a social context. It attempts to provide a kind of ideal of a literate, cultured aristocrat. Humanity and virtue, ren and de, are achievements of character, to be accomplished through proper training and practice and eventually manifested in effortless excellence—wu-wei. This cultivation always requires and, in turn, supports a social order grounded in the family and in well-ordered social institutions. Li and xiao, ritual propriety and filial piety, are the foundations of this social order and, in turn, reflect the cosmic order, or tian.

Turning to the text, we first note the special role that filial piety plays in the foundations of Confucian theory. The idea here is that we learn respect for our elders and obedience and conformity to maintain order in the family, and that behavior is then exported to produce a harmonious society. Proper social interaction then grounds this stability. According to The Analects, we should ask ourselves every day whether or not we have practiced virtue in our dealings with others. Later in the text, Kongfuzi tells us that to be respected as a leader, one must show respect and trustworthiness in interpersonal relationships.
Li, propriety or etiquette, is also essential to the social order and to excellence in life. For Kongfuzi, it is “acceptable” to be “poor without being obsequious, rich without being arrogant … but it is still not as good as being poor and yet joyful, rich and yet loving ritual.” Li must be cultivated, but it also itself is a cultivating force.

With regard to wu-wei, The Analects tells us that successful leadership or administration requires a minimization of effort, not heavy-handedness. The good ruler stays in the background, exemplifying the virtues and inspiring his subjects, not threatening them. Wu-wei also involves a kind of spontaneity and harmony. To harmonize with others is to work together with them; the parties may sometimes disagree, but they always exhibit respect, propriety, and a common sense of purpose and order.

The notion of Confucian goodness animated by this set of constructs is a global characterization; it’s not a single dimension of human life. We may know that someone has particular good qualities, but overall goodness involves having all of these good qualities harmoniously unified. Note, too, that this global dimension of goodness is always social in character; these virtues are manifested in our social interactions with others.

The Confucian framework shows some similarities to the framework of the Gītā and Stoicism and to Aristotle, but quite distinctively from any of the cultures we’ve seen so far, there is a strongly ritual and aesthetic understanding of the good life in Confucian thought. The good life is beautiful in certain respects—effortless, spontaneous, ritualized, and aestheticized.

Confucius (Kongfuzi) (c. 551–479 B.C.E.): Confucius was born in the Chinese state of Lu (the present-day Shandong province of China) to a military family near the end of the spring-autumn period of Chinese history, a period that saw a great deal of warfare between small Chinese states.
**Important Term**

*Analects, The*: The collection of sayings and dialogues attributed to Kongfuzi (Confucius). It relies on a set of key philosophical ideas.

**Suggested Reading**


Wei-Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*.

**Study Questions**

1. Describe the differences among *ren*, *li*, *de*, and *xiao*. Why are they jointly necessary for the good life?

2. What is the relationship among the individual, the family, and the broader social order in a Confucian framework?
Remember in the background that for every chapter of the Daodejing we discuss, we’ll be relying on a single translation, [but] there are hundreds of others, and … interpretation always lies behind translation.

The Daodejing is traditionally ascribed to a figure known as Laozi ("old master"), although most scholars believe that the book is actually a compilation of sayings and chapters from a variety of sources. The text, comprising 81 chapters grouped into two books, was solidified around the 3rd or 2nd century B.C.E. The Daodejing is the most frequently translated book in the world, and its translations and interpretations differ vastly.

Although Daoism shares with Confucianism a certain preoccupation with the idea of *wu-wei*, the Daoists have an opposite understanding of its cultivation. For the Confucians, *wu-wei* is a positive thing, the building up of ever-greater virtuosity. For the Daoists, it is negative, a paring away of accretions and a return to a natural state. In Daoism, culture inhibits our natural state, whereas in Confucianism, it is part of our nature to become cultured. Language and conventions are not civilizing factors in Daoism.

The meaning of the word *dao* most simply is "a way," as in a path or a way of life. Interestingly, a *dao* can also mean a discourse or discussion or a text or poem. In this sense, it can be a way of thinking or a way of talking. Finally, it can refer to the fundamental nature of reality—as we might put it, "the way things are." The word *de* can mean moral virtue, but it can also mean nature, as in the nature of things. Other meanings include excellence, purity, power, and light.

In the Daodejing, what is the *dao* a *dao* of? Primarily, it’s a *dao* of life—a way of life—specifically, a way of life lived in harmony with the universe. For that reason, it’s also the *dao* of the universe, the fundamental nature of things, because the central insight of Daoism is that the right way to live is in harmony with the way the universe itself is. Given that human life is so concerned with talking and thinking and drawing distinctions, it’s also a *dao*
of talk and a dao of thought. The dao here is all of these things: the nature of the universe, the way we should live, and the way we should think about the nature of the universe and the way we should live.

One of the distinctive elements of the Daoist account of life is the focus on stripping away culture and returning to nature. Also important is an emphasis on the background, not the foreground. The Daoists focus on empty space, as opposed to the positive things that occupy space. The goal is not to create spontaneity but to recover the spontaneity that we have in us from birth. There’s also a deep suspicion of language in thought and an attempt to return to a primordial mode of thinking.

As mentioned, different translations of the Daodejing offer differing interpretations of the text. We read excerpts from three translations of chapter 1 that introduce us to a number of important Daoist themes. Among these is the idea that words and names are conventional, not constant; their meanings aren’t anchored to reality. Further, there is a kind of primordial ground for the possibility of thinking that we can’t literally describe but is the basis of our ability to experience and describe anything. We also see the idea that desire and human concerns bring particular entities into a foreground; it is our concerns that make objects what they are. Finally, positive space emerges from negative space, and to understand the relationship between that emergent positive and the primordial is the deepest mystery.

Chapter 2 of the Daodejing gives us a discussion of the relativity of values to each other—good to bad, beautiful to ugly—and the mutual dependence of opposites. We can characterize something as having a particular quality only if we characterize something else as having the opposite quality. In this way, we attribute value to things in the world that have no intrinsic value. The
properties or qualities we identify are projections of our own concerns and desires, and these projections distance us from reality.

The Daodejing urges us to pay attention to the background of reality, as well as the foreground. The Daoist sage gives up the effort of distinguishing foreground and background and is able, therefore, to recover a spontaneous engagement with the entire matrix of the world in which he or she exists. The sage also recognizes that he himself is not an object against a background who initiates unique actions but a participant in a vast array of processes. Our achievements are the consequence of the confluence of a vast causal network of which we are only one part. Because the sage makes no claims—has no attachments—“he suffers no loss.”

Suggested Reading

Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*.


Red Pine, *Lao-Tzu’s Taoteching*.

Study Questions

1. What is the range of meanings of dao? How are they related to one another? How is the dao different from the Confucian tian?

2. Why is the issue of relativity so important? What is achieved by focusing on binaries instead of on particular poles of those binaries?
We also find here, more specifically with respect to the ... Confucian
context, a specific denigration of justice and ritual, a specific
denigration of the explicit forms of behavior, forms of social intercourse,
and the most ritualized, calcified, specified, and explicit forms of
social interaction.

As we continue with the Daodejing, recall the multiple meanings
of dao: a way of living, of talking, and of thinking; the way the
universe works; and a way of understanding all these things. The
first chapter of the Daodejing points out that language and the concepts that
language encodes are not fixed and do not reflect the nature of reality; they
are, instead, projections of our own thinking onto reality. If the goal is to live
in harmony with reality, these projections are obstacles. By naming objects,
we are also picking them out against a background, and thus, we tend to
experience the world as discrete. But according to the Daoists, reality is a
seamless whole, of which our lives are a part.

Confucianism and Daoism share a valorization of wu-wei that differs from
anything we have seen in the Western tradition or in the Bhagavad-Gītā.
The difference here lies in the concept of a meaningful life as one that is
lived spontaneously, not one in which we deliberate and choose each action
we perform. The contrast between the Daoists and the Confucians is in the
analysis and achievement of that kind of effortless spontaneity.

In chapter 3 of the Daodejing, we read: “Bestowing no honors keeps people
from fighting. Prizing no treasures keeps people from stealing. ...” The
positive value of winning prizes or having treasure is often valorized without
noticing the negative content that creates jealousy or covetousness. Instead,
the text says, “the rule of the sage empties the mind, but fills the stomach;
weakens the will, but strengthens the bones.” The mind is the part of us that
conceptualizes and drives us through calculation, while the stomach drives
us through instinct. This passage also suggests that fixing on models of
success results in the occlusion of other possibilities.
Chapter 38 gives us the Daoist valuation of effort and conceptualization with regard to moral action. In both the Aristotelian and Confucian accounts, virtue required a great deal of effort and thought. In Daoism, we find a complete rejection of that and an explicit denigration of Confucian accounts of justice and ritual. A beautifully ironic passage in this chapter reads: “When the way is lost, virtue appears; when virtue is lost, kindness appears; when kindness is lost, justice appears.” Remember that “the way” is spontaneous behavior in accordance with nature. When we lose our spontaneity—by getting caught up in conventions and focusing on the foreground—we turn to a doctrine of virtue for guidance on how to behave. If we lose virtue, then we must be instructed to at least be kind. And when we stop being kind to one another, then we need justice. Having followed this Confucian hierarchy, the Daodejing then tells us: “When justice is lost, ritual appears. Ritual marks the waning of belief and the onset of confusion.”

We see here a kind of negative valuation of effort in what it takes to be human. Each of these stages requires more effort than the preceding one, but the most effortless, spontaneous behavior is the best. Cultivation and effort emerge only as necessities when we lose our character. The Confucian ideal of ritual—of highly explicit forms of social interaction—is viewed by the Daoists as the most fossilized, least natural form of interaction. And those are often the forms that are most valorized as the foundations of our social order.
For the Daoist, every step down the hierarchy—from *dao*, to virtue, to kindness, to justice, to ritual—is a denigration of ourselves from a natural state to an artificial one. This denigration occurs in a single process, cultivation. The Confucian model of cultivation is akin to bottling spontaneous, natural behavior, and the result is the destruction of natural life.

In chapter 12, we see that this destruction is wrought by language and cognition and their role in the Confucian goal-driven approach to life, as opposed to a spontaneous, natural approach. The chapter begins with a set of paradoxes: “The colors make our eyes blind. The five tones make our ears deaf. The five flavors make our mouths numb.” The idea here is that if we conceptualize something, such as the color red, then we tend to see scarlet, crimson, and so on as all the same color. We reduce our multifarious world to boxes defined by conceptual categories. This doesn’t reveal reality but breaks it into chunks.

Chapters 18 and 19 give us similar paradoxes, pointing out that morality is harmed—not helped—by sophistication, cultivation, and structure. Our social structures and the artificial values they embody induce not human progress but decadence and corruption. Productive action stems from *wu-wei*, and sometimes, doing nothing is exactly the right thing to do.

**Suggested Reading**

Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*.


Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person*.

Red Pine, *Lao-Tzu’s Taoteching*. 
Study Questions

1. How does the fact that there is no constant *dao* ground the idea that flexibility, tolerance, and spontaneity are fundamental to moral life?

2. Why do Daoists disparage moral striving and effort, and why in particular are justice and ritual regarded as antithetical to moral life?
All this space between sky and earth is there, and it’s inexhaustible—it doesn’t go away—and just as it’s a bellows that makes it possible for us to have a fire and be warm, it’s that space that makes it possible for things to exist, to be, and to change.

In chapter 5 of the Daodejing, we read, “Heaven and earth are heartless, treating creatures like straw dogs.” Straw dogs were burned in Chinese rituals as a way of expiating one’s sins. Here, the Daodejing means that as far as the universe is concerned, people are dispensable. This echoes the idea we saw in the book of Job: that the universe isn’t constructed around us.

Detachment makes sense if what we want is a life of harmony. Attachment is getting stuck in one piece of the foreground and ignoring all of space and time as a consequence. Our lives and our world are empty—they have no essence, no permanence—but it’s because of that emptiness that our lives are full of possibilities.

In chapter 7, we read, “Heaven is eternal and earth is immortal. The reason they are eternal and immortal is that they don’t live for themselves; hence, they can live forever.” The message here is that if we want to lead a life that has some endurance through positive effects, we need to let go of ourselves and our concerns. The sage, we are told, “lets himself go, but ends up safe.” Our self-centered, goal-directed behavior is often exactly what gets in the way of accomplishing our goals; if we relax and allow other ideas to flourish and others’ goals to be met, our own will be met, too.

The Daodejing offers us a beautiful metaphor about water: “The best are like water, bringing help to all without competing, choosing what others avoid, hence approaching the dao….” Of course, water is beneficial, but also important is the idea that water doesn’t compete: It flows around rocks in a stream; it provides a home for fish; it makes things possible for others. For us, to live as spontaneously as water and to live to benefit others is to
approach the *dao*. Another water metaphor emphasizes the importance of moderation: “Instead of pouring in more, better stop while you can.”

Elsewhere, the Daodejing tells us, “Houses full of treasure can never be safe. The vanity of success invites its own failure.” If you parade your successes and set yourself up as the foreground of the universe, you put yourself in disharmony with those around you, and your projects will fail because you lack cooperation.

Chapter 11 concludes, “When your work is done, retire. This is the way of heaven! Focus on the empty space!” We realize that there is always more that could be done tomorrow, but we don’t need to keep filling that space. Possibilities are just as important as accomplishments. The focus on empty space continues with this metaphor: “Thirty spokes converge on a hub, but it’s the emptiness that makes a wheel work.” If a wheel was nothing more than spokes and a rim—solid things—it couldn’t be put on an axle, and it wouldn’t work. It’s the emptiness at the hub that makes the wheel work. We’re so conditioned by conceptual thought, language, and socialization to focus on the wood and the metal of the wheel that we miss that important empty space. The same is true of a pot and even a house. The conclusion here is: “Existence makes something useful, but nonexistence makes it work!” This is a key to the great mystery—the relationship between the *dao* and all the things that are manifest in the world. Nothing is what it is in virtue of its positive or negative aspect alone.

We’ve seen that concern for others is the best way to advance ourselves and that self-concern always backfires. Just as we don’t want to focus on the wheel but notice the hub, we can’t focus on just ourselves, but we have to pay attention to the social context in which we figure. Such ideas are subtle, but the Daodejing argues that a virtuous life is subtle. Indeed, the text tells us that when an idiot hears about the *dao*, “he laughs out loud.” From the standpoint of most social convention, the good life described in the Daodejing sounds absurd, but it’s precisely because it runs counter to
cultivation that we know we’re on the right track. Often, what is imperfect is best and what we don’t have turns out to be the most useful.

Following the dao is not a positive cultivation, not building something up. It’s eliminating the rigidity that arises from cultivation. In this, it’s much more like Stoicism than it is like the Gītā or Confucius. It’s also much more metaphysically charged than many of the texts we’ve read so far, an account not only of what our lives are like but of what the universe is like and of how our lives can be in harmony with the universe.

Suggested Reading

Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought.*


Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person.*


Study Questions

1. Why is virtue so paradoxical? Why does Daoism valorize the paradoxical?

2. Why is imperfection valued over perfection? Why is ruling a nation like cooking a small fish?
We can lead our lives as Chinese philosophers (or as American individuals), or we can lead our lives as butterflies, just so we flit about as a butterfly would or flit about as a Chinese philosopher would. That’s all that counts.

Before we move on to the *Zhuangzi*, we need to keep some of the “big ideas” of Daoism in mind: the emphasis on the negative rather than the positive; the idea that moral cultivation is a negative process, a stripping away of attachments and even of knowledge; and the idea that language and concepts are variable and reflect more about us than they do anything beyond us. For Daoists, the recognition that language and concepts aren’t fixed leads to a suspicion of logic and reason, which are also artificial constructs—tools that we invent ourselves. Interestingly, this critique of logic and reason is based on logical argument, but Daoists acknowledge that it applies to Daoism as much as to anything else. In the end, Daoism gives us good reason to reject good reasons; it urges us to strip away all accretions, even the accretion of understanding the *dao*.

One other point we need to keep in mind is the fact that Daoism, like Confucianism, involves an aestheticization of experience and philosophical reflection. Both accounts are pregnant with aesthetic metaphors, although Daoism finds beauty in a kind of rough naturalism as opposed to a beauty of perfect cultivation and civilization. We also find this aesthetic dimension to life in the *Zhuangzi*.

The core of this text seems to have been written by an author named Zhuangzi, who lived from about 369 to 286 B.C. The full text was probably completed about 150 years after the original author’s death, again, a compilation from numerous authors. Zhuangzi is said to have turned down a lucrative political post because he didn’t want to be like the ox offered in sacrifice: “He is generously fed for years and dressed in the finest embroidered fabrics, so that he may one day be led into the Great Temple for slaughter.”
One of the most famous passages in the *Zhuangzi* concerns the philosopher named Zhuang Zhou who dreamed he was a butterfly; then, when he awoke, he was unsure whether he was a butterfly dreaming about Zhuang Zhou. Reason can’t possibly settle the question of which is the dream and which is reality, and further, the answer doesn’t matter. Whatever reality we’re in, trying to reach a conclusion about its fundamental nature merely mobilizes more concepts. This story also illustrates the Daoist point that distinctions—butterflies, human beings; reality, dreams—are just projections. In a sense, we live in a dream world all the time. When you look at a tree, you’re seeing your own perception of the tree; it isn’t somehow in your mind. Experience does not put us in direct contact with reality.

Another famous story in the *Zhuangzi* is that of Cook Ding. He studied oxen for three years in an attempt to learn how to cut them up for cooking. “But now,” he says, “I encounter [the ox] with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with my eyes.” The cook continues, “My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus do the promptings of the spirit begin to flow.” The result for the cook is that cutting up the ox is effortless. Indeed, he says that his knife goes into the empty spaces within the joints, reminding us of the bellows metaphor from the Daodejing. This story emphasizes both the priority of spontaneous, nonconceptual engagement with reality and the insight that spontaneous engagement emerges from cultivation that involves the peeling away of a certain kind of conceptual perception, not the addition of more knowledge.

The story of Zhuangzi’s reaction after his wife’s death offers a wonderful example of the power of Daoist insight to lead us to serenity. Zhuangzi says that his immediate reaction was to mourn his wife’s death, but he stopped when he thought about the parallel between the infinite period before life and
the infinite period afterward and about the inevitability of death. Indeed, if we want somebody to exist, we want that person to die because existence in life without death isn’t even a coherent possibility.

Finally, the *Zhuangzi* gives us a dialogue between Confucius and Lao Tzu that ridicules the Confucian view. Confucius says that he has sought the *dao* for five years “in measures and numbers,” that is, words, concepts, and rituals. Lao Tzu tells him that names are merely “tools for public use. Goodwill [*ren*] and duty [*li*] are the grass huts of the former kings. You may put up in them for a night, but do not settle in them for too long….” If we emphasize these things too much, they will become prisons rather than useful way stations. Lao Tzu closes with the words “To ramble without a destination is *wu-wei.*”

### Suggested Reading

Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters.*

———, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China.*

Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought.*

Ziporyn, trans., *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries.*

### Study Questions

1. What is the significance of the butterfly dream? What does it suggest as an appropriate attitude to reality as we experience it?

2. What is the difference between a Confucian and a Daoist approach to death and mourning? What is the origin of this difference?
The Teachings of the Buddha

Lecture 17

You can try this at home. Remove all of your thoughts. Remove your body. Remove your memories. Remove your personality. Remove your perceptions. And ask, what’s left? The Buddhist insight was nothing is left. Persons are fundamentally selfless, just constantly changing continua, and that’s because of their impermanence.

The word “Buddha” comes from the Sanskrit bodh and means simply “awakened one.” The Buddha was a prince named Siddhartha Gautama who lived in about the 5th century B.C. At around the age of 30, Siddhartha left his home as a śramana, a wandering mendicant, seeking to answer the problem of why there is suffering in the world. In the course of his travels, he came to a small town called Bodh Gaya, sat down under a tree—now called the Bodhi Tree (the “tree of awakening”)—and vowed not to arise until he had attained full awakening. He meditated all night and, at dawn, realized the fundamental nature of reality, becoming awakened. For the last 45 years of his life, he wandered across northern India, communicating his insight to hundreds of students.

Three fundamental ideas animate all of Buddhist philosophy: impermanence, selflessness, and interdependence. First of all, the Buddha recognized that all phenomena are impermanent, and he divided impermanence into two levels: gross impermanence, the slow change in things over time, and subtle impermanence, the idea that everything is constantly changing, moment by moment. Ourselves and everything around us are continua of causal processes, sequences of momentary events, not single solid things that persist through time.

The second major idea is that of selflessness; there is no core, no basic entity to things. The Buddha distinguished between two kinds of selflessness: the selflessness of the person and of phenomena. Because things are constantly changing, there is no component or identity that they retain over time. The same is true of ourselves. We, too, are constantly changing continua.
Closely connected to selflessness is the idea that everything in the universe, including ourselves and every state of ourselves, is interdependent. The Buddha distinguished three kinds of interdependence. The first of these is causal, meaning that everything that occurs depends on causes and conditions. The second is mereological; that is, the whole is dependent on its parts and vice versa. Finally, the Buddha argued that everything depends for its identity on conceptual imputation, meaning that the identity we find for anything in the world arises from our own conceptual categories.

The Four Noble Truths, set forth by the Buddha, should really be understood as four truths for those who would be noble. The First Truth is that all is suffering. Each thing we encounter is either itself a source of suffering or something that is suffering. The most obvious kind of suffering is what the Buddha called the suffering of suffering, that is, ordinary pain and unpleasantness. The second kind of suffering is the suffering of change, which involves both change itself, such as growing old, and anything that lasts too long, even something pleasant, as sources of suffering. The third kind of suffering is that of pervasive conditioning. This suffering is brought on by the fact that we live in a world of uncertainty, one in which everything depends on a vast network of causes and conditions that are out of our control. The background anxiety caused by those conditions is pervasive suffering, which gives rise to the suffering of change and the suffering of suffering.

The Second Truth is that there is a cause of suffering: attraction and aversion. Those two causes, in turn, are caused by primal ignorance, our inability to recognize that things are impermanent, selfless, and interdependent. We
treat things as though they have natures that make them the things they are, independent of our imputation and desires, independent of their parts, independent of their causes and conditions. The result is that we accord much more importance to things that are attractive or aversive than they really have. We treat them as being desirable or undesirable in themselves, and we treat change as something to be resisted or dreaded, rather than a natural part of our lives.

The Third Truth is that there is a release from suffering, which is to eliminate primal ignorance. The Buddha urges us to reduce attraction and aversion by coming to understand the fundamental nature of reality. We can’t eliminate pain or change, but we can eliminate the suffering that they bring by eliminating our primal confusion about those things and about ourselves.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the prescription for removing this confusion, which is the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path identifies domains of concern for Buddhists and suggests that if we live appropriately in those domains, we can eliminate primal ignorance and, hence, suffering. The three principal domains here are action, which includes right action, right livelihood, right propriety, and right speech; thought, which includes the right view, right meditation, and right effort; and mindfulness.

**Name to Know**

**Siddhartha Gautama (c. 500 B.C.E.–c. 420 B.C.E.):** Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as Šakyamuni Buddha or just the Buddha, was born in Lumbini to the royal family in the small state of Kapilavastu, in present-day Nepal.

**Important Term**

**śramana:** A wandering ascetic of ancient India.
Suggested Reading

Chödron, *Taming the Monkey Mind*.

Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*.

Williams, *Buddhist Thought*.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to say that the world is pervaded by suffering? Is this true even for those who enjoy life?

2. What is the relation among primal ignorance, attachment, aversion, and suffering? Why is primal ignorance so difficult to extirpate?
When we put together the idea of emptiness and the bodhisattva ideal, you have a sense of how, about 500 years later, Buddhism develops a kind of deeper metaphysics but also a more committed social face.

The term Mahāyāna means “great vehicle,” and it describes an evolution of Buddhist thought that arose in India between the 1st century B.C.E. and the 1st century C.E. The Mahāyāna revolution brought the idea of lay practice of Buddhism to prominence and saw the gradual evolution of the ideal of self-development into an ideal of altruistic practice and social virtues.

The Mahāyāna began with the propagation of a set of controversial sutras. In Buddhism, a sutra is a text taught by or in the presence of the Buddha, but these sutras, the Prajñāpāramitā sutras, or “Perfection of Wisdom” sutras, became known after Buddha’s death. According to the Mahāyāna tradition, the Buddha taught these during his lifetime but only to a select group of people, because he recognized that they were complex and might be misunderstood if they fell into the wrong hands. Many scholars believe that they were developed by Buddhist monks who needed to legitimate the new ideas evolving in the Mahāyāna.

The revolutionary content of the Mahāyāna is embodied in two significant ideas. The first of these is that our primal ignorance is an innate tendency to think that both ourselves and phenomena around us have inherent existence—that we are substantial, independent things. But the fact is that the fundamental nature of things is to be empty of essence, empty of substantiality. To understand things as they are is to understand them as empty in this sense—not nonexistent but conventionally designated, interdependent, and not substantially existent. There are held to be two truths about things: the ultimate truth, their emptiness of essence, and the conventional truth, their ordinary functioning as interdependent things. Although conventional truth is more superficial, the two are, in a deep sense, identical. To understand that things are empty is to understand that they are
just conventional. To understand the conventional reality of things is to see that they are empty.

The second revolutionary idea in the Mahāyāna is the bodhisattva path. In pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism, the moral ideal was that of the arhat, the person who understands the Four Noble Truths, practices the Eightfold Path, and achieves the cessation of suffering. The ideal of the bodhisattva is of a person who commits himself or herself to attaining full awakening in order to benefit other sentient beings.

Among the principal figures of the Mahāyāna movement was the 8th-century philosopher Śāntideva, who taught at the great Buddhist university Nalanda. The text for which he is most famous is the Bodhicaryāvatāra, which can be translated as “How to Lead an Awakened Life.” It’s a kind of how-to manual setting out the bodhisattva path and remains one of the most popular texts in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The bodhisattva path begins and ends with the cultivation of a state of mind called bodhicitta, meaning a commitment to attaining an awakening. This is animated by another mental state, karunā, usually translated as “compassion.” The bodhisattva revolution can be thought of as the replacement of the ideal of self-awakening with the ideal of compassionate engagement. Note that the karunā is not about feeling and it’s not an emotion; it is a commitment, not “sloppy sympathy.”

Śāntideva distinguishes two levels of bodhicitta, the first of which is aspirational bodhicitta. That is the genuine aspiration to attain awakening in order to benefit others, and it motivates the arduous task of cultivating the bodhisattva path. But because aspirational bodhicitta emerges at the beginning of the bodhisattva path and isn’t animated by full awakening—by a true understanding of interdependence, selflessness, and impermanence—it’s not fully engaged. By the end of the bodhicitta path, when we’ve realized the full wisdom that makes it possible to see reality as the Buddha
thought reality should be seen, then we reach fully engaged bodhicitta with spontaneous awakened action, spontaneous karunā for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The bodhisattva path is characterized by the cultivation of the six perfections: generosity, propriety, patience, effort, meditation, and wisdom. All of this is reflected metaphorically in the Buddhist wheel of life. At the hub, we have a snake, a rooster, and a pig, representing aversion, attraction, and ignorance. Outside of the hub, we have the six realms of cyclic existence, a kind of iconographic representation of our emotional lives. If we broaden our vision, we see that the whole wheel of life is within the jaws of death. The iconography of the wheel of life demonstrates that all of our constant cycling between different emotional states has as its background this anxiety or terror about death. In the next lecture, we’ll see Śāntideva’s understanding of how we can deal with that fear to transform ourselves from beings who are constantly shuttling between these states of suffering into beings who can actually do something about it.

**Name to Know**

Śāntideva (8th century C.E.): We know almost nothing of the life of Śāntideva. All biographical sources agree that he was born a Brahmin, converted to Buddhism, and studied at Nalanda University in present-day Bihar state in India.

**Important Terms**

bodhisattva: In Buddhism, one who has formed the altruistic aspiration to attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings.

karunā: Compassion, the commitment to act to relieve the suffering of others.
Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*.


**Study Questions**

1. How do we understand the Buddhist wheel of life as a metaphor for ordinary life?

2. What is the significance of taking phenomenology as an approach to morality?
After all, when we look at other lives and we ask which one is the most meaningful, we don’t pick the one that’s most sordid, the one that’s most selfish. We pick the one that is most beneficial to others.

At the end of the last lecture, we saw that there is a fundamental psychological block to meaningfulness—the fear of death—and to solve the problem of suffering, we need to remove that block. That subject is addressed in Śāntideva’s *How to Lead an Awakened Life*.

In chapters 1 and 2, Śāntideva explores the motivation for cultivating virtue in order to make our lives meaningful. He begins by saying that he hopes to benefit others with his text and, in doing so, to become a better person himself. He points out that in our ordinary lives, we are overcome by motivations—greed, fear, selfishness—that make our lives sordid and meaningless, but we know that the cultivation of virtue and concern for others would make our lives more meaningful. If for a moment we have the motivation to cultivate moral development, we should seize it.

Śāntideva argues that the vicious life—the life replete with vice—is permeated by fear; the fear of death conditions our lives by animating confusion, attachment, and aversion, but despite its pervasiveness, this fear is invisible to us. In our inattention, we get caught up in motivations that we would never reflectively endorse. Vice is grounded in fear and it generates fear. Given that the two are so deeply interrelated, the only release we could possibly imagine from fear is the cultivation of virtue, which makes our lives peaceful, meaningful, and beneficial to others.

Recall, from our last lecture, that the first step on the bodhisattva path is the cultivation of aspirational *bodhicitta*, that is, the commitment to achieve awakening. Engaged *bodhicitta* is a goal that can be achieved only by cultivating all the perfections on the bodhisattva path, especially the perfection of wisdom. This perfection allows us to engage with reality as it is, not as it appears to us through the haze of ignorance. Engaged *bodhicitta* is the
spontaneous capacity, arising out of deep insight, to see things that have to be done and to do them. This idea coincides with those of Aristotle and the Daoists: The cultivation of deep insight generates the possibility of spontaneity.

In the remainder of the text, Śāntideva works through the structure of the perfections, beginning with generosity. This is the first of the virtues to be cultivated because giving enables us to reduce our attachment to things and to the self. The innate view that places us at the center of the universe is a distortion that generates pointless cycling through suffering instead of pointed altruistic aspiration.

The second perfection is that of mindfulness. From the Buddhist perspective, mindfulness is deeply moral because it keeps us focused on the virtues we intend to cultivate and on the degree to which our own activity reflects those virtues. Śāntideva gives us the image of unmindfulness as a mad elephant, stampeding and causing destruction wherever it goes. He further argues that our suffering is caused primarily by our own mental attitudes. For that reason, we can lead better lives, not by transforming the world around us,
but by transforming our minds. This idea recalls the exhortion from Stoicism to focus only on what we can control.

Śāntideva then turns to the perfection of patience, an important virtue because it is the answer to anger and because it’s a state of mind that can block attraction and aversion. It’s also a necessary virtue for anyone who is seriously committed to moral cultivation, because self-transformation is an arduous path. The chapter on patience gives us numerous echoes of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius on the topic of anger. Anger destroys our ability to think rationally and to benefit others; a single moment of anger can devastate lifelong relationships or commitments. As Marcus Aurelius did, Śāntideva urges us not to become angry at people, who are driven by conditions, any more than we would become angry at a stomachache. Śāntideva also emphasizes the fact that anger isn’t harmful to just others but to ourselves. Again, echoing both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, Śāntideva tells us to respond to those who make us angry with pity and compassion. If we are going to benefit others, we must help them overcome irrationality, not pile our own irrational anger on top of theirs. The instrument for overcoming our own anger is thinking about it analytically and, in doing so, cultivating patience, which requires mindfulness, meditation, and wisdom.

In the cultivation of wisdom, we make the transition from aspirational bodhicitta to fully engaged bodhicitta. Wisdom is the distinction between just knowing analytically that anger is bad and patience is good and completely eliminating the superimposition of essences and independence. This leads to an engagement with things as interdependent, selfless, and impermanent, a spontaneous engagement that allows the virtuoso manifestation of compassionate action.

Suggested Reading

Dalai Lama XIV, *A Flash of Lightning in a Dark Night*.

1. What is bodhicitta? What is the difference between aspirational and engaged bodhicitta, and why is this difference so important?

2. What are the six perfections? Why is each of them central to the cultivation of bodhicitta? How do they connect to the causes of suffering?
When Buddhism entered [China,] it was always interpreted through the lenses of Daoism and Confucianism. When Buddhism was translated into Chinese, it was translated into a language that was already rich with philosophical resonance.

The Zen (Chinese: Chan) tradition sees its own beginning in a special moment of wordless communication between the Buddha and one monk, Maha Kasyapa. Since that moment, the Buddha’s realization about the nature of reality, gained from contemplation of a single flower, has been passed from one Zen master to another in an unbroken line of transmission.

Zen came to China in the late 5th or early 6th century C.E. with the monk Bodhidharma, regarded as the first Chinese patriarch in a succession of six. The story of the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng, brings to life some of what is pregnant in Zen. Hui Neng, an illiterate woodcutter, was living at the temple when the fifth patriarch held a poetry contest to choose his successor. The patriarch’s principal disciple, Senxiu, came up with this verse: “The body is the Bodhi tree; the mind is a clear mirror. Always strive to polish it. Let no dust alight.” The physical practice of Buddhism is like the tree under which the Buddha gained awakening; it’s the physical prop that makes awakening possible. The mind, like a mirror, is naturally luminous and reflects the nature of reality. We see echoes of Confucianism in the emphasis on polishing and cultivating that mirror. Finally, “Let no dust alight” tells us to keep our minds clear of emotions and delusions.

Hui Neng’s response was this poem: “Bodhi originally has no tree. The mirror has no stand. Buddha nature is primordially clean and pure. Where could dust even alight?” Here, awakening doesn’t depend on physical being; it depends on the primordial nature of the mind—the mirror—which has no stand. In other words, don’t worry about the ordinary physical world; pay attention to experience. Further, our ability to attain awakening “is
primordially clean and pure.” The attractions and aversions highlighted by Senxiu’s poem aren’t even part of our primordial nature.

The second verse reads: “The mind is the Bodhi tree. The body is a mirror stand. The mirror is primordially clean and pure. How could it ever be dusty?” Here, the mind is the support for awakening, while the body merely holds up the mind. And given that the mind is “primordially clean,” what we need to eliminate is the idea of cultivation. In doing so, we’ll find that we are already fully awakened, already, effectively, a Buddha.

Zen Buddhism is suspicious of language and conceptuality and emphasizes direct experience and meditation as opposed to study. If you understand your own nature, you attain Buddhahood. Much of Zen training hinges on puzzles called coagons: What is the sound of one hand clapping? These puzzles are meant to make us realize that rational and discursive thought doesn’t work; solutions come with sudden insight. Understanding this inner process leads us to understand our own minds.

In the Zen tradition, each of us has a primordial capacity to understand ourselves and the world completely, to live in a fully awakened, spontaneous way. Practice is a matter of recovering or uncovering that Buddha nature. Zen also emphasizes the idea that beauty is the world, and seeing beauty is part of what it is to understand the world.

The notion of impermanence plays a much more central role in Zen than it does in other Buddhist traditions. While Indian Buddhism makes a distinction between gross and subtle impermanence, Zen also distinguishes metaphysical impermanence, an impermanence in the nature of things. The idea here is this: Zen focuses on our own mind and experience, and the mind is subtly impermanent; our thoughts change from moment to moment. Because of this, we are constantly experiencing subtle impermanence. Our own mental states provide us with the foundation for a constant experience.
of constant change. But because of our fear of death, we reinterpret the experience of impermanence as an experience of constancy, thus creating a layer between ourselves and reality and between ourselves and genuine experience. As a result, we live in a meaningless dream world even though we have the constant reality of a beautiful, impermanent world before our perception all the time.

We close with a poem from Dōgen: “Being in the world: To what might it be compared? Dwelling in a dewdrop fallen from a waterfowl’s beak, the image of the moon.” Dōgen compares “being in the world”—our experience—to a dewdrop from a bird’s beak—something delicate, impermanent, and unbelievably beautiful. Further, the moon is contained in this tiny dewdrop, just as being in the world entails containing the vastness of reality within us—but only momentarily. The deepest kind of beauty is that which reveals impermanence because in doing so, it reveals the nature of our minds and reality. We can experience reality only if we grasp and celebrate impermanence.

Suggested Reading

Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person*.

Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*.

Study Questions

1. How is Zen a continuation of Indian Buddhist ideas? What does it draw from Daoism?

2. Why is impermanence such an important part of the Zen understanding of the nature of reality?
If you really apprehend emptiness—this notion of voidness of essence—then all you apprehend is the ordinary nature of ordinary things.

The Indian philosopher Nagarjuna distinguished between two truths that are distinct in one sense but constitute a fundamental unity. Conventional or everyday truth posits entity, while ultimate truth sees phenomena as empty of essence, empty of independence, and empty of permanence. The unity between these two truths arises as follows: One way to characterize the ultimate truth of emptiness is to say that conventional phenomena are no more than conventional; their identities are posited by us, but they do not inherently have identities. The two truths are distinct in our awareness but are ontologically unified, that is, unified in being.

The emptiness of phenomena is itself empty. For my hand to be empty is for it to have the property of emptiness, but the emptiness of my hand depends on my hand. If I don’t have a hand, I don’t have any emptiness of my hand. The notion of emptiness here is not a deeper reality behind ordinary things but the actual reality of ordinary things—itself empty of essence, empty of independence, and empty of permanence. We don’t say that ordinary things are empty; there is just emptiness. Even emptiness is empty.

The Heart sutra helps us understand this idea of the emptiness of emptiness and the nonduality of ultimate and conventional truth. In this sutra, the question is asked: How does one become truly wise? The answer is that anyone who wants to understand the nature of reality should contemplate its components and see that each of them is empty of essence. The sutra then gives us the fourfold profundity: Form is empty, but emptiness is form. Form isn’t different from emptiness; emptiness isn’t different from form. The point here is that form—physical reality—is empty. But to be empty is just to be the emptiness of ordinary things; there is no deeper reality behind that idea. The fact that emptiness and form are different from each other means that if you truly understand both conventional phenomena and emptiness, you understand the ordinary world around us, which is nothing but empty
phenomena. Thus, these two truths, even though they involve two different apprehensions of the world, are actually nondually related—they’re the same thing.

In this sense, for Zen, *phenomenology*—the nature of our experience—joins with *metaphysics*. Metaphysically, we understand that there’s no difference between ordinary reality and its ultimate nature. But phenomenologically, we understand that to experience ordinary reality is to see things as they are, not to see beyond them. This ties to the distinction between perception and conception, two modes of awareness with different objects: the particular and the universal. Universals are permanent, independent, and unreal. Perception can reveal reality to us, but conception, because it always involves engagement with abstract concepts, is deceptive. If we superimpose conception over perception, we fail to see actual momentary phenomena and, thus, fail to see the ultimate nature of reality. But if we can strip away that superimposition, we realize the absence of duality between the conventional and the ultimate.

This stripping away also allows us to see the absence of duality between subject and object. In ordinary experience, we distinguish ourselves as the subjects and everything else around us, including people, as objects; thus, we’re the center of the world. But once we drop the notion that we exist as substantial phenomena and see that we are interdependent, constantly changing processes, then that pole of subject and object disappears. This is what enables spontaneity and allows us to enter into the experience that Dōgen called *being-time*, real presence in the world.

Dōgen emphasizes that existence itself is temporal. Time is the nature of our world, not an abstract container in which the world occurs. Time is change; thus, it’s constituted by things that are changing. Things don’t happen in time; time exists because things happen. Time has two aspects: It is experienced as flowing, and it is arrayed simultaneously, like Dōgen’s mountain range.
We may experience only the present right now, but the present exists and is significant only in its relationship to the past and the future. To ignore the moment that we live in is to lose reality, because all that is real is that moment, but to ignore the past and the future is to lose the meaning of reality.

The goal of Zen practice is full awakening, which is not to suddenly see beyond reality but to see reality as it is. Dōgen tells us that we are constantly perceiving things as impermanent, interdependent, and essenceless, but we then superimpose conception on them. That primordial perception, however, is the ground of our Buddha nature, what makes it possible for us to be awakened. We are always, in every moment, primordially awakened, and our task is to recover that state through mindfulness and meditation.

**Important Terms**

**being-time**: The intimate union of existence and temporality; the fact that to exist is to be impermanent yet to have a past and a future to which one is essentially connected and the fact that human existence is always experienced in relation to past, present, and future.

**metaphysics**: The study of the fundamental nature of reality.

**phenomenology**: Inner experience, or the theory of inner experience.

**Suggested Reading**

Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person*.

Study Questions

1. In what sense are the two truths different? In what sense are they identical? Why is a nondual understanding of their relation so central to Zen?

2. What does it mean to say that we are primordially awakened? Why is practice necessary at all if this is true?
Each of these distinctions, each of these debates, finds itself echoed in Asia and in the West, and I’m hoping that’s one of the things that’s worth learning from comparing all of these texts and putting them together: When human beings ask about the meaning of life, all of the range of alternatives seems to crop up in almost every culture we imagine.

So far in the course, we’ve examined the classical worlds of India, China, the Hebrews, and Greece. Before we turn to the modern world, we’ll take stock of where we are and see what questions remain. Of course, we shouldn’t expect a single answer to our central question: What is the meaning of life?

The Bhagavad-Gītā and the book of Job were clearly oriented to finding the meaning of life in our relationship to the divine. Marcus Aurelius, though he didn’t focus on divinity, was working in a Stoic tradition, which posits a divine creator, Zeus. Other texts we’ve looked at, such as those of Aristotle, Confucius, Daoism, and Buddhism, try to find the meaning of life in a mundane context, although Aristotle and Confucius were more concerned with the manifest nature of reality, while Daoism and Buddhism focused on a deeper, fundamental nature of reality.

Some of the texts we’ve examined, again, the Bhagavad-Gītā, Job, and the texts of Confucius, see the meaning of life as concerned with what is permanent and stable, while other texts find it in connection to the universality and beauty of the ephemeral. Marcus Aurelius directed our attention to the beauty of the aged lion and overripe figs. The Buddha, Śāntideva, and Dōgen also emphasized that everything around us, including ourselves, is conditioned by impermanence and is, in the end, ephemeral.

We saw an emphasis on careful cultivation and socialization in the texts of Aristotle and Confucius. We might also say this of Śāntideva in his exposition of the bodhisattva path and the cultivation of the six perfections. Others have
argued that cultivation is precisely the problem and that the meaning of life is to be found in paring away cultivation and returning to our natural selves. We’ve seen that idea articulated forcefully in the Daodejing, the Zhuangzi, and the work of Zen philosophers.

These answers offer us enormous plurality but also a cluster of common dimensions. They all address the central question of the meaning of life in terms of our relationship to some much larger context; they recognize that the question itself is initially posed by our finitude; and they all emphasize the importance of achieving some kind of spontaneity. Let’s examine each of these unanimities in turn.

Some of the texts we’ve examined, again, the Bhagavad-Gîtā, Job, and the texts of Confucius, see the meaning of life as concerned with what is permanent and stable, while other texts find it in connection to the universality and beauty of the ephemeral.

In some texts, such as the Bhagavad-Gîtā, we find that life gets its meaning through our comprehension of the divinity of the cosmos and ourselves and through our union with the divine cosmos. Job suggests that we understand our lives as meaningful when we accept the incomprehensibility and the transcendence of the divine. Both the Daoists and Confucians argue that the meaningful life is one that is led in harmony with a cosmic order properly understood. The Stoics, too, argue that it’s our rationality that enables us to harmonize with the rational divine. But the Stoics share with Aristotle a sense that the social dimension is the larger context, and for the Confucians, of course, social role is everything. The Buddhist context offers a complicated dialectic between the social and the cosmic.

The second area of unanimity is the emphasis on finitude. In the Bhagavad-Gîtā, we saw that our finite nature generates attachment to things and makes our lives trivial. Transcending our own suffering requires us to recognize our finitude as the source of the problem. In Job, we saw that coming to grips with our finitude in the context of an infinite universe permits us to lead
meaningful lives in a universe that’s fundamentally incomprehensible. The Stoics and Epicureans also urged us to come to terms with the fact that we are very small parts in a complex whole. For Buddhism, it’s the recognition of our causal and temporal finitude in the context of a vast array of conditioned existence that causes suffering; again, understanding ourselves and our resulting responsibilities as part of a larger whole gives us the possibility of leading a meaningful life.

Finally, we’ve seen that all these texts emphasize spontaneity, the idea of the good life as the virtuoso life. The Gītā valorizes nonattached action, action that is made possible by recognition of our union with the divine. Aristotle, as we saw, distinguished virtuous action from action that is simply in accordance with virtue. The Confucians emphasized a kind of cultivated spontaneity, while the Daoists valued a natural spontaneity. The Buddhists focus on nonconceptual engagement with the world, as opposed to conceptual engagement.

Thus far, we’ve seen that the achievement of a virtuoso life requires a confrontation with our own finitude in relation to the vastness of the universe in which we live. It’s also notable that the virtuoso life isn’t that of a soloist on stage but of an ensemble player, because virtuosity is manifested in the joyful discharge of our social responsibilities.

**Study Questions**

1. Why is the problem of finitude and death so central to human questions about the meaning of life?

2. What are the reasons for preferring a transcendent to a mundane context or a permanent to an impermanent context for human meaning, or vice versa?
Like Job, Hume is saying, God may not be accessible to reason, but the fact that he’s not accessible to reason need not matter to us. We can choose to have a theological life and a relationship to religion if we want. We can choose not to if we want, but we don’t need to provide arguments or reasons, like Job’s friends, in order to make our religious lives make sense.

As we move from the classical world to the modern European world, we note a major transition in modes of thought. In Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, the rise of science and the scientific method led to skepticism about the value of tradition, an emphasis on individuality and free thinking, and the gradual evolution of secularism.

European modernity is grounded in a divide between science and religion that can be traced to the Catholic Church’s persecution of Galileo after his establishment of the heliocentric model of the universe. As a result, philosophy and political science began to push the church aside as either irrelevant or hostile to the progress of social, scientific, and political thinking. The break between reason and faith also forced an emphasis on the primacy of the individual and the rise of rights. The doctrine of foundationalism emerged, the idea that we know things because of our observations in the laboratory or by reasoning, not through scripture. Classical Greek skepticism also played an important role in the emergence of the scientific method and the critique of religion that animated early European modernity.

God found himself in a precarious spot with the development of European modernity and its rejection of theology as a foundation for knowledge. In persecuting Galileo, the church realized that science was asserting its own authority as the measure of reality, which meant that it was undermining the authority of the church. With the new skeptical approach of science, the existence of God required proof.
David Hume was one of the thinkers who was most instrumental in reviving classical skepticism. Like the classical skeptics, he used reason to attack the pretensions of reason, to show that reason itself is self-undermining. Hume also introduced the idea of naturalism to philosophy, arguing that if we want to know what human life is about, we need to subject ourselves to the methods of science. Hume further recognized that we are not entirely rational beings; just as important as our reason are our emotions and our imagination.

Among the proofs put forth for the existence of God was the argument from design, which Hume refuted decisively. According to this argument, the fact that the universe is replete with complex, perfectly functioning phenomena means that it must have been created by an intelligent designer. If you find a working watch on a beach, you don’t assume that it developed organically out of the sand; you assume that it was the work of an intelligent designer.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe began focusing more on the individual than on the context in which individuals led their lives; individualism emerged as an important hallmark of European modernity.
Hume pointed out that this argument is nonprobative; that is, it doesn’t prove its conclusion. For one thing, most artifacts are small, while universes are huge, and when there are significant differences between phenomena, arguments from analogy do not work. Moreover, arguments from analogy gain strength from many instances, but the design of the universe is a unique case. According to Hume, we also know that certain complex things in our world, such as animals and plants, grow naturally through biological reproduction. If we want to argue that the world must be created in the same way that these complex organisms are, we should expect that the world grows by organic biological development, not through intelligent design.

Hume further argued that if the world was designed, it wasn’t, in fact, all that well designed. Think of all the things that go wrong in nature—floods, earthquakes—and with the human body. Finally, the assumption of design leads to an assumption that the design was carried out by designers with which we are familiar: architects, engineers, and other mortal, finite human beings. If the world was designed, we can conclude that it was probably designed by a committee of rather unintelligent mortals.

Hume also pointed out that the proponents of the design argument seem to agree with atheists that belief in the existence of God should be based on reason. Hume argued that many of our most important beliefs, such as beliefs in the external world or the regularity of nature, aren’t rational but instinctual and emotional. In other words, our instincts and our passions lead us to beliefs and practices that are reasonable. It is, thus, part of our nature to trust our senses and to trust reason. Theism may not be susceptible to proof either, but it doesn’t follow that theism is unreasonable; it might not even demand proof. If that’s the case, then faith should be relegated to the realm of the private sphere, while we leave what is rationally judicable in the public sphere.

Name to Know

Hume, David (1711–1776): David Hume was a philosophical prodigy and a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment.
**Important Term**

**foundationalism**: The doctrine that knowledge must rest on a basis. Examples of foundations of knowledge are perception and reason.

**Suggested Reading**


Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

**Study Questions**

1. What are the central pillars of European modernity? How are they related to one another?

2. Why is the argument from design such a modern argument for the existence of God? How does Hume show it to be a failure? What are the consequences of his critique for Christianity?
Hume is pointing out that we are justified in our beliefs, even if we can’t provide reasons for them, because we are the kinds of beings who participate in those kinds of lives.

In the last lecture, we saw Hume argue that neither reason nor the senses can possibly be justified on their own or give us confidence in the things we take most for granted—the existence of the external world, causal connections, or the probative character of reason itself. But Hume points out that behavior, thinking, and discourse can be reasonable even if they are not rationally justified. In fact, it’s not our reason or our sensory experiences that ground most of human life but certain biological and psychological dispositions—dispositions to believe in the external world, in causal connections, and so on. In *The Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume writes, “Nature, by an obstinate and uncontrollable necessity, has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.” We don’t need reasons to believe in reason, the external world, or even God; these are things that simply emerge from the kind of animals that we are.

For Hume, our social relations and our social context are important to who we are because genuine happiness comes from our relationships to others and because a functioning society provides us with the external goods we need. At the same time, many of our deepest values and important traits are social in nature. Everything that gives our lives meaning, according to Hume’s secular account, is social or socially constructed.

Both original nature and second nature are important to Hume in understanding who we are and how we live. We’re equipped from birth with natural passions, such as a natural affection for our parents. Hume had the idea that natural affection, like Isaac Newton’s gravitation, is a force of attraction and obeys a sort of inverse-square law; that is, the closer a person is to us, the more we naturally tend to like that person. However, Hume believed that if human society was governed completely by natural attraction, the result would be tightly knit bands of people devoted to each
other and hostile or indifferent to everyone else. Obviously, this is no way to create a flourishing society.

Fortunately, Hume thinks that we are also born with a propensity to use our imagination. This allows us to see distinct things as similar to one another, and it is from this ability that justice and charity arise, the passions we need to stitch society together. Justice and charity are artificial in one sense—we construct them—but they’re natural in that it is part of human nature to act in such a way as to cultivate them. In this sense, they constitute a second nature. Our primary nature can be found in our innate emotions and imagination, but the product of the imagination is the construction of the second nature, the emotions that hold society together.

According to Hume, even an injustice that doesn’t affect us displeases us because “we consider it prejudicial to human society … [and] we naturally sympathize with others in the sentiments they entertain of us. Thus self-interest is the original motive for the establishment of justice, but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that virtue.” It’s in our own interests to extend our natural sympathies in order to construct stable societies that afford us goods. The moral approbation comes from the fact that we sympathize with public interest, because public interest is our own interest. These natural sentiments are extended into the public sphere, “but still nature must furnish the materials. …” Parents, too, play a role in inculcating these kinds of sensibilities in their children.

On the question of naturalness, Hume says, “When I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word natural only as oppos’d to artificial … Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may properly be said to be natural as any thing …. ” Although it sounds as if Hume is talking about an elaborate kind of Confucian cultivation, he is also, like the Daoists, asking us to realize our own original
nature, which is seen to include the propensity for social artifice. It’s through artifice that society makes us who we are and that society is made valuable.

In addition to our moral and social lives, the social context is also important to our cognitive lives. Knowledge, justification, judgment, and discourse are primarily social, discursive practices, things that we cannot engage in without a social context that makes language and the practices of science possible. Science is a social activity with standards that are socially constructed; even mathematical knowledge is a public phenomenon. Knowledge requires our passions and our imagination because it requires participation in public life that is made possible only by our emotional, passionate nature.

Suggested Reading


Study Questions

1. In what ways does Hume’s skepticism underpin modernity? In what ways does it undermine it?

2. How does Hume’s account of our social nature and the role of compassion compare with those of Aristotle and Śāntideva? In what ways is it different?
For Kant, what makes our lives meaningful individually, what makes our lives meaningful as societies, is our ability to extend, to deepen, to correct what we know or to build on what is bequeathed to us from previous generations and to advance it. To abrogate that responsibility would be to abrogate genuine human life.

Immanuel Kant is the philosopher whose work set the bar, in a sense, for later philosophers. His writings are of such enormous importance that no one since his time can be considered a professional philosopher unless he or she has read and mastered the work of Kant.

The texts that give Kant this preeminence are The Critique of Pure Reason, on metaphysics and epistemology; The Critique of Practical Reason, on ethics; and The Critique of Judgment, on aesthetics. In these texts, Kant attempted to effect a Copernican revolution in metaphysics. Until Kant, philosophers had viewed thought, knowledge, morality, and aesthetic response as revolving around the objects of human experience—the structure of knowledge determined by considering external objects, the structure of morality determined by considering external acts, and so on. But Kant tried to understand how our knowledge, morality, and aesthetics work by putting the human mind, the human will, and human sensibility at the center. Like Hume, Kant also argued that religion should not intrude on the cognitive sphere.

The essay “What Is Enlightenment?” was written in the context of liberalization in the state of Prussia and a move to separate the faculties of theology and philosophy at the university where Kant taught. In it, Kant illustrates that the only meaningful life is one grounded in rational discourse in the public sphere. Here, we get Kant’s famous motto for a meaningful life: Sapere Aude!, “Dare to know!”—an acknowledgment that knowledge and inquiry require not only intelligence but courage.
Kant argues that the European Enlightenment marked a separation between childhood and adulthood for humankind. In childhood, our actions are heteronomous, that is, determined by others, but to be an adult is to be autonomous and to reason for oneself. According to Kant, this autonomy is always inhibited by authority, particularly religious authority and ideological paternalism. Further, we are often complicit in our own juvenilization through cognitive or behavioral laziness. That’s why it’s important to dare to know: The Enlightenment doesn’t simply liberate us, but it calls upon us to use that liberty to assert our own freedom of thought and speech and our willingness to participate in the public sphere.

Kant begins by telling us, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” and goes on to say that immaturity is much easier than maturity. He writes, “If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual advisor to have conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take over the tiresome job for me.” This is Kant’s vision of a meaningless life.

Kant argues that authority, whether political or ecclesiastical, uses the excuse of paternalism and our own terror of disorder in society, as well as our own laziness, to keep us immature and obedient. Thus, our immaturity has two sources: our own willingness to be guided and the willingness of authority to take advantage of our immaturity to reinforce its own power and keep us docile. Coercion isn’t necessary here. To overcome our immaturity, what’s needed is the freedom and the courage “to make public use of one’s reason in all matters.”

Kant makes a distinction between the public and the private sphere that is the forerunner of our contemporary separation of these two realms. He defines the public sphere as the arena of intellectual discourse in the domains of science, philosophy, and politics. We enter this sphere purely as citizens, not office holders. By “private” discourse, Kant means discourse carried out in
the conduct of a particular office or duty, even if that office is public. Private discourse might be restricted for reasons of confidentiality or for contractual reasons, but public discourse must be free. Kant gives us a wonderful example here of a pastor hired by a particular congregation. He must preach the doctrine of the church from the pulpit, but if he disagrees with church doctrine, he is also obligated to speak out in public against it. In fact, Kant thinks that no one, not even a clergyman, can be bound to believe anything, because the freedom to believe is the essence of enlightenment.

Kant explicitly ties human nature and the good life to intellectual, moral, and political progress, all of which presuppose the free use of reason. To refuse to think freely or refuse to engage in public discourse violates the human rights of all, because we all have rights to one another’s ideas. This model of the good life, which takes for granted the importance of progress, freedom, rationality, and secularism, is one we’ve inherited in our own society.

**Name to Know**

**Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804):** Immanuel Kant is almost universally regarded as the greatest of all European philosophers.

**Important Term**

*Sapere Aude!*: Kant’s motto of enlightenment: “Dare to know!”

**Suggested Reading**

Kant, *An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’*

Study Questions

1. How does Kant draw the distinction between the public and the private spheres? How is that different from the way we draw the same distinction in contemporary discourse and jurisprudence?

2. Why, on Kant’s view, do we have not only a right but a duty to participate in the public sphere by exercising free speech and thought?
Mill’s Call to Individuality and to Liberty
Lecture 26

Mill is not talking about the destiny of society, collective obligation, progress. He’s talking only about the individual. This is a superbly individualist construction of privacy and liberty and a continued move, following Kant, away from any kind of paternalism, again, going much further than Kant did.

In our exploration of European modernity, we’ve moved from a social to an individualistic conception of the good life and from sentiment to reason. In John Stuart Mill, we will see an elaboration of Kant’s public/private distinction and an extension of his focus on the individual into an even more individualistic model of civil society.

Mill was the son of James Mill, one of the founders of utilitarianism in England. From his father, he received an intense education in the classics of Greece and Rome, as well as mathematics, science, and political philosophy. In later life, he became an ardent social, economic, and political reformer.

Mill begins his work On Liberty with an articulation of what he calls the “harm principle”: The only time it is permissible for a society or an individual to interfere with the freedom of others is for self-protection. Such interference is not even permitted to prevent others from harming themselves, although we may attempt to reason with those who are bent on self-destructive behavior. Echoing our American conception of individual freedom, Mill writes, “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” Thus, he creates a much stronger protection for Kant’s sphere of privacy and moves farther away from paternalism: Everything that doesn’t affect the welfare of others is private. Exceptions to the harm principle include parents protecting their children and colonial administrators governing “barbarians.”

Mill, like Kant, was also concerned about the tyranny of the majority. Mill writes, “Society … practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since… it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating more deeply into the details of life and enslaving the soul
itself.” Social tyranny comes to us through advertising, through politics, and through the expectation that we must believe, think, or behave in certain ways. It constrains and cramps individual liberty, not just as explicit legal pressure or censorship might, but because there’s nothing to challenge social tyranny and no escape from it.

A society that enables us to lead truly meaningful lives must take measures to mitigate social tyranny. Conditions for individuality don’t emerge by accident; they must be actively encouraged by government. Mill calls for an activist government that moves against monopoly of the public space by social tyrannies and the majority. This idea enters the American tradition in the work of John Dewey and his thinking about American education.

As part of his defense of absolute freedom of thought and expression, Mill gives us his famous dilemma argument, in which he claims that speech or thought should be defended and protected even if it is false or dangerous. Suppressing ideas, Mill argues, slows progress and carries with it the possibility that we might be proved wrong; again, the persecution of Galileo serves as an example. More importantly, even if an idea is harmful or false, suppressing it deprives us of the opportunity to refute it rationally by argument and bullies believers into ideological submission. Ideas may be driven underground, where they may cause more harm than if they had been openly debated and properly put to rest.

Another reason for absolute freedom of speech derives from the absolute value Mill accords to pluralism in society, a radical idea for his time. Mill points out that refuting rival ideas or perspectives often gives us a clearer idea of what we ourselves think and why. He also says that different views or traditions may be better for different people and that there’s no reason to impose uniformity when variety brings wider benefits. Pluralism in a society brings to its citizens increased ideological ferment and offers opportunities

Echoing our American conception of individual freedom, Mill writes, “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”
to share new ideas and traditions, all of which are sources of happiness. Mill noted—and we note in our society today—that many people see diversity and individuality as factors that promote disunity, even conflict. But Mill showed that they promote progress and originality, making life better for all.

Mill’s distinction between self-regarding acts—acts that don’t affect others—and other-regarding acts—acts that affect others or may harm them—replaces Kant’s distinction between public and private. In American society and jurisprudence today, we think of other-regarding acts as those in which the law has some say, but self-regarding acts remain in the zone of privacy. Still, critical speech should always be protected.

What we see in Mill is the final flowering of individualism and libertarianism that runs throughout the modern viewpoint. From Hume to Mill, we evolve much deeper secularism, a much deeper individualism, and a much stronger public/private distinction. In Mill’s contemporary expression, our lives are meaningful only when we are self-expressive, free individuals, and they are meaningful for precisely that reason, not because of our social context. ■

Name to Know

**Mill, John Stuart (1806–1873):** John Stuart Mill was the son of the historian James Mill, a close follower of the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

Important Terms

**libertarianism:** The belief that individuals should have the maximum personal liberty consistent with the liberty of others; resistance of the intrusion of the law into the private sphere.

**utilitarianism:** A moral theory according to which actions are right to the degree to which they promote happiness or pleasure and wrong to the degree that they promote unhappiness or pain.
Suggested Reading


Study Questions

1. How are Mill’s and Kant’s conceptions of liberty, of publicity and privacy, and of the obligations of the state with regard to speech and opinion, similar? How are they different?

2. Why does Mill believe that the state must actively encourage, as opposed to merely tolerate, free speech and individual development? What does this say about the necessary social conditions of leading a meaningful life?
Again, as we read the novel and experience all of this, there’s a sense maybe of a kind of compassion or a sense of even contempt for [Ivan Ilych’s] family and his friends, but there’s more of a sense of embarrassment, I think. The sense of embarrassment comes from the fact that probably each of us at some point has reacted—even if we didn’t like to admit it—to a death or an illness in exactly this way.

In addition to being a great novelist, Lev (Leo) Tolstoy was also an important social reformer and political activist in Russia. He believed that secularization and the mass society that results from secularization, coupled with capitalism, lead to a meaningless life. In The Death of Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy takes as his theme the importance of pre-modern spiritual values, including an awareness of death, the need to develop deep human relationships, and a connection to nature as opposed to an artificial society. He argues implicitly that a life led in a secular world—like Ivan Ilych’s life and our own—is completely hopeless and, at death, leaves us feeling as though that life has been wasted.

The novel opens with a scene in which Ilych’s friends and colleagues are discussing who will fill his position at work. Then Tolstoy writes, “The mere fact of the death of a near acquaintance aroused, as usual, in all who heard of it the complacent feeling that, ‘It is he who is dead, not I.’” The sentiment is familiar to all of us; we push the thought of our own death away when we encounter the deaths of others. Ilych’s wife tells us that his death was so painful that she could hardly bear it, focusing on her own grief. Another friend, Peter Ivanovich, denies that Ilych’s death has any relationship to himself. This depersonalization of death is often how we deal with our own mortality and, for Tolstoy, is an inevitable consequence of secularism.

Tolstoy points out that Ilych is all of us: “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.” When he falls ill, he at first denies the fact of his impending death. Like Ilych, we are all generally quite
happy with an abstract understanding that death happens to everyone, but we also fail to see that we fall under that abstraction, that death happens to us, too.

Tolstoy also shows us that in the secularized world, people tend to move away from those who are dying. In the novel, Ilych’s family actually gets bored and rather annoyed with the inconvenience of his death, while Ilych experiences this unique and incomprehensible tragedy alone.

At this point in the novel, Tolstoy introduces a new character, a kind, clean peasant boy named Gerasim, who is able to provide some comfort to Ilych. He cares for Ilych in an unpretentious, natural way, not out of some obligation or social pretension. He seems to be honest in a way that others in the book are not and understands the inevitability of death, not just in the abstract but in a concrete sense. Because Gerasim takes his own death seriously, he is able to be honest about death and to engage in meaningful interactions with others. In giving us this cheerful, happy, healthy character, Tolstoy is telling us that the only way we can live a happy, healthy life is if we, too, are honest about death.

As Ilych’s health declines, he finds that his accomplishments and possessions, even his family, pale in significance to death. He realizes that he has frittered his life away on the trivial, on the public sphere, instead of confronting the structure of his own existence. He questions whether life is that “senseless and horrible,” but of course, that’s the point: If we lead a life in which we pay little attention to the concrete reality of our existence and our mortality, a senseless and horrible life is what we’re left with.

On the eve of his death, Ilych wonders whether his whole life might have been false; he asks, “But if that is so … and if I am leaving this life with the consciousness that I have lost all that was given to me and it is impossible to rectify it, what then?” Tolstoy’s point is that we may all be in exactly that
position if we don’t move to lead more authentic, meaningful lives now. That terrible possibility with which we are confronted is the consequence of the modern secular life.

At the moment of his death, Ilych has a revelation and finds that he no longer fears death. The message here is that we need to confront the fact that our lives are aimed at death. Not only do we all die, but we’re all dying every minute from the moment of birth. That’s what structures our lives, and indeed, the most important moment of our lives may be that final one, the one where we need to ask whether it was all worthwhile.

**Name to Know**

**Tolstoy, Lev (Leo) (1828–1910):** Count Leo Tolstoy was born into one of the most distinguished Russian noble families, but his own youth was undistinguished. He became a great novelist and an important social reformer and political activist.

**Important Term**

**depersonalization:** Abstraction from one’s own personal interests or place in the world; taking a disinterested view of things.

**Suggested Reading**

Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych.*
Study Questions

1. How does the life of Ivan Ilych as portrayed by Tolstoy compare to the kinds of lives to which most people aspire? Does Tolstoy’s indictment of this kind of life seem fair?

2. How does the servant Gerasim contrast with the other characters in Ivan’s life? What makes his values different? What kind of life does Tolstoy recommend as meaningful, in contrast to the meaningless lives he portrays in the other characters?

3. In what ways do the values of European modernity contribute to the kind of life that Tolstoy is concerned to criticize?
A central theme of Nietzsche’s is this idea of creativity and authenticity, that we should lead our lives as works of literature, as great novels in which we are protagonists, novels that we want to leave behind as worth living. Nietzsche challenges us to aestheticize our lives and to lead a life worthy of consideration.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche launched the movement called postmodernism, attacking modernity not from a classical perspective but from a perspective beyond modernity itself. As we have seen, modernism valorized the integrity and transparency of the individual and put forth an image of progress as a constant march forward. Postmodernity questions the sovereignty of the individual and rejects the idea that human history is progressive. It questions whether liberal democracy is self-evidently good and whether reason and science are truly foundational. And it criticizes the idea that religion or spirituality is a legitimate option even in private.

Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-christ: Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* is the first clear shot in the battle of postmodernity against modernity. The idols Nietzsche is referring to are the philosophical principles that we tend to take for granted in the history of ideas. Nietzsche uses his hammer to demonstrate the hollowness of many of these ideas, then smashes them. The empty space left behind from previous philosophical activity invites us to novelty, creativity, and authenticity.

Nietzsche opens the section called “Maxims and Arrows” with what he calls questions of conscience, urging us to ask ourselves whether we are leading lives of which we are truly the authors or lives derived from the templates or theories of others. Our lives should arise from a self-creative act, a conscious decision about where we want to be and the enactment of that decision. Nietzsche points out that our ability to take on values from external sources is the greatest danger to authenticity. If we are to live our lives as artists, then we must safeguard our own creativity.
On the theme of knowledge, Nietzsche writes, “Once and for all, there is a great deal I do not want to know: Wisdom sets bounds even to knowledge.” In modernity, wisdom was a central human value, but Nietzsche asserts that to valorize all knowledge is foolish. On the notion of being natural, he writes, “It is by being natural that one best recovers from one’s unnaturalness, from one’s spirituality.” The spiritual is a kind of decadence that removes us from the natural world into the supernatural. When we move into the realm of religion, we deny our essential naturalness, deprecating the world in which we live. In a deep rejection of religion, Nietzsche asks, “Is man only God’s mistake or God only man’s mistake?” Nietzsche then tells us, “If we possess our why of life, we can put up with any how. Man does not strive after happiness … .” There isn’t one single, highest good, and the attempt to locate one would have the effect of destroying all creativity. Further, Nietzsche says, “The will to a system is a lack of integrity.” In other words, if we establish a system to regulate our lives, we’ve given responsibility for our lives to that system. We should, above all, retain responsibility, authenticity, the freedom to act, and an appreciation of diversity and spontaneity; simplifying life is always dangerous. In summing up his “Maxims and Arrows,” Nietzsche asks whether we are being true to ourselves, reducing ourselves to fulfilling other people’s goals, or giving up our responsibilities entirely. Are we serving as representatives for the values of others or are we something represented? Are we spectators in our own lives or truly engaged?

In another section of *Twilight*, Nietzsche takes his hammer to Socrates. The ancient Greek is a touchstone for modernity because his demonstration of the power of reason allowed Hume, Kant, and others to view reason as progressive. But for Nietzsche, the philosophy of the past, from classical Greece to modernity, is a retreat from actually living life—from being creative and engaging with the world—to abstract, airy, meaningless thought. By accepting any one valuation of life—whether it’s Aristotle’s or Kant’s—
we decline the responsibility to evaluate our own lives and live according to our conscience. We must simply accept the fact that we can’t know the meaning or value of life; reason won’t give us an answer. If our lives are art, then we must put reason aside and live creatively.

According to Nietzsche, the ideas of past philosophers are dead things, “conceptual mummies.” The past idolatry of reason leads to a deprecation of the senses and passions, our bodies, and the real world in favor of abstract ideas and principles. The result is an abandonment of authentic values. Nietzsche argues that the desire to find some greater reality outside of the one in which we actually live is simply irrational. To posit the existence of a greater reality is cowardly, life-denying, and inauthentic. Nietzsche challenges us, instead, to create meaning in our own lives and to find significance in the world we actually inhabit.

**Name to Know**

**Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900):** Nietzsche grew up in a middle-class Prussian family. He excelled in his studies, particularly in music and literature, and pursued theology and philology at the University of Bonn.

**Important Term**

**postmodernity:** An ideological outlook that rejects the fundamental tenets of European modernism—the unity of the subject, the fact that knowledge constitutes a unified system that rests on sure foundations, the conviction that civilization is progressive—in favor of a conviction that subjectivity is variable and often fragmented, a suspicion of unified systems and a conviction that knowledge is socially constructed and fluid, and a suspicion of a single narrative of human progress.

**Suggested Reading**

Cox, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation*.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-christ: Or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. 
Study Questions

1. In what ways does Nietzsche build on the insights of Kant and Mill? In what ways and for what reasons does he reject their views?

2. Why would a religious life be inauthentic for Nietzsche? How is Nietzsche’s vision of the meaningful life similar to and how is it different from that articulated in Daoism? In Zen?
Nietzsche is far from a nihilist. Nietzsche urges an important kind of creativity, but Nietzsche actually thinks that modernity is deeply nihilistic; that’s the irony. Nietzsche is actually a critic of nihilism, not a nihilist himself.

Nietzsche’s oratorical prose and his calls to conscience, his poetry, and his irony can sometimes blind us to the depths of his critiques of philosophy. The idols he smashes are the values of modernity that undergird much of our contemporary intellectual and political culture: progress, reason, systematicity, faith, and the idea of transcendent values.

The section of *Twilight of the Idols* called “How the Real World Became a Myth” is Nietzsche’s six-step analysis of how we find ourselves on an inauthentic flight from reality and responsibility for our own lives. We begin with the understanding that wise people or sages dwell directly in reality, understanding its concreteness, impermanence, and beauty. From there, we leap to the mistaken belief that only wise people dwell in reality—the unwise dwell in some kind of cosmic illusion—and with that, we disenfranchise ourselves. We believe that knowledge of the real world is practically unobtainable for ordinary people; in fact, we conclude that it is completely unknowable. The next step, of course, is to conceptualize the real world as so remote that it’s basically nonexistent. The only rational attitude then is to do away with reality and assert that we live in a world of appearance completely. When we reach this step, we have abandoned any commitment to our own lives as real, let alone meaningful. The alternative to following this path to nihilism is to make beauty and meaning out of the actual lives we live.

Nietzsche offers a completely alternate vision of the ideas of freedom and progress to what we saw in modernism. He rejects the idea of freedom found in liberal democracy because he believes it is shallow; it ends up being the freedom to act like everybody else. Further, liberal democracy ceases to be
liberal the moment it is put in place because it establishes an overarching ideology that frames all our thinking.

Nietzsche’s conception of freedom is freedom from conformity, freedom to rise above the herd, not to be an equal member of the herd. This is profoundly anti-democratic. Nietzsche sees democracy not as a great achievement but as a disaster for humanity because it treats us all as equal. The person who might move out ahead and create an authentic life is prevented from doing so because of the subtle imposition of a uniform ideology. Further, in Nietzsche’s view, truly great art arises from struggle, but liberal democracy makes our lives too easy. A meaningful life is one of striving for self-expression; it’s a life of real individuality, not a life of comfort. Nietzsche’s conception of freedom is closer to that experienced by Arjuna—the freedom to fight and to realize himself—rather than the kind of abstract, pre-packaged liberty advocated by Mill.

Nietzsche tells us that “there exists no more poisonous poison” than the doctrine of equality. He sees most of modern civilization as a degenerate force, a force that levels us and keeps us down instead of lifting us up. This force diverts us from the natural life we would ordinarily lead and directs our thinking to abstract ideas that drain the content from our lives and encourage complacency.

Equality, for Nietzsche, is not justice. When we preach equality of all people, we’re saying that everyone is the same and should be treated in exactly the same way, but Nietzsche argues that we’re all different from one another. A better sense of justice would be to accord each person the opportunities that he or she is willing and able to take advantage of, rather than giving each person the same opportunities. Nietzsche is an elitist, and he challenges us to strive for elitism, as well.
Nietzsche is distinctively postmodern in a number of ways. He rejects the idea of a sort of preexisting individual in favor of a self-creative individual. He rejects the systematic nature of knowledge in favor of multiple kinds of knowledge, none of them preeminent; as a result, he rejects the sovereignty of reason. The classical idea of progress, too, is reversed: Instead of the steady march of human history from the primitive to the peak of advancement in modernity, Nietzsche sees modernity as the most life-denying, self-alienating approach to life possible. We need to return to our nature and to embrace the possibility of creativity at every moment. Finally, Nietzsche rejects the personal freedom found in liberal democracy in favor of the freedom of individual strength.

For Nietzsche, a meaningful life is one of authenticity, in which we create our own goals and values and live up to them. This life requires intellectual, moral, and aesthetic integrity and demands that we take responsibility for our own deepest values. In this strongly aesthetic conception of meaning, a meaningful life is a work of art on a grand performance scale.

Suggested Reading

Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-christ: Or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*.

Study Questions

1. What does Nietzsche mean by freedom? Why is this not the freedom of liberal democratic theory?

2. How is Nietzsche’s critique of democracy connected to his critique of modernity in general? Is this critique plausible?
The narrative for Gandhi of Indian spirituality is both philosophical and religious. It’s aimed at the future, but it’s aimed at grounding the future in an Indian past that reaches back to the Gītā. Gandhi’s critique of modernity and of British rule is not just a political critique; it’s a very deep cultural critique.

Like Nietzsche, Mohandas Gandhi was a critic of modernity, believing that modernity itself makes a meaningful life impossible. During his life, Gandhi lived in India, Britain, and South Africa and, as a philosopher, wove together ideas from many sources into an extraordinarily complex, multicultural vision of what human life is and ought to be.

One idea that animates Gandhi’s thought is a deep sense of justice, a sense of the importance of human rights and the obligation of a nation to respect the rights of its citizens. As a young lawyer in South Africa, Gandhi’s political sensibility was galvanized by an act of personal injustice he experienced: He was deposited at a remote station in the middle of the night when a white South African demanded his berth on a train. In response, Gandhi mobilized a massive civil disobedience movement to liberalize race laws in South Africa. Later, he was invited to return to India to help lead the fight against colonial rule.

Many of Gandhi’s ideas derived from reading the Gītā and from Jainism, a religion with a strong emphasis on nonviolence embodied in the principle of ahimsa, meaning “non-harming.” Jainism also encompasses the idea that no single individual has a complete grasp of the truth; we must always act on our own conception of the truth but hold ourselves open to the fact that others may understand some things better than we do. From Tolstoy, Gandhi inherited an emphasis on personal spiritual development as essential to human life and a powerful critique of industrialism and modernity. He derived a sense of justice from his studies in Britain and an emphasis on civil disobedience from Henry David Thoreau. From the Indian leader Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi developed a sense of the importance of national identity.
and the need for a revolution in Indian culture, which he thought could be achieved through a union of svadharma and ahimsa.

Recall that svadharma is the idea that we each have a particular duty in society and a meaningful life involves our discharge of that duty. For Gandhi, our svadharma derives from our political circumstances, which entail public political duties. Gandhi diagnosed the primary disease of modernity as inconsistency with ahimsa; that is, modernity itself is harmful to individuals and causes us to lead our lives in ways that harm others. The only way to confront modernity is to do so publicly and representationally through civil disobedience. Our svadharma in the face of an unjust law is to defy it publicly.

Gandhi endorsed the liberal democratic ideals and fundamental freedoms of Mill, but he believed that they had become the foundation of industrial capitalism, which he saw as intrinsically harmful. The idea of liberal democracy should be reinterpreted to be consistent with ahimsa. Government could not be an institution that allows some to benefit and others to suffer.

Another central construct for Gandhi is the idea of satyagraha, meaning a commitment to determining the truth and an insistence that truth prevails. This is a realization of the ideals of the Gītā, specifically, the role of jñāna yoga in understanding the nature of reality and karma yoga in acting so as to realize that understanding. Gandhi thought that satyagraha must be performed publicly, actively, and nonviolently and should be aimed at enabling others to see and act on the truth. Gandhi follows Thoreau in suggesting that such action always invites resistance and punishment, which one should accept publicly, again, because doing so educates others about injustice.

The second important construct in Gandhi’s political thought is swaraj, literally meaning “self-rule,” a term that can be applied to both politics and the individual. Gandhi believed that political swaraj was impossible without
personal *swaraj*, self-mastery. For Gandhi, *swaraj* and *satyagraha* are tightly connected. *Satyagraha* is the vehicle for obtaining political *swaraj*, but personal *swaraj* is the necessary condition of genuine *satyagraha*. We can’t grasp the truth without first ruling ourselves.

In Gandhi’s view, the individualism of Hume, Kant, and Mill was the foundation of capitalism, which inevitably resulted in industrialism and, in turn, the exploitation of workers, concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and eventually, colonial expropriation of wealth from other countries. Gandhi also thought that secularism—the abandonment of religion in public life—had the effect of eliminating moral critique, which generally arises from religious roots. Gandhi urged a kind of *swaraj* that resisted modern ideas of liberality, individualism, and so on, replacing large-scale government and industry with a commitment to local production. He acknowledged that this commitment would involve the sacrifice of many of the benefits of modernity—technology, medical advances, and so on—but he argued that it’s better to do without those benefits than to lose the human soul.

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**Name to Know**

**Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1869–1948):** Gandhi was born in Porbandar, then a small princely state, in the modern state of Gujarat. His father was *diwan* of that state. Gandhi’s parents were both devout Hindus, but much of the surrounding community was Jain; hence, he grew up in a context of great piety and commitment to nonviolence.

**Important Terms**

*ahimsa*: Nonviolence, or refraining from harming others.

*Jainism*: An Indian religion in which nonviolence is the central value.

*satyagraha*: A Gandhian term: holding on to, or insisting on, the truth.

*swaraj*: Self-rule.
1. What are the roots of Gandhi’s account of satyāgraha and swaraj? Are they consistent with one another?

2. How do the personal and political dimensions of swaraj fit together? What aspects of the political program are plausible? Can they be disentangled from the less plausible aspects?
Gandhi—The Call to a Supernormal Life
Lecture 31

Liberalism claims to be the way to make sense of human dignity, the way to encourage freedom, the way to encourage the development of knowledge and progress, but Gandhi argues, in fact, it subverts all of that.

Gandhi insisted that a meaningful life is a supernormal life, and his own was supernormal in a number of respects: his extreme asceticism, his practice of chastity, and his devotion to religion. His concept of satyāgraha involved a willingness to sustain injury and deprivation at the hands of his adversaries, and he was imprisoned many times. He was also committed to the idea that every aspect of his life was representational, a potential lesson to others in the possibilities for human life. Of course, his life was also nonviolent in the extreme, and we might say that it was successful in the extreme. This one man mobilized a disunified and largely impoverished subcontinent in rebellion against the most powerful military force in the world.

For Gandhi, a normal, ordinary life involves a rejection of autonomy. He believes that we all too often unreflectively accept social norms, political structures, economic values, and so on. He argues that this abdication of responsibility for our lives is always an acquiescence to and a complicity in violence and oppression, because industrial capitalism and the existence of militaries are themselves inherently violent and oppressive. These entities always involve the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few and the impoverishment of many. Because so much of our lives is structured by capitalism and industrialism, we accept these outcomes as legitimate. For this reason, we live lives of bad faith, lives in which we are alienated from our own values and cannot take responsibility for our actions.

One possible justification for living such an inauthentic life might be liberalism of the kind advanced by Mill or Kant, but Gandhi thinks that’s insufficient because it ignores the harms of capitalism and industrialism. According to Gandhi, Mill’s harm principle is violated by liberalism itself.
because liberalism is set up to make harm possible. It argues for freedom, but the freedom it makes possible for the few is bought at the cost of enslavement of the many.

For Gandhi, normality gives others authority over our actions and ideology, allows us to relinquish responsibility for the way we live, and involves a rejection of truth because it requires us to accept ideologies that we know to be false. Further, normality violates the Jain idea of *ahimsa*, because leading a normal life in the context of a system that is built on the legitimation of harm involves leading a life that itself causes harm, even if we don’t intend to harm directly. Thus, a normal life is a meaningless one.

Gandhi believes that the principles of liberalism—freedom of speech and of ideas—enable capitalism. People become free to sell their labor, accumulate wealth, and spend their wealth freely. This small-scale capitalism quickly becomes large-scale industrialism; the resulting concentration of wealth and power among the few subverts democracy and encourages consumerism. Further, capitalism and political oppression are built on advertising and propaganda, the purpose of which is to convince us that values we don’t actually endorse are acceptable. The result is the replacement of knowledge with confusion and a reduction in autonomy. This critique of liberalism is based on the idea of *svadharma* in the Bhagavad-Gītā. Gandhi argued that our membership in society gives us a collective

*Swaraj, a mastery of ourselves, calls upon us to be deeply self-reflective, to be aware of our motivations and our values.*
svadharma of service, the duty to bring our societies in line with the values we endorse on reflection.

Gandhi’s articulation of satyāgraha, an insistence on truth, and of swaraj, self-mastery, place supernormal demands on us: the duty to engage in constant social and political activity and struggle and the obligation to live a life of relentless nonviolence, consistency of values, and austerity. Such a supernormal life is active in alleviating the suffering of others and in achieving political liberation for the oppressed. Any recognition of harm is an obligation to organize our lives in such a way as to avoid it or eliminate it. Finally, the supernormal life is one of local production and consumption, one in which we attempt to minimize our participation in global economic structures.

For Gandhi, anything less than the supernormal life is utterly meaningless. The kind of self-discipline involved in this life is what gives us freedom from unreflective submission to mass values. Such a life is meaningful because it is the only one that reflects the truth as we know it. Finally, a life led through discipline and service to others connects us to something broader than ourselves: our fellow human beings and genuine sources of values. It’s a life that actually serves the values we endorse: genuine freedom, not the artificial freedom of liberalism; genuine equity, not equality of opportunity to suppress others; and complete nonviolence. This is the kind of life that serves the highest good.

Suggested Reading

Gandhi, Hind Swaraj.

Study Questions

1. What aspects of the life Gandhi recommends seem reasonable? Which are unreasonable and why?

2. Do the principles that Gandhi uses to justify the life he recommends in fact entail that life? If so and if that life seems unreasonable, which of these principles might we reject?
Modernity doesn’t only construct a prison for us, but it’s a prison without any windows. It’s a prison that we can’t even see out of and imagine alternatives to.

In some respects, John Lame Deer, a medicine man of the Lakota Sioux, shares insights with some of the other critics of modernity whose work we’ve examined. Along with Nietzsche, he is a critic of “mass-produced people.” With Tolstoy, he shares the belief that society’s focus on consumerism and normalcy alienates us from interpersonal relations. Lame Deer also agrees with Gandhi that modernity forces us to lead lives in which we’re complicit in harmful social structures. He connects modernity and mass culture to alienation from ourselves and the world of nature that we inhabit. He also points out that the values of modern life tend to assume a kind of universality that makes it impossible for us to see alternatives. We adopt a regime of ideology and morality that takes over our way of seeing the world; as a consequence, we lead lives that are unreflective, self-alienated, and meaningless.

The context in which the Lakota seek the meaning of life encompasses both the social and the natural world. It embodies a sense that, first and foremost, human beings are animals living in a natural ecosystem. We should treat other animals as our peers, members of our culture who have obligations to us and to whom we have obligations, and should care for the environment. This natural context also means that we must internalize a sense of temporality, because the natural world itself is marked by temporal cycles.

An important issue for the Lakota is the nature of symbols and the pervasiveness of the symbolic. The world is defined by its symbolic character, and that symbolism is central to the meaning of life. To the Lakota, life as a whole is permeated with symbols, things that mean something in a linguistic sense. Part of the meaning of life is the meaning of those symbols, and part of what makes our lives meaningful is that our lives themselves can be seen as symbolic.
Lame Deer offers an eloquent example of the meaning found in nature in his description of a cooking pot. He writes, “The bubbling water [in the pot] comes from the sky: it represents the rain cloud.” The water itself is symbolic of the cloud; it’s not just caused by the cloud, but it represents the cloud. Lame Deer continues, “The fire comes from the sun which warms us all—men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves that we might live. … These things are sacred.” Each of these commonplace things is a symbol that calls to mind something sacred, something greater than us. For the Native American speaker, simply looking at the pot is to look at a host of symbols that remind us we live in a vast, sacred order. The symbols around us are actually language, the language of the universe teaching the meaning of life.

The symbols around us are actually language, the language of the universe teaching the meaning of life.

Understanding the world in this symbolic dimension effects a transfiguration of the commonplace into the sacred. Opening our eyes and seeing these symbols enables a much deeper connection to a sacred natural world that gives our lives meaning. Lame Deer points out that the human world of symbols—names and rituals, for example—is part of the natural world. Human language is just one instance among thousands of the symbolic; the symbolic is a much grander affair than something that we instantiate.

Lame Deer describes the Native American sun dance as a ritual that served as a symbolic sacrifice of the dancer’s body, sensations, and endurance. These are the only things humans have to sacrifice; everything else already belongs to the universe. The ritual of the sun dance reinforces a vision of unity of the universe through devotion, as well as the symbolism of the dancer himself. The dancer becomes a symbol of his own devotion.

The symbol of the Native American is the circle, which not only resembles and describes the character of nature but is also a representational symbol. In the repetition of circles in the universe—the planets, the stars, the rainbow—Lame Deer sees “symbols and reality at the same time, expressing the
The harmony of life and nature.” Symbols and reality don’t stand apart from each other; the universe is already saturated with the symbolic, and the symbolic is natural to the universe, not imposed by our conceptual activity. In contrast, the symbol of non-Native Americans is the square, seen in houses, office buildings, and walls. Our world, too, is full of symbols, but they are the wrong symbols—symbols of separation. The truly meaningful life is the organic life, the life that is in unity with nature and represented by the circle. What’s wrong with modernity is not that it fails to be meaningful but that it means the wrong things.

Name to Know

Lame Deer, John (1900–1976): John Lame Deer was a Lakota Sioux medicine man born on the Rosebud Reservation and educated in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.

Suggested Reading

- Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*.

Study Questions

1. How does the notion of meaning found in Lame Deer’s writing—symbolic meaning—differ from the understanding of “meaning” that we’ve explored to this point in the course?

2. In what ways is Lame Deer’s critique of modernity familiar to us from other thinkers and in what ways is it different?
We end up living in a world that’s square, not a world that’s circular; a world that’s a prison, not a world that’s organic. That’s not a world that any of us would choose to live in, despite the fact that every day, in every action, we make choices that entail the necessity of just such a world.

“My grandparents grew up in an Indian world without money,” writes Lame Deer. Most of us take for granted that money must play a role in the world, but for this philosopher, that’s part of the totalizing character of modernity: We can’t even envision a world that different from ours. Most of us also spend a great deal of time thinking about money, possessions, and so on. Those things become the objects around which we organize our lives. But we would never reflectively endorse the idea that the focus of our lives should be money. Lame Deer tells us that after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the victorious Native Americans gave the soldiers’ money to their children to play with. Thus, the money became useful in precisely the way it should be useful—not as the central organizing principle of our lives but as something that has a useful subsidiary role.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn was over gold in the Black Hills, and Lame Deer points to another “battle” based on money: the poisoning of prairie dogs to preserve grass for cows. According to Lame Deer, the rancher “looks at a prairie dog [and] sees only a green frog-skin [a dollar] getting away from him.” But when a Native American looks at a prairie dog, he sees another member of the community to which we all belong. The prairie dog, if it’s symbolic of anything, is symbolic of the natural order that enfolds us. The Native American sees the dollar as a symbol of what it can do. The rancher, in a deep reversal of priority, sees the natural world as symbolic of the artificial symbol. In the European view, everything—grass, prairie dogs, Black Hills—comes to be seen in monetary terms. That view imposes a new symbolic order on our world, one in which everything stands for money.
Lame Deer points out that the bald eagle appears on our money as a national symbol, but our money is killing the eagle, and the destruction of this symbol means that we’ve lost the ability to connect with symbols as symbols. If we lose the ability to appreciate the symbolic character of the eagle, then we’ll be happy to simply let it become endangered and disappear. The disappearance is bad enough, but the alienation from the natural order we inhabit is the disease of which that’s a symptom.

For Lame Deer, the symbolic and natural orders go hand-in-hand. Symbols are part of reality; reality is completely symbolic. Commodity fetishism and the systematic disregard of symbols also go hand-in-hand. When we see things only in terms of their economic value and we see the economic value as all that matters, we abstract ourselves from the natural world, precisely because we abstract ourselves from its symbolic character. In doing so, we commodify the world and, in the end, we commodify ourselves.

Modern European culture draws a clear line between the biological world of plants and animals and the nonbiological world of minerals. But for Lame Deer, this line is dangerous because the biological world depends on the nonbiological one. To call rocks and minerals “dead” gives a kind of implicit permission to commodify that world and despoil it. Further, domestication has changed animals from creatures with beauty and integrity to artificial things that can live only on feed lots or in cages—things that are symbolic of exactly what might be uncomfortable for us. Ultimately, we no longer even think of ourselves as biological animals who live in an ecosystem but in terms of our functions in an economic order. We thus imprison ourselves and are complicit in our own imprisonment.

The end of this path of rejecting the symbolic and the natural, of fetishizing commodities, and of denying that we are biological animals is a completely ersatz life, a life that’s a stand-in for a real life.
ersatz life, a life that’s a stand-in for a real life. For Lame Deer, the nature of modernity is to turn us into spectators, not even of our own lives but of other people’s lives. We become prisoners looking at televisions that give us views into other people’s cells.

Finally, Lame Deer argues that modernity alienates us from death. As we’ve seen in so many other views we’ve examined, confronting the reality of death and coming to terms with it is essential to leading a meaningful life. But Lame Deer argues that modernity sweeps that under the rug. We live in a culture of violence, war, and pollution, but we sanitize it away through television and other means. To come to terms with death, we must think about it, plan it, and accept it. That leads to an authentic life, a life that understands us as natural objects that are indeed mortal.

Suggested Reading

Black Elk and Lyon, \textit{Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota}.

Lame Deer and Erdoes, \textit{Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions}.

Study Questions

1. Why does modernity, in Lame Deer’s view, necessarily alienate people from the natural world and its symbolic order? How does commodity fetishism lead to the destruction of nature and of meaning?

2. What is added to our understanding of the meaning of life through Lame Deer’s emphasis on the natural world as the ground of meaning?
[The Dalai Lama] has argued repeatedly that as far as he is concerned, it’s the deliverances of science that tell us about the fundamental nature of reality, not classical religious scriptures, and he has repeatedly said that where Buddhism or any religion conflicts with science, we should go with science, not with the deliverances of religion.

The Dalai Lama’s view of the meaning of life is, of course, deeply inflected and motivated by Buddhism, but he articulates it primarily as a modern secular vision, a vision with roots in ideas of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, democratic theory, and the importance of science. He follows Aristotle in seeing the universal goal of human life to be happiness, but that happiness can only be attained in the context of social interdependence. Like any Buddhist, the Dalai Lama sees the problem of life as constituted by suffering, whose modern sources he finds in consumer capitalism and industrialism. He sees the sources of happiness in purposive action in a human context.

The Dalai Lama agrees with Aristotle that happiness, flourishing, meets the criteria for the highest good in life: finality and self-sufficiency. The components of happiness in a modern life include food, shelter, physical security, peace, education, access to health care, the opportunity for free expression of ideas, a certain amount of leisure, and possibility for personal development. The fact that people around the world are willing to fight to achieve these goals must mean that they are universal.

Because the Dalai Lama’s is a Buddhist account of the nature of reality, it is rooted in the doctrine of dependent origination, in which all things are interdependent in three senses. The first is causal dependence; everything occurs as a consequence of innumerable causes and conditions, and every event produces innumerable effects. The second form of interdependence is part-whole dependence; parts depend upon the whole for their nature and functioning, and wholes depend upon parts in order to exist. The third form of interdependence is dependence on conceptual imputation, that is,
dependence of things for their identity and function on the way in which we think about them.

The Dalai Lama argues that interdependence provides us with the deepest analysis of the fundamental nature of reality. Everything around us, in particular, our own lives and the lives of the communities in which we participate, is characterized by this threefold interdependence. Moreover, the Dalai Lama emphasizes that this is completely consistent with the deliverance of modern science. Physics, for example, demonstrates that everything is part of a uniform, causal whole and interdependent in all these ways. He argues that if our lives are to be meaningful, they must be grounded in reality, and given that interdependence is the fundamental nature of reality, a meaningful life is one that responds to and reflects an appreciation of interdependence.

For the Dalai Lama, human interdependence deserves special emphasis. Social reality develops for us distinctive kinds of part-whole interdependence because so much of our lives and our identities are determined by the wholes of which we’re parts. Conceptual imputation in the construction of identity and roles is also salient in human affairs in ways that it’s not in physical affairs. Our decisions that a particular person is a

Interconnection also constitutes our happiness because so much of our happiness is social. We become happy when our actions actually match the goals and values we endorse. That’s often only possible socially because so many of our goals and so many of our values are collective social values.
criminal versus an upright citizen, a colleague versus a competitor, and so on determine the nature of our relations, the nature of our lives, and the nature of our happiness.

Each of the dimensions of interdependence is implicated in the arising of suffering and the production of happiness. All these forms of interdependence give us the possibility of having complex effects in our actions. Everything we do ripples through societies instantly and in countless ways and in ways that we can’t always control but that demand our reflection. And because our actions have so many effects, we have obligations to make sure that those effects are beneficial, and we have responsibilities to those who can be affected by our actions.

According to the Dalai Lama, modern capitalism has brought the original source of suffering—primal confusion that results in attraction and aversion—to new heights. Advertising, for example, creates both need and fear, attraction and aversion, and it isolates us in a marketplace with a given commodity, forcing a decision on whether or not we need something. The Dalai Lama thinks that commodification has also infected politics because it creates politicians and ideas as commodities, then generates attraction or aversion. The mass media and mass culture are, thus, sources of confusion and suffering.

Oddly, the sources of happiness in the modern world are similar to the sources of unhappiness. One such source is our interconnection with others, which enables us to produce both the material and the collective social goods we want and allows us to discover truth in learning from one another. This interconnection also brings us happiness in the form of social interactions and activities with friends and families. It offers us the opportunity to work out the kinds of social values and ideals we endorse and lead a life of integrity and authenticity.
His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV, Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935): The Dalai Lama lineage in Tibet is regarded by Tibetans as a reincarnate lineage: Each successive Dalai Lama is recognized as a rebirth of his predecessor, and all are regarded by Tibetans as emanations of Avalokiteśvara, the Buddhist celestial bodhisattva of compassion.

Suggested Reading

Dalai Lama XIV, *Ethics for a New Millennium*.

———, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*.

Prebisch and Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma*.

Study Questions

1. In what sense is the Dalai Lama’s diagnosis of modern life Buddhist? In what sense is it modern?

2. What is the difference between the analysis of modernity presented by Gandhi and that presented by the Dalai Lama?
The union of compassion and discernment is a union of moral perceptual skills—where, when we see a situation, we see the sources of suffering, we see the possibilities for happiness—and the interpersonal skills that allow us to see what kinds of interventions will be most useful and commit us to those kinds of interventions.

As we saw in the last lecture, dependent origination grounds the possibility of both suffering and happiness. For the Dalai Lama, the source of suffering in the modern world is the ideology of commodity fetishism, and the only solution to suffering is to develop a deep kind of compassion, an attitude that respects interdependence and commits us to the creation of happiness.

The Dalai Lama notes that unhappiness doesn’t derive directly from external circumstances but from our emotional reactions to adversity. Such emotional reactions arise from both attachment and aversion and can be either individual or collective. The Dalai Lama thinks of emotions that cause suffering as pathologies; examples include greed, lust, hate, and so on. In some cases, such as when we speak of righteous anger, we mistake pathology for virtue, but as we’ve seen, anger never results in positive outcomes. If we’re going to understand the nature of suffering and happiness, we must be able to distinguish between beneficial and pathological emotions.

According to the Dalai Lama, pathological emotions are grounded in confusion, a misperception of reality. We see something else as the source of our unhappiness instead of ourselves; we see some object as necessary instead of simply an option. To cultivate positive emotions, we need a clear, accurate understanding of reality and not just on a theoretical or abstract level. We must seek instinctive, spontaneous responses to the world as causally dependent, part-whole dependent, and dependent on imputation. This instinctive cognitive habit is difficult to accomplish, and that’s why the notion of karunā—compassion—is so important. Karunā gives us commitment, that altruistic aspiration to act, impelling us to develop
spontaneous ways of interacting with the world in place of our ordinary approaches. The use of moral imagination is important here because we need to be able to understand that the interests of others are, in a deep sense, just like our interests and that their pain is just like our pain.

The Dalai Lama argues that the cultivation of compassion comes in two parts: the cultivation of restraint and the cultivation of virtue. By restraint, he means the holding back of instinctive negative reactions, actions of anger, greed, carelessness, and so forth. By virtue, he means developing a positive commitment to benefit others. Restraint cuts off the roots of suffering by prompting us to reflect on the causes of pathological emotions, thus subverting primal confusion and ignorance. Reflection also highlights the impermanence of the world, including the impermanence of the things that cause us to experience suffering and our own emotional reactions. Through reflecting on selflessness, we’re able to suspend the ordinary cognitive habit of thinking of ourselves as subjects and everything else in the world as objects. That way of thinking reflects the nature of reality as determined by a polar coordinate system with oneself at the center and everything else arrayed in terms of its relationship to the center. This conception gives rise to conflict, but by reflecting on selflessness, we come to take our own importance less seriously.

Restraint keeps us from doing bad things, but it doesn’t by itself motivate us to do the things that are necessary for own happiness or the happiness of others. To do that, we need to cultivate generosity, the willingness to detach ourselves from our possessions. As Śāntideva reminded us, virtue also requires patience, not only with others but with ourselves. The moral development that we come to demand of ourselves when we adopt this understanding of the nature of our lives isn’t acquired in a moment.

The concept of virtue that the Dalai Lama emphasizes requires attentive concern, mindfulness, discernment, and compassion. The dimension of
attentiveness commits us to truly understanding the nature of the problem and the solutions that would rectify it. The dimension of concern is a commitment to take action. Mindfulness of our own emotional states enables us to focus on virtuous rather than nonvirtuous emotions. Discernment is necessary to allow us to understand the details of any particular situation: What are the causes, conditions, and effects? Finally, we need compassion in the sense of karunā, an altruistic commitment to act. For compassion to be genuine and efficacious, it must rest on discernment, a deep analytical understanding of suffering.

The Dalai Lama emphasizes that this kind of compassion entails a Gandhian universal responsibility, a responsibility for the welfare of all, because there are no limitations on compassion. Any limitations could originate only in pathological distinctions between ourselves and others. Compassion must be rooted in the de-centering of the individual, which will make such distinctions impossible. What we’re seeing here is a modern version of the bodhisattva path: the altruistic resolution to act for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Suggested Reading

Dalai Lama XIV, *Ethics for a New Millennium*.

Queen, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*.

Study Questions

1. In what sense is the Dalai Lama’s recommendation for a meaningful life different from those of Gandhi and Lame Deer? In what respects is it similar?

2. Why is compassion, as opposed to a sense of duty, the foundation for a meaningful life in the modern world, according to the Dalai Lama?
So, What Is the Meaning of Life?
Lecture 36

Often, one is led to find superficial similarities and to overemphasize those and, therefore, to lose a lot of the texture and detail that’s bequeathed to us by the textual traditions that we’ve been examining.

We’ve encountered a great deal of diversity in this course, but we can still point to certain recurrent themes. For example, almost every position we’ve considered has emphasized the importance of a connection between our own lives and some larger context, of temporality, of some ideal of human perfection, and of spontaneity. In conjunction with spontaneity, we’ve seen an emphasis on freedom. We’ve also seen the need to understand the nature of the world we live in and the nature of our own lives in order to live an authentic life. In this lecture, we examine each of these themes to see what general conclusions we might draw.

The larger context required for a meaningful life has sometimes been conceived as a universal, divine, or cosmic context, as in the Bhagavad-Gītā, the book of Job, and the Stoics. For the Daoists, this larger context is similar but more impersonal; it’s the context of the dao, the way of things. Sometimes, this context is a bit more narrow—a global context or a natural one. Lame Deer, for instance, emphasized that the context of our lives that matters most is that of nature, and the Dalai Lama, along with Aristotle, Confucius, and others, emphasizes a social context. In each case, the key to finding meaning in our lives is to first identify the larger context in which our small lives make sense, then to understand how we can make our lives meaningful by connecting them to that context.

With regard to temporality, the Stoics emphasized the eternality of the universe and the fact that the period of our existence is brief and bounded by infinite gulfs of our absence. Buddhism also emphasizes a constant awareness of impermanence, the beauty of impermanence, and the urgency that impermanence gives to our lives. Tolstoy, Lame Deer, and Nietzsche pick up on the theme of mindfulness of death: At each moment in our lives, we need to be aware of our own mortality and finitude.
In the texts we’ve examined, we’ve often seen the question of the meaning of life addressed in terms of an account of human perfection. Aristotle offered us an ideal of the perfect human life in the concept of *eudaimonea*, flourishing, and tells us that this ideal can be achieved through a life of activity in accordance with virtue, through moral strength and practical wisdom, and through friendship. The Daoists and Zen Buddhists give us the sage as the ideal of perfection, one who pays attention to the empty spaces and who lives spontaneously, effortlessly. Śāntideva and the Dalai Lama extend this account of perfection to encompass the cultivation of a certain kind of compassion, a commitment to altruistic action on behalf of others. For Kant and Mill, human life is focused on reason, discourse, and participation in liberal democratic societies. That ideal was challenged by Nietzsche, who emphasized that what makes our lives beautiful is our artistry and spontaneity, our ability to re-evaluate the values we’re taught and lead our lives in harmony with values we ourselves create.

Many of the philosophers and theologians we’ve examined have urged us to cultivate spontaneity in our lives. This spontaneity is motivated by the idea that our actions and values don’t need to be brought together artificially. For Aristotle and Confucius, the model here is that of the artist, one who practices endlessly to achieve a second nature. For Daoism and Zen, the emphasis is on the need to pare away the artificial second nature and return to naturalness. Ultimately, Lame Deer tells us that we need to understand that we are fundamentally part of the biological world, a world of circles rather than squares.

For the thinkers we’ve explored, a meaningful life necessarily entails freedom. The Gītā emphasized the fact that freedom emerges from discipline, while the Daoists urged us to free ourselves from social standards. Hume and Kant emphasized the need to attain freedom from authority, an idea that Mill extended to an insistence on absolute freedom of thought. Nietzsche was concerned with freedom from philosophical ideas and from an intellectual
tradition that makes creativity impossible. Gandhi emphasized self-mastery similar to that in the Gītā, the kind of discipline that frees us from consumerism and other external constraints.

The answer to our original question is deeply complex and conflicted; it requires us to cultivate an awareness of reality in all its complexity and adversity, to understand that our lives are finite, and to develop a commitment to achieving individual excellence and to creating meaning in the lives of others. Perhaps the first step in finding meaning is to ask the question, then to engage, as we have done in this course, with the wide diversity of answers that have been given throughout history and around the world.

Study Questions

1. What are the major dimensions along which accounts of the meaning of life differ from one another? How would one go about choosing one approach over another?

2. What common insights survive these differences? Why do these ideas transcend the different approaches? Are they consistent with one another?
**Glossary**

**ahimsa**: Nonviolence, or refraining from harming others.

**Analects, The**: The collection of sayings and dialogues attributed to Kongfuzi (Confucius). It relies on a set of key philosophical ideas, including:

- **ren**: Humanity, warm-heartedness
- **li**: Ritual propriety, etiquette
- **de**: Virtue, integrity, moral rectitude
- **xiao**: Filial piety; respect for, and obedience to, one’s parents, elders, and superiors
- **tian**: Heaven, or the order of the universe
- **wu-wei**: Inaction or spontaneous, effortless activity in contrast to studied, deliberate action

**aretē**: Virtue or excellence.

**awarē**: In Japanese Buddhist aesthetics, the particular beauty that derives from the impermanence of things, the beauty things have just before they fade.

**being-time**: The intimate union of existence and temporality; the fact that to exist is to be impermanent yet to have a past and a future to which one is essentially connected and the fact that human existence is always experienced in relation to past, present, and future.

**bodhisattva**: In Buddhism, one who has formed the altruistic aspiration to attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings.
**Chaldeans** (Book of Job): An ancient Near Eastern people who lived in Mesopotamia.

**depersonalization**: Abstraction from one’s own personal interests or place in the world; taking a disinterested view of things.

**dharma**: A word with many meanings the root of which means “to hold.” Meanings include duty, virtue, doctrine, entity, and reality, depending on context.

**Epicurean**: A school of Greek and Roman philosophy following the teachings of Epicurus (4th–3rd century B.C.E.). Central doctrines of the school were atomism, materialism, and an emphasis on the attainment of peace of mind through moderation and control of the emotions.

**ēthikē/ethos**: Behavior or conduct.

**eudaimonea**: Human flourishing, a good life, often translated as “happiness.”

**foundationalism**: The doctrine that knowledge must rest on a basis. Examples of foundations of knowledge are perception and reason.

**Jainism**: An Indian religion in which nonviolence is the central value.

**karunā**: Compassion, the commitment to act to relieve the suffering of others.

**kratē**: Moral strength, the ability to stick to one’s resolve in the face of temptation or fear.

**Krishna**: An Indian manifestation of divinity.

**libertarianism**: The belief that individuals should have the maximum personal liberty consistent with the liberty of others; resistance of the intrusion of the law into the private sphere.

**metaphysics**: The study of the fundamental nature of reality.
**neo-Vedānta**: A late 19th- and early 20th-century philosophical movement in India grounded in a revival and reinterpretation of the ancient Indian texts collectively called the *Vedas*. Prominent neo-Vedānta philosophers included Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.

**phenomenology**: Inner experience, or the theory of inner experience.

**phronesis**: Practical wisdom, the ability to deliberate wisely about how to accomplish one’s goals.

**postmodernity**: An ideological outlook that rejects the fundamental tenets of European modernism—the unity of the subject, the fact that knowledge constitutes a unified system that rests on sure foundations, the conviction that civilization is progressive—in favor of a conviction that subjectivity is variable and often fragmented, a suspicion of unified systems and a conviction that knowledge is socially constructed and fluid, and a suspicion of a single narrative of human progress. The term also refers to the social conditions that reflect this view, namely, conditions in which fundamental claims are contested, societies are pluralistic, and values do not sustain a unified view of knowledge or progress.

**Sabeans** (Book of Job): An ancient Near Eastern tribe that lived near present-day Yemen.

**Samaj movements**: The Arya and Brahmo Samajs (*Samaj* means “society”); two prominent modernist religious reform movements that swept India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Both emphasized a return to classical Indian texts and ideas but also the abandonment of ritual, the rejection of caste, and an embrace of modernity and Indian nationalism.

**Sanskrit**: The language of classical Indian scholarship, as opposed to Prakrits, classical vernacular languages.

**Sapere Aude!**: Kant’s motto of enlightenment: “Dare to know!”
**satyāgraha**: A Gandhian term: holding on to, or insisting on, the truth. A refusal to act in accordance with any principle one does not endorse and a commitment to principled action and honesty.

**Sheol** (Book of Job): The underworld, the place where the dead reside in the ancient Hebrew tradition.

**śramana**: A wandering ascetic of ancient India.

**svadharma**: One’s own particular duty or role in life, often in India tied to caste.

**swadeshi**: Literally, one’s own country. Commitment to the value and practices of one’s own country or culture, to self-reliance, and to consuming only what is produced locally.

**swaraj**: Self-rule. This can mean individual self-mastery or the self-government of a people or nation. For Gandhi, these two senses were deeply connected.

**theophany**: Revelation of the deity.

**Transcendentalists**: A group of American philosophers, poets, and writers who looked to Asia for inspiration and who were oriented toward mystical values and concerns that transcend the mundane world. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were prominent Transcendentalists.

**Utilitarianism**: A moral theory according to which actions are right to the degree to which they promote happiness or pleasure and wrong to the degree that they promote unhappiness or pain.

**yoga**: Discipline or spiritual practice. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* enumerates three kinds of discipline, representing three aspects of life:

- *karma* yoga: The discipline of action, the pursuit of divinity through action
• *jñāna* yoga: The discipline of knowledge, the pursuit of divinity through knowledge

• *bhakti* yoga: The discipline of devotion, the pursuit of divinity through devotional practice
Biographical Notes

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.): Aristotle was born in Stageira and moved to Athens in his youth, where he was a prominent aristocrat. He studied under Plato at the Academy. After Plato’s death, he traveled in present-day Turkey, conducting scientific research. In 343 B.C.E., he was appointed tutor to Alexander the Great. In 335 B.C.E., he returned to Athens and established the Lyceum, where he taught for 12 years, probably his most philosophically creative period. He left Athens to avoid prosecution for impiety and died at age 62 in Chalcis. Aristotle, like Plato, wrote philosophical dialogues, but none of his original works survives; what we have instead are lecture notes from his students. He wrote and taught on virtually every academic subject, including the natural sciences, rhetoric, poetry, metaphysics, logic, ethics, and political philosophy. Aristotle was enormously influential in the development of Islamic philosophy and medieval European philosophy.

Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi) (perhaps c. 370–c. 300 B.C.E.): There is no consensus regarding the existence of Chuang Tzu, who may have been created as a fictional author of the text that bears his name. This text, however, may be the work of multiple authors over several centuries. It is said that he left a minor government position for a life as a hermit philosopher and that he once turned down a prime ministership.

Confucius (Kongfuzi) (c. 551–479 B.C.E.): Confucius was born in the Chinese state of Lu (the present-day Shandong province of China) to a military family near the end of the Spring-Autumn period of Chinese history, a period that saw a great deal of warfare between small Chinese states. His father apparently died when Confucius was young, leaving the young boy and his concubine mother in poverty. Confucius clearly studied the Chinese classics with great success and spent most of his life as a low-level civil servant. He became famous as a teacher and spent much of his life traveling from state to state, teaching philosophy and politics. The texts by means of which we know Confucius’s thought are records of his conversations and teachings preserved by his disciples.
His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV, Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935): The Dalai Lama lineage in Tibet is regarded by Tibetans as a reincarnate lineage: Each successive Dalai Lama is recognized as a rebirth of his predecessor, and all are regarded by Tibetans as emanations of Avalalokiteśvara, the Buddhist celestial bodhisattva of compassion. Dalai Lamas are, hence, regarded by Tibetans as physical manifestations of compassion in the world. The Dalai Lama has traditionally been both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. The present Dalai Lama was born in a small village in Amdo, in far northeastern Tibet. When he was 3 years old, he was recognized by a search party as the rebirth of the 13th Dalai Lama and brought to Lhasa for enthronement and education. In 1949, the Army of the People’s Republic of China entered Tibet, and despite his youth, the Dalai Lama assumed, at the age of 14, political leadership of Tibet. Shortly after this, he completed his monastic education and earned the highest academic degree conferred in Tibet, the geshe lharampa (a Ph.D. with highest honors). For 10 years, the Dalai Lama attempted to cooperate with the Chinese government in order to allow Chinese authority and modernization while preserving Tibetan cultural identity. But as Chinese repression grew more severe, Tibetan resistance increased. In 1959, the Tibetans rose up against Chinese occupation, and the Dalai Lama was forced to flee into exile in India, followed by several hundred thousand Tibetan refugees. In India, the Dalai Lama has led a government-in-exile and overseen the establishment of Tibetan schools, orphanages, hospitals, social services, monastic institutions, universities, and finally, a democratic Tibetan government, stepping aside as head of government. He has opened a long-running dialogue with scientists and has published dozens of books, ranging from highly technical books on Buddhist philosophy to popular guides to happiness. The Dalai Lama has taught or spoken in countries around the world, always promoting nonviolent conflict resolution, interfaith harmony, and a humanitarian social identity. In 1989, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Dōgen (1200–1253): Dōgen was the illegitimate son of a high-ranking Japanese courtier, who died when her son was 7 years old. Early in his life, Dōgen joined the great Tendai monastery at Mt. Hiei. But he was dissatisfied with Tendai philosophy, bothered by the problem of the need to seek awakening if all sentient beings are primordially awakened. He moved to a Zen temple in Japan, studying under the great Zen master Eisai
until the latter’s death. In 1223, Dōgen traveled to China to search for teachings that would resolve his remaining concerns. After visiting several monasteries, he encountered the Zen teacher Rujing, under whom he had his awakening experience. In 1228, Dōgen returned to Japan with the Sōtō Zen lineage inherited from Ruing; he taught at several important temples and wrote hundreds of essays, laying the philosophical foundations of Sōtō Zen in Japan. He settled near the end of his life at Eiheji, which became the headquarters of the Sōtō Zen lineage in Japan.

Epictetus (55–135 C.E.): Little is known of the life of Epictetus, who was born a slave. He lived the first part of his life in Rome but was exiled to Greece. He studied Stoic philosophy in his youth and, at some point, gained his freedom. He was a popular teacher and widely respected both as a Stoic philosopher and an orator. None of his writings, if ever there were any, survives. The fragments that constitute his corpus are, in fact, lecture notes.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1869–1948): Gandhi was born in Porbandar, then a small princely state, in the modern state of Gujarat. His father was diwan of that state. Gandhi’s parents were both devout Hindus, but much of the surrounding community was Jain; hence, he grew up in a context of great piety and commitment to nonviolence. He was married at age 13. At age 18, he left India for London, where he studied law. While in England, he was active in the Vegetarian Society and came into contact with theosophists; thus, he developed a broader interest in world religions. Gandhi also studied liberal political theory and read Tolstoy and the American Transcendentalists. He returned to India in 1891 and, after some desultory practice, accepted a position in South Africa in 1893. In South Africa, Gandhi encountered firsthand the racial discrimination that pervaded the British Empire. Most famously, he was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg when he refused to vacate the first-class compartment for which he had a ticket. This event and others led Gandhi to lead massive nonviolent protests against discriminatory laws. In this context, he formulated his principle of satyāgraha—insistence on the truth and principled nonviolence as the only ways to challenge overwhelming repression. Gandhi returned to India in 1915, joined the Indian National Congress, and became active, first, in the congress’s efforts to resist unjust laws and policies, then in the independence movement. Gandhi led this movement to Indian independence through careful cultivation of
nonviolent resistance and refusal to comply with British imperial rule. He led numerous public protests and was jailed regularly but maintained his pacifism and tolerance. Gandhi was deeply opposed to the partition of India and deeply saddened by that eventuality and the violence that came in its wake. He was assassinated by a Hindu fundamentalist terrorist as he walked to prayers in 1948. Gandhi has been a major influence on such subsequent advocates of nonviolence and insistence on truth as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, and HH the Dalai Lama XIV.

**Hume, David (1711–1776):** David Hume was a philosophical prodigy and a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment. He entered the University of Edinburgh when he was 12 years old, rejecting the study of law for philosophy. After a brief career in business, he traveled to La Flèche, where in conversation with Jesuit philosophers and with access to an excellent library, he wrote his *Treatise of Human Nature*, published when he was 26 years of age. The *Treatise* is today recognized as one of the great masterpieces of Western philosophy but was ridiculed by critics at the time of its publication. Hume was undaunted and continued to publish philosophical essays, many of which were well-received, and his monumental *History of England*, a text that remained a standard history for more than a century after his death. He aspired to a chair in philosophy at Glasgow but was rejected as an atheist. Hume was widely admired as a humanist and as a scholar. He died in Edinburgh a very happy man.

**Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804):** Immanuel Kant is almost universally regarded as the greatest of all European philosophers. He was born and spent his entire life in Königsberg (present-day Kaliningrad) in Prussia. Indeed, he never ventured more than 100 miles from that city. Kant studied at the University of Königsberg, then spent his entire career teaching there. He was a prolific writer, but most of the books of his early years are no longer influential. In 1781, however, he produced his masterpiece, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, one of the most profound philosophical investigations undertaken in the Western tradition. This was followed by both *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Critique of Judgment*, extending Kant’s philosophical system from epistemology and metaphysics to ethics, then to aesthetics and a number of smaller but important texts. It is fair to say that
Kant completely transformed the face of European philosophy. He was the first professor of philosophy to be an important philosopher in his own right; he developed the first comprehensive European philosophical system since the Enlightenment; and he demonstrated that philosophy can take natural science seriously yet remain an autonomous domain of thought. Today, nobody can become a serious philosopher without first studying the work of Kant.

**Lame Deer, John (1900–1976):** John Lame Deer was a Lakota Sioux medicine man born on the Rosebud Reservation and educated in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. In early adult life, he was a rodeo rider and led the rough life of that trade. After meeting the keeper of the medicine pipe of the Lakota people, he became a medicine man. The second half of his life was devoted to educating Lakota and other Americans about Lakota culture, to the revival of Lakota culture, and to the recovery of traditional Lakota land in the Black Hills.

**Lao Tzu (perhaps 6th, 5th, or even 4th century B.C.E.):** There is no consensus about whether Lao Tzu (Laozi) ever existed. Many scholars regard him as a mythical figure constructed as the author of the Daodejing, which may well have developed under the hands of multiple authors over several centuries. Putative biographies locate his birth in Chu (Henan province) and state that he spent much of his adult life in Zhou, near present-day Luoyang, working in a library. He is said to have left the court and disappeared into the West.

**Marcus Aurelius (121–160 C.E.):** Marcus Aurelius was the son of a wealthy, noble Roman family living in present-day Spain. Marcus was educated by eminent tutors and adopted, in 138, by the emperor Aurelius Antoninus (Pius), under whom he served as consul for some time. While in public service, Marcus continued to pursue his education, studying Greek, literature, philosophy, and rhetoric with some of the most prominent teachers in Rome. He also studied law, a subject for which he appears to have had little appetite. In 161, on the death of Antoninus Pius, Marcus assumed the throne as emperor of Rome along with his adopted brother Lucius, who died soon thereafter, leaving Marcus as sole emperor. His reign was marked by many border wars, all of which concluded satisfactorily for Rome. He was
noted as a skilled legislator and judge and was apparently much occupied with administration. Marcus continued to pursue philosophy throughout his life and, on a visit to Athens, proclaimed himself “Protector of Philosophy.” He died while on tour in what is now Vienna.

**Mill, John Stuart (1806–1873):** John Stuart Mill was the son of the historian James Mill, a close follower of the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham and Mill developed a rigorous system of upbringing and education for the young John Stuart, who was isolated from other children and taught Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and algebra from age 3. By the time he was 10, he could read Plato in Greek and composed poetry in classical Greek. In his teens, Mill studied logic, rhetoric, history, and economics, but by age 20, he suffered a psychological collapse. Mill married Harriet Taylor, a brilliant young woman, and with her was a forceful advocate for the rights of women, for political liberty, and for a social policy aimed at the benefit of the masses of ordinary people. Mill’s essays on political philosophy were widely read in his own time and are still influential today.

**Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900):** Nietzsche grew up in a middle-class Prussian family. He excelled in his studies, particularly in music and literature, and pursued theology and philology at the University of Bonn. Despite his parents’ piety, he dropped theology and devoted himself to classical philology. Under the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, he also developed an intense interest in philosophy and science. In 1869, Nietzsche was appointed, at age 24, professor of philology at Basle. Nobody before or since has held such a chair at such a young age. Nietzsche held the chair for 10 years, before his health declined, and during that period, he began his philosophical work. He was a close friend of the composer Richard Wagner during his early days at Basle but became estranged from Wagner later, breaking with him over political and cultural issues. In 1879, Nietzsche resigned his chair because of ill health, and for the next 10 years, he traveled Europe and wrote almost all of his most influential philosophical books. By 1889, however, Nietzsche descended into madness. From that time, his sister and mother cared for him, and he was frequently hospitalized. He died in 1900.
Śāntideva (8th century C.E.): We know almost nothing of the life of Śāntideva. All biographical sources agree that he was born a Brahmin, converted to Buddhism, and studied at Nalanda University in present-day Bihar state in India. He composed two principal works, Siksasamuccaya (“Collection of Teachings”) and Bodhicāryavatāra (“How to Lead an Awakened Life”).

Seneca (c. 4-65 CE): We know little of Seneca’s early life, although his was an influential family. One of his brothers was a proconsul, and Seneca himself became tutor to the emperor Nero. He studied Stoic philosophy with eminent teachers but seems to have been at odds with the court, nearly executed by Caligula and exiled by Claudius. Nonetheless, he returned to Rome to serve as Nero’s tutor and counselor. Once again, however, he fell into political disrepute and retired to write. Seneca was later accused of participating in a conspiracy to assassinate Nero and was ordered to commit suicide, which he did. He was a remarkable writer, and his letters and essays have been widely read and have influenced many subsequent ethicists and moral psychologists.

Siddhartha Gautama (c. 500 B.C.E.–c. 420 B.C.E.): Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as Śakyamuni Buddha or just the Buddha, was born in Lumbini to the royal family in the small state of Kapilavastu, in present-day Nepal. The precise dates of his life are uncertain, and he may have lived as much as 50 years earlier or later than the dates indicated here. What we know of his life derives from the record of his teachings and from frankly hagiographic biographies. He was raised in the royal palace as crown prince, but in his early 30s, he abandoned the palace for the life of a wandering ascetic. He studied for several years under a series of teachers and finally set off on a solitary quest for understanding, culminating in his experience of awakening at Bodh Gaya, in present-day Bihar state in India. Following that experience, he taught for about 50 years, wandering through what is now northern India and Nepal, attracting numerous disciples and the patronage of several powerful kings, and establishing a monastic community. He died at the age of 80 in Kushinagar in what is now Uttar Pradesh state.
Tolstoy, Lev (Leo) (1828–1910): Count Leo Tolstoy was born into one of the most distinguished Russian noble families, but his own youth was undistinguished. He did poorly in school, dropped out of university, ran up huge gambling debts, and joined the army. Between 1857 and 1861, Tolstoy traveled extensively in Europe. During this time, he met eminent European writers and political thinkers, experienced the difference between liberal European states and the repressive Russian regime, and was exposed to new ideas about education. He returned to Russia an anarchist and a pacifist and with a passionate interest in the elevation of the serfs through education. He founded schools for his own serfs’ children and began to write the magnificent novels for which he is so famous, novels critical of war, of the state, and of middle-class society. Tolstoy became a devout Christian and fused his Christianity with his commitment to nonviolence. He communicated with Gandhi and was influential in Gandhi’s own fusion of religious fervor, nonviolence, and criticisms of modernity and the state. At the end of his life, at age 82, Tolstoy renounced his wealth and left home to become a wandering ascetic, but he died of pneumonia shortly after setting out.


Dalai Lama XIV. *A Flash of Lightning in a Dark Night*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1994. The present Dalai Lama’s commentary on key passages of Śāṅtideva’s *Bodhicāryāvatāra*, emphasizing the nature of moral cultivation and the role of metaphysics as a foundation for ethics.


Chinese philosophy, addressing the debates between philosophical schools and their role in the development of Chinese philosophy.


