The Quest for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience
Part I
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Dr. Kane is the author of four books and over sixty articles and reviews in professional journals on such topics as the philosophy of mind and action, ethical theory and social ethics, the theory of value, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science. His books include Free Will and Values (State University of New York Press, 1985), Through the Moral Maze (M. E. Sharpe Publishers, 1994), and The Significance of Free Will (Oxford University Press, 1996). His edited Companion to Free Will is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. The Significance of Free Will received the Robert W. Hamilton Faculty Book Award for 1996 and has been the subject of symposia in major journals in Europe and the United States and a conference in the United States. Dr. Kane is one of the world’s leading defenders of an anti-determinist conception of free will and is internationally known for his efforts to reconcile such a notion with modern science.

Dr. Kane’s article, “The Modal Ontological Argument,” on St. Anselm’s proof for God, which appeared in the British journal Mind, was selected by The Philosopher’s Annual as one of the ten best articles in philosophy published in 1984. His other professional articles include “The Ends of Metaphysics” (International Philosophical Quarterly, 1993), “Dimensions of Value and the Aims of Social Inquiry” (American Behavioral Scientist, 1997), and multiple contributions to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy.

Since coming to the University of Texas at Austin, Professor Kane has received fifteen major teaching awards, including the Friar Society Centennial Teaching Fellowship, the President’s Excellence Award for teaching in the University’s Honors Program, Plan II, the Liberal Arts Council Teaching Award, and the Delta Epsilon Sigma Award for teaching introductory freshman classes. In 1995, he was named an inaugural member of the University’s Academy of Distinguished Teachers.
# Table of Contents

**The Question for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience**  
**Part I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Biography</th>
<th>.................................................................................................................................. i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture One</td>
<td>Values and Modernity ........................................................................................................ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Two</td>
<td>An Ancient Quest, A Modern Challenge ............................................................................. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Three</td>
<td>Pluralism, Religion, and Alien Cultures ........................................................................... 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Four</td>
<td>Are Values Subjective? ..................................................................................................... 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Five</td>
<td>From Experience to Worth .................................................................................................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Six</td>
<td>Hume and the Challenge of Relativism ............................................................................. 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Seven</td>
<td>Cultural Diversity, Human Nature, and the Social Sciences .................................................................................................. 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eight</td>
<td>Kant’s Appeal to Reason .................................................................................................. 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Nine</td>
<td>Bentham, Mill, and the Appeal to Utility .......................................................................... 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Ten</td>
<td>Social Contract Theories (Part I) ..................................................................................... 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eleven</td>
<td>Social Contract Theories (Part II) .................................................................................... 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twelve</td>
<td>Some Critiques of the Modern Project ............................................................................. 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. contained in Part II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................................... 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................................... 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................................... 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................................... 48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Quest for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience

Scope:

This lecture series has three goals. The first is to tell the story of how the modern era of Western civilization experienced a loss of moral innocence over the past several centuries, as ancient and medieval views of the world were overthrown, and to show how this process has led to current confusions and disagreements about values (Lectures One to Five). The second goal is to describe how major thinkers of the modern period (since the sixteenth century) attempted to respond to these intellectual challenges of modernity by formulating new theories of ethics and values (Lectures Six to Twelve). The third goal is to explore, in the light of this background, the prospects for renewing the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past after these vast intellectual challenges of the modern era (Lectures Thirteen to Twenty-Four).

Lectures One to Five discuss the original Axial Period in human history (from 800 to 300 BC), a period of spiritual awakening across the globe in which many of the major religious and philosophical traditions were born or revitalized (in China, India, Persia, Israel, and the origins of philosophy, science, and Western civilization in Greece). These introductory lectures describe how the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning that vivified this Axial Period was challenged by the rise of the new science and humanistic learning in the modern era of Western civilization (from the sixteenth century onward). As the modern era evolved, objective explanation of fact was taken over by the empirical sciences, which were supposed to be value-neutral, leaving questions about value and worth precariously dangling in the winds of intellectual change. If values were not matters of objective fact, they could appear to have their source in individual preference and therefore to be merely “subjective.” By the same token, notions of worth, virtue, and right action, being differently defined in different cultures, could appear to be “relative” rather than universal or absolute.

Lectures Six through Twelve describe how major thinkers of the modern era responded to the resulting challenges of subjectivism and relativism. In the attempt to find new foundations for objective value and worth, modern philosophers variously appealed to human nature and common human sentiments (Lectures Six and Seven), to human reason (Lectures Eight and Nine), to utility, or the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Lecture Nine), to a social contract in which persons with differing beliefs could all agree (Lectures Ten and Eleven). Each of these options has defenders today—and critics, who believe that the modern project of trying to rebuild ethics on the foundations of reason and science has failed (Lecture Twelve). Some of these contemporary critics believe we must return to ancient and medieval ways of understanding value and worth (such as virtue ethics, natural law, or religious revelation). Still others concede the failure of the modern project and embrace relativism, or suggest we must move beyond modernity to a “Brave New ‘postmodernist’ World” (Lecture Twelve).

Using the preceding lectures as background, in Part II (Lectures Thirteen through Twenty-Four), we explore the prospects for renewing the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in the modern age. First, drawing on what we have learned in preceding lectures about the conditions of modernity, we attempt to bring together the wisdom embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past that stretch back to the Axial Period—an attempted reconciliation of the wisdom of the ancients and the moderns (Lectures Thirteen to Fifteen). This exploration leads to a discussion of contentious moral and social issues of the day that are consequences of modern pluralism and lie at the heart of current disagreements about values (Lectures Sixteen to Nineteen). The contemporary issues considered include conflicts between public and private moralities; the degree to which morals should be enforced by law; censorship and freedom; teaching values in the schools; church/state issues and the role of religion in public life; the limits of liberty and rights of privacy; individualism versus the needs of community; the loss of shared values in modern societies; and the resulting discontent about politics and public discourse. Finally, in Lectures Twenty to Twenty-Four, we will address the challenge of postmodernists and other modern skeptics who argue that it is no longer possible to rise above historically and culturally limited points of view to make claims that are true for all persons and all times—as the philosophical and religious traditions of the past aspired to do. Lectures Twenty to Twenty-Four tackle this challenge, asking how it is possible to continue to talk in the modern age about objective value and worth and about the objective truth of philosophical and religious claims concerning the meaning of life.
Lecture One

Values and Modernity

Scope: Widespread confusions and disagreements about values in the modern age suggest that we may be entering a new Axial Period. The original Axial Period in human history was a period of spiritual awakening that took place in many of the major civilizations of the world from 800 to 300 BC, giving rise to religious and philosophical ideas that have guided the human race ever since. The advent of the modern era or “modernity” in Western civilization (since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) has challenged many of the assumptions of this older Axial Period.

Two sources of the challenges of modernity are pluralism (the prevalence of competing points of view on matters of fundamental belief and value) and uncertainty (the difficulty of determining which of the competing views is right from within any one view). A modern parable from a fantasy novel by C. S. Lewis is used to explain how pluralism and uncertainty together conspire to undermine moral innocence. Among the consequences of pluralism and uncertainty are widespread beliefs that all values are merely subjective (matters of individual preference) and that all values are relative (good only for some persons or from some points of view, but not for all persons and from all points of view). Such doctrines haunt the modern intellectual landscape and lie behind many of our current moral confusions and disagreements.

Outline

I. Widespread confusions and disagreements about values and ethics in the modern world suggest a new Axial Period in human history.
   A. The original Axial Period, identified by existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers in his book The Way of Wisdom, was a spiritual awakening throughout the ancient world two and a half centuries ago, from 800 to 300 BC. We consider its manifestations in:
      1. China (Confucius and Confucianism, Lao Tze and Taoism)
      2. India (Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism, the Buddha, Jainism)
      3. Persia (Zoroaster or Zarathustra)
      4. Israel (the transformative prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, the Book of Job)
      5. The rise of philosophy, science, and the beginnings of Western civilization in Greece (from Thales to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle).
   B. The modern era, or “modernity” in Western civilization (from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onward) posed challenges to the older religious and philosophical traditions of the original Axial Period.
      1. These intellectual challenges of modernity will be a subject of the next few lectures.
      2. An important story of the twentieth century is the expansion of these challenges to the entire globe through the spread of modern science, technology, global capitalism, and the information revolution.
      3. Wherever the culture of modernity has spread, it threatens traditional values, religious beliefs, and ways of life.

II. To explain the nature of the intellectual challenges of modernity, we begin with a fitting parable.
   A. C. S. Lewis’s fantasy novel Perelandra is a modern parable of lost moral innocence.
   B. Comparisons are made with the ancient story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Lewis has identified a modern version of the “Fall” from innocence.

III. Two primary sources of moral confusion in the modern world connected to this modern fall are identified.
   A. The first of these sources is pluralism (living in a world of conflicting voices, philosophies, religions, and points of view on fundamental matters), which has been made more insistent today by two features of the modern world:
      1. The new “global village” (perhaps, better, the “global city”) brings different cultures and values into more direct communication with one another.
      2. The spread of pluralist and democratic societies makes pluralism of points of view an ever-present feature of daily life for more and more people.
B. The second source of moral confusion is *uncertainty* about how to show which of the plural and competing views is right from within any one of those views.

1. This uncertainty is based on deeper philosophical problems that haunt the modern intellectual landscape, which we consider.
2. The recognition that we are finite creatures embedded in limited points of view is an important consequence of these philosophical problems.
3. A comparison is made with the ancient Biblical image of the Tower of Babel.

C. Problems of pluralism and uncertainty lie behind new intellectual trends such as *postmodernism*, which we will consider in later lectures.

IV. Two threats from pluralism and uncertainty that will especially concern us in subsequent lectures are the following:

A. *Relativism* (of values) is the view that all judgments about what is good or evil, right or wrong, are valid only for some persons or times or societies or particular points of view, but not for all. Another way to state this is that there is no one truth applicable to everyone.

B. *Subjectivism* (of values) is the view that judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, do not describe objective facts in the world, but represent only individual or subjective expressions of feeling or emotion, desire or preference, recommendation or condemnation.

C. These modern threats can lead to skepticism about the possibility of progress in philosophical inquiry into the issue of truth. We will consider whether this skepticism is justified.

D. We must be aware that there is a difference between making progress in the pursuit of truth and having the “final answer.” This leads us to the idea of a quest, which is a theme of these lectures as captured in the title.

**Essential Reading:**
MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 1, “A Disquieting Suggestion.”

**Suggested Reading:**
C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Do you think the problems of pluralism and uncertainty really do lie behind many current views about values such as subjectivism and relativism? Do you see pluralism and uncertainty influencing the views of people you know toward subjectivist, relativist, or emotivist views about values?

2. Some people respond to pluralism by simply asserting that they are certain of the truth of their own view. They know it in their heart, or intuit that it is true, or hold it on the authority of the Bible or some other source. Are these adequate responses to pluralism and the supposed claims of uncertainty? If not, why not?

* Professor Solomon delivered the Teaching Company lecture series *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life* and, along with Professor Higgins, the series *Friederich Nietzsche: The Will to Power.*
Lecture Two
An Ancient Quest, A Modern Challenge

Scope: This lecture explains the nature of the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in life which is threatened by the modern era. It does so by using as an example one of the greatest thinkers of the ancient Axial Period, the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle uses the term “wisdom” (sophia) to designate the subject matter of “first philosophy.” It was the love (philia) of this wisdom (sophia) which gave philosophy its name.

Wisdom or first philosophy, according to Aristotle, seeks comprehensive answers to the questions “what is?” and “why?” He thinks there are four kinds of answers one can give to the question “why?” which are designated by his “four causes”: material, formal, efficient, and final. To fully explain anything, you must know its purpose and meaning and the good that it seeks (final and formal causes) as well as knowing what it is made of and the sources of its changing (material and efficient causes). This means that the quest for wisdom for Aristotle (as it was for most other ancient thinkers) was simultaneously a quest for meanings and purposes of things and the good they should seek, as well as a quest for scientific explanations of facts and mechanisms. By expelling final causes or purposes from nature, modern science sundered fact from value and scientific inquiry from practical inquiry about the good—thereby threatening this ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in life.

Outline

I. What was the “ancient quest for wisdom and meaning” which is allegedly threatened by the pluralism and uncertainty in the modern era?

A. To answer this question, we consider in this lecture one of the greatest and most influential thinkers of the original Axial Period, the Greek philosopher Aristotle.
   1. Aristotle’s influence was pervasive on Western civilization and also on the philosophy and theology of the medieval Islamic world (which preserved his and other ancient Greek philosophers’ writings that were “rediscovered” by the West after the Crusades).
   2. In the twentieth century, many thinkers have argued for a return to thought and value systems derived from Aristotle.

B. Aristotle used the term “wisdom” (sophia) to designate the subject matter of first philosophy or metaphysics. It was the love (philia) of this wisdom (sophia) that gave philosophy its name.
   1. Wisdom or first philosophy seeks comprehensive answers to the questions “what is?” and “why?”
   2. The lover of wisdom (philosophos) and the lover of myth (philomythos), he says, are kindred spirits, since both seek comprehensive answers to the question “why?,” but the lover of wisdom does it critically and self-reflectively.

C. For Aristotle, ultimate explanations or answers to “why?” are of four kinds (his four “causes,” or “modes of explanation”).
   1. Material cause: what is it made of?
   2. Formal cause: what is its inner form or essence or meaning?
   3. Efficient cause: what is its source of change?
   4. Final cause: what is its purpose or the good that it seeks?

D. To fully understand anything—to have wisdom about it—you must have an answer to all four questions, which means that you must also (and especially) know its purpose and the good that it seeks.
   1. Aristotle’s cosmos is thus “teleological” (i.e., purposive) through and through (from telos, his term for “purpose” or “final cause”).
   2. Everything has a purpose and a good that it essentially seeks.
   3. Thus, values enter the picture.
   4. For humans, the good sought is “happiness” (eudaimonia) and humans can achieve this good in certain ways, through certain behaviors.
II. The rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries undermined this teleological view of the world.

A. The new mechanistic science of Galileo and Newton expelled final causes or purposes, and hence value, from the physical universe.
   1. This was in contrast to Aristotle’s idea that planets move in circular orbits to imitate the continuous perfection of the divine.
   2. With the new science, rocks fall not for a purpose (as with Aristotle), but due to mechanical forces.

B. Aristotle did not distinguish between “scientists” and “philosophers,” whereas the modern world does.

C. Later, Darwin expelled purposes and design from the biological world, explaining evolution in terms of chance and natural selection.

III. Aristotle’s second or “formal cause” was also eliminated from the new physical sciences of the modern era.

A. It is important to understand Aristotle’s notion of formal cause.
   1. The form or formal cause is related to the meaning (logos) of a thing (the in-form-ation) in it.
   2. A connection is drawn between this idea of meaning or logos and early versions of the Christian New Testament. (The logos in the Gospel of St. John is identified with the “Word” made flesh.)
   3. The formal cause is also related to the final cause and value of a thing. (It is owing to this that the questions “what is the meaning of life?” and “what is the purpose of life?” are so connected.)
   4. The formal cause may also be viewed as an inner code. It is sometimes compared to the genetic code of modern biology.
   5. Understanding the formal cause or essence of anything, including human beings, means understanding what the fulfillment of that kind of thing would be.

B. The role of Aristotle’s formal causes in the modern social and behavioral sciences is discussed.
   1. The key idea is the very modern idea of information.
   2. It is illustrated by the example of cube* that tells the story of Huckleberry Finn, or the example of electromagnetic information from space. Natural science and behavioral science view these things very differently. (*refer to FIGURE 1 in appendix)

IV. Since wisdom or first philosophy sought all four causes, the search for purposes, meaning, and value merged with scientific explanation of facts and causes in an overall “quest for wisdom.”

A. This pattern held true for most ancient thinkers, even if they may not have spelled it out in such detail or in exactly Aristotle’s way.

B. With the rise of modern science, however, there was a “sundering” of these and other contrasts, with consequent effects on the ancient quest for wisdom (as Hegel first pointed out).
   1. The new science of Galileo, Newton, and their successors sought the material and efficient causes of all things, but rejected Aristotle’s formal and final causes.
   2. Thus, scientific explanation was sundered from the study of purpose.
   3. And fact was sundered from value. The study of objective facts about the natural world would no longer necessarily tell us what the good was for each thing.
   4. And theoretical inquiry into nature was sundered from practical inquiry about how to live.

C. These three “sunderings of modernity”—of scientific explanation from purpose, fact from value, theoretical from practical inquiry—will play a significant role in the discussions to follow.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Smith, “The Revolution in Western Thought,” in Beyond the Postmodern Mind, pp. 3–16.

Questions to Consider:
1. Aristotle thinks that the notions of formal cause and final cause are intimately associated and inseparable. Why does he think that? Both these causes have something to do with value? Why?
2. Do you believe a case can still be made for the existence of purpose or design in nature, despite the claims to the contrary of Darwinian evolution and mechanistic physical science? Is there still a place for Aristotelian formal or final causes in our explanations of the natural world?
Lecture Three
Pluralism, Religion, and Alien Cultures

Scope: In this lecture, we turn to crucial aspects of the Western world’s confrontation with pluralism and uncertainty at the beginning of the modern era. A series of developments toward the end of the Middle Ages, including the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the birth of modern science, and the discovery of the new world, conspired to undermine many of the beliefs and received certainties of the medieval world, and to shatter its religious unity. We will pick the date of 1500 AD as a reference point to start the modern era.

The lecture gives special attention to the confrontation with cultural and religious pluralism, especially to the religious disputes and wars that consumed Europe after the Reformation, as well as to the reaction of the West to the discovery of alien peoples and cultures in the new world of the Americas. It also considers the growing interest of the Western world during the modern era in Eastern civilizations, such as China and India. A number of interesting historical episodes are related involving missionaries to the new world and to China. We also consider episodes involving the philosopher Leibniz and other figures that instructively illustrate the implications of the Western world’s confrontation with cultural and religious pluralism.

Outline

I. Beginning around the fifteenth century, a series of developments in European history—including the Renaissance, the Reformation, the birth of modern science, and the discovery of the new world—began to undermine many of the received doctrines of the medieval world.

A. This was the beginning of the modern era’s confrontation with uncertainty.
   1. Consider, for example, learning that the earth was round and not flat, as it seemed and had been assumed to be (Columbus’ discovery of the “new world” in 1492).
   2. It looks flat. Can we be certain anymore of what our senses and our experience lead us to believe?
   3. Consider learning that the earth was not at rest at the center of the universe, but actually moved around the sun. (Copernicus’ new theory of the heavens appeared in 1543.)
   4. The earth we stand on does not seem to move. Why don’t we fall to one side? Nearly a century after Copernicus, Galileo was still answering such questions in defense of Copernicus’ new theory.
   5. On the authority of Aristotle, it was taken as certain that there was no change in the heavens in the spheres of the distant stars. But in 1577, Johannes Kepler discovered a bright new star (actually a supernova) in the heavens that shone for several months.

B. In the Renaissance there was also a renewed interest in ancient doctrines of skepticism, which had not been given much of a hearing by medieval thinkers.
   1. Renaissance skeptics, like Michel de Montaigne, argued vigorously against dogmatism and claims to certainty.
   2. Montaigne, and others, also argued for tolerance in the face of conflicting religious beliefs, none of which they believed could claim certainty.

C. Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, began his Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), by saying that much that we had been told on authority had turned out to be false.
   1. Descartes therefore proposed in his Meditations to doubt everything until he found something that could not be doubted (his procedure of “methodic doubt”).
   2. In such fashion, modern philosophy was born out of uncertainty and became (with Descartes) an attempt to somehow recapture the certainty that had been lost.

II. The Western world’s confrontation with pluralism in the modern era was equally as important as its confrontation with uncertainty.

A. One aspect of it began once again with the discovery of the “new world.”
   1. Columbus’ voyage not only changed views about the earth. It forced Europe to confront strange new peoples and cultures in the new world.
2. Even if the Norsemen had got to North America five hundred years before, that would not diminish the importance of Columbus’ discovery because of the profound impact it had on European consciousness of the other and the alien.

3. There were serious debates in the early sixteenth century about whether or not native American peoples were human, or had souls, or should be proselytized or treated as chattel.

4. The incredible story is recounted of Friar Bartolome de Las Casas, who arrived in the Caribbean in 1503 with the first wave of Spanish colonists (a full century before Jamestown and Plymouth).

5. De Las Casas engaged in a controversy with Friar Sepulveda over whether the native Americans had souls and later was named by the Spanish crown “protector of the Indians.”

6. When the slave trade from Africa to the Caribbean began, he also engaged in controversy about the humanity of the black Africans and eventually wrote a work entitled All Mankind Is One.

7. This story addresses different meanings of “confronting pluralism.”

B. A second important chapter in the modern era’s confrontation with pluralism is the Protestant Reformation.

1. Martin Luther broke with Rome in 1517 and the Reformation spread quickly in the next two decades.

2. The Reformation shattered the religious unity of Europe and led to a devastating period of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, culminating in the Thirty Years War of 1618–1648.

3. These wars shattered the belief that reasonable people could agree to disagree without bloodshed, and they replaced the authority of the Church with a plurality of competing religious positions.

4. The interesting case of King Henri IV of France is discussed. He tried to institute an era of pluralism and tolerance of different religions in France, only to be assassinated in 1610 before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War.

5. Political theories of the “social contract” arose in the seventeenth century as well (with Thomas Hobbes and John Locke), partly as a means of finding agreement and common ground without open warfare.

C. A third chapter in the modern era’s confrontation with pluralism concerns the growing knowledge of Far Eastern civilizations, such as China and India, filtering back to Europe from Christian missionaries.

1. An interest in pluralism and exotic foreign cultures is a significant feature of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

2. Enlightenment interest is demonstrated by the popularity of Baron de Montesquieu’s Persian Letters and Gotthold Lessing’s play “Nathan the Wise.”

3. The great rationalist philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716) is another example of this interest in pluralism. An ecumenical Protestant, he tried to find common intellectual ground between Catholics and Protestants and between Western and Eastern religion as well.

4. Just before his death, Leibniz wrote a “Treatise on the Natural Theology of the Chinese” in which he defended neo-Confucianism from the charge of atheism and related it to Western ideas.

5. The “rites controversy,” about whether the Chinese terms for the divine translated into the Western notion of God, was precipitated by Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (who lived at the Chinese emperor’s court from 1587 till his death in 1610).

III. Leibniz’ interest in finding common rational grounds for reconciling conflicting religious and philosophical beliefs also took the form of a proposal for a universal language in which all people could communicate.

A. The proposal did not succeed in its purpose, but his suggestions did eventually flower in the creation of modern mathematical or symbolic logic in the twentieth century.

1. This was a great achievement of our century.

2. But unfortunately, logic proved too abstract a discipline for solving Leibniz’ problem of overcoming disagreements about values and religion.

B. Leibniz’ suggestion did flower in yet another intriguing and successful way, which throws much light on the Enlightenment and its contribution to modern thinking about values.

1. This concerns the story of L’Abbe L’Epee, a humble priest who ministered to the deaf street urchins of Paris in the eighteenth century and is one of the great unsung heroes of history.

2. L’Epee was fascinated by Leibniz’ idea of a universal language and took interest in the sign language of the deaf urchins he ministered to as a possible candidate for this unknown language.

3. Their primitive signs were not the universal language he thought, but he eventually developed a sophisticated sign language for them and his work spread rapidly throughout the world.
4. The result was that the hearing impaired were liberated from their prison of silence. Before him, it had been assumed that because they could not speak, they lacked intelligence, and most were treated as less than human.

5. The Abbe’s book propounding the new ideas is sometimes referred to as “the emancipation proclamation of the deaf” and was published coincidentally in 1776, the year of American independence.

C. This story is used as an example of both the meaning of the Enlightenment and of the modern world’s confrontation with pluralism. We can compare L’Abbe L’Eppe’s story with the lessons drawn from de Las Casas’ confrontation with the natives and black Africans of the “new world.”

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Modern philosophy is said to have begun with figures like Descartes who were seeking certainty and even claimed to have found it. Can such claims to certainty by modern philosophers be reconciled with the theme of this lecture that an important feature of the modern era was its recognition of uncertainty?

2. When we translate into other languages, the meanings of words subtly change. This is of special significance in the case of terms like “God.” Were those sixteenth-century clerics correct who said that the Chinese had no term corresponding to our (Western, Christian) conception of God and were therefore, strictly speaking, atheists?
Lecture Four
Are Values Subjective?

Scope: In this lecture we turn our attention from pluralism and uncertainty to the “sunderings” of modernity, and particularly, to the fundamental sundering of fact from value. The question posed by the separation of fact from value for the modern era was whether there are any objective values or whether all judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, are merely subjective expressions of personal feelings or attitudes. This lecture considers strands of modern thought that have led many persons to such subjectivist views about values. To illustrate, we focus on two of the most influential intellectual movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: positivism and existentialism.

No two movements of thought could be more opposed than positivism and existentialism—one emphasizing science as the source of all knowledge, the other emphasizing personal experience. Yet both tended to lead, from opposing directions, to subjectivist views about value. We illustrate this by focusing on two of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell, the British logician and philosopher, and John-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist. Both were important public figures of the twentieth century as well as influential thinkers (Nobel prize winners, one for peace, the other in literature). Modern debates about the objectivity and subjectivity of value are considered through a discussion of their views.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we turn our attention from the confrontation of the modern era with pluralism and uncertainty to its confrontation with the third condition that has threatened the ancient quest for objective value and meaning, the “sunderings” of modernity.

   A. These sunderings—of scientific explanation from purpose (as in Aristotle) and theoretical from practical inquiry—are based on an allegedly unbridgeable “gap” between fact and value.
      1. Facts are objective—out there in the world to be studied by the sciences—while values are merely subjective expressions of personal taste or feeling (see Lecture One for a definition of subjectivism).
      2. The doctrine at issue with these sunderings is therefore subjectivism: the view that judgments of value express personal feelings, desires, or attitudes and are not objectively true or false.

   B. This lecture considers strands of modern thought that have led many persons to subjectivism. We focus especially on two of the most influential of these strands: positivism and existentialism.
      1. Positivism is the view that all the objective knowledge we can have comes through science, that is through experience, experimentation, and observation, filtered through the scientific method.
      2. Existentialism is a complex movement more difficult to define in a simple formula than positivism. Existentialists emphasize the engaged and unique experiences of individual persons—personal existence—from which existentialism gets its name.

   C. The two views are diametrically opposed in many ways.
      1. While positivists emphasize objective scientific truth, existentialists speak of what Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard, the first modern existentialist, called “subjective truth”—the truth I am and live rather than the truth I know in a detached way. Existentialists tend to be concerned with specific emotions, like anxiety, guilt, and despair.
      2. While positivists emphasize abstract reasoning as truth revealing (as in science and mathematics), existentialists emphasize concrete experience and emotions as revelatory of the human condition.
      3. While positivists incline toward scientific accounts of human behavior in terms of heredity and environment, existentialists tend to emphasize individual freedom. We are not entirely made by nature, but make ourselves by our own free choices.
II. Despite these profound oppositions, positivism and existentialism both tended to lead, for different reasons, to subjectivist views about values. They represent two ways in which subjectivism can get a hold on us.

A. We illustrate this by considering two of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the British logician and philosopher, and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), the French existentialist.
   1. Both were Nobel Prize winners, Sartre in literature, Russell for peace, though Sartre refused to accept the award.
   2. Both were well-known public figures often involved in intellectual controversies or political causes.
   3. The two in fact joined in public protest of the Vietnam War in the 1960s (just before Russell’s death at the ripe old age of near 100).

B. While their views and temperaments were diametrically opposed, both Russell and Sartre nevertheless held subjectivist views about value. There is irony in this, in the light of their public stances on issues like the Vietnam War.

III. Bertrand Russell.

A. Russell had a lonely, unhappy childhood (he was orphaned at the age of three) until he discovered mathematics, which gave him a purpose. He had a desire for certainty.
   1. His *Principia Mathematica* (1910, written with Alfred North Whitehead) is one of the founding works of modern mathematical logic.
   2. Russell was also one of the founding figures of twentieth century analytic philosophy (which focuses on analysis of concepts and language).
   3. After mathematics and logic, empirical science exerted the strongest influence on Russell.

B. Russell did not refer to himself as a positivist, but the spirit of his thinking is positivist.
   1. He rejected the doctrine of “logical positivism” of his day, which denied the very meaningfulness of any metaphysical speculation beyond science.
   2. Russell engaged in considerable metaphysical speculation in his lifetime, but he thought that all such speculation—and philosophy in general—should be based on science, interpreting its results and emulating its methods.
   3. He claimed that all his philosophical efforts were but attempts to synthesize four sciences—physics, physiology, psychology, and mathematical logic.
   4. Thus the spirit of his philosophy was positivist in the broad sense, though he rejected the dogmatic logical positivism of his day.

C. On values and ethics, Russell’s positivist leanings are also evident.
   1. He held that all knowledge is limited to science and “science has nothing to say about values."
   2. Hence, he held that values and ethical beliefs were subjective. To say something is good, for Russell, is the “affirmation of a personal wish or desire” for it.
   3. Such a view is also sometimes nowadays called “emotivism.”

IV. John-Paul Sartre.

A. In his essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre says that existentialism is defined by the formula “existence precedes essence.”
   1. By this, Sartre means that man first of all exists, finds himself and defines his essence only after this discovery of self.
   2. Central to Sartre’s philosophy are the ideas of free choice and personal responsibility.
   3. Man is not created with a preassigned essence (Aristotle’s formal cause) by God or nature, but “man makes himself” by his own free choices.

B. In such self-making, Sartre insists, there are no objective grounds to appeal to for certain ethical judgments of right and wrong.
   1. Human nature does not provide such grounds because there is no preassigned human nature.
   2. The commands of God provide no such grounds, for Sartre, because there is no God. He thus repudiates both Athens and Jerusalem, which embody the philosophical and religious foundations of the West.
   3. Reason also provides no such grounds. Philosophical principles, like Kant’s Categorical Imperative, he argues, are too vague and unsupported.
4. Sartre illustrates all this by telling the story of a moral dilemma faced by a student of his during World War II, who had to choose between staying at home with his ailing mother or joining the French resistance to the Nazis. The choice offers many paradoxes. In this case, objective values did not provide the young man with a guide. Sartre says instinct takes over (the young man chose to stay with his mother).

C. In the end there are no preassigned objective values to guide us, according to Sartre.
   1. We make our own values by our subjective choices and by taking responsibility for those choices (as in the case of the young man above).
   2. By a very different route, therefore, he arrives at subjectivist views, as did Russell.
   3. Their differing views represent the two faces of the modern descent into subjectivism—from the rationalist part of our nature, or from the emotional.

D. In the next lecture, we consider the other side of the modern debate about the objectivity versus subjectivity of value—the case for objectivity.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What do you think are the limitations, if any, of the positivist view? Does science give us all the objective knowledge we can have? And is Russell right to say that “science has nothing to tell us about values”?
2. Sartre’s existentialism has some attractive features. But is he entirely correct in saying there is no preassigned human nature to guide us in our choices? Does human nature provide no constraints whatever on what counts as a good or bad choice? The young man’s choice to stay with his mother or join the resistance may have no clear resolution, but are all choices like that one?
Lecture Five
From Experience to Worth

Scope: In this lecture, we reflect on where we have come thus far and attempt to get a broader perspective on the vexing issues about fact and value introduced in the preceding lecture. The previous lecture developed the modern case for the subjectivity of values. Here we consider the opposing case for objectivity and try to frame the debate for later lectures.

To do so, appeals will be made in this lecture to other modern thinkers not yet discussed, and to some ancient figures as well, in order to suggest a distinction between four dimensions of human value: the experiential dimension, the dimension of purposive activity, the dimension of meaning and excellence in forms of life, and the dimension of non-relative worth transcending particular points of view. A number of modern debates about values—including the debate about objectivity—come into clearer focus in the light of this distinction. For example, the gap between fact and value can be bridged in some of these dimensions of value; hence, the problem of subjectivism can be partly addressed. More difficult is the problem of relativism, and it will be the main subject of the next few lectures.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we reflect on where we have come thus far and try to gain a broader perspective on modern debates about “fact and value” and “subjectivity versus objectivity.”
   A. The case for subjectivism of values was considered in the previous lecture. This lecture also considers the opposing case for their objectivity.
      1. Something is right about the idea that values are related to feelings, emotions, desires, passions, and sentiments.
      2. If everything in the universe were unfeeling, like a rock, would there be any values in it? This gives subjectivism, like that of Russell and Sartre, its hypnotic appeal.
   B. But if values arise in feelings and emotions, it does not follow that they are merely subjective.
      1. To see why, this lecture will appeal to the wisdom of some ancient and modern figures, whose views suggest that there are different dimensions of value.
      2. Four dimensions of human value will be considered, each higher dimension including, but going beyond, lower ones.

II. The first dimension of value is experiential.
   A. Seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza (1632–1677) provided a clue to this dimension when he noted that our first encounters with good and evil are through certain basic value and disvalue experiences.
      1. Basic value experiences identified by Spinoza include joy, delight, enjoyment, sensory pleasure, feelings of accomplishment, amusement, contentment, love, ecstasy, and the like.
      2. Basic disvalue experiences include sadness, loneliness, frustration, pain, boredom, disappointment, grief, humiliation, anxiety, despair, and the like.
   B. We may think of such experiences as prima facie good or bad respectively, that is, good or bad in the first instance, other things being equal, or unless they are overridden in some higher dimension of value.
      1. The delight of a small child takes in seeing a squirrel is one thing; the delight a torturer takes in torturing his victim, quite another.
      2. The delight in the second case, we might say, is overridden when looked at from a higher dimension and becomes evil.
   C. Why do we regard such basic experiences as good or bad in the first instance, if not overridden?
      1. Spinoza again provides a clue when he notes that we initially learn what good and evil are by having such experiences, so that good and evil are initially defined in terms of them.
      2. We can see a similar sentiment in Friederich Schiller’s An der Freude, used by Beethoven in his Ninth (“Choral”) Symphony.
3. Something similar was said by one of the great figures of the first Axial Period, the Buddha, for basic disvalue experiences.

D. Value thus conceived in the first dimension is both subjective and objective.
1. It is an objective fact about the world whether someone is experiencing joy or sadness, euphoria or pain, though the experiences themselves are, in another sense, subjective, i.e., accessible only to the subject that experiences them.
2. Every time you or anyone feels joy or pain, the gap between fact and value has already been bridged—even if only for you.
3. The value (or disvalue) may be able to be overridden in a broader context to be sure. But if not overridden, it is good (bad) for the person who has it.

III. The second dimension of value involves purposive activities.
A. When experience is stretched out over time, it involves “sentient life.” And when this life involves purposive activity with practical goals, we reach a second dimension of value, which includes first-dimensional experiences as a part.
1. We build houses for shelter, grow food to eat, adorn our environment with flowers, play games to win, and so on.
2. The value here lies in the fulfillment of the purposes and whether that fulfillment satisfies the desires of the agents.
B. Values are objective in this second dimension as well.
1. There is an objective fact of the matter about whether some purpose is or is not fulfilled, or whether its fulfillment satisfies our purposes.
2. The value is also subjective and relative in a sense since the fulfillment and satisfaction are of the purposes and desires of particular subjects or agents.

IV. The third dimension of value includes the first two, but raises them to a still higher level.
A. Experiences and purposive activities are not merely viewed in the third dimension in terms of what we can get from them, but in terms of how they define what we are.
1. In this dimension, the hunter in a primitive tribe does not merely hunt for food (a second-dimensional concern), but takes pride in his skill with the bow because of what it says about what he is.
2. It signifies that he is an excellent archer, a good provider for his family, a loyal member of his tribe, etc.
B. Third-dimensional value thus has to do with the meaning or significance of activities and experiences within certain forms of life (that is, ways of living, traditions, cultures, and so on).
1. It has to do with our ideals rather than just our interests.
2. It also has to do with the excellences and virtues (aretai) exemplified in those forms of life, which modern philosopher Charles Taylor calls “strong evaluation.”
3. These include not merely moral virtues or excellences, but also excellences of all kinds, exemplified in what Alasdair MacIntyre has called human “practices,” such as medicine, farming, painting, architecture, law, violin making, teaching, athletic competition, family life, and so on.
4. It is through such varied practices that humans strive to realize diverse human goods and various standards of excellence.
5. When extended over time, these practices can become “traditions” and then “cultures.”
C. Third-dimensional value can also be objective in a stronger sense than the first two dimensions.
1. There can be an objective fact of the matter about whether or not an excellence is attained or a virtue realized in a given form of life or practice (whether or not the hunter is an excellent archer or the violin maker has made a beautiful-sounding instrument).
2. Indeed, value in the third dimension attains a higher degree of objectivity than in the first two dimensions.
3. Individuals may be deluded about whether they have in fact attained excellence and they often are deluded.
4. People may think they are great violin makers or dancers or lawyers, or loyal persons, when they are not in fact.
D. But value in the third dimension, if objective, is still relative to groups of persons who participate in practices and forms of life that give meaning or significance to their lives.
   1. This does not mean excellences or virtues cannot in principle transcend particular forms of life.
   2. But that would mean “raising” third-dimensional value to a yet higher (fourth) dimension of value.

V. By the fourth dimension of value is meant the dimension of non-relative or universal value that transcends particular points of view and is objectively good from all points of view. It is “objective or universal worth.”
A. Fourth-dimensional value is far more problematic than the first three dimensions of value, especially for modernity.
   1. To many moderns, the first three dimensions exhaust the dimensions of human value, as the three dimensions of ordinary experience exhaust the dimensions of space.
   2. The fourth dimension of value is as elusive as a fourth dimension of space, since it requires rising above all particular perspectives to say what is true, right, or excellent for all of them. How do we climb above our finite perspectives to do that?
   3. We are talking about “objective worth” at this level.
B. It should not surprise us that many moderns say we cannot rise to the level of fourth-dimensional value or objective worth, or even deny such a level exists.
   1. It turns out that this denial is just what relativism amounts to.
   2. Relativists hold that all judgments about what is good or bad, right or wrong, must be qualified by saying good or bad, right or wrong for some persons or group (society or culture) or from some point of view.
   3. This means we cannot get beyond the first three dimensions of value to a fourth. This “value/worth” gap is the more difficult one to bridge than the “subjectivity/objectivity” gap.

VI. We must distinguish therefore between the problem of subjectivism of value and the problem of relativism.
A. Values can be objective in the first three dimensions of value; hence, the subjectivist claim that all values are merely subjective must be qualified.
B. But values remain relative to experiencers, purposive agents, and forms of life in the first three dimensions. The more difficult problem of relativism remains unsolved and it will be the main subject of the next few lectures.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 2 and 3.

Questions to Consider:
1. Someone might argue that the discussion of first- and second-dimensional value in this lecture commits what G. E. Moore calls the “naturalistic fallacy”—the fallacy of defining “good” in terms of some natural facts, such as the experience of joy or pleasure or the satisfaction of desire. According to Moore, you can’t define “good” in terms of such natural facts. The reason is that, for any such fact, such as “John is experiencing joy or pleasure” or “Jane’s desire was fulfilled,” you can always go on to say, “I know, but is it good (that he had this experience or that her desire was satisfied)?” But it would not make sense, says Moore, to ask that question if the experience of joy or satisfaction of desire were good by definition. Does the discussion of first- and second-dimensional value in this lecture commit this naturalistic fallacy? Is it a fallacy, in your opinion?
2. Someone might question whether third-dimensional value is really as objective as claimed. Can we really tell what is objectively beautiful or excellent anymore in art or music or literature or architecture, for example, or is it all a matter of taste? Do modern forms of life provide adequate standards? When we say Bach is a great composer and Shakespeare, a great writer, are we merely expressing the fact that we like them or think they are great, or are we saying something more objective than that?
Lecture Six
Hume and the Challenge of Relativism

Scope: In this lecture, we begin the second part of the series (Lectures Six to Twelve) in which we consider the responses of major thinkers of the modern era to the challenge of relativism—especially in ethics, where the search for universal, non-relative value seemed especially urgent. This lecture first clears away some of the most common confusions about the nature of relativism. It shows that there is a “vulgar” version of relativism that many people hold, which was refuted by ancient philosophers. But refuting this vulgar relativism does not eliminate the serious modern challenge of relativism, properly understood, to contemporary ethics and value theory.

The “project of modernity,” as we shall call it, is the ethical project undertaken by modern philosophers from the seventeenth century onward of addressing the problem of relativism, given the conditions of modernity. In Lectures Six to Twelve, we consider four major ways in which this project was carried out by modern philosophers—the “sentimentalist,” “rationalist,” “utilitarian,” and “contractarian” alternatives in modern ethics. In this lecture, we start with the “sentimentalist” option—the appeal to a “human nature” in the form of common moral feelings or sentiments. We begin the discussion with the most influential representative of this option in modern philosophy, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume. To throw further light on the sentimentalist option, Hume’s views are compared in the course of the lecture to those of Adam Smith, one of the founding figures of modern economic theory, and to two Chinese thinkers of the original Axial Period, Confucius and Mencius.

Outline

I. The previous lecture has led from the problem of subjectivism about values to the problem of relativism—from the first dimension of value to the fourth dimension. In this lecture, we begin to consider responses made by major philosophers of the modern era to the problem of relativism.

   A. The world we live in, that of pluralism, is the world of the first three dimensions of value. The fourth dimension is more of a “God’s eye view.” Relativists say that one cannot get up to this fourth dimension.

   B. The first step is to clear away a prevalent confusion about relativism that is one of the most common confusions in contemporary discussions of value.

      1. Most ordinary people think of relativism as the doctrine that “no point of view about values is objectively better than any other.”

      2. The problem is that most philosophers believe this doctrine—sometimes called “vulgar relativism”—was refuted long ago by the ancient Greeks.

      3. Vulgar relativists claim that no view about values is objectively more right than any other, while at the same time supposing that their own relativist view is more right than any other, thus contradicting themselves.

   C. But facile refutations of vulgar relativism of this kind often leave ordinary persons confused and unsatisfied, and for good reason.

      1. For what bothers them about relativism is the fact that you cannot make any judgments about values at all from above all perspectives.

      2. But this suggests you cannot jump up to the fourth dimension above particular (third-dimensional) points of view, either to say one view is the best one, or to say that no point of view is any better than any other.

      3. And it is this inability to rise above all particular perspectives that troubles most people about relativism.

      4. They fear one may not be able to justify judgments that some things are good or evil, right or wrong, for everyone or from every point of view, rather than just from their own view.

II. This was the relativism defined in the previous lecture and it is the kind that troubles most people today.

   A. Unlike vulgar relativism, this sort of relativism is not easily refuted.

      1. It is not subject to simple charges of contradiction or inconsistency.
2. To refute it, one must show how one can rise above limited points of view to establish the validity of some universal values and say what those values might be—not an easy task at all.

B. Such a task seemed much easier for people of the past.
   1. Many of them not only believed in universal or absolute (fourth-dimensional) values, they believed that they already possessed them.
   2. It was common to assume the values of their own society or culture or religion were the absolutely right ones.
   3. They knew it from their myths or had heard it from their gods. Their gods were the true gods, their beliefs, the true ones.
   4. Such people were in effect projecting their third-dimensional forms of life into the fourth dimension, assuming they were the universal ones. And this seems to be the natural human tendency.

C. The task of finding universal truths and values is more difficult in modernity, given the conditions of pluralism, uncertainty, and lost moral innocence. It called for a new project.

III. The “project of modernity,” as we shall call it, was the project undertaken by modern philosophers since the seventeenth century to address the task of overcoming relativism—real relativism, not the vulgar kind.

A. Simple refutations would not be enough. What was required was a constructive task of finding universal values or ethical principles common to all humans.
   1. Moreover, modern philosophers could not simply appeal to religious or other authorities, for these often conflicted. That was the lesson of pluralism and uncertainty.
   2. Nor could they appeal to final causes in nature, which Aristotle and their medieval predecessors had done, for these were rejected by modern science. That was the lesson of the “sunderings” of scientific explanation from purpose and theory from practice.

B. Thinkers of the modern period undertook this project of modernity in a number of different ways that will be discussed over the next six lectures.
   1. Some thinkers appealed to a common human nature in the form of moral feelings or sentiments that all humans share. This was the “sentimentalist” option of Enlightenment figures like David Hume, Adam Smith.
   2. Some appealed to a common human reason to derive ethical principles all could believe, despite cultural differences. This was the “rationalist” option of Immanuel Kant and others like Spinoza and Leibniz.
   3. Other thinkers appealed to utility, or the “greatest happiness of the greatest number,” defined in terms of pleasures and pains (first-dimensional value) common to all humans. This was the option of “utilitarians,” such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.
   4. Still others appealed to a social contract that all reasonable persons, despite differing values, could agree upon. This was the “contractarian” option of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others.

C. Each of these major strands of modern ethical thought—each searching for universality—have their proponents and critics today. Over the next six lectures, we will consider the fortunes of each of them.

IV. We begin in this lecture with the “sentimentalist” option and its most famous representative in the modern era, eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume.

A. Hume holds an important place in the history of modern philosophy.
   1. He was an empiricist who believed all knowledge comes through experience.
   2. He is also known as a skeptic about the powers of reason to resolve many philosophical problems.

B. On values and ethics, Hume looks for guidance, not to reason alone, but to human feelings, desires, and sentiments.
   1. What impels us to act and to judge things good or bad, he says, are our emotions, desires, and sentiments, or—to use an eighteenth-century term he favored—our “passions.”
   2. Even moral judgments about virtuous and vicious actions for Hume are expressions of feeling or sentiment, but of certain kinds, which he calls the “calm passions.”
3. Hume wrote that “when you say an action is virtuous (or vicious),” you mean “nothing but that, from
the constitution of your nature, you have a feeling or sentiment of” approval (or blame) “from the
contemplation of it.”

C. This looks like a version of subjectivism, but what saves Hume from mere subjectivism is another aspect of
his view that marks him clearly as an Enlightenment thinker.
1. Hume shares the optimistic Enlightenment faith that some sentiments, such as sympathy and
benevolence, are common to all humans and these can be the basis for a common morality.
2. Hume talks of common human virtues, such as sympathy, beneficence, friendliness, kindness,
integrity, honesty, gentleness, cheerfulness.
3. He has no doubt that all right-thinking persons would prefer, these virtues and shun vices, such as
cruelty, treachery, and dishonesty, because the virtues, Hume argues, are socially beneficial and the
vices, harmful.

V. Hume’s views are compared with those of Adam Smith, author of the Wealth of Nations and founder of modern
economic theory.
A. Hume and Smith are the two best known figures of the “Scottish Enlightenment”; they were friends and
companions in Edinburgh.
B. It is well known that in his economic theory, Smith argues for the benefits to society of individuals
pursuing their own economic self-interest.
C. But less well known is the fact that Smith wrote an earlier book, called A Theory of the Moral Sentiments,
in which he traced the roots of morality to common human sentiments of sympathy and benevolence, much
like Hume and other Enlightenment thinkers.
1. Smith was aware of the potential dangers of unfettered free markets and economic accumulation of
wealth.
2. But he also shared with Hume the Enlightenment faith that natural human sentiments of sympathy and
beneficence would curb the dangers of the marketplace and assist the “invisible hand.”
3. Debates about whether this faith is justified are obviously still with us today.

VI. Hume can be compared to another thinker, who in this case goes back to the Axial Period, the Chinese
philosopher Mencius (or Meng-Tze).
A. Mencius was the principle developer in the late Axial Period of the views of Confucius.
1. Like Hume, he appeals to common human sentiments to ground a universal morality.
2. Like Hume, and also following Confucius, Mencius refers to a certain “humanity” or “humaneness” as
the key to morality.
B. The Confucian term for this “humanity” is Ren (sometimes written as Jen).
1. Ren involves sympathy or “fellow-feeling.” Confucius had expressed part of its meaning in terms of
the Golden Rule.
2. For Mencius, Ren is the font of all the other Confucian moral virtues, such as Yi (righteousness) and Li
(propriety).
3. These virtues became the key principles of neo-Confucian philosophy, which became the basis of
Chinese culture for centuries.
C. Thus the sentimentalist option is not new to modernity.
1. But it was retrieved by Hume, Smith, and other Enlightenment thinkers, and given a modern cast, to
deal with the relativism and ethical problems of the new age.
2. But we need to ask how well does it (sentimentalism) succeed?

Essential Reading:
Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. The lecture argues that “vulgar relativism” can be refuted, but that relativism proper (of the kind defined in this lecture and the previous one) is not so easily refuted. Can you explain the difference between the two views, and do you think these claims made about them in the lecture are justified?
2. Do you think the sentimentalist option of Hume and others, like Smith and Menicus, as described thus far, escapes relativism? Formulate arguments as to why it does or does not escape relativism.
Lecture Seven
Cultural Diversity, Human Nature, and the Social Sciences

Scope: The appeal to common human sentiments in ethics and value theory, like that of Hume and Mencius, has continuing attraction, but it also has critics. In this lecture, we follow the debates about it from Hume’s time into the twentieth century. Might it not be the case that sentiments of approval and disapproval, and hence what counts as vice or virtue, differ from person to person, culture to culture? We consider the responses of thinkers like Hume and Mencius to such objections and debate the issues.

These debates lead in the second part of the lecture to a discussion of the contributions of modern anthropology and other social sciences to current debates about cultural and ethical relativism. In its early development, anthropology fanned the flames of relativism by alerting people to the amazing diversity of human cultures. But there has also been a concern in the social sciences of the twentieth century with the study of human uniformities and cultural universals. We look into this research and discuss its implications for modern debates about relativism and for modern appeals to human nature and common moral sentiments, like those of Hume, Adam Smith, and Mencius.

Outline

I. The sentimentalist option of Hume, Mencius, and others—the appeal to common human sentiments in ethics and value theory—has continuing attractions. But it also has difficulties as a solution to the problem of relativism.

A. Might it not be the case that feelings of approval and disapproval, and hence what counts as virtue and vice, differ from person to person, culture to culture, epoch to epoch?
   1. Hume had little doubt that on reflection all “right thinking” persons would prefer the virtues he lists, such as sympathy, friendliness, kindness, gentleness, and cheerfulness.
   2. Perhaps so. But critics asked who defines “right thinking” persons?
   3. For example, Hume, a skeptic about religion, castigates what he calls the “monkish virtues” celebrated in medieval times, such as celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, and solitude.
   4. Hume thinks these monkish virtues are not beneficial to society and would “everywhere be rejected by men of sense.”
   5. But a contemporary critic of the project of modernity, Alasdair MacIntyre, does not agree with Hume about the monkish virtues, nor would many religious people.
   6. MacIntyre even suggests that, in our morally dark times, we may need a new St. Benedict, whose monks preserved the West from total darkness after the fall of the Roman Empire. Would the monkish virtues “everywhere be rejected by men of sense?”

B. A second problem with his view that Hume was very much aware of is that human nature seems to be two-sided.
   1. Humans have sentiments and passions inclining toward virtues, such as sympathy and beneficence.
   2. But they also have equally powerful sentiments and passions inclining them toward vice—selfishness, vanity, greed, envy, acquisitiveness. We humans are part angel, part beast.

C. Mencius and Confucius were aware of this problem as clearly as was Hume, and the solution to it was the same for all three.
   1. One could not rely on untutored human nature as the basis for morality. Humans have a basic “humanity” that is good, but it must be carefully molded by moral education to overcome selfish instincts.
   2. Thus, Mencius, in the Confucian spirit, argued for an elaborate system of educating the young into the proprieties (Li) and with practical wisdom and principles.
   3. This is the elaborate Confucian system of learning and virtue that became central to subsequent Chinese culture and is now in a struggle with capitalism and other encroachments of modernity for the Chinese soul.
4. Hume agrees that unless people are properly educated they will not have feelings of approval or disapproval for the right things.

5. One has to be trained to this, according to Hume, as one is trained to appreciate good music or art.

D. But if education, social environment, and training are so crucial, critics have responded, does not relativism reappear, since education and conditioning differ from society to society?

II. An interesting sidelight on this problem is provided by Hume’s friend, Adam Smith.

A. As we saw, Smith felt that virtuous sentiments like sympathy and benevolence would curb the competitiveness and self-interest of the economic marketplace.

B. But in the nineteenth century, Karl Marx and others were to question this.

1. One of Marx’s central themes was the power of economic forces in society to shape sentiments and ways of thinking.

2. Would human sentiments toward cooperation and benevolence curb the competitiveness and self-interest of the capitalist marketplace, as Smith believed?

3. Or, as Marx’s followers argued, would the self-interest of the marketplace eventually erode natural human instincts toward cooperation and benevolence?

4. This issue is clearly still with us today and has taken on renewed importance in the new global economy.

C. This dispute in economics is related to the problem of education and social cultivation that bedeviled Hume and Mencius.

1. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we have become more aware of how different social and cultural influences can mold even basic human feelings and sentiments.

2. And this raises the specter of relativism in a new form.

III. Increasing awareness of social and cultural conditioning of human thinking and sentiment brings the social sciences into play. Social science has played a major role in debates about relativism in the twentieth century.

A. This is illustrated by the development of modern anthropology.

1. At the turn of the twentieth century, when anthropology was still in its infancy as a social science, field workers were fanning throughout the globe studying primitive cultures.

2. One reaction was sheer amazement at the diversity of cultures: unusual social forms, morals, sexual practices.

3. This fanned the flames of relativism, and many anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict (author of *Patterns of Culture*) and Melville Herskovits, expressed relativist views.

B. By mid-century, however, there was a reaction on the part of some noted anthropologists, such as C. Kluckholm and B. Malinowski, who argued that the interest in diversity had gone too far, contributing to belief in relativism.

1. The role of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals in this debate is discussed. Nazi leaders claimed to be merely doing their duty within their society.

2. Anthropologists, like Kluckholm, fearing relativism provided no satisfactory answer to Nazi war criminals and others, argued for more emphasis on the search for cultural universals or uniformities.

3. The movement of “structuralism” in France after World War II went in this direction also.

4. Its leading proponent, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, also argued for universal structures underlying all human cultures.

IV. We must consider some uniformities of human cultures suggested by modern social scientific research.

A. There are structural uniformities imposed by the needs of human nature on all human societies.

1. All human societies require a division of labor, family structures, kinship relations, sexual restrictions, rites of passage, rituals that provide social bonds and meaning, and so on.

2. As a result, certain virtues seem to be universally admired—such as courage or bravery (to protect from outside threats), self-control, and responsibility for doing one’s job or playing one’s role.

3. We relate these to traditional virtues, such as Plato’s four basic virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom—called the “cardinal virtues” in the medieval period.

B. Do such cultural uniformities solve the problems of ethical relativism?
1. We consider the negative response to that question by noted anthropologists, like Clifford Geertz, and by modern philosophical relativists, such as Gilbert Harman and David Wong.
2. The uniformities, they argue, are too general to resolve troubling disagreements about values.
3. All societies have divisions of labor, but they divide labor differently. Some practice slavery, indentured servitude, and so on.
4. All have family and kinship structures and rules, but actual forms differ and many have been exploitative, for example, of women.
5. The issue of the ethical ramifications of patriarchal societies (those ruled by males or in which males are dominant) is a further point to consider. There is a debate about their universality in human cultures.
6. Would the universality of patriarchy, even if it were so, make it right? No more, say critics, than if slavery or exploitation of lower classes may have always been present in human cultures, would they be right.

C. What may be said about uniformities across cultures of social motives and values which have interested those who appeal to sentiment, like Hume and Mencius?
1. Social scientific research concerning these uniformities indicates that humans generally desire approval from peers, social acceptance, admiration for their accomplishments, sympathy and affection from others, friendship, community, and roots.
2. The difficulty is that these social motives, though important, are balanced in the human make-up by egoistic motives.
3. Again we confront the fact that we are a mixture of angel and beast—the problem that bedeviled Hume.
4. As a consequence, persons may satisfy their social needs, for approval and acceptance from others, selectively within their own circle or group while acting immorally toward those outside their favored group.

D. Thus, critics like Geertz argue that while the modern search for cultural uniformities in anthropology and the other social sciences has yielded much insight about human nature and the requirements for human happiness, it has not solved the problems of ethical relativism.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What do you think of Hume’s idea that training young people to appreciate the virtues and have feelings of approval for the morally right things is like training them to appreciate good music or good art? Hume was convinced that, just as some people are more expert at appreciating fine music, so some are better at appreciating fine character. Is this a good analogy?
2. If researchers are right in saying that humans generally desire approval from peers, social acceptance, admiration for their accomplishments, sympathy and affection from others, and a host of other such social needs, would this not provide adequate grounds for defining happiness and a flourishing life for all humans? And if so, wouldn’t it solve the problems of finding the universal ethical values we are looking for, thus vindicating Hume and other sentimentalists?
Lecture Eight
Kant's Appeal to Reason

Scope: In this lecture we turn to the second alternative path of the project of modernity in ethics, the appeal to reason. Our starting point in this case is another major figure of modern philosophy and of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. Kant’s life and background are discussed first, as a way of showing how he was led to his distinctive views about science, knowledge, duty, and morality.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant demonstrated the limitations of theoretical reason in science. Science is successful within its own domain, he argued, but only because it stays within the limits of possible experience. By contrast, for Kant, traditional issues of “meta”-physics (which Aristotle called “wisdom”)—that is, issues about values and morality, the soul, free will, and God—went beyond the bounds of sensory experience and hence of theoretical reason. Nonetheless, Kant held that one could address these issues, especially those about ethics or morality, through practical reason (practical deliberation about how we ought to act and live). The lecture then discusses Kant’s argument from practical reason to what he called the Categorical Imperative—a universal principle of right action applying to all persons; subsequent debate is discussed concerning this controversial imperative.

Outline

I. In this lecture we turn to the second alternative path of the project of modernity, the appeal to reason.
   A. The major representative to be considered is another major figure of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant.
   B. Hume and Kant, regarded by many today as the two greatest eighteenth-century philosophers, are often contrasted in their ethical views, the one appealing to sentiment, the other to (practical) reason.
   C. Kant shared many of the objections concerning the appeal to sentiment aired in the previous lecture. He recognized the variability of human desires and feelings and thought this variability could only be overcome by an appeal to reason.

II. Kant’s life and background.
   A. Everything in Kant’s background pushed him away from an appeal to sentiment toward an appeal to reason
      1. He grew up in a pietistic German home that emphasized a stern moral conscience and control of passions.
      2. Kant’s father was a craftsman, a harness maker, but young Immanuel did not share his father’s aptitude as an artisan. He later related a revealing story about his father’s involvement in a guild labor dispute that imparted to Kant a life-long ethical lesson.
      3. His mother, who died when he was thirteen (perhaps the most profound event in Kant’s life), encouraged his intellectual interests and taught him to feel awe at “the starry heavens above and the moral law within.”
   B. Given this pietistic background, it is not surprising that the idea of duty—the moral law within—was central to Kant’s ethical thinking.
      1. Duty was often opposed to desire and sentiment, so it had to come from some other source he thought—namely, reason.
      2. Kant knew that for many persons in the past, duty meant merely obeying the commands of God or some other external authority—parents, teachers, rulers.
      3. But, as a true representative of the Enlightenment, he held that duty could not be based on mere external authority.
      4. Duty, like belief in God (and Kant believed in both), had to have their source in our own autonomous reason. If it was really to motivate, we had to internalize it.
      5. Kant’s short essay “What Is Enlightenment?” is discussed in this connection. The motto of the Enlightenment, he said, was “Sapire aud” (Dare to know”), in other words, dare to use your reason and think for yourself.
III. The problem was that by Kant’s time, the course of modern thought had shown that human reason had its limitations.

A. Kant, in his famous work The Critique of Pure Reason (1781), posed the central questions for modernity in this connection (recall the “sunderings” we discussed in Lecture Two).
   1. Why are modern science and mathematics so successful at giving us reliable objective knowledge of the physical world?
   2. And why do we find it so hard to get similar knowledge and agreement about the great questions of metaphysics or philosophy—about God, the soul, free will, and values?

B. Kant’s answer was that modern science and mathematics are successful because they deal only with the way things appear to us, not the way they really are in themselves (the realm of metaphysics).
   1. The world studied by science is the world that can be experienced by our senses.
   2. In order to experience that world, we impose on it certain forms and categories that make experience possible—space and time, causality and substance, action and reaction, and so on.
   3. Mathematics attains certainty only because it deals with the forms of space and time that we ourselves impose on nature.
   4. Science succeeds because it stays within the limits of these forms and the other categories, such as substance and causality, which define the limits of possible experience.
   5. But these strengths are also limitations, for as a result, science and mathematics describe only the world as it appears to us.

C. By contrast, the important questions of “meta”physics go beyond the limits of possible experience (and therefore beyond science and mathematics).
   1. Questions about God and the soul go beyond space, time, and matter.
   2. Questions about free will and values go beyond nature and physical causality.

IV. If Kant had stopped here with The Critique of Pure Reason, his contribution to the ancient quest for “wisdom” would have been largely negative. But he did not stop there.

A. He went on to write other works, such as the Critique of Practical Reason (1788), in which he argued that if the great questions of first philosophy could not be accessed by theoretical reason, they could be accessed indirectly—through practical reason.
   1. Through practical deliberation about how we ought to act and live, we could get insight into ethics and the moral law.
   2. And belief in the moral law in turn would require that we believe in other things, such as free will.

B. To take the first step to the moral law, however, Kant thought we had to get beyond individual desires and purposes. We had, so to speak, to expand our vision.
   1. Our concern must not be merely with what he called “hypothetical imperatives” or “ought’s”—what we ought to do, if we wanted this or that.
   2. For such hypothetical imperatives apply only to those who happen to have the desires, and human desires differ.
   3. By contrast, duty or morality—which is the key to accessing the important questions of life—is just the domain of what all persons ought to do “period,” no if’s, and’s, or but’s—no matter what their particular purposes, desires, or wants.
   4. Such unconditioned imperatives or “ought’s,” Kant calls “categorical”—what we ought to do without qualification.
   5. Such imperatives are not like “don’t lie, if you want to be trusted,” but rather “don’t lie period.” They tell us that certain acts are right or wrong “in themselves” and not because of their “consequences.”
   6. Therefore, the imperatives move us beyond relativism.

C. But what can motivate us to act on such categorical imperatives, Kant asks, since doing so requires abstracting from all of our particular desires and from the practical consequences of actions?
   1. His answer is that we can only be motivated by the idea of “conformity of our actions to universal law as such.”
   2. This leads to (the first formulation of) Kant’s well-known Categorical Imperative: “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” for everyone to follow.
3. When we exercise practical reason, we are “legislating” for ourselves. But to legislate for everyone, one needs to rise above the third dimension of value discussed earlier, that is, beyond individual purposes.

V. The Categorical Imperative and Kant’s argument for it have provoked more discussion in modern ethical theory than perhaps any other topic.

A. One of the first, and still one of the most common, criticisms made of the Categorical Imperative was made by Kant’s most influential immediate successor, Hegel, who argued that it was an “empty formalism.”

B. Hegel’s criticism is assessed by considering several examples used by Kant to illustrate his Categorical Imperative.
   1. The first example concerns Kant’s argument that “making a promise while intending to break it” is a maxim that cannot be willed to be a universal law for everyone to follow.
   2. One could internalize a “bad” maxim, if one is willing to take the consequences. But Kant wants a categorical that does not consider consequences, but rather judges an act to be right in itself.
   3. And what of the “selective moralist” discussed in the previous lecture? Do we want to universalize his behavior and choices?
   4. We also need to examine his argument that suicide is wrong on the grounds that the maxim “out of concern for myself, I will put an end to my life” involves a practical inconsistency. Also, we would need to consider the countervailing argument (or example) of Japan’s view on ritual suicide.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Kant argues that since duty and moral conscience are often opposed to desires and inclinations, when we act from duty we must be motivated by reason (by beliefs about what we ought to do) rather than by any desires. Does this line of reasoning make sense to you? Can we be motivated by reason alone without desires being involved? How does Kant think this is possible?
2. Do you think Kant’s Categorical Imperative is an “empty formalism,” as Hegel and other modern critics have claimed? Does it allow in too many maxims that would normally be regarded as immoral or rule out any that would seem to be moral? Is the idea that you could will something to be a universal law for everyone to follow too weak and general a requirement?
Lecture Nine
Bentham, Mill, and the Appeal to Utility

Scope: This lecture compares Kant’s approach to ethics with another modern theory with which Kant’s is often contrasted, namely, utilitarianism. The lecture begins by discussing a few further themes of Kant’s ethics—including his second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, the principle of treating persons as “ends in themselves” rather than as means. This principle is in turn related to notions of free will and autonomy (being a “self-legislator,” or giving laws to oneself).

The greater part of the lecture is devoted to utilitarianism, the third option of the project of modernity. We discuss the central principle of utilitarianism, the principle of utility, or of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” Through a discussion of the lives and work of Jeremy Bentham, founder of utilitarianism, and John Stuart Mill, its greatest nineteenth-century representative, we deal with central issues in utilitarianism about defining and measuring happiness, about pleasure and pain, about the alleged conflicts between utility and justice, about theories of punishment, and, finally, issues of social reform that interested Bentham and Mill and still interest utilitarians today.

Outline

I. This lecture begins by discussing a few further themes of Kant’s ethics before turning to utilitarianism and comparing the two theories.
   A. The account of Kant’s theory in the previous lecture would be incomplete if we did not mention that Kant also proposed a second version of his Categorical Imperative that has been as influential as the first.
      1. The second formulation, “the Principle of Humanity as an End,” says: “Act so that you always use humanity in your own person, as well as in the person of every other, never as a means, but at the same time as an end.”
      2. To treat someone as an end is to respect their desires and purposes; to treat them as a means is to subordinate their purposes to one’s own, to use them for one’s own purposes.
   B. Kant claims this second version of the Categorical Imperative amounts to the same thing as the first version.
      1. Many philosophers have doubted this, however, with some justification.
      2. In order to relate the two, we need to return to the notion of a universal “legislator,” rising above human biological limitations.
   C. Kant also associates this Principle of Humanity as an End with the idea of autonomy or free will.
      1. We are to be treated as “ends in ourselves” because we are capable, by using our reason, of creating our own “ends” or purposes, rather than merely acting on the purposes nature has given us (through instinct and desire).
      2. This capacity of creating our own ends is what he means by “free will.”
      3. Exercising it also involves being “self-legislators,” being able to act on laws or principles (imperatives) that we give to ourselves rather than simply following nature’s laws (which is “autonomy” [from “autos” (self) + “nomos” (law)])
   D. The second formulation of Kant’s Imperative seems to escape some of the objections to the first, but criticisms have been made of it as well.
      1. Some philosophers have argued that it does not escape relativism. This concern is considered in the light of some examples, including suicide.
      2. Other philosophers have raised the question of why respecting our own freedom and autonomy demands respecting the autonomy and freedom of all other persons as well.
   E. Another objection is that Kant seems to say that only the moral person can be autonomous. Nietzsche and others offer counter-arguments to this conclusion.

II. With this background, we turn to the contrasting theory of utilitarianism—the third alternative of the project of modernity.
   A. Utilitarianism, like Kantianism, has had considerable influence on modern ethical thinking.
1. In modern university courses in ethics, utilitarianism and Kantianism are often treated as the two main contrasting alternatives in ethics.

2. The two theories are generally distinguished in the following way: Kant’s theory is said to be “deontological” (from a Greek term signifying obligation or duty).

3. This means that acts are regarded as right or wrong “in themselves” and not because of their consequences.

4. Utilitarianism, by contrast, is the primary modern example of a consequentialist ethical theory, which says that acts can be judged right or wrong, better or worse, only by considering their consequences.

5. The consequences that make acts right for utilitarians are spelled out by their “Principle of Utility,” or the “Principle of the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number”: the right action among available alternatives is that which will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

B. The questions of how to define happiness and measure it were addressed by the founder of utilitarianism, British philosopher, legal theorist, and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832).

1. Bentham defined happiness in terms of pleasure and pain, those “sovereign masters” of all human endeavors, as he put it.

2. He even suggested a calculus for measuring the pleasures and pains (his “hedonic calculus”), to which we will return later in the lecture.

III. Bentham was a wealthy man, who received a degree in law, but never practiced. He spent his long life engaged in writing and social reform, especially of the British legal system.

A. Bentham’s interesting life illustrates the social reformist features of utilitarianism.

1. From its beginnings, utilitarianism has generally been associated with social policies, with the reform of public institutions, and with issues of morals and legislation.

2. Without knowing the details of the utilitarian philosophy, most people today tend to think in terms of the greatest good of the greatest number when they think about the justification of social policies, rules, laws, and institutions.

3. This is evidence of the influence utilitarianism has had upon modern political and legal theory, on economics, and everyday thinking, as well as upon philosophy.

B. The founding book of the movement was Bentham’s *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published in 1789.

1. In it, Bentham was especially interested in reforming the legal system, particularly, practices of criminal justice and punishment.

2. In this respect, as in others, he was very much a figure of the Enlightenment, sharing its optimistic faith in public reform and human betterment.

IV. The differences between Bentham’s approach to criminal punishment and Kant’s are a good way to illustrate the differences between the consequentialist ethics of utilitarianism and deontological Kantian ethics.

A. Bentham held that the only way to justify practices of punishment was in terms of their social consequences—by deciding which practices would produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

1. This meant we should concentrate on whether punishments actually deter criminals and deter others from committing crimes.

2. We should not try to determine, as Kantians would, whether a certain punishment was right in and of itself (because it “fits” the crime) quite apart from its social consequences.

3. For Kant, punishment was a backward-looking matter of retribution demanded by the nature of the crime. For Bentham it was a forward-looking matter of deterrence, and if possible, rehabilitation.

B. Bentham had many interesting proposals to make on the basis of this utilitarian approach to punishment.

1. He condemned capital punishment for offenses other than murder—not because it was cruel—but because it did not deter. He said juries would be reluctant to sentence to death for crimes less than murder, like theft, so they would not be inclined to convict at all.

2. Bentham also made proposals about the severity and certainty of punishments that are frequently endorsed by modern criminologists.

3. He also made some hilarious proposals. He opposed flogging, a common practice in his day, on the sensible grounds that floggers might take bribes from richer criminals and flog less harshly.
4. But as a remedy, he also proposed that flogging machines be invented which could be set exactly to the desired harshness.

V. Difficulties with Bentham’s utilitarianism and refinements by John Stuart Mill are considered.

A. To judge whether an act is right, for utilitarians, you have to be able to compute that it will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But how do you do that?
   1. Do you have to count everyone? And how are different pleasures and pains to be weighed against one another?
   2. Bentham introduced a calculus for measuring and comparing pleasures and pains in seven different categories: intensity, duration, certainty, remoteness in time, numbers affected, etc.
   3. This “hedonic calculus” has been much criticized ever since as unrealistic.
   4. Because of it, Karl Marx referred to utilitarianism as a philosophy for “accountants”—or perhaps bureaucrats, or “bean counters.”
   5. The writer Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) also objected to the utilitarian philosophy.

B. John Stuart Mill, the most influential of the utilitarians, and one of the greatest of nineteenth-century thinkers, parted company with Bentham on this matter of measuring happiness.
   1. Mill distinguished “higher” and “lower” pleasures, insisting that it was better “to be a Socrates unsatisfied, than a pig satisfied.”
   2. Mill thereby produced a more plausible version of utilitarianism, but did not clear up all its problems.
   3. Other principles besides utility would have to be invoked to account for the distinction between higher and lower pleasures.
   4. We must consider the issue of including “evil” pleasures in the utilitarian calculus.

C. Other difficulties with the utilitarianism of both Bentham and Mill concern the relation of utility to justice.
   1. Might an innocent person (or persons) be involuntarily sacrificed for the greatest good of the greatest number?
   2. Would the utilitarian principle justify social arrangements in which the greatest number of people (say ninety percent) prospered and were happy at the expense of a small oppressed minority?

D. Modern utilitarians have made additions or changes to the theory in the attempt to address such difficulties.
   1. To counter the problem of measuring happiness, many have shifted from pleasures and pains to the ranking of preferences.
   2. New techniques of rational choice theory in economics have been used by utilitarians to rank preferences.
   3. Some modern utilitarians have also shifted to “rule utilitarianism,” which uses the greatest happiness principle to judge the rightness of general rules of action or social policies rather than particular actions.
   4. Rule-utilitarianism escapes some of the criticisms of traditional “act-utilitarianism” but not all.
   5. Other thinkers sympathetic to utilitarianism are willing to combine the principle of utility with other principles of just distribution or equal respect.
   6. Such theories are not purely utilitarian, but they are less subject to the usual objections about justice made against utilitarianism.

Essential Reading:
Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, chapters 7 and 8, “Utilitarianism.”
Supplementary Reading:
Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, chapter 10, “Kant and Human Dignity.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Which theory of punishment do you think is more plausible, the utilitarian theory which emphasizes deterrence or the Kantian theory which emphasizes retribution? Might something be said in favor of both theories or perhaps a combination of the two?
2. It is sometimes said that utilitarians put too much emphasis on pleasures and pains and too little on the persons who feel the pleasures and pains. It is also sometimes said that utilitarianism has no notion of worth or desert (of persons or of pleasures). All pleasures count the same, no matter who has them, whether worthy or not. Are these criticisms justified?
Lecture Ten
Social Contract Theories (Part I)

Scope: In this lecture and the next we turn to the fourth alternative of the project of modernity, the appeal to a social contract. A brief history of modern social contract theory is discussed, and the recent revival of social contract theories in ethics and politics in our own time is introduced. There are two kinds of contemporary social contract theories to be considered. The first have their origin in Thomas Hobbes and are often called “Hobbesian” theories; the second kind, “ideal” theories,” stem from John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Kant.

This lecture begins by discussing Hobbesian theories of the social contract, beginning with Hobbes himself and then discussing his contemporary successors. One of the interesting developments of recent intellectual history is the realization that Hobbesian social contract theory is related to new ideas about altruism and the evolution of cooperation that have surfaced in modern biology and evolutionary theory. We explore this connection and these new evolutionary ideas in the lecture along with Hobbesian social contract theory. Toward the end of the lecture, we begin to discuss “ideal” social contract theories (a discussion that will continue into the next lecture), using John Rawls’ theory of justice as the most influential recent representative of this kind. Rawls’ two principles of justice are introduced and explained.

Outline

I. We turn to the fourth alternative of the project of modernity to be considered, the appeal to a social contract.
   A. While the idea of such a contract is ancient (it is discussed in Plato’s Republic), the idea took on a special urgency in modern thought as a possible way of finding common ground in ethics and politics.
      1. The first influential modern social contract theory was that of Thomas Hobbes (1651); others were by John Locke (1689) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762).
      2. These social contract theorists exerted a great influence on the American and French Revolutions.
   B. In the last half of the twentieth century, there has been a revival of social contract theories in both ethics and politics, such theories being seen as a means to deal with the problem of plurality.
      1. The most influential event in this revival was the publication of John Rawls’ A Theory of Justice in 1971. Rawls’ theory will be considered later.
      2. Two distinct kinds of modern social contract theory must be distinguished in this revival. One kind—Hobbesian” social contract theory—stems from Hobbes; the other—“ideal” social contract theory—stems from Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.

II. We begin by considering Hobbesian theories.
   A. Hobbes introduced the idea of a “state of nature” into modern ethical and political discussion, that is, the natural state humans lived in before the founding of governments or civil societies.
      1. Perhaps the best way to think of this in Hobbes is to think of a state of warring tribes. Hobbes defined life under such a state as “poor, nasty, brutish and short.”
      2. There are some contemporary examples that can be used to illuminate the Hobbesian state of nature: the modern novel Lord of the Flies, inner city gangs, and international relations.
   B. Wishing to escape the insecurities of this state, according to Hobbes, humans would be motivated out of self-interest to make covenants or agreements with their rivals to live in peace with one another.
      1. These covenants or contracts would have to be enforced, however, in order to be useful.
      2. Hobbes argued that the contractors would have to agree to submit themselves to a sovereign with near absolute power.
      3. Modern Hobbesian theorists in ethics, such as Kurt Baier and David Gauthier, follow Hobbes, except for this last step.
      4. An absolute sovereign is not necessary, they argue. The contractors can agree on any form of government, including a constitutional democracy, so long as they agree to abide by its laws.
   C. An important point on which these modern Hobbesians do follow Hobbes is in making the social contract the basis for ethics as well as politics.
1. They follow him in holding there is no right or wrong in the state of nature, just self-interest.
2. Rules of right and wrong are created by the contract itself. We define what is right or wrong by the promises and mutual commitments we make.
3. Thus, Gauthier’s book, one of the most influential of modern Hobbesian theory, is aptly entitled *Morals by Agreement* (1986).

### III. There is a connection between recent Hobbesian social contract theories and certain new ideas about “altruism” and the “evolution of cooperation” that have come to light in modern biology and social thought

**A.** The problem at issue is the “problem of altruism” in evolution.
1. Darwin’s theory originally emphasized the struggle for survival and the “survival of the fittest.”
2. It seemed to leave no room for altruism or sacrificing for the good of others.

**B.** In the late nineteenth century, a doctrine of “Social Darwinism” used the survival-of-the-fittest doctrine to argue for unfettered economic competition as a natural extension of Darwinism to human social life.
1. Social Darwinism is now a discredited doctrine, though the idea behind it keeps popping up here and there in different guises.
2. We need to realize that Social Darwinism was too hasty a transference of ideas of biological fitness to social and economic phenomena.

**C.** Social Darwinists also missed the fundamental point that has become a central theme of modern sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists.
1. Evolution proceeds as much, if not more, by cooperation between groups, and even between species, as by competition.
2. E. O. Wilson, founder of sociobiology, was an entomologist who first noted the pervasiveness of cooperation in the insect world (ants, termites, bees, etc.) with individuals sacrificing for the group.
3. Whole species also survive by cooperating with one another—bees with flowers, benign bacteria on our skins, and many more.
4. Turning to humans, sociobiologists, and later evolutionary psychologists, have argued that altruism and cooperation play a more important role in human evolution than previously recognized.

**D.** Two aspects of this cooperation are “kin selection” and “reciprocal altruism.”
1. Kin selection involves humans sacrificing for relatives who carry similar genes, helping raise a niece, finding a brother a job, sacrificing for family, kin, tribe.
2. Reciprocal altruism involves aiding unrelated neighbors or neighboring groups when they are in need, when they are likely to aid us when we are in need.

**E.** It has come to be recognized in recent decades that, in his account of the social contract, Hobbes anticipated the mechanisms of reciprocal altruism, which many now regarded as the main mechanism for the evolution of cooperation in humans.
1. But this connection to reciprocal altruism in biology also points up the limitations of Hobbesian social contract theories for ethics.
2. These limitations include the lack of a motive for the stronger to have an arrangement with the weaker (who can’t help in return) and the likelihood of the “free rider” (who can take the benefits and provide none in return).

### IV. “Ideal” social contract theories aim to remedy the limitations of Hobbesian theories.

**A.** In ideal theories (which are inspired in large part by Locke and Rousseau), certain requirements are made on the social contractors to ensure that the bargaining that leads to the contract will be fair or impartial.

**B.** The most influential contemporary social contract theory of this kind is that of John Rawls.
1. Rawls imagines a group of hypothetical social contractors who have come together to design a set of basic principles of justice to govern society they can all agree on.
2. His original and provocative idea is to place the contractors in an “original position” behind a “veil of ignorance.”
3. Behind this veil, they do not know what their actual place will be in society, or their talents and possessions, when the veil is lifted.
4. The idea is that without such knowledge they would choose fair principles that would benefit everyone. Rawls thus calls his view “justice as fairness.” There is a relation to Rousseau here.
C. Rawls argues that contractors in such an original position would choose two principles of justice to govern the society that they would agree to live in.

1. First Principle: Each person is to have the right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the similar liberty of others.

2. Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Essential Reading:


Supplementary Reading:


Questions to Consider:
1. Many modern evolutionary psychologists and social contract theorists believe that the ideas of kin selection and reciprocal altruism are adequate to explain both the evolution of cooperation among humans and to provide a foundation for ethics. Do you agree about their providing an adequate foundation for ethics?

2. Rawls’ ideas of the original position and veil of ignorance are certainly interesting, but Hobbesian critics say that his veil of ignorance is a highly artificial situation that no real contractors would ever be in. It does not tell us anything, they say, about what an actual social contract would look like, thus rendering it useless, or at least question-begging, as a foundation for politics or ethics. Assess this charge.
Lecture Eleven
Social Contract Theories (Part II)

Scope: Criticisms of Rawls’ contractarian theory of justice have come from all sides of the ethical and political spectrum, from libertarians and socialists, communitarians and social conservatives. This lecture considers the varied criticisms of Rawls’ theory as a barometer of the ideological and value debates of our times. Rawls controversial second principle of justice is first discussed in more detail. It allows for disparities of income, wealth, and power, but places restrictions and limits on these disparities—that they be to the benefit of all, especially the least advantaged.

Libertarian critics of Rawls, such as Robert Nozick, are then considered. They accept Rawls’ first principle of justice (on equal freedoms), but reject features of his second principle. Socialist and communist critics also reject Rawls’ second principle, but for entirely different reasons. Rawls’ recent revisions of his theory to meet these criticisms are considered. The lecture concludes by considering communitarian and social conservative critics of Rawls, including Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre, who object to the individualism of Rawls theory and its failure to adequately address issues about virtue, personal identity and the needs for community.

Outline
I. Rawls’ second principle of justice concerns differences of income, wealth, and power in society and is the most original and controversial feature of his social contract theory of justice.
   A. The first part of the second principle says that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.
      1. Contractors behind a veil of ignorance would choose this, Rawls reasons, because they would not know what their positions in society would be when the veil was lifted and might themselves be among the unlucky or disadvantaged.
      2. But they would also see the advantages of allowing disparities of income and wealth if everyone benefited, including the least advantaged.
      3. Examples of this are discussed: doctors might be paid disproportionately if medical care is thereby improved for everyone; businesses and investors will reap benefits if they provide goods, services, and jobs that benefit society, and so on.
      4. Of course, if the benefits of medical care, services, and jobs that produce these inequalities do not filter down to the least advantaged, Rawls’ second principle would not be satisfied.
      5. Rawls insists further (in the second part of his second principle) that these social and economic inequalities must be open to all under conditions of fair opportunity.
      6. His theory of justice is thus an ideal one; our real society falls short of it in many ways, even if the theory does allow for disparities of wealth and income.
   B. Rawls’ theory is clearly not socialist or communist, since it allows disparities of wealth and income and considerable private ownership and property. But it is a liberal theory of justice in both the classical and modern senses of that term.
      1. It is liberal in the sense of the “classical liberalism” of John Locke, by virtue of Rawls’ first principle of justice, which requires maximal liberty for each person consistent with the liberties of others.
      2. And it is also liberal in the modern “welfare” sense (by virtue of the second principle of justice), requiring that disparities of wealth and income be balanced by a substantial safety net for the disadvantaged.

II. These features are the sources of the criticisms of Rawls’ theory, which have come from all sides of the political spectrum, from libertarians and socialists, conservatives and communitarians. The varied criticisms of Rawls’ theory are a good barometer of the ideological debates of the day.
   A. We look first at libertarian critics of Rawls theory, such as Robert Nozick.
      1. Favoring liberty and limited government as they do, libertarians like Nozick have no problem with Rawls’ first principle of justice.
2. The first principle’s requirement of maximal liberty for all, consistent with the liberty of others, is indeed the central principle for libertarians.

3. But they object to Rawls’ second principle: in a free society, says Nozick, the economic and social chips fall where they may.

4. So long as property is justly acquired and transferred, he argues, people are free to do with their property and money what they will.

5. Nozick and other libertarians specifically criticize Rawls’ derivation of his second principle of justice. Rawls assumes his contractors will be averse to risk behind the veil of ignorance. But critics argue that he is not allowed to assume this. Perhaps the judges are risk takers, interested more with the opportunity for success, as opposed to a “safety net.”

B. This libertarian criticism is related to a more general criticism often made of Rawls’ theory by others.

1. You can get different results by what you do and do not allow the contractors to know behind the veil of ignorance.

2. Rawls admits that, while the contractors do not know their eventual place in society or what their particular conceptions of the good will be, they do know that they will want certain primary goods, such as liberty, opportunity, wealth, income, respect.

3. If they did not know these basic things, they would have no grounds whatever to choose.

4. This raises the question of just what they should be allowed to know behind the veil. Different assumptions would yield different results, as we show.

C. Socialist and communist critics of Rawls criticize him from the opposite direction.

1. His theory allows too much inequality.

2. If there are considerable disparities of wealth and power in society, then the freedoms guaranteed by Rawls’ first principle of justice will be undermined by the second.

3. Examples of this include: influencing political campaigns, fair trials, free speech, equal opportunity, and so on.

4. In short, his theory may be too idealistic.

III. Rawls’ responses to his libertarian and socialist critics are considered.

A. In his recent work, Political Liberalism, Rawls continues to defend his two principles of justice, but relies less on the formal apparatus of the original position and veil of ignorance.

1. He is no longer convinced that all rational persons behind a veil would have to choose his principles. The contractors would have to share some values and commitments—a significant concession.

2. They would have to share what Rawls calls an “overlapping consensus” to liberty, fairness, and reasonableness in order to reach agreement. This is far different from a Kantian “categorical imperative.”

3. Such agreement is not guaranteed by mere abstract rationality.

4. But he thinks such an overlapping consensus is in fact widely shared by those who believe in the value of free and democratic societies and that it is a growing consensus in the modern world.

B. The idea of an overlapping consensus is further discussed along with its role in more recent social contract theories besides Rawls’.

IV. Communitarian and social conservative critics of Rawls come from another direction on the political spectrum.

A. Communitarianism is a new catchword in ethical and political debate.

1. Communitarians may be on the political left or right or in the middle.

2. But what they have in common is that they lament the breakdown of community bonds and shared values in modern pluralist societies.

3. And they lament the breakdown or lessened influences of institutions like the family, churches, civic groups, close-knit neighborhoods, and the like, that hold communities together and provide a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

4. Communitarian critics of Rawls’ thus share some of the same criticisms as social conservatives but do not always agree with the goals or suggested remedies of social conservatives.

B. Two of the most well-known communitarian critics of Rawls are political scientist Michael Sandel and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.
1. Sandel and MacIntyre argue that Rawls’ original position behind a veil of ignorance is flawed because it requires persons to abstract from all of their social and communal bonds, their religious beliefs, and other affiliations.

2. Their critique of Rawls is thus akin to Hegel’s critique of Kant.

3. Rawls asks contractors to abstract from their concrete desires, purposes, and particular commitments. As a result, like Kant, Rawls’ procedure yields an “empty formalism,” they argue, which allows conflicting results.

4. Communitarians, like Sandel and MacIntyre, argue that the good for humans can only be defined relative to the communal and social roles one inhabits, not in abstraction from these roles.

5. Modern individualism, of which Rawls’ theory is an example, is the culprit, according to communitarians, since it destroys communal bonds.

6. Critics hold that his theory is too thin.

**Essential Reading:**


**Supplementary Reading:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Do you think Rawls’ principles of justice can be salvaged from his libertarian and socialist critics? If so, how? If not, why not?

2. Are you sympathetic to communitarian and social conservative criticisms of Rawls? If so, do we really have to choose between Rawls’ principles of justice and communitarian concerns about the loss of community? Might liberal principles of justice, like Rawls’, be reconciled with the needs of community?
Lecture Twelve
Some Critiques of the Modern Project

Scope: The preceding six lectures have discussed the “project of modernity”—the project undertaken by modern philosophers of trying to find common or universal ethical values that all persons could agree upon, given modern conditions of pluralism and uncertainty. In this lecture we consider some contemporary thinkers who believe the project of modernity has failed. Some of these critics, represented in the present lecture by Alasdair MacIntyre, believe that modern philosophers have failed to find new common ground in ethics because they have neglected or departed from the wisdom of the past. Such critics argue for a return to ancient and medieval ways of thinking about values and ethics, which emphasize the virtues (“virtue ethics”) and notions of the good life as a whole.

Other critics of the project of modernity take an entirely different line. They include postmodernists, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, who argue that the project of modernity was doomed to fail because it is impossible to rise above the finite and limited points of view we all inhabit in order to make general or universal claims about values and ethics that hold for all persons at all times. Postmodern critics are inclined therefore to give in and embrace relativism, not in the vulgar sense, but in the sense that there are no universal or non-relative (fourth-dimensional) values that transcend particular points of view. They agree with traditionalists, like MacIntyre, that the project of modernity has failed, but they do not think we can go back to pre-modern ideas about values and ethics either. We must go forward to a new “post-modern” age.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we consider some contemporary thinkers who believe the project of modernity has failed.
   
   A. One group of such thinkers, represented in this lecture by Alasdair MacIntyre, believes that the modern project has failed because it has departed from the wisdom of the ancients.
      1. These critics argue for a return to ancient and medieval ways of thinking about values and ethics, which emphasize the virtues and notions of the good life.
      2. We will look at MacIntyre’s critique of the project of modernity—which he calls the “Enlightenment project” in his influential book, After Virtue (1981).  
      3. This work is a part of—and an important influence upon—the recent revival of “virtue ethics” in philosophy and in contemporary public debates about ethics.
   
   B. Another different group of critics of the project of modernity are postmodernists, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard.
      1. They believe the project of modernity was doomed to fail because it is impossible to rise above our finite points of view in order to make general or universal claims about values.
      2. Such postmodernists are inclined to embrace relativism (though not the vulgar variety) and argue that we must learn to live without transcendent claims about the good and the right. They hold that there is no “God’s-eye point-of-view.”

II. MacIntyre’s critique of the project of modernity and his defense of the virtues is considered first.
   
   A. MacIntyre argues in After Virtue that the project of modernity was destined to fail because it abandoned the “classical tradition” of thinking about values which goes back to Aristotle.
      1. In this classical tradition there is a fundamental contrast between “humans-as-they-happen-to-be” and “humans-as-they-could-be-if-they fulfilled-their-essential-nature,” i.e., their formal cause.
      2. Ethics is the knowledge of how you get from the initial untutored natural state to the state of essential fulfillment—the human end or telos.
      3. The virtues or excellences (aretai) are those qualities of character that allow us to progress from the untutored state to our natural end or final cause—the fulfilled human state.
   
   B. Modern thinkers rejected this “teleological” scheme based on ends or final causes when modern science rejected Aristotle’s final causes in nature.
1. But this classical scheme, according to MacIntyre, is the scheme in terms of which we understand the “good” and the right way to live.

2. As a result, moderns, who reject the scheme, have fumbled around trying to find new ways of understanding terms like “good” and “right.”

3. They were destined to fail because these terms had been detached from the teleological scheme that gave them meaning.

C. In place of the virtues, which had lost their classical meaning, modern philosophers sought to formulate general rules of behavior that all could assent to, such as the Categorical Imperative, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, Rawls’ principles of justice.

1. Rules became central to modern ethics, rather than virtues.

2. But the rules were very general, abstracted from concrete ways of living.

III. MacIntyre believes that a return to the “classical tradition” of the virtues is the only way out of this confusion.

To revive this tradition, we must understand the virtues at three levels, he thinks, in terms of practices, narratives, and traditions.

A. The classical notion of virtue or excellence is initially defined in terms of what MacIntyre calls “practices.”

1. By a practice, he means a cooperative human activity through which human goods are sought by trying to achieve certain standards of excellence.

2. Examples of practices are wide ranging and would include medicine, law, physics, architecture, farming, violin making, horticulture, painting, calligraphy, politics, teaching, the maintenance of family life, to name just a few.

3. The virtues at this level are the skills and other human qualities (excellences) that allow one to achieve the goods distinctive of the practices.

B. MacIntyre makes an important distinction between goods that are internal to practices and those that are external.

1. The making of an instrument with excellent sound is the good internal to (aimed at) by the practice of violin making; it is a good that can only be achieved by making violins.

2. The money, fame, or power a violin maker may acquire as a result of his craft are external goods to violin making, since money, fame, and power can be realized in many different ways, not only by making violins.

3. MacIntyre argues that human fulfillment can only be completely achieved by the realization of internal goods, not merely by external goods.

4. He also criticizes modern societies for their overemphasis on external goods; e.g., doctors more interested in money than in healing; craftsmen, politicians, athletes, motion picture celebrity vs. genuine achievement.

C. MacIntyre argues, at a second level, that virtues or excellences have meaning only in the context of the narrative of one’s life, which tells a certain story with specific goals.

1. We are story-telling animals who understand the meaning of our lives as narratives in which our goals play a crucial role.

2. The virtues in this context are qualities of character that will sustain us in our quests for the goods we seek.

D. Finally, at a third level, the virtues are to be understood within the context of traditions.

1. Practices change and develop over time and, when the pursuit of goods in practices extends over long periods of time, they become traditions.

2. The virtues in the context of traditions are just those qualities of character that sustain traditions and continue to make them productive of the goods they seek (e.g., loyalty to one’s job, fairness, honesty, etc.).

E. MacIntyre presents us with a rich conception of the virtues in terms of practices, narratives, and traditions. But does his account of the virtues escape relativism?

1. Many of his critics say no, because virtues and goods on his view must be defined relative to particular practices, narratives, or traditions.
2. MacIntyre accepts this criticism to some extent but has argued that one can communicate between traditions and thereby try to establish that some traditions are superior to others in their accounts of the human good.

IV. We turn to Lyotard’s postmodern critique of the project of modernity.

A. In his influential work, *The Postmodern Condition* (1987), French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as “the rejection of all meta-narratives.”
   1. By “meta-narrative” he means any grand theory of God or the Absolute, Eternal Forms, Universal History, or Being-in-itself that is supposed to be true for all times and from all points of view.
   2. According to Lyotard, there can be no such meta-narrative, no “one true story of the world.”
   3. We each have our different stories (our individual “narratives”) to tell from different perspectives, embodied in our religions, our myths, our cultural legends, but none of them is the true one about the nature of things.
   4. There can be no one true story, no grand theory that informs us of the meaning of life, and hence no account of good and evil, right or wrong, that is true for all persons.
   5. This is, for Lyotard, the “postmodern condition.”

B. And what are the reasons for this condition?
   1. All knowing and understanding involve interpretation in terms of some framework or point of view, according to Lyotard, a conceptual scheme or theory, a language-game or narrative, that is local and particular to the inquirer.
   2. It is impossible to rise above all such schemes in order to make the transhistorical, transcultural assertions to which traditional philosophy and religion aspired.
   3. There is no neutral, transhistorical point of view.

C. The project of modernity was to retrieve such a neutral, transhistorical, transcultural point of view in ethics on the basis of human reason alone.
   1. It was doomed to fail because even our human reason, our ways of thinking, are conditioned by the languages we speak and the traditions we inhabit.
   2. What seems “rational” or “reasonable” from one perspective will not seem so from another. There is no one conception of human reason either.

D. This postmodernist challenge is a formidable one. In the second part of the lecture series, one of our goals will be to consider modern responses to it.

Essential Reading:
MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 5, 14, and 15.

Supplementary Reading:
MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 6, 9–13, and 18.

Questions to Consider:
1. It would appear that on MacIntyre’s view of the virtues, they are much wider than merely moral virtues, like honesty, justice, or kindness. They include any kind of excellence that could be realized in some practice or tradition that realizes human goods. In taking this broad view of the virtues as human excellences, MacIntyre is definitely in the classical spirit of Aristotle. But one question to consider is whether his theory has an account of distinctively moral virtues at all. Can there be morally evil practices or traditions?
2. It is often argued that postmodernist views, like Lyotard’s, have dangerous implications for ethics and politics, because they allow no absolute or universal claims about right and wrong. But postmodernists characteristically respond that absolutist claims are the real danger in ethics and politics, because those who claim to have the absolute right, usually look down upon or marginalize those persons or groups whose views or behavior do not fit their norms. Who is right in this debate?
Glossary

**absolute value**: See value.

**aspiration**: from the Latin *aspirare*, which means literally “to breathe forth,” but also “to have a fixed desire or longing for something” and “to seek to attain it.” These lectures speak of an “aspiration toward wisdom,” which means a desire and seeking to know what is true and worth striving for in the nature of things.

**basic value experiences**: experiences such as joy, gladness, pride, delight, sensory pleasure, and enjoyment which we think of as good in the first instance unless they are overridden in some higher dimension of value. Initial human experiences of good as opposed to evil come through such experiences. Hence they comprise the first dimension of value. See **first-dimensional value**.

**categorical imperative**: a principle stating that something is a right action and therefore ought to be done, whatever its consequences and whatever the desires of the agent may happen to be. See Kant’s categorical imperative.

**communism**: political view according to which property and the means of production in society should be communally or publicly owned, rather than privately owned.

**communitarianism**: political view according to which individuals are constituted by the social and communal bonds, institutions, and practices of which they are a part. Their rights and obligations derive from those same communal bonds, institutions, and practices. Communitarians stress the need to be part of communities of shared values with others for human happiness and fulfillment.

**disvalue**: to say that something is bad in some respect is to say that it is a disvalue (where that something may be anything whatever, e.g., a painful experience, the loss of money, a rainy day, a trait of character, a form of government). Like values, disvalues may be subjective or objective, relative or universal (i.e., absolute), intrinsic or instrumental. For the meaning of these terms, see value.

**emotivism**: the view that judgments or statements about what is good or evil, right or wrong, are merely expressions of the feelings or emotions of those making the judgments or statements. Emotivism is version of subjectivism of values. See subjectivism of values.

**empiricism**: the doctrine that all ideas and all knowledge come through experience. There are no innate ideas or knowledge that precede any sensory experience of the world.

**ends principle**: “treat all persons (including yourself) in every situation as ends in themselves and never as mere means to your own ends, or to other persons’ ends.” To treat persons as ends in themselves is to respect their purposes and desires, allowing them to pursue their purposes without interference or exploitation. To treat them as means to your ends is to subordinate their purposes to your own, or use them for your ends without concern for their desires.

**Enlightenment**: a general movement of Western intellectual history associated with the eighteenth century in France, Germany, and other European nations. Attitudes characterizing the Enlightenment (which were not shared by all thinkers of the period, but were held by many influential thinkers) include a distrust of fanaticism, superstition, and authoritarianism (in religion and government); an optimistic faith in the powers of human reason and experimental science to bring human betterment and progress; belief in religious toleration; and belief in individual dignity, freedom, and human rights.

**fact/value gap** (or the gap between fact and value): the alleged inability to infer from objective facts about a thing that it is good or bad. In short, you cannot derive value (what is good or bad) from mere fact.

**final cause** (*telos* in Greek): in Aristotle’s philosophy, the goal or end or purpose, which each thing strives for in virtue of its nature or essence. Alternatively, “that for the sake of which” something exists, or something occurs (its end or purpose).

**first-dimensional value**: the experiential dimension of value that includes basic value experiences such a joy, delight, enjoyment, sensory pleasure, and the like, through which we initially define good as distinct from evil. See **basic value experiences**.
fourth-dimensional value: non-relative or universal worth from every point of view; that which is good, not merely from the points of view of some particular persons or groups, but from the points of view of all persons and groups, whether they all recognize the worth or not. Alternative terms for such value are “objective worth” or “universal worth.” See objective worth.

glory: clear recognition with praise for one’s deeds or accomplishments. This definition is taken from medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas, who defines it thus “gloria est clara notitia cum laude,” “glory is clear recognition with praise.” Worthiness for glory from all points of view is one of the two dimensions of objective worth. See objective worth.

harm principle (also called Mill’s harm principle, after John Stuart Mill): “the liberty of individuals can be justifiably limited by law or government or society only to prevent their doing harm to others.”

hypothetical imperative: a principle stating what a person ought to do, if he or she wants to fulfill a certain desire or purpose.

inscape: term borrowed from poet Gerard Manley Hopkins meaning the inner life of a person, the world as the person subjectively experiences it.

instrumental value: See value.

intrinsic value: See value.

Kant’s categorical imperative: the supreme principle of morality, or moral law, according to Immanuel Kant. Kant gives several formulations of the principle, of which two are discussed in these lectures. The first formulation: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (for everyone to follow). The second formulation (also called the principle of humanity as an end): “Act so that you always use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of every other, never merely as a means, but at the same time as an end.” See categorical imperative.

Kantian ethics (or Kantianism in ethics): the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant which is a rationalist theory, based on an appeal to reason, and which holds that the “categorical imperative” is the supreme principle of morality. See rationalist alternative in ethics and Kant’s categorical imperative.

legal moralism principle: the liberty-limiting principle that would justify legal restrictions of activities (such as obscenity or pornography) which violate community moral standards as determined by the average member of the community or the person “in the jury box.”

libertarianism: political doctrine which advocates maximal individual liberty and minimal government regulation of the social and economic activities of citizens.

liberty-limiting principles: principles which define the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government. See harm principle, legal moralism principle, offense principle, and paternalism principle.

metanarrative: term used by French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard to designate any grand philosophical or religious view of the world which is supposed to be true for all times and from all points of view. Lyotard defines postmodernism as the rejection of all metanarratives. See postmodernism.

modernity: the period of Western civilization from the end of the Middle Ages to the present, which was initiated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by such movements as the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the birth of modern science, and the rise of capitalism.

moral innocence: the secure feeling that the rights and wrongs learned in childhood or held by one’s society or religion are the only correct and true ones, unchallengeable and unambiguous.

moral sphere: a sphere of peace and justice where every person can respect every other person, or treat every other person as an end and not as a means. Equivalently, it is the sphere in which the “ends principle” can be followed by everyone. See ends principle.

objective value: See value.
**objective worth:** non-relative (or fourth-dimensional) value from every point of view. Objective worth has two dimensions: objective worthiness for glory or clear recognition with praise from all points of view and objective worthiness of respect and love from all points of view. See **fourth-dimensional value** and **glory**.

**offense:** shocked sensibilities at the violation by the activities of others of one’s deeply held beliefs or views of right and wrong.

**offense principle:** liberty-limiting principle which defines the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government to prevent them from giving offense to others.

**paternalism principle:** liberty-limiting principle which defines the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government to prevent them from doing harm to themselves.

**positivism:** the view that science is the source of all the objective knowledge about the world.

**principle of humanity as an end:** See **categorical imperative**.

**principle of utility** (or greatest happiness principle): the central principle of utilitarianism that says that those acts or rules are right, which among the available alternatives, promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals.

**practical reason:** the capacity to deliberate practically about what we ought to do and how we ought to live.

**project of modernity:** the project undertaken by modern philosophers of finding ways to justify universal values, especially in the area of ethics, and thereby overcome relativism, without merely appealing to religious or other authorities or to final causes in nature.

**pluralism:** the existence of a multiplicity of conflicting points of view about good and evil, right and wrong, and the meaning of life, in one’s social environment.

**postmodernism** (in philosophy): contemporary movement of thought characterized by skeptical attitudes toward the traditional methods and goals of philosophy. Postmodernist philosophers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard reject any grand metaphysical or philosophical theories (“metanarratives,” he calls them) that are supposed to be true for all times, persons, and places. Postmodernists emphasize that we necessarily view the world through some finite perspective, a conceptual scheme or language, a culture or tradition, which we cannot rise above in order to make general claims about reality and value that are true for everyone.

**practices:** term used by ethical theorist Alasdair MacIntyre to designate cooperative human activities through which humans seek to realize certain goods by attaining standards of excellence defined for the activity—for example, medicine, law, farming, physics, architecture, music, sports, and so on.

**private morality** (or particular morality): what a person believes is the right way to live for himself or herself, and perhaps for all others as well.

**public morality:** what we owe others, even if they disagree with our private or particular morality.

**public morality principle:** society and government have a legitimate interest in protecting and encouraging attitudes, practices, institutions, and social conditions that tend to sustain a moral sphere in which persons can respect one another, despite their differing values.

**quests:** See **searches in the realm of aspiration**.

**rationalist alternative in ethics:** ethical view attributed to Immanuel Kant and others, according to which principles of right and wrong are based on, and known through, reason, and not through sentiments or desires.

**reciprocal altruism:** assisting or sacrificing for others with the expectation that they will assist and sacrifice for you in similar circumstances when you are in need.

**relative value:** See **value**.

**relativism** (of values): the view that all values are relative, i.e., good merely for particular persons or groups (societies, cultures) or from some particular points of view, not for all persons or from all points of view.
searches in the realm of aspiration (or quests): seeking something of great importance (such as the Holy Grail or the final truth about nature) the attainment of which requires patience, skill, and disciplined effort, but which attainment can never be assured or certain.

second-dimensional value: value that results from human purposive activity through which humans seek various practical or utilitarian ends or goals. Second-dimensional value consists in the fulfillment of the purposes of such activities and consequent satisfaction of the desires of the agents.

sentimentalist alternative (in ethics): ethical view attributed to David Hume, among others, according to which ethical and other judgments about right or wrong, virtue and vice, are based upon sentiments of approval or disapproval that are rooted in common human sentiments of sympathy and benevolence.

social contract theory: a theory of ethics or politics according to which rules of right or wrong, or principles of justice, or the laws governing a society, are based upon, and justified by, a contract or mutual agreement made (explicitly or tacitly) by those persons who are to be subject to the rules or laws. Ideal social contract theories (of which the theory of John Rawls is an example) impose certain prior constraints upon the contractors (about what they can know or whether they desire that all should willingly agree) designed to ensure that the agreement will be fair. Hobbesian social contract theories impose only the requirement that the contractors rationally seek their own enlightened self-interest.

socialism: a political view which advocates public (collective or government) control of the means of production in society and redirecting the use of those means for the general welfare.

sociobiology: the systematic study of the biological basis for all social behavior.

state of nature: in social contract theories, the natural condition humans live in before they make a social contract and form governments or civil societies.

subjective value: See value.

subjectivism (of values): the view that judgments or statements about good or evil, right or wrong, are not true or false descriptions of objective facts in the world, but are merely expressions of the personal feelings, attitudes, recommendations, or directives of those making the judgments or statements. Emotivism is a version of a subjectivist view. See emotivism.

sunderings of modernity: the severings of (1) scientific explanation from purpose, (2) fact from value, and (3) theoretical inquiry about the cosmos from practical inquiry about the good, that were brought about by the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

theoretical reason: reasoning about matters of fact or about what is the case and why it is the case.

third-dimensional value: value that is embodied in and derives from the pursuit of various excellences of achievement and virtues in different practices and forms of life; for example, excellence in painting or calligraphy, or virtues such as fidelity to one’s family or loyalty to friends.

universal value: See value.

utilitarianism: ethical theory according to which acts or rules are to be judged right on the basis of whether they accord with the principle of utility, that is, whether they promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals affected by the acts or rules. Act-utilitarians apply this criterion to judge the rightness of individual actions. Rule-utilitarians apply the criterion to judge general rules, principles, or policies.

value: This term is used throughout these lectures in the broadest sense. To say that something is good in some respect is to say that it is a value (where that something may be anything whatever, e.g., an enjoyable experience, a painting, the fulfillment of a purpose, a trait of character, a form of government). Different theories of value offer different interpretations of what it means to say that something is good. For example, values are subjective, if someone’s saying they are good merely means that the person approves of them or desires them or feels (or thinks) they are good. Values are objective if there are facts about them that make it fitting or correct to approve or desire them, or think they are good. Values may also be relative (if they are good only for particular persons or groups or from some points of view) or they may be universal or absolute (if they are good for all persons or from all points of view, i.e., good period). Values are intrinsic if they are desired (or fittingly desired) for their own sake.
and not for the sake of something else (e.g., happiness was so desired, according to Aristotle). Values are
in instrumental if they are desired (or fittingly desired) for the sake of something else, or as a means to some other end
(e.g., money, if it is not desired for itself, but for what it can buy).

**virtue**: morally praiseworthy traits of character, such as courage, honesty, loyalty, generosity, and the like.
Sometimes the term is used more broadly to mean praiseworthy traits or excellences of character of any kinds,
moral or non-moral.

**virtue ethics**: ethical theories in which the virtues, or praiseworthy traits of character, are fundamental. In such
theories, claims about other moral concepts, such as right action and correct rules of behavior, are based upon, or
derivative from, claims about virtuous traits of character.

**vulgar relativism** (of values): the view that no point of view about what is good or right is any better or more
correct than any other.

**wisdom**: the name given by Aristotle (sophia is the Greek term) to “first philosophy” or “metaphysics,” which seeks
to know “what is” (real) and the fundamental principles or causes (or explanations) of all things (answers to the
question “why?”). Wisdom also designates the understanding attained by this study, thus it consists in the
understanding of both (1) what is objectively real and (2) what is objectively good or worth striving for in the nature
of things.
Biographical Notes

**Aristotle** (384–322 BC). Greek philosopher of the late Axial Period. Along with Plato, one of the two ancient philosophers with the greatest influence on the subsequent history of Western philosophy. His works include the *Metaphysics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*.


**Descartes, Rene** (1596–1650). French philosopher, known as the “father of modern philosophy.” Sought to put philosophy and science upon new certain foundations. His best known work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, was published in 1641.


**Hegel, G. W. F.** (1770–1831). The most influential of the German Idealist philosophers, and the most systematic. His vast system attempted to encompass all human ideas in an evolving historical narrative leading to absolute spirit. Major works include *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

**Hume, David** (1711–1776). Scottish empiricist philosopher. A leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume is one of the most influential philosophers of the modern era. He appealed to moral sentiment in his ethical writings, which included Books II and III of the *Treatise on Human Nature* (1740) and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

**Kant, Immanuel** (1724–1804). German philosopher of the Enlightenment period. Perhaps the greatest, and certainly one of the most influential, philosophers of the modern era. His *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) demonstrated the limits of theoretical reason; his two major works on ethics, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) tried to put ethics on new rationalist foundations.

**Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm** (1646–1716). German philosopher. One of the Continental rationalists who made seminal contributions to mathematics and science as well as to philosophy. He discovered the infinitesimal calculus independently of Newton and made interesting contributions to logic. Leibniz developed a complex metaphysics based on a doctrine of monads and engaged in many of the religious as well as philosophical controversies of his day.

**Locke, John** (1632–1704). English empiricist philosopher. Locke’s empiricism (all ideas and knowledge come through experience) and Newton’s philosophy were two of the major influences on the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Locke’s theory of the social contract in the *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) had a profound impact on later Western political philosophy, influencing among other things, the American and French revolutions.

**Lyotard, Jean-Francois** (1935– ). French philosopher, author of *The Postmodern Condition* (1987), among other works, and one of the leading philosophical representatives of the contemporary movement known as postmodernism.

**Maclntyre, Alasdair** (1930– ). British philosopher who has taught for many years at various universities in the United States. MacIntyre is a leading figure in the modern revival of what is called “virtue ethics.” In his *After Virtue* (1981), he criticizes modern ethical theories and advocates a return to ancient styles of ethical thinking, particularly Aristotle’s, which emphasize the virtues.

**Mill, John Stuart** (1806–1873). English philosopher. The leading nineteenth-century defender of utilitarianism, the ethical philosophy first put forward by Bentham, which Mill developed in a distinctive fashion in *Utilitarianism* (1861). Mill’s *On Liberty* (1860) is the most influential modern defense of freedom of speech and other liberties.

**Montaigne, Michel de** (1533–1592). French essayist and philosopher who set forth a Renaissance version of Greek skepticism. Montaigne’s personally written essays emphasize uncertainty and the limitations of human knowledge and preach tolerance in the light of cultural and religious pluralism.

**Nietzsche, Friedrich** (1844–1900). German existentialist philosopher. He foresaw an intellectual and cultural crisis of Western civilization which he characterized in terms of the “death of God” and the advent of “nihilism.” Traditional religious and philosophical ways of thinking were on the wane and science, he believed, could not fill
the gap. Because of such views, Nietzsche is sometimes regarded as a precursor of postmodernism. He himself advocated a life-affirming view to ward off nihilism.

**Plato** (427–347 BC). Greek philosopher of the late Axial Period. Along with Aristotle, one of the two most influential philosophers of the Western tradition. He saw philosophy as the attempt to transcend the world of changing appearances and grasp eternal unchanging forms. His most well-known work, *The Republic*, describes an ideal state governed by philosopher kings (i.e., rulers who “love wisdom” more than they love power).

**Rawls, John** (1935–). American ethical, social, and political philosopher. Has taught for many years at Harvard University. Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is perhaps the most widely discussed work of political philosophy in the English-speaking world of the past half-century. It contributed to the revival of social contract theory in modern ethics as well as political philosophy.

**Rousseau, Jean-Jacques** (1712–1778). Swiss-born French philosopher, essayist, and novelist, who defended a unique social contract theory in his *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (1762). Rousseau believed that humans in their natural state were free and good, but were corrupted by civilization.

**Russell, Bertrand** (1872–1970). British philosopher, mathematician, and logician; one of the founders of analytic philosophy and of modern mathematical logic. Russell believed that philosophy should be based on the sciences. On the topic of values, he was a subjectivist, believing that value judgments express our wishes or desires. Russell devoted himself throughout his life to the causes of peace and was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace later in life.

**Sartre, Jean-Paul** (1905–1980). French philosopher, novelist, and essayist, the leading advocate of existentialism following World War II. The idea that “man makes himself” by his own free choices was central to his philosophy. His greatest work is *Being and Nothingness* (1943), though we also discuss his essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism” which nicely summarizes the main tenets of his existentialism.

**Smith, Adam** (1723–1790). Scottish economist and philosopher. His *Wealth of Nations* (1776) is the most important founding work of modern economics. An earlier work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which made him famous, traced the foundations of morals to the sentiment of sympathy—the ability to put ourselves imaginatively in the situation of another.

**Spinoza, Baruch** (1632–1677). Rationalist philosopher of Jewish origins whose family emigrated from Spain to Holland to escape persecution. Spinoza himself was exiled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam for heretical views about God. His major work, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (1677), painted a pantheistic picture in which all things were aspects of the one substance, God. Spinoza argued that our ideas of good and evil arise in emotions or feelings, such as joy and sadness, pleasure and pain. The vulgar therefore take these for the highest good, but mistakenly, for the highest good lies in rational understanding of the divine.
Bibliography


FIGURES

Figure 1 — Morrison’s Cube
(Lecture Two, Paragraph III.B.2)
The Quest for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience
Part II
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Robert Hilary Kane, Ph.D.
University Distinguished Teaching Professor of Philosophy
The University of Texas at Austin

Robert Kane received his B.A. from Holy Cross College in European literature and philosophy, also studied at the University of Vienna, Austria, and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale University on a Woodrow Wilson Foundation Fellowship and Sterling Fellowship. Since 1970, Professor Kane has taught in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, where he was named University Distinguished Teaching Professor in 1995. Previously, he taught at Fordham University, The University of Pennsylvania, and at Haverford College on a grant from the Alfred E. Sloan Foundation for integrating the teaching of humanities and sciences in a liberal arts curriculum.

Dr. Kane is the author of four books and over sixty articles and reviews in professional journals on such topics as the philosophy of mind and action, ethical theory and social ethics, the theory of value, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science. His books include *Free Will and Values* (State University of New York Press, 1985), *Through the Moral Maze* (M. E. Sharpe Publishers, 1994), and *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1996). His edited *Companion to Free Will* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. *The Significance of Free Will* received the Robert W. Hamilton Faculty Book Award for 1996 and has been the subject of symposia in major journals in Europe and the United States and a conference in the United States. Dr. Kane is one of the world’s leading defenders of an anti-determinist conception of free will and is internationally known for his efforts to reconcile such a notion with modern science.

Dr. Kane’s article, “The Modal Ontological Argument,” on St. Anselm’s proof for God, which appeared in the British journal *Mind*, was selected by *The Philosopher’s Annual* as one of the ten best articles in philosophy published in 1984. His other professional articles include “The Ends of Metaphysics” (*International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1993), “Dimensions of Value and the Aims of Social Inquiry” (*American Behavioral Scientist*, 1997), and multiple contributions to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.

Since coming to the University of Texas at Austin, Professor Kane has received fifteen major teaching awards, including the Friar Society Centennial Teaching Fellowship, the President’s Excellence Award for teaching in the University’s Honors Program, Plan II, the Liberal Arts Council Teaching Award, and the Delta Epsilon Sigma Award for teaching introductory freshman classes. In 1995, he was named an inaugural member of the University’s Academy of Distinguished Teachers.
# Table of Contents

**The Question for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience**

*Part II*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Biography</th>
<th>...........................................................................................</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirteen</td>
<td>Retrieving the Quest for Wisdom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Fourteen</td>
<td>Wisdom, Ancient and Modern</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Fifteen</td>
<td>Dilemmas of Might and Right</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Sixteen</td>
<td>Public and Private Morality (Part I)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Seventeen</td>
<td>Public and Private Morality (Part II)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eighteen</td>
<td>Plato on the State, the Soul, and Democracy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Nineteen</td>
<td>Democracy and Its Discontents</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty</td>
<td>The Parable of the Retreat</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-One</td>
<td>Searches in the Realm of Aspiration</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Two</td>
<td>Love and Glory, the Same Old Story</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Three</td>
<td>The Mosaic of Value</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Four</td>
<td>Religion and Meaning in a Pluralist Age</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>contained in Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>contained in Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>...........................................................................................</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Quest for Meaning: Values, Ethics, and the Modern Experience

Scope:
This lecture series has three goals. The first is to tell the story of how the modern era of Western civilization experienced a loss of moral innocence over the past several centuries, as ancient and medieval views of the world were overthrown, and to show how this process has led to current confusions and disagreements about values (Lectures One to Five). The second goal is to describe how major thinkers of the modern period (since the sixteenth century) attempted to respond to these intellectual challenges of modernity by formulating new theories of ethics and values (Lectures Six to Twelve). The third goal is to explore, in the light of this background, the prospects for renewing the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past after these vast intellectual challenges of the modern era (Lectures Thirteen to Twenty-Four).

Lectures One to Five discuss the original Axial Period in human history (from 800 to 300 BC), a period of spiritual awakening across the globe in which many of the major religious and philosophical traditions were born or revitalized (in China, India, Persia, Israel, and the origins of philosophy, science, and Western civilization in Greece). These introductory lectures describe how the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning that vivified this Axial Period was challenged by the rise of the new science and humanistic learning in the modern era of Western civilization (from the sixteenth century onward). As the modern era evolved, objective explanation of fact was taken over by the empirical sciences, which were supposed to be value-neutral, leaving questions about value and worth precariously dangling in the winds of intellectual change. If values were not matters of objective fact, they could appear to have their source in individual preference and therefore to be merely “subjective.” By the same token, notions of worth, virtue, and right action, being differently defined in different cultures, could appear to be “relative” rather than universal or absolute.

Lectures Six through Twelve describe how major thinkers of the modern era responded to the resulting challenges of subjectivism and relativism. In the attempt to find new foundations for objective value and worth, modern philosophers variously appealed to human nature and common human sentiments (Lectures Six and Seven), to human reason (Lectures Eight and Nine), to utility, or the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Lecture Nine), to a social contract in which persons with differing beliefs could all agree (Lectures Ten and Eleven). Each of these options has defenders today—and critics, who believe that the modern project of trying to rebuild ethics on the foundations of reason and science has failed (Lecture Twelve). Some of these contemporary critics believe we must return to ancient and medieval ways of understanding value and worth (such as virtue ethics, natural law, or religious revelation). Still others concede the failure of the modern project and embrace relativism, or suggest we must move beyond modernity to a “Brave New ‘postmodernist’ World” (Lecture Twelve).

Using the preceding lectures as background, in Part II (Lectures Thirteen through Twenty-Four), we explore the prospects for renewing the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in the modern age. First, drawing on what we have learned in preceding lectures about the conditions of modernity, we attempt to bring together the wisdom embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past that stretch back to the Axial Period—an attempted reconciliation of the wisdom of the ancients and the moderns (Lectures Thirteen to Fifteen). This exploration leads to a discussion of contentious moral and social issues of the day that are consequences of modern pluralism and lie at the heart of current disagreements about values (Lectures Sixteen to Nineteen). The contemporary issues considered include conflicts between public and private moralities; the degree to which morals should be enforced by law; censorship and freedom; teaching values in the schools; church/state issues and the role of religion in public life; the limits of liberty and rights of privacy; individualism versus the needs of community; the loss of shared values in modern societies; and the resulting discontent about politics and public discourse. Finally, in Lectures Twenty to Twenty-Four, we will address the challenge of postmodernists and other modern skeptics who argue that it is no longer possible to rise above historically and culturally limited points of view to make claims that are true for all persons and all times—as the philosophical and religious traditions of the past aspired to do. Lectures Twenty to Twenty-Four tackle this challenge, asking how it is possible to continue to talk in the modern age about objective value and worth and about the objective truth of philosophical and religious claims concerning the meaning of life.
Lecture Thirteen

Retrieving the Quest for Wisdom

Scope: In this lecture, we begin the third task of the lecture series: to explore how, if at all, the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in life, embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past, can be retrieved, given the intellectual challenges of the modern era. This will require reconsidering some of the wisdom of the ancients, which goes back to the original Axial Period, without neglecting the insights of the moderns discussed in preceding lectures; it will also require thinking about old issues in new ways. The ultimate goal is to find what convergences may exist between ancient and modern wisdom and then to apply these convergences to a host of contemporary moral problems.

To begin this task in the present lecture, we shall take the idea of a “quest” for wisdom and meaning seriously. The title of this series is “The Quest for Meaning” and at this point in the series, I want to refocus attention on the notion of quest in that title. The notion of a quest or search for meaning, if properly understood, can throw light on the problems of pluralism, uncertainty, and relativism that have engaged us since Lecture One. It is the task of the present lecture to show that this is the case. By starting with a certain attitude of openness that represents a quest for “objective” value and significance (which transcend our limited and finite perspectives), we are led to some universal principles combining ancient and modern wisdom.

Outline

I. We now begin the third task of this lecture series: to ask how, if at all, the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning can be retrieved, given the intellectual changes of the modern era.
   A. This will require making use of the wisdom embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past, some of which go back to the original Axial Period.
   B. It will also require making use of the best ideas of the modern thinkers and the modern period embodied in previous lectures.
   C. Finally, the task will require new perspectives on both the ancients and the moderns, which means being willing to think about old questions in new ways.

II. To do this, we are going to take seriously the idea of a “quest” for wisdom and meaning.
   A. Joseph Campbell, the noted expert on mythology, has reminded us that the idea of a “search” or “quest” for spiritual and worldly wisdom is a central theme of the great myths of human history.
   B. The idea of such a search or quest will be an integral part of these lectures as well.
      1. Recall the title of this series “The Quest for Meaning.” I now want to attend to the idea of quest in that title.
      2. We are to think of ourselves as engaged in a common quest—not necessarily possessing the truth, but searching for it.
      3. Such an idea—if we can learn to understand it properly—provides clues for seeing our way through the moral confusions and controversies of the age.

III. To illustrate, let us return to the themes of the opening lectures, namely, pluralism and uncertainty.
   A. Confronting other ways of life, like the woman on Perelandra, the moral innocence of believing one’s own view is the only right one is threatened.
      1. One natural reaction to this realization is common to people in modern pluralist societies.
      2. They think to themselves that since it seems impossible to show theirs or any view is right for everyone, the only proper attitude to take is one of “openness” or “tolerance” to other points of view.
      3. Judgments about good and evil, right or wrong, they reason, are personal matters and should not be imposed on others against their will.
   B. As natural as such an attitude of openness is, it is often disparaged by theorists and social critics.
2. Bloom thinks such openness and tolerance are the scourges of our times because they lead to vulgar relativism, the belief that no view is any better than any other.

3. Openness and tolerance lead young people, and society in general, he thinks, to an indifference to what is really true or right.

IV. But openness need not have the dire consequences Bloom and other critics suppose. In fact, properly conceived, it does not lead to relativism or indifference, but to something quite different.

A. The guiding idea of a quest suggests why this is so.
1. Let us view “openness” to other points of view about values, not as an invitation to indifference or relativism, but as a way of expanding our minds beyond our own limited perspectives.
2. The goal would be to find out what is true from every perspective (objectively or universally true).
3. Openness is thereby viewed as a way of questing or searching for the objective truth about values, not a denial of that truth.
4. Moreover, since the search is for the objective truth about values, it has the features of the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning described in Lecture Two on Aristotle.
5. That ancient quest had two convergent goals—it was a search for what is objectively true and objectively valuable.

B. There are similarities in this way of thinking to the way “openness” and “objectivity” function in the natural sciences where they function well—keeping one’s mind open and trying to be objective.
1. In science, openness and objectivity require consideration of theories opposed to one’s own and restricting undue bias in favor of one’s own.
2. This is done in the interests of limiting narrowness of vision and searching for the objective truth about nature.

C. The suggestion is that we think of openness in the search for objective values in a similar way—as a way of limiting narrowness of vision and finding the objective truth about value.
1. This suggestion borrows from some ancient wisdom of the original Axial Period to go along with the clues from modern science.
2. Great sages of the Axial Period, like Confucius and the Hindu authors of the Bhagavad-Gita, remind us that systems of value are not abstract theories to be tested in a laboratory, like scientific theories.
3. They are ways of life that can only be tested by being lived.
4. Openness to systems of value other than one’s own (in the interests of finding out what is true from every point of view, not just from one’s own), would therefore mean respecting other ways of life.
5. It would mean allowing them to be lived or experimented with or tested in a way appropriate for values, in action or practice.

D. But would that imply respecting every way of life, including evil ways? If so, openness would seem to lead to relativism, as critics contend it would.
1. The answer is that it does not require respecting every way of life, because there are situations in life, many of them, in which it is impossible to be open to, or to respect, every way of life.
2. For example, if you see an assault in an alley and can do something to help, you cannot respect the purposes and desires of both parties.
3. In such situations, you cannot be open to, or respect, every point of view, no matter what you do. You must choose between the victim and the assailant.
4. When such situations occur, what we may call the “moral sphere” has broken down—the sphere in which every way of life can be respected. (Refer to FIGURE 1 in the appendix)

V. When this happens, some ways of life must be treated as less worthy than others. But which ones?

A. The clue resides once again in the idea of a quest or search for the truth.
1. The original ideal of respect for all, or openness, was not the final truth, but was a guide in the search for that truth.
2. When the moral sphere breaks down, we cannot adhere to that ideal guide to the letter.
3. But we can continue to adhere to it in spirit by trying to restore and preserve conditions in which the ideal respect for all can be followed once again.
4. That is, we can restore the sphere by stopping those (like the assailant) who have broken it and made it impossible for others to follow the ideal.
B. In such manner, openness to all ways of life (in the interests of limiting narrowness of vision), when put to the test in practice, does not lead to relativism or indifference.
   1. It leads rather to the view that some ways of life are less worthy of respect than others.
   2. Persons, like the assailant, who place themselves outside the moral sphere by their actions, make their ways of life less worthy of respect by making it impossible for others to respect them and others too (refer to diagram in Appendix for a visualization of this concept).

VI. This reasoning represents a retrieval of the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning described in Lecture Two, under modern conditions of pluralism and uncertainty.

A. In such a world, there are two ways of searching or questing for absolute or non-relative values (those that hold for all persons and from all points of view).
   1. One way—the way people have practiced for centuries—was to position yourself in one view (your own) and argue it was right and every other view, wrong.
   2. This traditional way founders in modernity over pluralism and uncertainty, as we have seen.

B. One could give up here or continue the quest by trying to find some alternative way suitable to modern conditions.
   1. Openness suggests itself as such an alternative because it takes seriously the conditions of pluralism and uncertainty.
   2. If you are uncertain which of the many views is true, open your mind initially to all in order to find out what is true from every point of view, not just your own.
   3. You thereby find that some are less worthy and some more worthy.

C. In this way, you also lift from yourself the burden of proving your view absolutely right and every other, wrong.
   1. The burden of proof is shifted instead equally to everyone to prove themselves right or wrong by their actions.
   2. What of your own view? It is to be treated no differently. If you break the moral sphere, you make your view less worthy of respect by others.
   3. But the proof, whether for your view or any other, is carried out not by arguing in the abstract that one view is better.
   4. It is carried out by how you live and act, just as one would expect for a theory of values or ethics.

D. This lecture has suggested that the ancient idea of a “quest” or “search” for wisdom and meaning of the original Axial Period may lead to substantial insights about values and ethics when combined with modern themes concerning science, pluralism, and uncertainty.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you see any connections between the arguments of this lecture for universal values or principles of conduct and the arguments of any of the modern thinkers we have considered in previous lectures—Hume, Kant, the utilitarians, Rawls and other social contract theorists?
2. One might grant that it is not possible to treat every person or group with respect, or to be open or tolerant to every way of life in every situation in life. But is it always so clear who is the guilty party and hence who is less worthy of respect when such situations occur?
Lecture Fourteen
Wisdom, Ancient and Modern

Scope: This lecture considers the Golden Rule and other traditional moral commandments of the religious and wisdom traditions of East and West in the light of the retrieval of the ancient quest for wisdom discussed in the previous lecture. In addition, the lecture considers modern notions of human rights and ethical theories discussed in previous lectures, such as Kant’s Categorical Imperative, in the light of the suggested retrieval. The general theme is once again the possible convergence of ancient and modern wisdom.

We first consider traditional moral commandments, such as the Biblical commandments of the Mosaic law against killing, lying, stealing, etc., which are widely shared in different religions; we also consider the vexing question of exceptions to these and other moral rules. The existence of exceptions to moral rules is another source of confusion about values in the modern world, along with relativism. The thought is that if rules or commandments have exceptions, they cannot be absolute. We discuss this issue. The lecture then considers various formulations of the Golden Rule in different religious traditions, many of which go back to the original Axial Period. Two versions of the Golden Rule are distinguished and their merits considered. Finally, we consider the modern notion of human rights and take another look at Kant’s Categorical Imperative in light of the earlier discussion of exceptions.

Outline

I. This lecture considers how the retrieval of the ancient quest for wisdom discussed in the previous lecture can throw light on the ethical wisdom of both the ancients and the moderns.

A. A preliminary objection must be considered before going on.
1. Must one wait until people break the moral sphere and show themselves less worthy before intervening? This would lead to impractical and sometimes horrible consequences.
2. The answer to the question is no, since the goal of overcoming narrowness of vision requires striving to maintain the ideal of respect for all to the degree possible under adverse circumstances.
3. This requires restoring the sphere when it has broken down, but also preserving it to the degree possible from future breakdown.
4. We thus punish criminals not only to stop them here and now (restore the sphere), but to deter them and others from similar acts (to preserve the sphere in the future).
5. The case of Adolph Hitler’s Mein Kampf serves to illustrate preemptive action in warfare and leads us to consider the question of pacifism (which we will do in more detail in Lecture Fifteen).
6. We can analyze pacifism in the spirit of the quest for moral truth. Sometimes force is necessary to preserve the moral sphere.

B. With this background, the lecture turns to traditional moral commandments, like those of the Mosaic law (thou shalt not kill, lie, steal, etc.), and to the vexing question of exceptions to moral rules.
1. The existence of exceptions is recognized even in most of the religious traditions; for example, self-defense and just wars are commonly recognized exceptions to harming and killing.
2. But the existence of exceptions is another source of confusion about ethics and values.
3. The thought is that if rules or commandments have exceptions, they cannot be universal or absolute. They cannot hold for all persons at all times and places.
4. This seems to have been an important motivation for Kant’s excluding exceptions.

C. We see in this way how the existence of exceptions to moral rules is related to relativism and this suggests how they might be dealt with.
1. The exceptions arise at just those points where all views cannot be treated as equally worthy no matter what we do—where the moral sphere breaks down.
2. Violence and force are not usually allowed inside the moral sphere, but are needed to restore it when it breaks down.

D. The traditional commandment “thou shall not lie” is considered in this connection.
1. Consider the following famous example: The Gestapo come to a farm in Nazi Germany and ask whether the residents are hiding a Jewish family.
2. The farm family cannot respect the purposes and desires of both parties (Gestapo and Jewish family) no matter what they do.
3. If the ones who created this impossible situation (the Gestapo) are to be treated as less worthy, then the farm family should lie.
4. The same principle that tells one lying is bad in most instances tells one it is the right thing to do in some circumstances.

II. From ancient moral commandments, we turn to modern doctrines of human rights.
   A. Openness in the search or quest for what is true from every point of view leads to ancient moral commandments and commonly recognized exceptions.
   B. But it also leads to modern doctrines of human rights, such as the Jeffersonian rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
      1. To respect others’ ways of life (as openness initially requires) is to respect their right to live and pursue happiness as they freely choose.
      2. But this respect extends only to the point where the moral sphere breaks down.
      3. This accords with the common idea that rights are limited by the equal rights of others.
      4. This is therefore another way of arriving at Rawls’ first principle of justice; i.e., everyone is to be accorded the maximum liberty consistent with the liberty of others.
      5. This also puts a new twist on John Stuart Mills’ argument on behalf of freedom of speech, namely, by being open to all points of view and operating in that spirit of openness, we see that the ethical truth emerges that some ways of life are more worthy of respect and some are less worthy of respect than others.

III. We turn to another piece of ancient wisdom, the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”).
   A. The Golden Rule has been a central principle of most of the major religious traditions of mankind.
      1. As evidence, consider formulations of it in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Zorastrianism.
      2. Many of these formulations go back to the original Axial Period.
      3. Many of them also refer to this rule as “the sum of duty” (the Mahabharata of Hinduism), or “the law and the prophets” (Christ’s words in the gospel of Matthew), or say it is “the entire law: the rest is commentary” (Talmud of Judaism).
   B. We must evaluate two versions of the Golden Rule that have existed and competed through history, contributing to confusions about it.
      1. A narrower version counsels doing unto others as if they shared, or should share, the same values as you.
      2. A wider version says that one should allow others to pursue their values, even if their values are different than one’s own.
      3. A final reference to the Golden Rule is made through a story of the Sioux Indian chief Sitting Bull, best known for his encounter with General Custer at Little Big Horn.

IV. We consider finally Kant’s Categorical Imperative.
   A. A comparison is made between the ideal of openness or respect for all and the second formulation of Kant’s imperative, the Principle of Humanity as an End.
      1. The ideal of openness or respect for all is first translated into Kant’s language and designated the “Ends Principle”: “Treat all persons, including yourself, in every situation, as ends in themselves and never as mere means to the ends of others.”
      2. If treating others as ends in themselves is allowing them to pursue their ends or purposes as they chose, then this Ends Principle is similar to the second formulation of Kant’s imperative.
   B. But there are crucial differences between the two principles, starting with their different derivations.
      1. Kant’s Imperative in both its formulations allows no exceptions, whereas the principle of respect for all clearly does have exceptions.
2. This difference is connected with another difference that takes us back to the idea of “quest.”
3. The ideal of openness or respect for all is an initial step in the search or quest for objective value, not the final one. You cannot ultimately be open to all ways of life; they must be tried or proven in life, in practice.
4. Looking at the Ends Principle as a way of questing for the truth, rather than as a rationally proven principle, is what allows the exceptions to emerge.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Which of the two versions of the Golden Rule considered—the narrower or wider version—do you think is the correct interpretation of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”? Which interpretation do you think was meant in the various religious traditions considered in this lecture in which the rule was stated?
2. Were the traditional commandments discussed in the lecture (on killing, lying, stealing, etc.) meant to have exceptions in their original Biblical formulations? Or were they meant to be absolute prohibitions? Is there a conflict between having exceptions and being absolute prohibitions?
Lecture Fifteen
Dilemmas of Might and Right

Scope: This lecture considers ethical dilemmas of force and non-violence, guilt and innocence, war and peace, that have exercised humans since recorded history. We begin with the two extreme positions of pacifism on the one hand, which rejects violence, and “might makes right,” or the other, which holds that there is no right or wrong without the force of law. Debates about these two opposed positions—and about violence and just warfare generally—are traced back to the original Axial Period, in China, in India, and in Western civilization.

We then consider the dilemmas of pacifism in the modern world. It has inspired important non-violence movements in the twentieth century like those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, which are discussed. But pacifism also gives rise to moral dilemmas where violence seems inevitable. This leads to a discussion of just wars and the modern Hague and Geneva Conventions on warfare, whose ethical significance is considered in the light of examples, including Vietnam and the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima. A possible role for the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number is considered in connection with these examples. Finally, we are led to general ethical questions of guilt and innocence in everyday life when conflicts of interest break out. This leads in turn to a discussion of life-plans, heroism, lifeboat situations, and other ethical dilemmas.

Outline

I. Dilemmas of violence and non-violence, war and peace, have exercised humans since recorded history.

A. Two extreme positions were discussed in the original Axial Period.
   1. One was pacifism, the view that violence is always wrong as a solution to human conflict.
   2. At the opposite extreme was the doctrine that “might makes right”: right and wrong are determined by those who have the power to enforce laws.
   3. We have seen the second view resurface in the modern period in Hobbes’ theory of the state of nature. The social contract “makes right,” for Hobbes, only when backed up by the might of an absolute sovereign.

B. Both these views—pacifism and “might makes right”—were discussed during the Axial Period. We consider China first.
   1. Pacifist tendencies were evident in China during the Axial Period in some of the Mohists, followers of Mo-Tze (479–438 BC), who preached a form of universal love (though Mohist views were not always strictly pacifist).
   2. Pacifist tendencies were also evident in Taoism, reputedly founded by Lao-Tzu (sixth century, BC), who called for a return to nature without the corruptions of civilization.
   3. Opposed to these schools were “realist” thinkers who argued that force was necessary in human affairs and came close to advocating “might makes right.”
   4. Confucius (sixth century BC) reacted against both extremes. He lived at a time of warring kingdoms in China and tried to find a “middle way” between realists and pacifists.

C. Indian civilization of the Axial Period also wrestled with questions of violence and non-violence, war and peace.
   1. Both Buddhism and Jainism, two religious doctrines born in the Axial Period in India, preached pacifist views.
   2. The Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism begins with a discourse between King Arjuna and the god-incarnate Krishna on whether war against kinsmen can be justified and under what circumstances.
   3. In the twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi borrowed from his Jain roots, as well as from Hinduism and Buddhism, in founding his movement of non-violence (which he tellingly called Satyagraha (“the force of truth”).

D. Western civilization also began wrestling with these issues in the Axial Period.
1. The “might makes right” doctrine was held by some of the Sophists in the fifth and fourth centuries BC in Greece and Asia Minor.
2. It was clearly stated and opposed by Plato (427–347 BC) in his *Republic*.
3. Christ’s injunction to “turn the other cheek” and the Christian “Sermon on the Mount” are often regarded as expressing pacifist views.
4. Yet subsequent Christian thinkers, notably in the medieval period, evolved sophisticated “just war” theories that still have pertinence today.
5. Pacifist views also arose in the modern period in the Socinians (an unorthodox Christian movement of Italy and Poland in the sixteenth century) and later among the Quakers, or Society of Friends.

II. Pacifism is a noble view, but one that can also breed moral dilemmas.

A. It inspired non-violence movements of the twentieth century, such as Gandhi’s and Martin Luther King’s.
   1. King’s non-violent civil rights movement in the United States was inspired in part by Gandhi; Gandhi’s was partly inspired by an American thinker, Henry David Thoreau.
   2. The non-violence movements of Gandhi and King are related to two of the most important developments of the twentieth century, namely, the end of (Western) colonialism and the civil rights movements in the United States and elsewhere.

B. But pacifism is also the source of moral dilemmas.
   1. Since it seems to be correct within the “ideal” (moral) sphere, one might infer that it is the ideal view always to be followed.
   2. The problem is that the world is not always ideal; there are circumstances in which one cannot avoid violence no matter what one does.

III. But if pacifism has limits, does it follow, when these limits are breached, that “might makes right”?

A. If violence or war ever become necessary, are there moral constraints on “just warfare,” or does anything go? There are two possible constraints.
   1. Force is to be used against the guilty, not the innocent.
   2. Use minimum force to restore peace.
   3. There is an ethical or moral basis to such constraints, derived from longstanding traditions of the “just war.”

B. The Hague and Geneva Conventions for “just warfare” are important to discuss in this regard.
   1. They were formulated after World War I, the bloodiest war up to its time in human history; and they have had an important impact on twentieth-century history since.
   2. It is suggested that the two constraints about “getting the guilty” and “using minimal force” are functioning behind these modern conventions on warfare.

C. We can apply these discussions to two difficult examples:
   1. The Vietnam conflict and its moral dilemmas.
   2. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the dropping of the atom bomb.

D. In the atom bomb example, we consider the role played by the utilitarian principle of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”
   1. Certain limitations of the utilitarian principle were discussed in Lecture Nine.
   2. But it does not follow that it has no role to play in resolving ethical dilemmas such as the A-bomb decision.

IV. The issues of warfare lead to general questions about guilt and innocence in everyday life. When the sphere of peace—or what we have been calling the moral sphere—breaks down in conflicts, is it always easy to identify the guilty party?

A. The answer is obviously no, as we have seen in cases of warfare. (refer to FIGURE 2 in the appendix).
   1. But it is often difficult to identify the guilty party in moral dilemmas of everyday life as well.
   2. And it is crucial to do so, if the goal is to “get the guilty” and not the innocent when conflicts arise.

B. We consider this general problem of guilt and innocence in the light of everyday examples of conflicts of interest.
   1. To resolve such conflicts, one needs to bring in the notion of a *life-plan* or a *plan of action*.
2. Plans of action embody intentions and purposes—from the simplest of intentions or plans (for example, to go to the store) to the most comprehensive plans, which are ways or forms of life.

3. Some plans of action are “moral-sphere breaking” in the sense that they cannot be carried out without using someone else as a means. Such plans provide clues about guilt and innocence.

V. But will there always be a guilty party when conflicts of interest break out?

A. The answer is not always. Two nations may claim the same piece of land, one man may want to practice the trumpet while his neighbor wants to sleep, a husband would like to play golf while his wife wants him to mow the lawn.

1. “The ends of humans are many, and often they conflict” (Isaiah Berlin). Purposes and plans of action of both parties cannot be realized in these cases.

2. But no one is yet guilty, if no one has thus far decided to force his will on the other parties.

B. What is ethically required in such cases of conflict of interest?

1. Many would say a negotiated settlement that respects both parties.

2. This is the “social contract” solution (the nations agree to split the disputed land, the man plays his trumpet only when the neighbor is not sleeping).

3. But this solution is not always possible: the disputed object cannot always be split, emotions may run too high, people do not bargain in good faith, and so on.

4. The famous Biblical story of King Solomon and the two women who claimed the same baby is an illustration of this central moral dilemma.

C. In such cases, we often resort to “second-best strategies” (arbitrators like King Solomon, judges, juries, legislatures, drawing by lot, majority vote, and so on).

1. We consider why and how such strategies are ethically justified, if they can be justified at all, and why they are “second best.”

2. The issues are illustrated by considering majority vote.

D. Finally, to illustrate second-best strategies, we consider so-called “lifeboat scenarios” familiar to ethicists.

1. Examples are considered of ten people on a lifeboat with room for only eight, or five people in a falling aircraft with only four parachutes.

2. The parties may end up merely fighting and force will prevail. But the question is: what would be the ethically favored solution?

3. In the light of lifeboat examples, we discuss such topics as heroism, drawing lots, and other possible resolutions.

VI. The lecture concludes by discussing various “levels” of ethical significance that fall between the extremes of pacifism and “might makes right.”

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, chapters 1 and 4–8.

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you agree that there are some situations in life in which pacifism is the favored option, and perhaps other extreme cases, where force or might may be the only option, because all other ethical options have run out? Or is this too much of a “situational” approach: if one of these views is right should it not always and everywhere be right?

2. It was suggested that non-violence movements, such as those of Gandhi and King, have ethical significance far beyond the practical results that the movements may or may not realize. Why is this so, or is it so?
Lecture Sixteen
Public and Private Morality (Part I)

Scope: In this lecture and the next, we discuss contentious moral and social issues of the day that are the inevitable result of living in pluralist societies, where people have different values and views about how to live. The most important consequence of living in such societies is that one must come to grips with a fundamental distinction between public and private morality. One’s private (or particular) morality is what one thinks is the right way to live for oneself or anyone. Public morality, by contrast, is what we owe others, even if they disagree with our private morality. This distinction is itself controversial, but it seems to be required in order to live in free societies where people can choose their own conceptions of the good.

In this lecture, we discuss the public/private morality distinction and go on to consider how public morality is to be understood. The discussion leads to questions about shared values and eventually to certain controversial principles which social ethicists and legal philosophers refer to as “liberty-limiting principles”—principles that purport to define the justifiable limits which can be imposed on individual thought and behavior by society, law, or government. We consider the merits of John Stuart Mill’s “Harm Principle” and other liberty-limiting principles of this sort in the light of contemporary examples of public harm, offensive behavior, censorship and pornography, free speech, and other topics relating to law and morals that are frequent subjects of debate in modern free societies.

Outline

I. In this lecture and the next, we discuss contentious moral and social issues of the day that are the inevitable result of living in pluralist societies.
   A. Living in such societies means confronting a basic distinction between public and private (or particular) moralities.
      1. Your private (or particular) morality is what you think is the right way to live for yourself, and perhaps also for everyone.
      2. Public morality is what you owe others, even if they disagree with your private morality.
   B. Such a distinction seems to be required by the pluralism of modern societies in which people have differing conceptions of the good.
      1. Yet the distinction is controversial and many believe it is a dangerous and pernicious error.
      2. If you do believe your particular morality, religion, or way of life is the right way to live for yourself or anyone, why not try to make it the public morality?
      3. Is it not difficult, and perhaps even immoral, to publicly tolerate behavior you privately find deeply wrong or offensive, as many regard pornography, homosexuality, or abortion, and others?
   C. But as natural as such a reaction may be, there are problems about whose private or particular morality would become the public one and be imposed on everyone.
      1. Where the distinction between public and private moralities entirely collapses, we have totalitarian societies.
      2. These characteristically make one group’s morality the public one, seeking total control over actions, minds, and consciences of citizens.
      3. Twentieth-century fears of totalitarianism are powerfully illustrated in great works, such as Huxley’s Brave New World, Orwell’s 1984, Koestler’s Darkness at Noon, and Hannah Arendt’s The Essence of Totalitarianism.
   D. It would appear that a distinction between public and private moralities is the price we pay for living in free societies.
      1. At a deeper level, we could say it is the price we pay for living under the conditions of modernity—of pluralism and uncertainty.
      2. It is a consequence of the loss of moral innocence experienced by the woman on Perelandra, and thus of living in a more morally complex world.
   E. Because of these associations, one might expect to find considerable resistance to the public/private morality distinction.
1. One indeed finds such resistance globally where traditional ways of life clash with modernization and secularization.

2. Examples are considered: fundamentalism in Islamic countries, clashes between orthodox and secular Jews in Israel, legalizing divorce and abortion in Catholic countries, fundamentalism in the United States, and so on.

3. The “culture wars” have become international and everywhere they have to do with the encroachment of pluralism and other conditions of modernity on traditional ways of life.

II. But if some distinction between public and particular moralities is required by pluralist societies where people are free to choose their own conceptions of the good, how is public morality to be defined?

A. What do we “owe others if they disagree with our private or particular morality”? Various possibilities are considered.

1. One is the Kantian idea that we owe them respect for their ways of life—up to the point that they make it impossible to respect them and others too.

2. Another possibility is the Jeffersonian rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which seem to constitute our public or shared morality in the United States (as spelled out in our Bill of Rights).

B. We must next investigate whether these principles are good enough or whether they have sufficient content to constitute a public morality.

1. The issue is related to, but not exactly the same as, Rawls’ search for an “overlapping consensus.”

2. We consider it in the light of social contract theories previously discussed.

III. Other candidates potentially defining public morality have been considered in recent decades by social ethicists and legal philosophers under the heading of “Liberty-Limiting Principles.”

A. The most well-known of such principles was proposed by John Stuart Mill in his On Liberty and is often referred to as Mill’s “Harm Principle”: the only legitimate reason society or government can have for limiting the liberty of individuals is to prevent them from doing “harm to others.”

1. Mill argued that such a principle followed from the principle of utility (or the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number).

2. From his utilitarian perspective, public morality is concerned mainly with the prevention of harm. But numerous questions arise in social ethics and legal philosophy about what constitutes “harm.”

3. Particularly troubling is the distinction between “genuine harm” and “mere offense.”

4. Many people are offended by obscenity, pornography, public nudity, and other forms of behavior they privately regard as wrong or indecent.

5. Are these offended persons being “harmed” by the presence of such things in their community, even if they do not directly see or partake of them?

B. Most social theorists, Mill included, have held that liberty cannot be limited merely on such grounds of offense.

1. But questions arise about whether offense (“shocked sensibilities at the violation of one’s deeply held beliefs”) can ever be grounds for limiting liberty.

2. Concrete examples are considered to illustrate different aspects of this problem: obscenity, pornography, nudity, offensive speech.

C. A second possible “liberty-limiting principle” is considered in the light of these examples, often called the “Offense Principle.”

1. The Offense Principle would allow the liberty of individuals to be limited by law if it gives “offense to others,” but only under certain conditions.

2. In the light of concrete examples, we discuss what some of the restricting conditions might be. One example is if the attitude from which the “offense” arises is itself outside the sphere of morality (e.g., religious or racial prejudice).

3. We also consider whether such a principle needs to be added to the Harm Principle to adequately define public morality.
IV. The lecture concludes by considering the views of conservative legal theorists, such as British jurist Sir Patrick Devlin, who argue that stronger principles than Harm and Offense are needed to define public morality.

A. Devlin argues for a “Legal Moralism Principle,” which would allow restrictions of behavior that violate community moral standards as determined by the average “person in the jury box.”

B. In making his argument, Devlin (a British judge) had in mind restrictions of obscene and pornographic material in communities and anti-sodomy laws then being discussed in Britain.

C. Objections of other legal theorists to such a principle are considered, including the question of determining “community standards.”

Essential Reading:
Feinberg, Social Philosophy, chapter 2.

Supplementary Reading:
Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, Parts 1–3.
Feinberg, Social Philosophy, chapter 1.

Questions to Consider:
1. In American public discourse, one often hears politicians or other public figures say they are “personally” opposed to abortion (on religious or other grounds), but oppose a Constitutional amendment or other laws that would make it illegal. Is this a legitimate expression of the “public/private” morality distinction? Is it a coherent position, or mere hypocrisy, as its critics say?

2. John Stuart Mill argues that the only reason justifying societal or government interference in the private lives of individuals in a free society is to prevent their doing harm to others. Do you agree, or are there other justifying reasons for such interference?
Lecture 17
Public and Private Morality (Part II)

Scope: In this lecture we continue the discussion of principles needed to define an adequate public morality in modern free and pluralist societies. Devlin’s “legal moralism” principle (considered at the end of the previous lecture) presents difficulties, but even most of Devlin’s critics agree with his contention that “society is held together by invisible bonds of common thought” which must include shared ethical beliefs of some kinds. We consider the pros and cons of an alternative “public morality principle” that might serve the purpose of providing such shared beliefs. This leads to a discussion of the teaching of values and moral education in the schools. We address current debates about this topic and current methods of teaching values, such as values clarification and virtues-education.

The lecture then turns to issues of paternalism, liberty, and privacy in public morality, discussing the limits of government interference in the private lives of individuals. A series of examples is considered to test intuitions on these questions, such as regulation of drugs, seat belt laws, free exercise of religious practices, and physician-assisted suicide. The lecture concludes by discussing whether some issues may lie beyond the bounds of resolution by even an expanded public morality in modern pluralist societies. Abortion is considered as a possible example.

Outline

I. In this lecture we continue the discussion of whether principles beyond Harm and Offense are needed to define an adequate public morality.
   A. Devlin’s Legal Moralism Principle presents difficulties about determining “community standards,” but even his critics agree with one of his underlying claims.
      1. Devlin says that “society is held together by invisible bonds of common thought” which must include shared ethical beliefs.
      2. If Legal Moralism is too strong a principle for this purpose, perhaps other principles with the same goal are possible.
   B. An example might be a “Public Morality Principle” which says that “society has a legitimate interest in protecting and encouraging attitudes, practices, institutions, and social conditions that tend to sustain a sphere in which persons can respect and be respected by one another.”
      1. Such a principle goes beyond the Harm and Offense principles without sharing problems of Devlin’s legal moralism.
      2. It does so by recognizing certain “communitarian” themes discussed in Lecture Eleven.
      3. For example, it recognizes society’s vested interest in sustaining and strengthening institutions, such as families, extended families, neighborhoods, churches, and schools, which are involved in the moral education of the young.
      4. We consider this concern in the light of views expressed by Alexis DeTocqueville and James Madison concerning what might be called the “moral ecology” of society.

II. This raises the troubling question of moral education in the schools in pluralist societies, where there are differing private moralities and conceptions of the good.
   A. This is our contemporary version of the problem of “moral education” that concerned Mencius and Hume (Lecture Seven).
   B. A standard method used in our public schools in recent decades is called “values clarification.”
      1. Through group discussion, in which the teacher remains non-judgmental, young people discuss their differing values in order to come to a better understanding of their own values and to respect the values of others.
      2. Advocates of values clarification say it is the only way public schools in a pluralist society can go about teaching values.
      3. Critics, by contrast, say it leads to the belief that no view is any better than any other, so long as it “feels” good to the one who accepts it—and thus it breeds relativism and subjectivism.
C. We discuss the pros and cons of this method of values clarification.
    1. It seems to rely on the assumption that the proper attitude of society or government (in the person of the public school “teacher”) is one of “neutrality” to different conceptions of the good.
    2. Is such neutrality possible? We consider the much debated neutrality principle (“society and government must remain neutral toward differing conceptions of the good”) and whether it is a consequence of pluralism.

D. A second method of teaching values in schools is the “cognitive method,” inspired by the developmental psychologist Laurence Kohlberg.
    1. This method focuses on moral reasoning capacities by presenting moral dilemmas to students and asking how they would resolve them.
    2. Critics argue that since the dilemmas offered frequently do not have clear-cut “right” answers, and teachers are not supposed to impose their views, the cognitive method also leads to relativism and subjectivism.

E. An alternative to values clarification which has become recently popular in the wake of the revival of “virtue ethics” (Lecture Twelve), is the teaching of basic virtues in the schools, starting in the younger grades.
    1. The four virtues most commonly taught are: honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility.
    2. We consider the pros and cons of these virtues and this approach in the light of the Public Morality Principle; i.e., how do we live together even if we have different views about how to live?

III. Another controversial “liberty-limiting” principle of public morality that is debated by social ethicists and legal theorists is the so-called “Paternalism Principle.”

A. To what degree can the liberty of individuals in a free society be limited by law or government to prevent persons from doing harm to themselves?
    1. Here the question of government interference in individual lives is especially acute, and issues of the rights of privacy come to the fore.
    2. Some theorists, like Mill, would say that paternalistic legislation is never, or almost never, justified except for children (for example, restrictions on underage drinking or of advertising).
    3. But paternalism is also sometimes used as justification for controversial laws restricting liberty to adults: gambling, drug legislation, prostitution, anti-sodomy laws, mandating motorcycle helmets or seat belts, and so on.

B. We can profitably discuss the pros and cons of paternalistic legislation by considering a number of examples.
    1. One interesting case concerns laws against dueling, which at one time in our history was legal. What lessons do such laws teach us about paternalism in general? Is informing people of danger and allowing them to decide for themselves enough to prevent harm?
    2. Sometimes paternalistic legislation also involves issues of harm to others. Consider the cases of motorcycle helmets and seat belt laws.
    3. Cases of government regulation of drugs, food, and other substances raise additional questions, for example, about the role of information in paternalistic legislation.
    4. Finally, we say something about the currently controversial topic of physician-assisted suicide, which contains many lessons about the relation of public to private morality.

IV. The lecture concludes by noting that even with an expanded list of principles of “public morality” beyond Harm and Offense, there are certain issues that seem to go beyond the possibility of resolution by public morality.

A. Inevitably, such issues are the most contentious and difficult to deal with in modern pluralist societies.

B. The issue of abortion is discussed as an example.

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Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you think the “public morality principle” discussed in this lecture is sufficient to provide the “shared ethical bonds” that communitarians think are necessary to hold societies together? Or, are stronger principles required? Or, do you think to the contrary that communitarians, and legal moralists like Devlin, overemphasize the need for common ethical bonds for the maintenance of society?
2. How far should the rights of privacy and the limits of government regulation extend? Do you think paternalistic legislation is ever justified for adults in a free society? If not, why not? If it is sometimes justified, then under what conditions?
Lecture Eighteen
Plato on the State, the Soul, and Democracy

Scope: The theme of this lecture is that politics, as ancient thinkers realized, cannot be isolated from ethics, from the “search” or “quest” for the good. Nor can politics be isolated from the quest for wisdom and meaning in life. This is especially true of modern democracy and democratic politics. Democracy is the favored political form of a new Axial Period. Nations of the world are lurching toward it warily from different directions, left and right. There is a reason for this attraction. Democratic politics is part of the larger struggle of the modern world to cope with the lost moral innocence of pluralism and uncertainty. It represents a new way of searching for values that contrasts with authoritarian ways of the past. That is the source of democracy’s appeal, but also of its dangers.

These dangers were presciently diagnosed centuries ago by one of the greatest thinkers of the original Axial Period, the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato’s criticisms of democracy in his Republic are still the most important ever written, and they have great relevance to the political problems and quest for values of our own day. In this lecture, we look at our modern political problems through his criticisms. For Plato, the condition of the state (polis) and the condition of the soul (psyche)—politics and ethics—are related. Flawed states rot the souls of those who live in them, and he feared democracy was flawed in this regard. His own alternative—authoritarian rule by philosopher-kings (rulers who love wisdom)—may seem worse to us moderns, but if we love democracy and wish it to be better, we do well to heed his criticisms.

Outline

I. Democracy is the favored political form of our pluralistic age.
   A. With the demise of communism, nations are lurching toward it throughout the world from both left and right.
      1. The transition is not easy in many nations (Russia, China, and many others in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe) because democracy requires habits of mind and heart different from the totalitarian and authoritarian ones to which they are accustomed.
      2. In still other nations, there are problems of tribalism and fundamentalism, which clash with the openness and pluralism of democratic ways of thinking.
   B. These clashes make clear that the present ferment over democracy is not simply about practical politics, it is about “ways of thinking” and ways of understanding values.
      1. Democratic politics is part of the larger struggle of the modern world to cope with pluralism and uncertainty.
      2. Politics, as ancient thinkers understood, cannot be isolated from the “search” or “quest” for the good. That is the theme of the present lecture; and democracy is central to it.
      3. The strife over democracy is related to the two contrasting ways of searching or questing for values discussed in Lecture Thirteen.
      4. To see this, consider two different images: in one image, values seep downward from the top, from rulers to ruled. This is the image of totalitarian and authoritarian forms of government. (Refer to FIGURE 3 in the appendix for both images).
      5. In the other image, values emerge in the desires, feelings, and aspirations of the people and flow upward to the leaders, who are supposed to be responsive to the “rule of the people.” This is the image of democracy.
      6. Clearly, the second image is more chaotic, pluralistic, and uncertain. In democracy, as John Stuart Mill pointed out, the search for the good is very much an “experiment with values,” with no certainty guaranteed.
      7. That is why in democracy, even the sovereignty of the people must sometimes be curbed (when it takes the form of a tyranny of the majority) by constitutional checks and balances.
II. Democracy therefore has its dangers and flaws. Instead of finding the good, it may end up in moral chaos. We see this danger today.

A. But the dangers and flaws of democracy were even more presciently seen centuries ago by one of the greatest thinkers of the first Axial Period, the Greek philosopher Plato.
   1. In his major work, The Republic, Plato argued for an authoritarian solution to the problems of politics, in contrast to democracy.
   2. But his twist was that the rulers be philosophers, or rather, “philosopher-kings.”
   3. This famous expression is misleading. What it means literally is that the rulers be those who would love (philein) wisdom (sophia) more than they loved power.
   4. Such rulers would have insight into the Good (the ideal forms) and pass this down to the people in the manner of the authoritarian image of values seeping downward from the top.

B. Plato criticized all other forms of government as flawed.
   1. They were flawed for a reason that seems strange to moderns who have lost the true meaning of politics in his view: bad governments were flawed because they clouded and inhibited the search or quest for the Good.
   2. The condition of the state (polis) and the condition of the soul (psyche)—politics and psychology—were related for Plato. Flawed states rotted the soul, and vice versa.
   3. And democracy was especially flawed in his regard. It was the worse form of government, except for tyranny.
   4. Democracy brought discord, moral confusion, disagreement about values, a degeneration of public discourse, a fetish for images and illusions (cf., the “Allegory of the Cave”).
   5. And in all this confusion in democracy, people lose their way in the search for the Good.

C. Plato’s criticisms of democracy are still the most prescient ever written; they have great relevance to the political problem and quest for values of our own day. In this lecture, we look at modern problems through his criticisms.

III. Plato’s criticisms of democracy are of two kinds, “political” and “social.” We begin with the political criticisms.

A. Plato argued that leaders in a democracy would first of all seek popularity, rather than statesmanship.
   1. Popularity with the masses was what was required to get elected and stay elected.
   2. The “people” would tend to vote for leaders more like them, who projected an attractive image, not necessarily the most competent.

B. In addition, elected representatives in a democracy would tend to pander to the wishes of the electorate rather than do what they think is right. If not, they are thrown out of office.

C. Democratic leaders are therefore also tempted to focus on short-term goals at the expense of long-term needs of society.
   1. What happens in the distant future will not affect the next election. The difficulty of getting leaders to take the long view is no accident of democracy, according to Plato.
   2. By contrast, taking the long view (and the larger view) is the essence of wisdom in his view. Philosophic rulers (lovers of wisdom) should rise above the turmoil of the present.
   3. Democratic politicians, by contrast, cannot afford to do that.

D. As a consequence, democracies also have an in-built tendency to spend more than they take in.
   1. As Plato puts it, it is always easier for democratic politicians to give things to people rather than to ask for sacrifices.
   2. And they lack the authority to force sacrifice on a reluctant public that will throw them out of office.

IV. Plato focuses additional political criticisms on the nature of debate and discourse in democratic societies.

A. He argues further that debate in democratic politics will become superficial and focus more on images, less on substantive issues.
   1. The masses are impatient with complex reasoning and prefer the sensational over the important.
   2. We are some present-day examples and consequences of this tendency.

B. Also in the electoral process, “images” would come to dominate in democracies over substantive debate.
1. More emphasis is placed on superficial matters of how candidates looked and presented themselves, rather than on substantive issues.
2. All these tendencies were not accidental, Plato thought, but built into the fabric of democracy.
3. Yet he had no inkling of modern media and the extremes to which these predictions could be taken in our times.

C. This set of criticisms touches on deeper themes in Plato’s thought.
1. The central distinction of *The Republic* is between “appearance” and “reality”—how things seem to us and how they really are.
2. Indeed, that is the central distinction for “wisdom” or “first philosophy,” as we have seen in Aristotle.
3. The distinction is illustrated by Plato’s famous “Allegory of the Cave.” Ordinary experience is like living in a cave in which we only see the appearances of things, not the reality behind them.
4. For Plato, all imperfect societies fail because they favor appearances over reality, and so lose their way in the quest for wisdom.
5. For wisdom is seeing through the appearances to the reality and meaning underneath. It is climbing out of the Cave.

D. Democracy is especially flawed in this regard. In a democracy, people are awash in images; they wallow in appearances.
1. As a consequence, more emphasis is placed on emotion than on reason in public debate.
2. We consider modern-day examples of this tendency as well.

E. Further, societies focused on images and appearances like this are easy prey to those interested in manipulating public beliefs to their own advantage, rather than finding the truth.
1. If you live by illusions (in a Cave), you die by illusions.
2. These manipulators of images and appearances in our own time are the media consultants, advertising agents, lobbyists, spin-doctors, public relations experts, and numerous others.
3. In Plato’s day, they were called “sophists” and they were his chief antagonists in *The Republic* (and other dialogues as well).
4. The Sophists pretended to seek wisdom, but their real concern was winning the argument, not finding the truth. They were lovers of power, pretending to be lovers of wisdom.
5. True lovers of wisdom (*philosophoi*) would prefer to lose the argument to find the truth.
6. Democracy opens the door to rule by manipulators and sophists, because the people are awash in images, and images are easy to manipulate.
7. The manipulation of interests in turn leads to unrestrained growth and competing special interests seeking to manipulate public opinion to fulfill private desires rather than the public good.

F. As a final example of how images dominate in democratic societies, Plato suggests that in democratic societies people will tend to eat poorly.
1. They will be more concerned with how food looks and tastes (its appearances) rather than the real nutritive value behind the appearances.
2. For Plato, the reality is always hidden, unseen. What appears is not what is—in the marketplace as well as in politics. It takes wisdom to see through the appearances.

V. The preceding were mainly Plato’s political criticisms of democracy. We now turn to his social criticisms.

A. He argues that in a democracy people will also gradually lose a sense of *shared values*.
1. The “democratic character,” as he puts it, wants to go its own way, pursue its own personal values.
2. But individual desires and values differ; so disagreements increase and shared values are hard to find.

B. In addition, people become absorbed with their personal interests and are less willing to sacrifice for the common good.

C. Democracy therefore also breeds:
1. Social disorder
2. Increase in crime
3. Distrust of authority and government
4. A greater gap between the generations, since young people want to do their own thing and do not share values with their elders.
Finally, and oddly, Plato argues that democratic societies will spawn successions of fads and fashions that will capture public attention for a time and fade away.

1. These fads and fashions fill a value vacuum that is created by the loss of shared values.
2. Plato’s ideas emerged from his own experiences with both democracy and tyranny in late fifth century BC Athens.
3. We can easily find contemporary examples of Plato’s criticisms from our own times.

VI. Plato’s critique of democracy links politics to the general quest for wisdom and meaning in life—the themes of these lectures. In the next lecture, we consider current discontents with politics and possible modern responses to Plato’s concerns.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Plato makes an analogy between the state and the soul, arguing that “justice” in the state is a kind of harmony of the different parts or factions. Similarly, justice in the individual soul is a kind of harmony of its parts (for example, of reason with desire and emotion). The ability to attain justice in the one (the soul) depends in part on the ability to attain justice in the other (the state). What connections do you see between this idea and Plato’s criticisms of democracy?
2. Plato’s criticisms of democracy, both political and social, seem to point to real dangers in our present-day representative democracy. Do you think he perhaps exaggerates the case or is he on target? Are some of his complaints perhaps counterbalanced or remedied by other positive features of our present-day democratic system?
Lecture Nineteen
Democracy and Its Discontents

Scope: This lecture discusses current discontents with politics and with our political culture that are reflected in Plato’s criticisms of democracy. There is a growing chorus of criticism about the way democratic politics is carried on in media-driven societies—the role of lobbyists and special interests, the influence of money, campaign financing, the superficiality of public debate, the dominance of images, manipulation of public opinion, and the resulting disenchantment of the public with politics in general—all reflected in Plato’s criticisms. Some political theorists have argued that, in light of these problems, we may have to rethink the democratic architecture of tomorrow to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

We explore this possibility in the present lecture, considering attempts by recent political theorists and others to rethink the democratic architecture of the future in response to current political discontents. If Plato is right that a discordant politics is reflected in the discordant souls of citizens, then this is an ethical task as well as a political one. Can the search for wisdom and the common good, the goal of Plato’s philosopher-rulers, be carried on amid the discordant voices of today’s pluralist culture? In this lecture, we consider various responses to this question, and we consider reforms that try to combine the ancient quest for political wisdom of Plato’s philosopher-rulers with the necessities of modern democratic politics.

Outline

I. Plato’s criticisms of democracy are powerful, but they are not likely to lead those who live in the modern era to give up democracy without a better alternative in the offing.
   A. We note Winston Churchill’s statement that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.
   B. One of those other forms of government was Plato’s own proposed state, which has failings of an opposite kind to democracy.
      1. Plato’s ideal city-state (polis) is authoritarian, though it is meant to be a benign authoritarianism of the wise.
      2. He envisions a class of “guardians”—including philosophic rulers (kings or queens, since women are not excluded)—who are not elected by the populace.
      3. Rather, they are selected by an elaborate educational program designed to train them in wisdom and virtue as well as technical competence.
      4. In such a system, values flow downward from the rulers, who are supposed to be educated to a vision of Good that is then imposed on the rest of society (Confucius and Mencius developed a similar system in China during the first Axial Period).
      5. Noted modern democratic theorist, Robert Dahl, has called any such political system a “guardianship system.”
   C. There is a problem with all guardianship systems, noted by Dahl and other critics, and known to the ancients.
      1. Can one guarantee that rulers so educated will be wise and good as well as competent? If not, one would hesitate to abandon the checks of democracy.
      2. Plato had enormous faith in higher education and founded the first university in human history (his “Academy”), modeled on his Republic and dedicated to training leaders.
      3. The Academy is still our model today in the West for higher education and its goal is still to train leaders. But we have more than two thousand years of experience Plato did not have.
      4. Our universities can produce competent and knowledgeable leaders, but wisdom, goodness, and virtue are more difficult. They can be taught, but not guaranteed.
      5. Thus the deep question for Plato and any guardianship system becomes the one posed by the Latin poet Juvenal: “Quis custodes ipsos custodiet?”—“Who guards the guardians themselves?”
      6. That question might incline us to democracy, whatever its flaws.
But the difficulties with democracy to which Plato alerts us are still with us and have to be addressed in the modern world. We consider three major issues of special concern that flow from his criticisms.

A. The first is the issue of direct (or participatory) democracy versus indirect (or representative) democracy.
   1. The influence of special interests, lobbyists, and money in the political system has given rise to widespread feelings that elected representatives no longer serve the people or the general interest.
   2. Much contemporary political debate concerns how such influences can be curbed and especially how citizens can be more directly involved in the political process.

B. The second current problem concerns informed political discourse versus distorted and manipulated political discourse.
   1. This was one of the main concerns of Plato’s criticisms—shallow debate, image-dominated politics, appeals to emotion, and manipulation of political debate by sophists.
   2. Can the idea of attentive and informed public debate, such as Plato expected of his philosophic rulers, be retrieved within large modern democratic societies?
   3. It seems like an impossible ideal, yet a good deal of modern political theorizing is beginning to address it.

C. The third issue, related to the other two, is how long-term goals and the common good can be wisely addressed in a climate in which elected officials must worry about the next election.

Let us begin with the issue of direct or participatory democracy.

A. It has always been a dream of utopian democratic theorists to have people directly involved in deciding policy issues without the intervention of representatives.
   1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed this as an ideal in his writings on the social contract.
   2. But Rousseau’s ideal political unit was a small Swiss canton or district—his modern version of an ancient Greek city-state.
   3. How can direct or participatory democracy be realized in a large modern nation-state? To most thinkers, it is a utopian dream.

B. Yet efforts have been made in the direction of more participatory democracy in our own political system.
   One such controversial effort is the Initiative and Referendum movement.
   1. This is an exercise in direct democracy allowing citizens to put measures to a direct vote of the people after collecting a suitable number of signatures (Initiative) or to repeal something enacted by an elected legislature (Referendum).
   2. Both Initiatives and Referendums have spread since the 1970s tax revolt in California and are now fixtures in many states.
   3. This movement, whatever its flaws, should be seen for what it is—a clear symptom of voter dissatisfaction with representative government and an attempt to circumvent legislatures by having people decide issues directly.
   4. But Initiative and Referendum have problems. They also fall prey to many of Plato’s criticisms of manipulated discourse and special interests taking over the process.
   5. We consider the pros and cons of this experiment through a recent book, Direct Democracy by political scientist Thomas Cronin, which surveys and assesses the movement.

C. Other thinkers see hope for more direct or participatory democracy in the future through advances in modern communication technologies.
   1. Suggestions have been made in numerous recent books about the potential for interactive TV and other media—or more recently, the Internet—to increase direct citizen involvement in political decision making, at the local and higher levels.
   2. The political movement in this direction is nowadays called “teledemocracy” (see the book Teledemocracy by Christopher Arterton).
   3. We consider the pros and cons of teledemocracy by discussing recent works on the subject.

IV. Other recent proposals for reforming democratic politics address the second two issues listed earlier, Plato’s concern about manipulated and distorted public discourse and Rousseau’s concern about arriving at the common good.

A. One such suggestion, made by Yale political theorist Robert Dahl in his Democracy and Its Critics, is what he calls a “minipopulus.”
1. Dahl argues that the central problem of modern democratic politics is how “rule of the people” can be extended from small societies to modern nation-states.
2. “If the democratic process is not firmly anchored in the judgments of the people,” he says, “the system will drift toward quasi-guardianship” in Plato’s sense of rule by knowledgeable elites.
3. What is needed he thinks to recapture “rule by the people” is an attentive and informed public, which teledemocracy and Initiative and Referendum do not give.
4. Dahl’s minipopulus would be a selection of perhaps a thousand citizens who would deliberate for a year on a major issue, “meeting” by telecommunications (or Internet) and render a judgment.
5. There are pros and cons of this minipopulus idea that bear investigation.

B. Other suggestions similar to, but different from, Dahl’s have been made and even tried out in recent years.

1. One is the “deliberative opinion poll” of James Fishkin (Democracy and Deliberation).
2. A representative sampling of six hundred citizens is gathered for a week’s discussion of certain issues.
3. Or, prior to elections, they are gathered to listen to each of the candidates and debate among themselves, and then an “informed” and “deliberated” opinion poll is taken.
4. Such deliberative opinion polling has been tried out on specific policy issues in Britain (for example, on health care policy and capital punishment).
5. It was also tried in a “National Issues Convention” in the United States before the 1996 election (with unfortunately little impact).
6. There are pros and cons of both these ideas.

C. Finally, we consider further suggestions with the same goals, such as Citizen Commissions and Expert Citizen Commissions.

1. Examples of the latter in recent U.S. history are considered, such as the commissions that looked into causes of the Shuttle Challenger disaster of 1987 and decided on military base closings through the Base Realignment and Closure process.
2. Could Citizens Commissions decide upon, or advise on, other public issues regarding long-term policies and the common good without running afoul of manipulated and distorted discourse or appeals of special interests, or the Constitution? The lecture introduces one such new proposal for consideration.

V. The ideas and experiments considered in this lecture fit into the general theme of the lecture series: How can the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning (in this case, in politics) be retrieved under modern conditions of pluralism and uncertainty which require democratic forms of government?

Essential Reading:
Fishkin, Democracy and Deliberation, Parts I and III.

Supplementary Reading:
Cronin, Direct Democracy, chapters 1–4.
Arterton, Teledemocracy, chapters 1–3.

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you think Initiative and Referendum and teledemocracy are positive or negative developments? Can either or both be made to work, despite their flaws? Is the Internet a boon to public discourse, or a danger—or perhaps a little of both?
2. Do you think Citizens Commissions or “minipopuli” can be made to work in our democratic system? Can they help to overcome some of the criticisms of representative government and improve citizen participation in our democratic system? Or are they too impractical or unrealizable in our current system, or in general?
Lecture Twenty
The Parable of the Retreat

Scope: In this lecture and the following ones, we turn our attention to the deeper philosophical meanings behind the reflections of the previous seven lectures. In Lecture Thirteen, we began the third task of this lecture series: to ask how, if at all, the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in life, embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past, can be retrieved, given the intellectual challenges of the modern era. The initial step in that lecture was an attitude of “openness” or “objectivity” to ways of life, which led to ancient ethical principles like the Mosaic commandments and the Golden Rule and to modern ideas of human rights (to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) and principles of public morality.

But why should one take such an attitude of openness to begin with? This lecture explores the deeper philosophical motivations behind the quest idea involved by introducing an extended modern “parable of the retreat”—a story about a gathering at a remote Himalayan monastery which brings together people from all over the world, representing different cultures, religions, and ways of life. The discussion of this parable brings us back to central themes of the lecture series—about the quest for meaning and about attempts to retrieve it under conditions of modernity. These themes are discussed in terms of the further idea of “aspiration”—the idea of the spirit going outward to find what is true beyond its own limited perspective.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we turn our attention to the deeper philosophical meaning behind the reflections of the previous seven lectures.
   A. The third task of this lecture series begun in Lecture Thirteen was to ask how, if at all, the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning in life, embodied in the philosophical and religious traditions of the past, can be retrieved, given the intellectual challenges of the modern era.
      1. In Lecture Thirteen, as an initial step in this direction, we began with an attitude of “openness” or “objectivity” toward different points of view and ways of life in response to pluralism and uncertainty.
      2. This was a decidedly “modern” attitude that might appear at first sight to lead to relativism, subjectivism, or indifference.
      3. But instead, it led to some ancient and venerable ethical principles, such as the Mosaic commandments not to kill, lie, steal, or cheat, and to the Golden Rule.
      4. It also led to some modern ethical principles of respecting the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which provided a basis for defining “public morality” in subsequent lectures.
      5. At issue was a kind of convergence of ancient and modern wisdom.
   B. But such results follow only if persons are willing to take such an attitude of openness to different points of view and ways of life. Why should such an attitude be taken in the first place?
      1. This question leads us to the deeper philosophical issues about value and meaning that we are going to explore in the lectures to follow.
      2. An initial reason for taking an attitude of openness was hinted at in Lectures Thirteen and Fourteen.
      3. It was connected with the idea of a “quest” or “search” for wisdom and meaning, which is the central theme of this series.
      4. Openness to different points of view was not the final truth about values, but rather a way of searching for that truth under conditions of pluralism and uncertainty.
      5. One might say it was a way of groping toward, or searching for, objective value and worth from limited points of view.

II. To illustrate and pursue such thoughts further, we consider a modern parable, called the “parable of the retreat.”
   A. Suppose we organized a retreat at a monastery at some remote mountainous site in the Himalayas, inviting people from all over the world, representing different cultures, religions, and ways of life.
      1. The attendees are given the collective task of coming to some kind of agreement before they leave about which values or ways of life are the right ones (or the right one) to live by.
2. We invite representatives of all the large and small religions in the world, various branches and (sometimes competing) groups of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on.
3. In addition, to make things realistic, since this is a “modern” parable, we also invite atheists, agnostics, positivists, secular humanists, Marxists, social Darwinists, Australian aborigines, representatives of African cultures, native Americans, new age channelers, postmodern relativists, etc.

B. We can guess what will happen initially—total chaos.
1. We can imagine representatives of the various religions, and others with strongly held views, trying to persuade others of the absolute rightness of their own views.
2. They see the task of bringing everyone to the truth as one of proselytizing or conversion.
3. Others may not think in such terms, but will be prepared to defend the rightness of their own world-views when challenged.
4. We can also guess the outcome of all this ferment.
5. Some persons might actually be converted to this or that religion, or perhaps lose their faith in the presence of agnostic, scientific, and secular arguments.
6. But most are likely to stand firm with their respective world-views, having failed to persuade others, or be persuaded.

C. What then? We can imagine that many will become discouraged at the fruitless bickering and leave.
1. Let us assume (which seems likely) that one set of the leavers will include those who are absolutely certain they have the truth and, having failed to persuade others, depart. They are the dogmatists.
2. Nor will this group include only religious people. There are dogmatic atheists, Marxists, positivists, secularists, etc., just as well as dogmatic religious believers.
3. And we may assume that there are non-dogmatic religious believers as well as atheists and agnostics who will not leave.
4. A second group likely to leave will be the relativists and skeptics about objective values and truth.
5. They will leave, not because they already know what the truth is, but because they believe the enterprise is fruitless. There is no universal truth about values (no fourth-dimensional value) to be found on their view.

D. Now let us assume that all the dogmatists, relativists, and others who choose to leave have left. What motivates those who stay to continue searching?
1. Since they think it valuable to go on searching, they will be neither dogmatists about objective truth and value (believing they already have it), nor relativists and skeptics (believing it does not exist).
2. Acknowledging conditions of pluralism and uncertainty, they cannot join the dogmatists.
3. Yet they have not given up on the idea that there is an objective truth and worth from all points of view to be sought, so they cannot join the relativists and skeptics either.
4. Above all, they have not given up on the “search” or “quest” for that elusive truth and worth. So they stay in order to go on searching.

E. Now let us suppose some wise persons among them stand up and say:
1. “We have come here to search for what is truly right and good for all of us. We have failed to convince each other.”
2. “But we are not for that reason going to give up the search. Let us try something new.”
3. “Since it is truth for all of us, from all points of view, we seek, let us draw a large circle around all of us that represents an initial attitude of respect for every way of life here present, as well as for others who departed and for all other ways of life whatever.”
4. “We do not thereby concede that other ways are good or right. We do not know that.”
5. “Nor do we know for certain our own is right (though we each naturally believe in our own ways). That is what we are here trying to find out.”
6. “Let us draw this circle and take this attitude and see what happens.”

F. What happens in this thought experiment is, as we have seen, that by doing so they arrive at some universal principles, such as the Mosaic commandments and the Golden Rule and respect for the rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.
1. As it turns out, these are a part of many of the beliefs of those who stay at the retreat, religious believers and secularists.
2. It represents a kind of Rawlsian “overlapping consensus.”

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3. The key to finding it, however, was that, despite modern conditions of pluralism and uncertainty, the retreatants had not given up the ancient quest for wisdom and meaning.

4. The old way of doing this—of positioning oneself in one view and trying to prove it right and others wrong from that point of view—no longer works, as witnessed by the bickering at the retreat.

5. But they were not willing to give up and were willing to try other ways.

III. There are questions to be addressed about their efforts, however.

A. What are the retreatants to say and do about those persons who left the retreat—the dogmatists, relativists, and others? Do the conclusions reached apply to them as well?

1. The retreatants cannot say for sure. Theirs is a “quest” for the truth after all, not the final truth.

2. But they do know that unless their openness and respect applies to every way of life, including those who departed, their results will not be true from every point of view.

3. They must respect every way of life, even those who do not respect theirs (to the degree that they can, of course, up to moral sphere breakdown).

B. In sum, to find the universal truth, everyone does not have to be brought to agree (which is impossible).

1. But everyone’s way of life has to be taken into account and respected to the degree possible in the search, or it will not attain universal truth. That is the lesson of the retreat.

2. So it is not merely a matter of the retreatants agreeing to respect each other—or making a “social contract” among themselves (and therefore valid and applicable only to themselves).

3. It is rather a matter of a philosophic quest for what is right that would justify any such contract. That’s why the respect must go beyond those who stay at the retreat, until they break the moral sphere.

IV. The motive of the retreatants who stay behind is what we might call “an aspiration to wisdom and meaning in the ancient philosophical sense,” the desire to find out what is objectively true and right for all of them.

A. The term “aspiration” is an apt one to express this fundamental motivation.

1. It comes from the Latin “aspirare” which means “to breathe (“spirare”) forth,” but also “to have a fixed desire or longing for something” and “to seek to attain it.”

2. The image suggested is of the “spirit” (spiritus) going outward—breathing forth—beyond the finite perspectives we inhabit, to find what is true from every perspective.

B. Near the end of his Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant said there were three great questions humans can ask. (I translate them loosely, for reasons to be explained in the lecture.)

1. What can we know? How should we live? What should we aspire to?

2. For centuries, one sought to answer the second (or ethical) question in terms of the first, how we should live in terms of what we can know.

3. The task seems less straightforward today. It is not so clear we can know enough, at least with certainty, to fully tell us how to live.

4. What the parable of the retreat suggests is that to fully answer the second of Kant’s questions, the ethical one, we must also appeal to the third question—what should we aspire to?

5. It is the retreatants’ aspiration for objective truth and worth—their desire to go on questing for such ideals, despite the disagreements brought on by pluralism and uncertainty—that brings them ethical insight.

Essential Reading:
Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. How is the parable of the retreat like or unlike other views or procedures discussed in these lectures, for example, Rawls’ choice of principles of justice from an original position, agreement to live by common rules in a social contract of the Hobbesian kind, Kant’s idea of self-legislating for all persons, or Hume’s and Mencius’ appeal to common human sentiments?

2. The relativists who leave the retreat might say that the retreatants who stay behind are chasing an illusion because there simply are no universal values or principles such as they seek. Relativists might also object that aspiration is a form of wishful thinking rather than of rationally justified belief. What, if anything, could be said in response to these charges by the retreatants?
Lecture Twenty-One
Searches in the Realm of Aspiration

Scope: This lecture further explores the “aspiration toward wisdom and meaning” that was said to animate the retreatants in their search for truth. If those retreatants are symbols of us all, then it is our own search that is at issue as well. The lecture begins by talking about different kinds of searches, from everyday searches for our lost keys to Pythias’ legendary search for the land of the midnight sun. These examples are used to introduce a special notion of “searches in the realm of aspiration.” To explain this idea, various mythical images are used, like the search for the Holy Grail. Such searches are called quests in the myths and legends of humankind (where, for good reason, they play a prominent role). But searches in the realm of aspiration are exemplified in other than mythical ways, for example, in the scientists’ search for the final truth about nature.

The lecture then turns to the object of the retreatants’ search, the wisdom and meaning aspired to. We return to the discussion of wisdom (sophia) in Aristotle of Lecture Two and to Plato’s account of the wisdom of the philosopher-rulers in Lecture Eighteen. The two goals of ancient wisdom, or “first philosophy,” as represented by these two thinkers, were the goals of understanding objective reality (the way things are in themselves rather than how they appear to us) and objective value or worth (the way they ought to be). Both goals are threatened today by the thought that we cannot climb out of limited perspectives to see either reality or value from a neutral perspective above it all. This was the gist of the postmodernist critique of Lyotard and others discussed in the end of Part I, in Lecture Twelve (the rejection of “metanarratives”). The remainder of this lecture addresses this postmodernist critique, asking how we can continue to talk about objective reality and truth (about the way things really are) despite it.

Outline

I. The previous lecture made clear that what distinguishes the retreatants is their continuing aspiration to wisdom and meaning in the ancient sense—their desire to find out what is objectively true and right for all of them.

A. Aspiration requires an intelligent search for what is aspired to, with the requirement that we can never know with certainty that we have attained the goal. To illustrate, consider that there are different kinds of searches.
   1. In the simplest cases, we have lost something, like our keys in the yard, and are looking for them. We know that what we are looking for exists and where to look for it.
   2. Contrast this with the search for something that, for all we know, may not exist: for example, the ancient explorer Pythias went in search of the land of the midnight sun.
   3. Physicists look for faster-than-light particles not knowing whether they exist and similarly, for other examples.
   4. Still, even in these cases, the agents know what they are looking for and will know they have found it when they have found it.

B. Contrast this with a third kind of search.
   1. A knight journeys into an uncharted forest in search of the Holy Grail.
   2. His search requires the skill of Pythias and other explorers and as much danger.
   3. But even if he finds the golden chalice of a certain description, the knight will not know that he has found what he is looking for, the Holy Grail of legend, or just a fake.
   4. In such searches, agents do not know for certain they have found what they seek, even when they have found it.

C. Let us call searches, such as the knight’s, “searches in the realm of aspiration.”
   1. The characteristics of such searches are spelled out at this point:
      a. The object of the quest is of great importance.
      b. The goal is obtainable, but difficult and not guaranteed.
      c. There are certain actions to be performed to lead to the goal.
      d. Doing these actions doesn’t guarantee success, but not doing them would mean failure.
2. Searches in the realm of aspiration, like the search for the Holy Grail, are called “quests” in the language of the myths and legends of human history, where they play a prominent role.

3. References are made here to Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, two of the most prominent modern researchers on myth. Campbell tells us of the stages of all quest myths.

D. But it would be a mistake to think that searches in the realm of aspiration have their place only in myth and legend.
1. The scientists’ search for the final truth about nature also have the features of quests, or searches in the realm of aspiration mentioned above.
2. This example illustrates what legends like the Grail legend also emphasize: aspiration is not merely an attitude, but a form of life.
3. It is not mere wishful thinking, but involves patient, disciplined, intelligent searching for cherished goals the attainment of which cannot be assured.
4. Xenophanes, an early Greek philosopher of the original Axial Period is cited in support of this point.

II. Having talked about searches in the realm of aspiration, we now turn to the second part of the retreatants’ motivation.

A. We turn to the objects of their search, wisdom and meaning.

B. Here we reach back to Lecture Two in this series, to the discussion of wisdom (sophia) in Aristotle, which is briefly recapitulated.
1. “Wisdom” was the name Aristotle gave to “first philosophy” or “metaphysics,” and it was the love (philia) of this wisdom (sophia) that gave philosophy its name.
2. It was this same wisdom that was sought by Plato’s philosopher-rulers in The Republic and applied by them to the political domain, as we saw in Lecture Eighteen.
3. Aristotle (Lecture Two) and his teacher, Plato (in Lecture Eighteen), had many disagreements about the details of their metaphysics.
4. But on this topic—the nature of the quest for metaphysical wisdom, and hence meaning in life—they were as one.

C. The wisdom both sought had two goals: to understand objective reality or truth (the way things really are) and to understand what had objective value or worth (the way things ought to be).
1. The two goals converged. To understand objective reality would be to understand objective value and worth.
2. That is why Plato thought you could teach leaders or rulers to love the good as well as know the facts.
3. From mathematics to virtue, “liberal education” as we would call it, was a seamless web. (He would simply call it “philosophy”).
4. But the sunderings of modernity split apart these two goals: knowing all the scientific facts would not necessarily tell us how to live.

III. Not only have the two metaphysical goals of wisdom—understanding objective reality and objective worth—been sundered in the modern era, but our ability to attain both goals has been questioned.

A. The idea that human inquirers are embedded in historically and culturally conditioned points of view from which they cannot escape threatens an understanding of objective reality and truth as well as worth.
1. How can we grasp the way things are in themselves, rather than how they appear to us, if all interpretation is dependent on limited frameworks of interpretation—conceptual schemes, language-games, or forms of life?
2. This is in essence the postmodernist critique of traditional metaphysics or philosophy by Lyotard and others (discussed in Lecture Twelve).
3. If this postmodernist critique is valid, both metaphysical goals of ancient philosophy are in jeopardy.
4. Thus, Lyotard speaks of a postmodernist age as also “post-metaphysical” and “post-philosophical.” There are no more idle dreams of understanding the meaning of things in general.

B. Can the aspiration to wisdom and meaning of the ancient philosophers survive this postmodernist critique?
1. In attempting to answer we can no long assume that the two goals of understanding objective reality and worth will converge.
2. We must look at each goal separately at first, hoping that discussion of one may throw light on the other.
IV. We begin with the goal of understanding objective reality or truth (the way things really are) and then turn to objective worth later.

A. When postmodernists say, “if all understanding is scheme-dependent, we can only grasp the way things appear to us, not the way they are in themselves,” trouble is already brewing with the expression “the way things are in themselves.”
1. It assumes there is such a thing as the way things are in themselves, when it is likely that there are many different ways things are, described in different vocabularies from different perspectives.
2. This is illustrated by an example of New York city over a twenty-four hour period as described by a weatherman, the society columnist, a social historian, the director of sewers, and so on.
3. Each has a limited perspective. But what is the true picture of New York? Which is the “real” New York “in itself”?
4. The question is odd because we cannot help but describe it from some limited perspective or other. There is no “neutral” perspective.

B. So much supports the postmodernist critique, but there is another possibility.
1. The “real” New York may not be what is described from some neutral perspective, but the summation of all the correct things said in the various non-neutral perspectives.
2. It may be what is correctly described by the weatherman plus the society columnist plus the social historian plus the director of sewers, and so on.
3. The “real” city is elusive, not because we do not know anything true about it, but because there might always be something more to say about it in new vocabularies.

C. This way of looking at the question of truth is very old. It too is a piece of ancient wisdom that goes back to the original Axial Period.
1. We have heard the ancient Buddhist tale of the blind men describing different parts of an elephant. Each tells a different “story” depending on whether he feels the leg or trunk or torso.
2. And they bicker about what this “thing” could “really” be.
3. One point of this ancient tale is that each blind man is wrong if he claims to have the whole truth about the elephant.
4. Yet each may be describing some truth about it. They go wrong only in claiming to have the whole truth.

D. Further examples are used to illustrate this and other points about objective truth: examples from chess, chemistry, and the cube of Lecture Two that told the story of Huckleberry Finn.

V. Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from these reflections about the postmodernist critique of metaphysics and philosophy.

A. The limitation to perspective of which postmodernists speak does not rule out talk of objective truth.
1. It does show that because of the limitations of perspectives, we can never be certain we have the truth.
2. And it does show we have to be cautious about claiming to have the whole truth.

B. But these limitations accord with the idea of aspiration discussed at the beginning of this lecture.
1. Objective truth may be an object of aspiration rather than of certain knowledge.
2. Yet a case could be made for saying that most of the important things in life are like that, as legends such as the Holy Grail attest.
3. They are the objects of quests, or searches in the realm of aspiration, and so it may be also with objective reality and truth.

Essential Reading:
Smith, “The View from Everywhere,” in Beyond the Postmodern Mind, pp. 17–44.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What are “searches in the realm of aspiration”? How do they differ from ordinary searches? How would you respond to someone who said that no search could be worth it, if you could not know you had found the goal, even when you had found it?

2. Many people despair of finding the “objective truth” anymore, or claiming to have found it. They think that to claim such a thing implies dogmatism and arrogance. How might one respond to this challenge in the light of the account of objective truth and reality presented in this lecture? How would one respond to the postmodernist charge that there is no objective truth to be found?
Lecture Twenty-Two
Love and Glory, the Same Old Story

Scope: This lecture turns from objective truth to the second goal, which is the heart of the ancient quest for wisdom, objective value or worth. The notion of objective worth turns out to be an interesting and complex one. We consider two dimensions of it in this lecture in terms of several examples. The first dimension—worthiness for glory (or clear recognition with praise)—is explored in terms of the story of a fellow called Alan the artist, who is deceived about the value of his paintings by a friend who wishes to lift Alan’s spirits. A second dimension of objective worth—worthiness for love—is explored through a novel, Solaris, by the celebrated Polish science fiction writer, Stanislaw Lem, about a planet covered with an astonishing intelligent ocean.

We explore the two dimensions of objective worth that emerge from these stories—objective worthiness for glory and for love—relating them to themes discussed in previous lectures. The two dimensions of objective worth are related to two aspects of the self. Glory is related to the outer or public self, of roles, projects, achievements, and accomplishments that (like Alan and his paintings) we want to be worthy of clear recognition with praise. Love relates to the inner self of conscious experience—what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls our “inscape.” These two dimensions of objective worth and their relations are finally explored in terms of an example using Johann Sebastian Bach and some mysterious crystals capable of producing beautiful polyphonic music like Bach’s.

Outline

I. We turn now from objective reality and truth to the second goal of ancient wisdom, an understanding of objective worth or value.

A. Postmodernists deny the existence of this kind of worth, if it means non-relative worth for all persons and from all points of view (what we earlier called “fourth-dimensional value”).
   1. They deny such worth for the same reasons they deny the existence of non-relative or absolute truth for all persons and from all points of view.
   2. That is, we are embedded in finite frameworks and points of view, from which we cannot escape to make such judgments.

B. We may find some clues therefore about how to respond regarding objective worth in the discussion of objective truth of the previous lecture.

II. Objective worth, as it turns out, is a highly complex and interesting notion. To illustrate it, we consider two examples.

A. The first example is of a fellow we will call Alan the artist.
   1. Alan is ill and depressed because his paintings are receiving no recognition.
   2. To cheer him up, a rich friend arranges a scheme to fake the sale of Alan’s paintings at a local gallery for $10,000 apiece.
   3. Alan’s spirits are lifted because he believes mistakenly that he is finally being recognized as a great artist.

B. We now consider two possible worlds involving Alan.
   1. One is like the world just described, where he is deceived about his paintings and dies happily, thinking he was a success.
   2. The other world is like the first, except that he is not deceived. His paintings are being recognized for their genuine artistic merit and again he dies happily.

C. We begin to understand what objective worth is all about when we ask whether it would make any difference to Alan which of these worlds he lives in.
   1. Like most of us, he is likely to choose the second world, where he really is a good artist and is being recognized as such.
   2. But one of the consequences of such an endorsement is that subjective happiness is not regarded as the final measure of value.
3. For Alan is equally happy subjectively in both worlds; he dies happily in both thinking he is a great artist.
4. It is just that in the one world and not the other the belief that satisfies him is objectively true.
5. Alan’s choice of the second world means that the objective worth of his paintings means something to him over and above his subjective happiness, as it would to most of us.

D. Postmodern critics will undoubtedly object that there is something odd and problematic about the choice given Alan.
1. To make this choice, Alan must stand outside the worlds, viewing them objectively.
2. Inside both worlds, subjectively, one world would not appear better than the other.
3. Of course there is a third possibility. He is deceived and finds out before he dies.
4. That’s the worst world of the three. But this does not show that the second (undeceived) world is not better than the first. And this means that objective worth is important to Alan.

E. The postmodernist is questioning the relevance of the “objective” view, outside both worlds.
1. What do other possible worlds matter if they are never realized, he is saying?
2. But if one takes wisdom or metaphysics seriously, then unrealized worlds do matter.
3. As the great twentieth-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke has said, other imagined worlds do “strangely concern us.”
4. We are creatures of fantasy, myth, and storytelling for a reason.
5. It is an important fact about us that we can stand back and take an objective view of such imagined worlds. In this way, we come to recognize the “objective worth” of things.

III. The Alan story shows one dimension of the complex notion of objective worth. But there is another dimension. To illustrate, we consider another example.

A. The Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem has written a fascinating novel about a planet called Solaris.
1. This planet is entirely covered by a swirling ocean with astonishing powers, which seems to be alive.
2. Among other things, this living ocean can conjure up what seem to be real figures from the past of the human visitors studying it from platforms above it.
3. In the case of the story’s hero, it conjures up his long-dead ex-wife.
4. They renew their relationship, until the hero realizes it is not his real wife but a phantom conjured up out of his unconscious mind by the ocean.
5. We can imagine that if he had dearly loved his wife, this realization would be crushing. To love something, St. Augustine said, is to want it to be for its own sake. This connects objective reality with objective worth.
6. The hero realizes she is not resurrected as he had thought and this is initially crushing to him.

B. This example illustrates how the inner life of conscious thought is important for objective worth.
1. If the hero on Solaris cared only about the outer appearance of the wife, what she could do for him, the phantom wife would have been just as good.
2. The phantom wife was as good a conversationalist and lover and in every other way indistinguishable from the outside.
3. But of course she is not the same from the inside; this is what he crushingly realizes.
4. What we want to be real when we love is the way the others are in their subjectivity, their inner life, what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls their “inscape.”
5. Otherwise, we do not have a person, but a mere simulacrum.

IV. There are thus two dimensions of objective worth, which I call “worthiness for glory” and “worthiness for love.”

A. The first dimension—worthiness for glory—is represented by the Alan story.
1. In a wonderfully succinct definition, medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas defined “glory” as “clear recognition with praise” (“Gloria est clara notitia cum laude”).
2. That is what Alan wanted for his artistic work—clear recognition with praise, and it is what most of us would like for our deeds and accomplishments in life, whatever they may be.

B. But we are not merely talking about glory itself here, but about the objective worthiness for it.
1. Alan did not want all that adulation based on false premises. He wanted his paintings to be objectively worthy of it.
2. Alfred North Whitehead has said that the problem with actual glory, honor, and esteem is that they require “an audience fit to render it.” And that audience is often lacking.
3. In a “celebrity” culture like our own, recognition by others and actual worth are severely distorted, or sundered. This is yet another consequence of the sunderings of modernity (fact and value).

C. The second dimension of objective worth—worthiness for love—is represented by the Solaris story.
   1. The desire for objective worth in this sense is represented by the desire to be worthy of the kind of love we imagine to be bestowed on the ex-wife by the hero in Solaris.
   2. We sometimes describe this as worthiness to be loved for our own sakes and not merely for what we can do for others, not merely as the phantom wife might be loved as a sex object or conversational partner.
   3. Note that for this kind of love, as with Alan, our own subjective happiness is not all that matters, but the objective reality of something else.

V. In the remainder of the lecture, we recount certain further themes about these two dimensions of objective worth.
   A. We consider, for example, the role of such notions as glory, love, and worth in connection with certain theological and religious doctrines held in the West concerning the love of God and glory due to God. God was thus the paradigm of objective reality and worth combined.
   B. We also note that the two aspects of objective worth are connected to two aspects of the self or person.
      1. Glory, or clear recognition with praise, is related to the outer or public self, the roles, projects, accomplishments, and achievements, which (like Alan and his paintings) we identify and want to be worthy of recognition by others.
      2. Whereas love (as in the Solaris story) is connected to the inner or private self, i.e., to the inner life or inscape.
      3. We are only one self, to be sure. But it is important to understand these two aspects of ourselves to fully understand objective worth.
      4. This point is illustrated by a final example about Johann Sebastian Bach and a mysterious set of crystals that could produce music as beautiful as Bach’s.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Lem, Solaris.

Questions to Consider:
1. If objective worth consists of these two dimensions, why do you think that is so? Can you think of any other dimensions that might be involved different from these two when persons think about the objective significance of their lives?
2. One of the consequences of taking objective worth seriously, in either of the dimensions discussed in this lecture, is that subjective happiness is no longer regarded as the only or final measure of value. How does that conclusion follow from both the stories of Alan and Solaris? Or does it follow? Is that conclusion in conflict with any of the modern ethical theories we have discussed in previous lectures of this series?
Lecture Twenty-Three
The Mosaic of Value

Scope: This lecture turns to the question of how anyone could know, if at all, what has objective worth—what is truly worthy of glory and love. The mind boggles at such questions, and often the problem is that the questions have to be asked in different ways. We cannot know what has such worth—if “know” means know with certainty. The proper question to ask is how we should aspire to know that anything is truly worthy of glory or love, and this question can be addressed. The lecture attempts to address it for the two dimensions of objective worth—love and glory—respectively.

The discussion of worthiness for love leads back to ethical ideas previously discussed in these lectures and to the ideas of the uniqueness and dignity that emerged from the Solaris story of the previous lecture. The discussion of worthiness for glory, or clear recognition with praise, leads back to ideas about practices, traditions and forms of life, such as MacIntyre’s (of Lecture Twelve), in which various kinds of excellences and internal goods are pursued. This discussion in turn leads to the idea of a mosaic of value, which links the discussion of objective worth in this lecture to objective truth in Lecture Twenty-One. Finally, we consider the relations between the two dimensions of objective worth—glory and love—by exploring the Faust legend and other examples, the significance of which can be traced to deep questions about the meaning and worth of life.

Outline

I. How do we determine what is truly worthy of glory and love—that is, how do we determine what has objective worth?
   A. It is not enough to cite worldly glory or fame or love, which may be fraudulent or based on deception.
      1. Objective worth is worth from all points of view, whether or not it is recognized as such in all points of view.
      2. It may be compared in this regard to objective truth.
      3. It should not count against the objective worth of Beethoven’s music that tone-deaf persons cannot appreciate it any more than it counts against the truth of Einstein’s theory of relativity that mathematical illiterates cannot understand it.
   B. But then, how do we know anything has objective worth?
      1. The mind boggles at such deep questions, and it is frequently the case that this is because the question has to be posed in another way.
      2. The beginning of an answer is that we do not know if anything has such worth—if “know” means know with certainty.
      3. The question should be: how do we aspire to know that something is truly worthy of glory or love?
      4. To ask this is to ask what we can do to seek it, as scientists do experiments and look for the best available theories, without which we would have to abandon hope of attaining the goal.

II. Consider objective worthiness for love first.
   A. It is beyond our human capacity to do something that will guarantee our objective worthiness for being loved.
      1. Yet there is something we can do, if we aspire to such worth, without which we would have to abandon hope of attaining it.
      2. That is, we can ourselves strive to love and respect others to the degree possible.
      3. This will not guarantee worthiness to be loved by all, but it is that without which such worthiness cannot be objectively valid.
      4. If we exploit, cheat, marginalize, enslave, or ethnically cleanse other persons or groups, there is no reason why those others should love or respect us.
      5. Nor will it be possible for third parties to love us and them too. We will not be objectively worthy of love.
   B. To treat all others this way, one might object, is an ideal that is impossible to perfectly attain.
      1. Yes, but it is the striving or questing for it to the degree possible that makes the difference.
2. Michel de Montaigne is quoted once again in support of this. His image is that ideals are like the stars that guided the ancient mariners.

C. This accounts for the connection between objective worth and the Ends Principle, or the wide version of the Golden Rule.
   1. To treat all others in this way in the hope of being objectively worthy is to treat them with respect or dignity, as ends in themselves, not as mere means to be used or exploited.
   2. Such dignity was linked in the previous lecture to our uniqueness as persons.
   3. The idea was that there is nothing equivalent with which they could be replaced, as the Bach crystals replaced Bach or the phantom wife on Solaris replaced the real wife.
   4. To treat someone as an end is to treat them as irreplaceable in this way—as worthy of being for their own sakes.

D. This provides the deeper meaning for the retreatants’ persistence on the path of openness in the face of pluralism and uncertainty.
   1. The answer lies in their continuing aspiration toward wisdom, which includes the desire to understand and to seek to attain objective worth as well as objective truth.
   2. Aspiration involves more than the desire for high ideals and the hope of attaining them; it involves a persistent striving or quest for them.

III. We now turn to the objective worthiness for glory, or clear recognition with praise.
   A. This is also related to the idea of aspiration. But new ideas are involved as well.
      1. Glory, or clear recognition with praise for one’s deeds or achievements, is a cultural notion.
      2. It has significance in the context of forms of life that give specific content to the human quest by conferring meaning on one’s deeds or accomplishments.

   B. This is best explained in terms of MacIntyre’s notions of “practices” and “traditions,” which have a place in the quest for value, as you might guess.
      1. These notions can be reviewed from Lecture Twelve.
      2. Practices (social activities with standards of excellence through which specific human goods are pursued) include such things as medicine, architecture, physics, farming, painting, music, etc.
      3. Internal goods to practices are those that are specific to the practice—for example, the internal good of violin making is making a certain kind of instrument with beautiful sound.

   C. The search for objective worth in the form of glory or “clear recognition with praise” is intimately related to the pursuit of internal goods within practices.
      1. This does not mean that standards of excellence are always clear or definitive.
      2. MacIntyre emphasizes that practices change and develop and, when they do so, they become traditions.
      3. A tradition, as he says, is a continuing argument over time and generations about what is worth pursuing.

   D. There is a connection here between the desire for objective worth through glory and the desire humans have for roots—a historically defined sense of belonging to traditions, communities, and forms of life (Lecture Seven).
      1. If we lack roots in practices, traditions, and forms of life, we lack the contexts in which excellences have meaning.
      2. Imagine trying to adequately assess Shakespeare’s excellence apart from the English language, Einstein’s apart from the history of physics, Paganini’s if there were no violins, or Michael Jordan’s outside of basketball.
      3. Roots and forms of life provide the soil in which to plant the seeds of glory.
      4. The human desire for roots is not just for solidarity, but a desire to find meaning in life.

IV. But there would appear to be a paradox here. If the pursuit of glory takes place within finite traditions and forms of life, how can the internal excellences produced have objective worth from all points of view?
   A. By way of comparison, consider the case of objective truth discussed in the previous lecture.
      1. New York was described from different points of view by the weatherman, society columnist, social historian, and so on.
2. We could nonetheless talk about the objective truth of the “real” New York as the summation of what was correctly described from the different points of view.

B. Just as there need not be one and only one true way to describe a city, so there need not be one true way to be good or excellent.
   1. Bach is excellent in one way, Einstein in quite another, Shakespeare in another.
   2. To fully understand their diverse excellences, one would have to be initiated into different practices and traditions (Bach’s polyphony, Einstein’s physics, Shakespeare’s diction).
   3. But this is no argument against the objective worth of their excellences from all points of view, any more than it is an argument against the objective truth of quantum physics that you have to be initiated into the arcane language of physics to fully appreciate it.
   4. Objective worth may therefore also be the summation of all that is excellent and worthy in different practices or forms of life.

C. To illustrate this, an image is suggested of a mosaic of value.
   1. Mosaics are large pictures or designs created by putting together smaller pieces of colored stones or glass.
   2. The objective Good we may view as the whole mosaic while the inlaid pieces are the various excellences within different practices and forms of life.
   3. The meaning of your life or mine, insofar as we seek objective worth through clear recognition with praise is to be a piece of that larger mosaic of value.
   4. We must do it in our limited and finite ways (in our own practices and forms of life) but this does not prevent what we do from having objective worth in the larger mosaic.

V. One final issue is considered in this lecture: how are the two dimensions of objective worth—worthiness for love and glory—related?
   A. Might love be sacrificed in the pursuit of glory?
      1. Yes. Perhaps the most relevant case of this is the legend of Faust, who sold his soul to the devil in pursuit of worldly glory, treating others cruelly, like the maiden Gretchen, along the way.
      2. The Faust legend—so central to Western consciousness—is another one of those legends that probes deeply into the human quest for meaning.
      3. In this case, the myth touches upon the two aspects of objective worth, love and glory.
   B. We conclude by exploring the relation between the two aspects of objective worth in terms of Faust and other examples: Raphael or Bach and alien creatures that come across their works.
      1. The result of considering these examples is that while love and glory can be pursued separately, there is an interconnection between them.
      2. In an unusual and indirect way, worthiness for glory from all points of view depends on worthiness for love; conversely, worthiness for love represents an opening toward the worthiness for glory.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Postmodernist thought argues that excellences in various practices (and hence glory) are merely arbitrarily defined by the practitioners of those practices and are not objective. For example, the great figures of the literary “canon” of the West are merely those that influential figures have chosen. The canon of great books we teach in our universities could very well be different, since it is arbitrary. Do you agree?
2. Games such as chess and basketball are practices in MacIntyre’s sense. The rules in such games were arbitrarily drawn up. Does this mean that the excellence of chess champion Gary Kasparov or basketball star Michael Jordan is merely arbitrary and not objective—that they are not worthy of clear recognition with praise (glory)
from all points of view for their excellence? What about Big Blue, the IBM computer that defeated Kasparov in chess? Is Big Blue worthy of similar glory? Would this trivialize the idea of objective worth?
Lecture Twenty-Four

Religion and Meaning in a Pluralist Age

Scope: This lecture turns finally to the issue of religion and the future of religious belief in a potential new Axial Period. Two trends have made religious belief problematic in the modern age. One is the fact itself of a plurality of religions. In a world of conflicting religions, thoughtful persons naturally wonder about the truth of their own beliefs. The second trend is the pervasive secularization of everyday life. Many trends in the modern world tend to undermine the sense of sacredness, which historians of religion tell us is essential to religious ways of viewing the world.

In order to explore the future of religious belief in light of these trends, the lecture notes that religion is not just a theory of reality (like a science or metaphysics). It is also a theory of values that is embodied in a way (or path) of life. Moreover, historians of religion tell us that there is a tendency in religions for the highest value and highest reality to converge. This is illustrated from various world religions, East and West. This convergence in turn provides clues about how one goes about seeking objective truth in religion and how that truth is related to objective worth. The convergence also provides clues about the relation of religion to ethics, to the sacred, and to searches in the realm of aspiration, or quests. The lecture concludes with some final reflections on the future of religious belief in a potential new Axial Period.

Outline

I. Our final topic concerns religion and the prospects and difficulties of religious belief in a new Axial Period.
   A. Difficulties associated with religious pluralism have played a significant role in these lectures.
      1. Conflicts between religious beliefs following the Protestant Reformation played an important role in the West’s confrontation with pluralism (Lecture Three).
      2. Modern philosophers sought new foundations for ethics and objective values without appealing to religious authority, because religions and religious authorities conflicted (Lectures Six to Eleven).
      3. The distinction between public and private morality in modern free societies is needed to deal with conflicting religious and non-religious views about moral matters, such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, gambling, and the like (Lectures Sixteen and Seventeen); these conflicts have become the substance of our culture wars.
      4. The different religions of the world were invited to the retreat in Lecture Twenty along with non-believers in order to try to reach some agreement on fundamental questions of value.
   B. But we have not yet directly addressed the question of the rationality of, and prospects for, religious belief in a pluralistic age. That is the task of this lecture.

II. Two trends have made religious belief problematic in the modern age.
   A. One is the fact of a plurality of religions.
      1. In a world of different and conflicting religions, thoughtful persons naturally wonder which one is true and wonder about the truth of their own beliefs.
      2. The question of the woman on Perelandra was whether God allowed some people to live one way (follow one set of rules) and other people to live a different way.
      3. The corresponding question in religion is whether God (or the Supreme Reality) allows some persons to seek the ultimate goal through one religion or way of life and others to seek it in different ways.
      4. Relativism does not necessarily follow from such pluralism, of course—in religion any more than in ethics.
      5. The mere existence of many religions does not exclude the possibility that one is right and others, wrong. But pluralism does create uncertainty.
   B. The second trend affecting religious belief today is the pervasive secularization of everyday life.
      1. The distinction between sacred and secular (or merely worldly) things—places, books, holy days, bonds (like matrimony), vocations or callings (versus mere jobs or careers) is essential to religion, according to historians of it, such as Mircea Eliade (author of The Sacred and the Profane).
      2. Many trends in the modern world tend to undermine this sense of sacredness.
3. We cite two Nobel laureates in literature on this point, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz and Polish-Jewish novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer.

C. Two opposed reactions are common in the world today to these trends.
   1. One is an orthodox or fundamentalist retrenchment. “Stick fast to your own beliefs and sacred texts. Brook no deviation from them. Claim they are the truth and you know they are the truth.”
   2. The opposite reaction is a secular drift toward a humanist skepticism or secular humanism that rejects religion altogether.

D. The question to be explored in this lecture is whether these are the only options for those who wish to continue believing religiously (like Milosz and Singer) and yet are well aware of the difficulties posed by modern pluralism and uncertainty.

III. To explore this question we first look more deeply at the nature of religion.
   A. A religion is not just a theory of reality (like science or metaphysics), though it is that. It is also a theory of value embodied in a way (or path) of life.
      1. Thus, Buddhists speak of the Noble Eightfold Path or Way.
      2. A central notion of Chinese religious traditions, both Confucianism and Taoism is the Tao, which literally means the “Way”—both the way of the universe and the way for humans to live.
      3. The Hindu tradition speaks of different yogas (of knowledge, devotion, works, or meditation), literally disciplines, or paths, toward liberation.

   B. Moreover, historians of religion have suggested that, at the summit of their beliefs, religious theories of reality and of value—the supreme reality and the supreme good (summum bonum)—tend to converge.
      1. In Hinduism, the highest values, Sat, Chit, Ananda (infinite being, consciousness, and bliss) are identified with the highest reality, Brahman.
      2. In Taoism, the highest value of creative quietude (wu wei) is exemplified most fully in the supreme reality (Tao), so that to exemplify that value is to be brought into harmony with the Tao or Way of the universe.
      3. In Christianity, the supreme reality is God, the supreme value, love, and we are familiar with the formula “God is Love.”

   C. The point of this convergence of reality and value (differently construed in different religions) is that one can seek to know the supreme reality by seeking the supreme value, by living a certain way, since the two ultimately converge.
      1. This provides a clue about how the objective truth is sought in religion.
      2. If the supreme reality sought is objectively real (from all points of view), then the supreme value through which that supreme reality is sought, and with which it converges, must be objectively worthy (from all points of view) as well.
      3. To seek objectivity for one’s point of view, it is necessary to seek objective worth for one’s way of life.

IV. Significant implications follow about the relation of religion to ethics, to the sacred and to searches in the realm of aspiration.
   A. As argued in the previous lecture, objective worthiness for recognition and love from all points of view requires striving to recognize and love all others in turn—to the degree possible.
      1. It should not surprise us therefore that many religions affirm some version of the Golden Rule—doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.
      2. Nor should it surprise us that many affirm traditional commandments against killing, harming, cheating, or otherwise exploiting others.
      3. This is how ethical action is related to religious belief. It is by doing such things that one demonstrates the objective worth of one’s way of life and thereby (given the assumed convergence) the objective reality of its goal.

   B. The idea of the sacred, which is central to religion, is related to objective worth as well.
      1. The role of the sacred in religion is what is sometimes called the “hallowing” of life.
      2. This means that everyday things or events (say a marriage or a calling) are given significance that goes beyond the interests of the parties immediately involved.
3. This is illustrated by a marriage ceremony among the Ngaju people of South Borneo.
4. The point is that sacred undertakings, unlike secular ones, must not have mere relative worth for the parties involved, but universal worth from the point of view of the universe. They must have objective worth.

C. Third, this assumed convergence of objective reality and objective worth places the search for religious truth firmly in the domain of searches in the realm of aspiration.
1. Given our necessary finiteness and embeddedness in limited points of view, objective reality and objective worth are objects of aspiration.
2. We can aspire to them and seek them, but not be certain of attainment (at least not in this life). If we had certainty, there would be no room for faith.
3. This finiteness or embeddedness of the human condition is not the discovery of postmodernists. It is recognized in the religious traditions themselves.

V. But what are we to say about the conflicting claims of religion concerning supreme reality and value?
A. Are there perhaps different “ways” to be saved?
1. Some religions, especially Eastern ones, have acknowledged this possibility.
2. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna says “humans come to me in different ways, but whatever path they choose is mine.”
3. Gandhi and others who were deeply influenced by these traditions, insisted that there were many paths up the mountain, so to speak, to the one Truth.
B. But of course other religions say they have the sole truth and are the only way.
1. There is no simple reconciliation of these claims. If there is an objective truth of the matter, some must be right and some wrong.
2. But, while acknowledging this, it may also be true that, given our finiteness, we will not know with certainty until the search or quest is over. Short of that we see “through a glass darkly.”
C. A distinction is therefore needed between having the truth and having the whole truth.
1. Physicists once quarreled about whether light consisted of particles or waves. For it to be both seemed a contradiction.
2. But it turned out that both sides were right in a way. Light is both particle and wave. Yet one could not understand how it could be so without a higher understanding previously beyond them.
3. Both sides were previously right in what they affirmed, but wrong in claiming to have the whole story, like the blind men and the elephant in the old Buddhist tale.

VI. Can humans learn to think of religious faith in this way?
A. Can they think of it as an object of aspiration, not of certain knowledge?
B. Can they think of their faith as having an indispensable part of the mosaic of truth, without requiring that they have the whole of it?
C. Can they think of adherents of other religions as having enough of that truth from angles different than their own to be saved?
D. Can they accept the claim of Enlightenment dramatist Gotthold Lessing that no religion has the whole truth, only God has the whole truth?
E. Can they do all this and yet hold as devotedly to the truth of their own beliefs as when—living in moral innocence—they believed with certainty that their religion had the whole truth?
F. I do not know. We may not yet be ready for this. But these are among the central questions of a new Axial Period, the motto of which might well be: Aude aspirare sapire—dare to aspire to know.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Milosz, The Land of Ulro.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Do you think the convergence of objective truth and objective worth described in this lecture throws light on the nature of religion and religious belief? Or does it, in your view, paint a misleading picture of what religion is all about?

2. What is your answer to the questions about the future of religious belief asked at the end of the lecture (in section VI of this outline)? Do you think religious faith can be understood in the ways suggested by the questions without being undermined altogether? Or should it be understood in some other way?
Timeline

1492................................. Columbus’ discovery of the new world.
1510................................. Bartolome de las Casas arrives in the Caribbean among the earliest European settlers in the new world.
1517................................. Martin Luther publicly denounces the practice of indulgences; beginning of the Protestant Reformation.
1543................................. Publication of Copernicus’ work placing the sun at the center of the universe.
1583................................. Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci arrives in China; his catechism written ten years later started the “rites controversy” about the relation of Chinese ideas of the supreme reality to the Christian conception of God.
1610................................. Assassination of Henri IV, king of France.
1618................................. Beginning of the Thirty Years War.
1632................................. Galileo’s Dialogue Concerning Two Chief World Systems defending the Copernicus system against Aristotle’s cosmology.
1641................................. Rene Descartes’ Meditations.
1651................................. Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan.
1677................................. Baruch Spinoza’s Ethics.
1687................................. Isaac Newton’s Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy.
1689................................. John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Second Treatise on Government.
1716................................. G. W. Leibniz’ Treatise on the Theology of the Chinese.
1721................................. Baron de Montesquieu’s Persian Letters.
1740................................. David Hume’s Treatise on Human Nature.
1751................................. Hume’s An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.
1759................................. Adam Smith’s Theory of the Moral Sentiments.
1762................................. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s The Social Contract.
1776................................. L’Abbe L’Epee’s emancipation proclamation for the deaf; Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations; founding of United States of America.
1781................................. Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason.
1788................................. Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason.
1789................................. Jeremy Bentham’s Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation.
1807................................. G. W. F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit.
1848................................. The Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.
1859................................. Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species.
1860................................. John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty.
1886................................. Friedrich Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil.
1911................................. Principia Mathematica of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead.
1943................................. Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness.
1971 ................................................ John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice.*
1981 ................................................ Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue.*
absolute value: See value.

aspiration: from the Latin *aspirare*, which means literally “to breathe forth,” but also “to have a fixed desire or longing for something” and “to seek to attain it.” These lectures speak of an “aspiration toward wisdom,” which means a desire and seeking to know what is true and worth striving for in the nature of things.

basic value experiences: experiences such as joy, gladness, pride, delight, sensory pleasure, and enjoyment which we think of as good in the first instance unless they are overridden in some higher dimension of value. Initial human experiences of good as opposed to evil come through such experiences. Hence they comprise the first dimension of value. See first-dimensional value.

categorical imperative: a principle stating that something is a right action and therefore ought to be done, whatever its consequences and whatever the desires of the agent may happen to be. See Kant’s categorical imperative.

communism: political view according to which property and the means of production in society should be communally or publicly owned, rather than privately owned.

communitarianism: political view according to which individuals are constituted by the social and communal bonds, institutions, and practices of which they are a part. Their rights and obligations derive from those same communal bonds, institutions, and practices. Communitarians stress the need to be part of communities of shared values with others for human happiness and fulfillment.

disvalue: to say that something is bad in some respect is to say that it is a disvalue (where that something may be anything whatever, e.g., a painful experience, the loss of money, a rainy day, a trait of character, a form of government). Like values, disvalues may be subjective or objective, relative or universal (i.e., absolute), intrinsic or instrumental. For the meaning of these terms, see value.

emotivism: the view that judgments or statements about what is good or evil, right or wrong, are merely expressions of the feelings or emotions of those making the judgments or statements. Emotivism is version of subjectivism of values. See subjectivism (of values).

empiricism: the doctrine that all ideas and all knowledge come through experience. There are no innate ideas or knowledge that precede any sensory experience of the world.

ends principle: “treat all persons (including yourself) in every situation as ends in themselves and never as mere means to your own ends, or to other persons’ ends.” To treat persons as ends in themselves is to respect their purposes and desires, allowing them to pursue their purposes without interference or exploitation. To treat them as means to your ends is to subordinate their purposes to your own, or use them for your ends without concern for their desires.

Enlightenment: a general movement of Western intellectual history associated with the eighteenth century in France, Germany, and other European nations. Attitudes characterizing the Enlightenment (which were not shared by all thinkers of the period, but were held by many influential thinkers) include a distrust of fanaticism, superstition, and authoritarianism (in religion and government); an optimistic faith in the powers of human reason and experimental science to bring human betterment and progress; belief in religious toleration; and belief in individual dignity, freedom, and human rights.

fact/value gap (or the gap between fact and value): the alleged inability to infer from objective facts about a thing that it is good or bad. In short, you cannot derive value (what is good or bad) from mere fact.

final cause (*telos* in Greek): in Aristotle’s philosophy, the goal or end or purpose, which each thing strives for in virtue of its nature or essence. Alternatively, “that for the sake of which” something exists, or something occurs (its end or purpose).

first-dimensional value: the experiential dimension of value that includes basic value experiences such a joy, delight, enjoyment, sensory pleasure, and the like, through which we initially define good as distinct from evil. See basic value experiences.
fourth-dimensional value: non-relative or universal worth from every point of view; that which is good, not merely from the points of view of some particular persons or groups, but from the points of view of all persons and groups, whether they all recognize the worth or not. Alternative terms for such value are “objective worth” or “universal worth.” See objective worth.

glory: clear recognition with praise for one’s deeds or accomplishments. This definition is taken from medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas, who defines it thus “gloria est clara notitia cum laude,” “glory is clear recognition with praise.” Worthiness for glory from all points of view is one of the two dimensions of objective worth. See objective worth.

harm principle (also called Mill’s harm principle, after John Stuart Mill): “the liberty of individuals can be justifiably limited by law or government or society only to prevent their doing harm to others.”

hypothetical imperative: a principle stating what a person ought to do, if he or she wants to fulfill a certain desire or purpose.

inscape: term borrowed from poet Gerard Manley Hopkins meaning the inner life of a person, the world as the person subjectively experiences it.

instrumental value: See value.

intrinsic value: See value.

Kant’s categorical imperative: the supreme principle of morality, or moral law, according to Immanuel Kant. Kant gives several formulations of the principle, of which two are discussed in these lectures. The first formulation: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (for everyone to follow). The second formulation (also called the principle of humanity as an end): “Act so that you always use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of every other, never merely as a means, but at the same time as an end.” See categorical imperative.

Kantian ethics (or Kantianism in ethics): the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant which is a rationalist theory, based on an appeal to reason, and which holds that the “categorical imperative” is the supreme principle of morality. See rationalist alternative in ethics and Kant’s categorical imperative.

legal moralism principle: the liberty-limiting principle that would justify legal restrictions of activities (such as obscenity or pornography) which violate community moral standards as determined by the average member of the community or the person “in the jury box.”

libertarianism: political doctrine which advocates maximal individual liberty and minimal government regulation of the social and economic activities of citizens.

liberty-limiting principles: principles which define the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government. See harm principle, legal moralism principle, offense principle, and paternalism principle.

metanarrative: term used by French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard to designate any grand philosophical or religious view of the world which is supposed to be true for all times and from all points of view. Lyotard defines postmodernism as the rejection of all metanarratives. See postmodernism.

modernity: the period of Western civilization from the end of the Middle Ages to the present, which was initiated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by such movements as the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the birth of modern science, and the rise of capitalism.

moral innocence: the secure feeling that the rights and wrongs learned in childhood or held by one’s society or religion are the only correct and true ones, unchallengeable and unambiguous.

moral sphere: a sphere of peace and justice where every person can respect every other person, or treat every other person as an end and not as a means. Equivalently, it is the sphere in which the “ends principle” can be followed by everyone. See ends principle.

objective value: See value.
objective worth: non-relative (or fourth-dimensional) value from every point of view. Objective worth has two dimensions: objective worthiness for glory or clear recognition with praise from all points of view and objective worthiness of respect and love from all points of view. See fourth-dimensional value and glory.

offense: shocked sensibilities at the violation by the activities of others of one’s deeply held beliefs or views of right and wrong.

offense principle: liberty-limiting principle which defines the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government to prevent them from giving offense to others.

paternalism principle: liberty-limiting principle which defines the conditions under which the liberty of individuals can be restricted by law or government to prevent them from doing harm to themselves.

positivism: the view that science is the source of all the objective knowledge about the world.

principle of humanity as an end: See categorical imperative.

principle of utility (or greatest happiness principle): the central principle of utilitarianism that says that those acts or rules are right, which among the available alternatives, promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals.

practical reason: the capacity to deliberate practically about what we ought to do and how we ought to live.

project of modernity: the project undertaken by modern philosophers of finding ways to justify universal values, especially in the area of ethics, and thereby overcome relativism, without merely appealing to religious or other authorities or to final causes in nature.

pluralism: the existence of a multiplicity of conflicting points of view about good and evil, right and wrong, and the meaning of life, in one’s social environment.

postmodernism (in philosophy): contemporary movement of thought characterized by skeptical attitudes toward the traditional methods and goals of philosophy. Postmodernist philosophers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard reject any grand metaphysical or philosophical theories (“metanarratives,” he calls them) that are supposed to be true for all times, persons, and places. Postmodernists emphasize that we necessarily view the world through some finite perspective, a conceptual scheme or language, a culture or tradition, which we cannot rise above in order to make general claims about reality and value that are true for everyone.

practices: term used by ethical theorist Alasdair MacIntyre to designate cooperative human activities through which humans seek to realize certain goods by attaining standards of excellence defined for the activity—for example, medicine, law, farming, physics, architecture, music, sports, and so on.

private morality (or particular morality): what a person believes is the right way to live for himself or herself, and perhaps for all others as well.

public morality: what we owe others, even if they disagree with our private or particular morality.

public morality principle: society and government have a legitimate interest in protecting and encouraging attitudes, practices, institutions, and social conditions that tend to sustain a moral sphere in which persons can respect one another, despite their differing values.

quests: See searches in the realm of aspiration.

rationalist alternative in ethics: ethical view attributed to Immanuel Kant and others, according to which principles of right and wrong are based on, and known through, reason, and not through sentiments or desires.

reciprocal altruism: assisting or sacrificing for others with the expectation that they will assist and sacrifice for you in similar circumstances when you are in need.

relative value: See value.

relativism (of values): the view that all values are relative, i.e., good merely for particular persons or groups (societies, cultures) or from some particular points of view, not for all persons or from all points of view.
searches in the realm of aspiration (or quests): seeking something of great importance (such as the Holy Grail or the final truth about nature) the attainment of which requires patience, skill, and disciplined effort, but which attainment can never be assured or certain.

second-dimensional value: value that results from human purposive activity through which humans seek various practical or utilitarian ends or goals. Second-dimensional value consists in the fulfillment of the purposes of such activities and consequent satisfaction of the desires of the agents.

sentimentalist alternative (in ethics): ethical view attributed to David Hume, among others, according to which ethical and other judgments about right or wrong, virtue and vice, are based upon sentiments of approval or disapproval that are rooted in common human sentiments of sympathy and benevolence.

social contract theory: a theory of ethics or politics according to which rules of right or wrong, or principles of justice, or the laws governing a society, are based upon, and justified by, a contract or mutual agreement made (explicitly or tacitly) by those persons who are to be subject to the rules or laws. Ideal social contract theories (of which the theory of John Rawls is an example) impose certain prior constraints upon the contractors (about what they can know or whether they desire that all should willingly agree) designed to ensure that the agreement will be fair. Hobbesian social contract theories impose only the requirement that the contractors rationally seek their own enlightened self-interest.

socialism: a political view which advocates public (collective or government) control of the means of production in society and redirecting the use of those means for the general welfare.

sociobiology: the systematic study of the biological basis for all social behavior.

state of nature: in social contract theories, the natural condition humans live in before they make a social contract and form governments or civil societies.

subjective value: See value.

subjectivism (of values): the view that judgments or statements about good or evil, right or wrong, are not true or false descriptions of objective facts in the world, but are merely expressions of the personal feelings, attitudes, recommendations, or directives of those making the judgments or statements. Emotivism is a version of a subjectivist view. See emotivism.

sunderings of modernity: the severings of (1) scientific explanation from purpose, (2) fact from value, and (3) theoretical inquiry about the cosmos from practical inquiry about the good, that were brought about by the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

theoretical reason: reasoning about matters of fact or about what is the case and why it is the case.

third-dimensional value: value that is embodied in and derives from the pursuit of various excellences of achievement and virtues in different practices and forms of life; for example, excellence in painting or calligraphy, or virtues such as fidelity to one’s family or loyalty to friends.

universal value: See value.

utilitarianism: ethical theory according to which acts or rules are to be judged right on the basis of whether they accord with the principle of utility, that is, whether they promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals affected by the acts or rules. Act-utilitarians apply this criterion to judge the rightness of individual actions. Rule-utilitarians apply the criterion to judge general rules, principles, or policies.

value: This term is used throughout these lectures in the broadest sense. To say that something is good in some respect is to say that it is a value (where that something may be anything whatever, e.g., an enjoyable experience, a painting, the fulfillment of a purpose, a trait of character, a form of government). Different theories of value offer different interpretations of what it means to say that something is good. For example, values are subjective, if someone’s saying they are good merely means that the person approves of them or desires them or feels (or thinks) they are good. Values are objective if there are facts about them that make it fitting or right or correct to approve or desire them, or think they are good. Values may also be relative (if they are good only for particular persons or groups or from some points of view) or they may be universal or absolute (if they are good for all persons or from all points of view, i.e., good period). Values are intrinsic if they are desired (or fittingly desired) for their own sake.
and not for the sake of something else (e.g., happiness was so desired, according to Aristotle). Values are instrumental if they are desired (or fittingly desired) for the sake of something else, or as a means to some other end (e.g., money, if it is not desired for itself, but for what it can buy).

**virtue**: morally praiseworthy traits of character, such as courage, honesty, loyalty, generosity, and the like. Sometimes the term is used more broadly to mean praiseworthy traits or excellences of character of any kinds, moral or non-moral.

**virtue ethics**: ethical theories in which the virtues, or praiseworthy traits of character, are fundamental. In such theories, claims about other moral concepts, such as right action and correct rules of behavior, are based upon, or derivative from, claims about virtuous traits of character.

**vulgar relativism** (of values): the view that no point of view about what is good or right is any better or more correct than any other.

**wisdom**: the name given by Aristotle (sophia is the Greek term) to “first philosophy” or “metaphysics,” which seeks to know “what is” (real) and the fundamental principles or causes (or explanations) of all things (answers to the question “why?”). Wisdom also designates the understanding attained by this study, thus it consists in the understanding of both (1) what is objectively real and (2) what is objectively good or worth striving for in the nature of things.
FIGURES

Figure 1 — The Moral Sphere
(Lecture Thirteen, Paragraph IV.D.4)

Figure 2 — The (Moral) Sphere of Peace
(Lecture Fifteen, Paragraph IV.A)

1 = Moral Sphere
2 = Moral Sphere breakdown, guilty party identified.
3 = Moral Sphere breakdown, conflict of interest with no guilty party.
Figure 3 – Value Migration
Top image – Totalitarian State
Bottom image – Democratic State
(Lecture Eighteen, Paragraph I.B.4)