Philosophy as Quest

Notes to the Introductory Philosophy Student

Part II

Philosophy is frequently categorized into various fields depending on the main topic under consideration. The fields really do overlap and there is always some debate among philosophers over how the discipline should be organized. For the purpose of learning about philosophy for the first time, it is useful to consider the traditional fields and to sample the types of problems found in them. As you read this please do not assume that you must memorize all that is said here or understand all of the issues covered. This piece is an overview and may main objective is to acquaint you with the kinds of problems that philosophers have typically deal with over the last three thousand years or so. Mostly I want to emphasize in each case the importance of reasoned thought as the philosophic mode of addressing topics. Philosophers are usually not satisfied with describing the world or relating a history, they seek to discover important truths. Among the truths that philosophers have long considered have to do with aspects of reality that are beyond common experience. Such aspects frequently fall under the philosophic field of metaphysics.

Metaphysics

The word “metaphysics” originates with early commentators on Aristotle who wrote on a wide variety of topics, including a number of works collects under the title “physics” (from the Greek word *physikos* meaning *nature*). The Physics deals with movements of the planets, the laws of motion, the elements of the universe, and many other aspects of the physical world (do you see how that word stays with us as a core concept?) Aristotle’s Physics were regarded as the authoritative explanation of the natural world in Europe all the way to the 16th century. The movement away from Aristotelian authority, led by Descartes and Galileo, is the origin of modern science.

Aristotle also wrote works under the title First Philosophy. He regarded these matters as *first*, not because they should be read or studied before others, but because they are logically prior to conceptually above others. The issues of First Philosophy concern questions such as *What does it mean to exist? How is change possible? What is cause and effect? What is time? What is space?* and others. These questions sound odd to some people if they suppose that such things just are and require no explanation. Aristotle says that he must; “suppose what is called wisdom is to deal with the first causes and the principles of things.” In other words, if we have a mistaken or illusory conception of causality, then all observations about cause-effect in nature will be flawed. The principle of causality is more general and logically prior to our understanding of actual operations of causality in the world.
In the centuries after Aristotle, commentators called his First Philosophy *Metaphysica* which literally means “after the things of nature.” It is a bit confusing to have a philosophy that is both *first* and *after*. The *after* here means that the concerns are further removed from the senses and physical reality, they are matters of pure intellect, and perhaps harder to comprehend than matters that can be directly observed.

Since Aristotle many philosophers have sought to put first things first and much of philosophy became an enterprise of system building. Philosophers would start out with a set of principles that are general enough to direct all other ideas and claims. Some start by laying foundations for the idea of truth and how we can judge an idea true or false; then increasingly complex claims about the reality and the mind are built on those foundations. Some start by clarifying what it is to exist; then build from there to describe what can and cannot be in existence with increasing complexity.

Once of the oldest metaphysical questions is concerned with the concept of existence and is common phrased; “Why is there something instead of nothing?” It is at such a point that some non-philosophers throw up their hands in exasperation exclaiming that what is just is and there is no use in asking such questions! But the philosophical urge is more subtle and powerful than such folks recognize. Metaphysicians usually agree on one principle; *that something cannot come out of nothing*. One thing can change to another and a thing can cease to exist. But it is hard (maybe impossible) to make sense of the notion that things that do exist come into being ex nihlo, or out of absolute nothingness. Indeed, it appears that the only intelligible option is that there has been something in existence for all eternity. That eternally existing something is the ultimate source of all things. This is an metaphysical idea that is common to religion (God is eternal and the creator) and science (matter can neither be created nor destroyed). Well, such is the way some metaphysical thought operates with first principles.

David Hume, 18th century British philosopher, posed a serious challenge to the enterprise of metaphysics in its entirety. Hume viewed philosophy as the effort to explain why we have beliefs that we have. Note that this is a very different goal than that of previous philosophers who sought to explain reality in and of itself. Hume sought to explain the workings of the human mind. In doing so he concluded that statements about matters that are beyond human experience cannot be solved. In other words, the claims of metaphysics are unknowable by the human mind. Hume produced the most powerful form of skepticism - the view that human knowledge is severely limited - yet devised.

Immanuel Kant, 18th century German philosopher, addressed Hume’s challenge and originated a remarkable revolution in philosophy by recasting metaphysics as being not about the ultimate principles of the universe, but rather about the general structure of our thought. Kant regarded concepts such as time, space, and causality as necessary conditions for the operation of the mind.
We cannot suppose that these concepts stand for properties of the universe. Instead we see that
we are mapping the general belief system of the human mind. In this way, all humans share
some aspects of their belief system. After Kant, metaphysics became the project of mapping out
the core conceptual belief system that makes thought and consciousness possible.

Kant sought to separate philosophical metaphysics based in the analysis of concepts from the
open-ended speculations that some people make about the spiritual and supernatural. Much of
what goes under the names metaphysics and metaphysical these days consists of accounts of
spiritual realms populated by angels and the souls of the formerly living, or else various theories
about how the universe works according to occult or spiritual principles. Popular bookstores
have metaphysical sections that offer books on divination, magic, hypnosis, synchronicity, past
lives, and much more. This is not the metaphysics that traditional philosophers study. There is
no reason why the topics and ideas of the spiritual and occult metaphysics should be ruled out of
consideration. However, a brief perusal of the many popular books on contacting dead souls or
bringing luck into your life will show that they are largely descriptive assertions and not reasoned
inquiries. Philosophy, even when reaching beyond the veil of perception and imagination,
always rests on the ability to demonstrate claims based in a well-developed method of reasoning.

**Epistemology**

During 5th century BCE Greece there arose a movement of lecturer/teachers known as the
Sophists. They traveled throughout the Greek city states giving demonstrations of their
considerable intellectual abilities and offering to teach those abilities to others. Many of the
Sophists espoused views of extreme relativism, holding as Protagoras did that “man is the
measure of all things.” Socrates lived in Athens and distinguished himself from the Sophists,
though he was eventually accused of being one. Socrates staunchly opposed relativism, giving
powerful arguments in favor of objective standards of truth, good, justice, and beauty. What
Socrates did claim is that he did not have knowledge of what those objective standards are. He
met a lot of people who claimed to know many things (e.g. what was true, good, just, or
beautiful), though they were never able to demonstrate with certainty what it is that they claimed
to know. Socrates admitted his ignorance. He also asserted that it is better to accept one’s
limitations and recognize ignorance than to live convinced that you have knowledge that you do
not. In this way, Socrates made knowledge a central concern of philosophy. His greatest student
Plato went on to develop that concern into a fundamental area of human thought: epistemology -
the inquiry into what knowledge is, what the conditions for knowledge are, and how we might be
able to determine whether a claim is known or not.

Plato made issues about knowledge the center of just about everything he wrote. He wrote
mostly dialogues which read like plays or transcripts. Socrates is usually a main character in
those dialogues. In the Theatetus, in which Socrates converses with a young man named
Theatetus, the question *What is Knowledge?* is explicitly at the fore. Many theories are
considered, including the relativistic view of Protagoras the Sophist. Characteristically the dialogue does not arrive at a final answer, but a definition of knowledge is produced that has currency to the present: Knowledge is justified, true, belief. In this definition we can see the method of philosophical analysis at work. Knowledge is treated as a complex concept that is made up of three main parts or aspects.

1) Knowledge is belief. So if we are to look for actual instances of knowledge we must start with what it is that people believe. Consider some of your own beliefs as a starting point.

2) Knowledge is true. This is an important addition. It is possible for anyone to believe something even though it is false. History shows that it is possible for most people to maintain a false belief. Have you ever believed something only to find out later that you were mistaken? Plato’s point is that no matter how strongly you believe a claim, that alone will not make it true. We have to check and test our beliefs to find out whether they are true. Not many people are willing to do this.

3) Knowledge is justified. Justification is important because one could have a true belief by sheer luck. To know something is to believe that it is true, to be correct that it is true, and to have strong reasons for believing that it is true. The reasoning that establishes the truth of the belief is its justification. When we ask someone; How do you know that? We are asking for justification of the belief. That is a fair question to ask of yourself. You have some strong beliefs and you are confident that they are true. How do you know that they are? Only if you can answer that question with strong reason, maintained Plato, can you rightly say that your beliefs are knowledge.

Some philosophers took Socrates’ claims of ignorance to be the most important of his discoveries. These philosophers formed a school of thought known as Skepticism. In various forms this is the idea that knowledge as defined by Plato is not possible. For certain areas of belief or perhaps belief altogether, we do not have the justification needed to qualify it as knowledge. The consequence of this view is that however strongly we believe something and however many people believe it, we can still be in error. The influence of skeptical ideas continues to be strong in the present day. A main project of philosophy since Socrates has been to escape the bounds of skepticism. Two of the major approaches that have developed over the millennia are Empiricism and Rationalism.

Empiricists hold that all knowledge must be based in sensory experience. Skeptics tend to be empiricists as they hold that the limits of sensory perception are the limits of possible knowledge. Still, many empiricists do advance theories of knowledge. Indeed, modern scientific method might be considered an empiricist theory of knowledge. John Locke was a 17th century empiricist who regarded the mind as completely empty at birth, he called it a *tabula rasa* (Latin
for blank slate). Incoming information from the senses filled the mind with content such as ideas, thoughts, and beliefs.

Rationalism is characterized by philosophers who hold that there are forms of knowledge which belong to reason alone and have no dependence upon sense experience. Mathematics, geometry, and logic, are areas where pure reason results in knowledge. Some rationalists argue that empirical knowledge depends upon the knowledge that we gain from of reason. On this view, it is necessary for the mind to organize sensory experience into categories and according to principles. Without the pre-existing structure of innate knowledge the incoming sensory information would be chaotic and without order. A contemporary philosopher who maintains a form of rationalism is Noam Chomsky. He began his career as a linguist arguing that there must be a pre-existing language structure in the brain in order for a baby to learn any language at all. If the mind were a tabula rasa at birth, then the structure of language would not take hold in any way that was useful for communication with others.

Empiricism and the associated fields of philosophy of mind and cognitive science have taken a new turn with the dawn of the information age. Computers provide a unique set of challenges in terms of modeling mental processes, re-thinking the characters of knowledge and information, and the pursuit of artificial intelligence. If we can design a machine that reasons, understands, and is self-aware, then those abilities will no longer be unique to the human species (if indeed it is so) and strong models of mental processing including knowledge will provide the explanation. On the other hand, a central problem in the quest for artificial intelligence is how to determine when to say that a machine is able to think. Volumes of philosophy are currently being written in the debate over thinking machines. Personally I believe that this problem is just the start of the issue, because when we do achieve a machine that can think it will probably turn out to be a skeptic (just kidding).

**Ethics**

A recent area related to thinking machines is artificial morality. Some philosophers are creating programs with agents that react to one another. The agents can be endowed with simple principles, such as “always share” or “always steal” or “never share and never steal” and so on. The agents are also capable of self reproduction. Trials are run with various combinations of agents with various combinations of principles. The trial ends when the system becomes dominated by one character of agent or reaches a point of equilibrium. From the outcomes of these trials the philosopher draws conclusions about the viability of a particular principle within a complex and competitive system. [If you care to know more about the fascinating cutting-edge area of artificial morality, see the bibliography at the end of this essay].

Principles are guides to action. That is why the behaviors of agents in an artificial morality trial allow us to draw inferences about the principles of the agents. We normally expect a person’s
actions to agree with their principles. Of course, the world has no shortage of hypocrites and self-deceivers. Ofttimes we see people who claim to hold certain principles even while they are acting in ways entirely contrary to those principles. In such cases I am tempted to say that the hypocrite only pretends to hold the principle s/he asserts while her/his actions reveal the real and hidden beliefs. I also realize that people are more complex than that. It is possible to really believe in a moral principle but to betray oneself (and others) by weakness of will and other inner forces. Some people live in a constant state of self-loathing because they perpetuate a cycle of promising to change through self-control then incrementally giving into contrary conduct (e.g. addiction, anger, violence, procrastination). In the public lives of politicians and celebrities we constantly witness people who conflict in what they profess to be and that they actually are. We might wonder whether there is any a principle that one may hold consistently in thought, word, and action. Such questioning will take us a long way into the study of values and the actions consistent with those values. That study is an area of philosophy traditionally called Ethics or sometimes Moral Philosophy.

Divine Revelation
Every religion has guides and rules for conduct as a major part of its practice. The unique aspect that religious ethics brings to philosophy is the particular theory about how ethical ideas are acquired and justified. For some major religions moral truth is revealed to us (or some of us) directly by a divine authority, often God. This revealed knowledge may be gained through direct contact with God as in prayer or a vision. For most worshipers, the divine law is communicated through sacred texts that were revealed to a prophet or leader. Long ago Moses climbed mount Sinai to receive divine commandments directly from Yahweh then recorded in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Centuries later, Jesus’s words and actions became the subject-matter of the Gospels, both orthodox and censored. The Koran was revealed to Muhammad by an angel gradually over a period of years until his death in 632 C.E. In 1823 the spirit of Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in a dream and led him to the golden plates on which the Book of Mormon were etched in a secret language. In 1955 The Urantia Book, authored by celestial beings as a special revelation to our planet, was delivered by the beings to a Chicago physician who then formed the Urantia Foundation. Devout followers of these religions are serious in taking the moral guides in them as commands from a higher power. The main reason to do good on this theory is because God or the higher power commands it. According to divine command theory, things are morally good solely because of the divine authority’s will and commands. A central idea running throughout accounts of divine revelation is that ultimate moral truth must be received from a higher authority and is never the province of the individual.

In one of his most widely read dialogues, Euthyphro, Plato raised the main question that must be addressed by any ethical theory of divine revelation. The difficult question that Plato raised was this;
Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good
because they are willed by God?
This dual question is problematic for Divine Command Theory because it points out seemingly inescapable contradictions that arise from basing moral values solely on an authority (in what follows I refer to God as the ultimate divine authority, though for whatever religion involved the appropriate source of authority can be invoked).

On the one hand we might suppose that the first answer, *an act is willed by god because it is morally good*, to be consistent with a benevolent God. Yet saying so places the source of goodness as independent of God’s will. If good acts are willed by God because they are morally good, then they must be good before and independent of God’s willing them. They are good in and of themselves. This makes sense because we would hope that a benevolent God would only will the good. But this answer contradicts the Divine Command Theory which states that something is good only because God wills it. God’s will does not make it good. Rather, it’s being good is the reason why God wills it.

The other answer leads to a different difficulty. If something really is good only because God wills it and nothing has goodness independent of God’s will, then devout statements such as “God is good” or God’s will is good” are rendered trivial. “God is good” will reduce to “God is God’s will” and “God’s will is good” will reduce to “God’s will is God’s will.” That is to say, the complete identification of the value of goodness with God’s will serves to remove the value altogether. It is only the will and command that matter and no concern with the goodness or rightness comes in. This sort of approach may still appeal to folks who regard obedience and submission as the primary virtues. Yet, the problems created by reason will not go away because of that. Unquestioning obedience always runs the risk of being obedient to the wrong power, especially if no other gauge to ethical value is available or allowed.

**Conscience**
Many of us have the experience or at least idea of a kind of inner voice that warns us when we struggle with impulses to do wrong. It may not be anything like a voice but just a pause or hesitation. Some people feel the pangs of the conscience long after a wrong has been done. Perhaps you know the experience of flashes of shame over a long past action that no one other than you even knows about. However it is described, the conscience seems to be an experience that has long attended human awareness of right and wrong.

The word “conscience” comes from the Latin *conscientia* meaning "knowledge within oneself" (scientia = knowledge). Paul used the concept in *Acts* 24:16; “I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.” The word conscience was brought into the English language by Joseph Butler in his *Fifteen Sermons upon Human Nature* (1726) in which he sought to ground human morality in the moderation of self-love by the authority of a divinely-produced conscience.
Since it is often conceived as provided by God, the conscience has a role in moral philosophy related to divine command theory. Unlike the traditional authority of scripture and the prophets, the conscience is a very personalized communication of divine ethics. Certainly one need not be religious to experience one’s conscience. Yet, the experience still seems like a source of guidance that is separate from the one’s desires, values, and struggles. My own experience with conscience is like a hunch or intuition; not so much an inner voice as a it like a motion on periphery of my awareness that catches my attention long enough to make a pause in my flow of thought. It is not that my conscience tells me what is right or wrong. Rather it signals me to hold off for a bit and reassess the situation. It in the second look that I see the values involved more clearly. If not for my cautionary conscience stepping in just the moment before I hit the send button, I’d have sent several email messages that I’d later regret. A reliable conscience is a valuable friend.

Psychology recognizes types of human individuals who appear not to have any conscience or moral sense at all. Called sociopaths and psychopaths, such individuals seem to have no concept that causing harm to others is morally significant. Of course, many ordinary people also accept harm to others without any twinge of concern, so long as they are distant or different. We can all see the horrible suffering that wars cause. Still, many of us remain distant and passive observers of these tragedies. In the morning we see on the news that dozens of children were killed by our own military, then go on as if it mattered hardly at all. In war, peoples of different nations regard one another with the passive indifference that the psychopath regards his/her victims. Those who protest the immorality of war tend to be viewed as extremists or fools (if not traitors) by fellow citizens. Perhaps conscience has its limits as a moral guide after all.

Moral skepticism
Some people consider the world and do not find any moral order in it whatever. For the moral skeptic, value judgements have no objective standard by which they can be measured. In some versions of moral skepticism (and there are many varieties) the sentences “that is wrong” or “that is good” are really no more than saying “I don’t like that” and “I like it.” The subjective emotion expression may show something about the person who says it, but that does not make it an observation about objective reality. Moral skeptics often depict cultural debates over moral matters as struggles for power, rather than searches for moral truth.

John Mackie was an 20th century US philosophers who wrote extensively about moral skepticism. One of his tasks was to give an explanation as to why people commonly believe that moral values have objective reality. He built on an observation by David Hume that humans possess a psychological tendency to grant an objective and external status to subjective experiences. For example, everyone can see that bad things happen in the world and that some people do great harm to others. Historically, people of all cultures attribute these misfortunes as due to some substantive agent of evil. Many people believe in an objective self-directed Evil in
the world. Many religions place the course of evil in a supernatural being such as a devil. Mackie explores the tendency of humans to personify their subjective experiences as independently existing beings.

One advantage of personifying evil is that we are able to assign moral responsibility to an outside force. This same tendency takes hold when a nation seeks justification to wage war. You can see this when an opposing nation comes to be identified as an individual, usually the leader, and the war is then described as a moral act being taken against the evil-doer. It is not clear how to assign moral blame to a whole nation. We know how to assign blame to an individual. Therefore, advocates for war always emphasize that the action is not being taken against the people of the nation but only the evil leader. Never mind the cold fact that the people in the war zone end up bearing the brunt of the suffering. The victorious nation always celebrates itself as righteous. Whether it is a sentient being or a human tendency, evil has subtle and deceptive ways of manifesting. I am convinced that evil perpetually needs our cooperation to make it actual.

Moral relativism
A common theory of ethics holds that all values are dependent upon something else for their existence. This sort of theory is broadly known as Moral Relativism. Unlike moral skepticism, moral relativists do assert the existence of good, evil, right, and wrong. What is unique to the relativist is that they see these values are being relative to some other condition or standard. Some relativists hold that the standard of values is the individual. Such folks are inclined to say that disputes over moral values cannot be resolved by reason or experience. The differences between the points of views of individuals may be so great that no common ground can be found. One salient objection to this subjectivist form of relativism is to note that language is a shared activity and that despite difference in points of view, individuals are quite capable of discussing them. When shared aspects of language are taken into consideration it turns out that individual minds have far more in common than is recognized by the individual relativist.

Language is a shared activity, yet differences in languages are main parts of what hold separate cultures apart. Most of the people in the world have never been able to communicate in language (spoken or written) with most of the rest of the people in the world. The Tower of Babel story in Genesis is an account of the impact that cultural separation has upon us. Some ethical thinkers theorize that cultures are also separate in the values and morality that they hold in common. While every culture has systems of value judgement including morality, it appears that one culture may have an entirely different and incompatible value system from another. The problem raised by philosophers is whether there is any objective standard by which the diverse value systems may be judged? Cultural relativists argue that there are no standards of value that are external to cultural standards. That is, cultural standards are the basis of all morality, just as social standards are the basis of all law. In other words, morality is relative to culture. Note that cultural relativism explicitly denies that morality is relative to the individual’s beliefs and values.
Individuals belong to a culture and are subject to its moral standards.

One way to reject moral relativism is to demonstrate that there is a universal moral standard by which all beliefs and conduct can be judged. This view is known as moral absolutism. One way to argue for moral absolutism is to look for universal values that belong to all cultures. For instance, just about every culture that has produced a philosophic literature about ethics has discovered and endorsed the principle known in Western cultures as The Golden Rule. Chinese, Indian, and other expressions of this idea precede the Judeo/Christian texts so it is of no use to advocate a cultural priority on that account. The Golden Rule has many formulations which equate to; *treat other people in the manner in which you want to be treated*. The Golden Rule is known in ethical theory as the Principle of Reciprocity (though that same name is used for other ideas in other disciplines). Basically it is the idea that we should act on our own principles with generality and consistency. So, if I do not want others to steal from me, then my principle includes the idea that stealing is wrong. If I am to hold that principle consistently, then I will hold myself to it as well and not steal from others. We use this principle all of the time, for instance to convince others that they are being unfair to us, for instance; “You wouldn’t like that if I did it to you!” One attractive feature of a universal value such as the Principle of Reciprocity is that it does not mandate or prohibit specific actions. Rather, it is a principle that governs other principles. Thus, it is possible for cultures to maintain local values while still being held to a common standard. This is a complex topic. Suffice it to say here that when we catch someone in a inconsistency, we normally draw the inference that something is wrong with their principles (i.e. an internal contradiction). I don’t have empirical evidence of it, but I do suspect that in every culture hypocrisy is looked upon with disdain.

At many times in history some culture has regarded itself to be the living standard of all morality and truth. Some folks even today may say that they certainly can judge other cultures as substandard simply because they live in the greatest nation on earth. Being born in a particular location and being raised with a certain language and value system is more than enough for such people to consider themselves morally superior to others. This is not idle talk either, because those who live in the great culture (by their own estimation) often have the right to use force to subdue other people to their will. The argument for the right to force is often that being the greatest of cultures obligates one to use force to bring the lesser cultures in line with the correct value system. Numerous wars, persecutions, economic exploitations, and slavery have been practiced according to this superiority theory. You can probably think of several in recent history and even at present.

Cultural relativists point out the historical consequences of the superiority theory as further evidence that values are culturally dependent. When one culture regards itself as a higher moral authority than others, then tolerance fails and oppression begins. Interestingly, this is exactly where a universal moral principle such as the Principle of Reciprocity has clear application.
Imagine, for instance, that an single culture had the economic and military power to subdue any other. If that culture came to view itself as morally superior to others, then it may see itself as having the right to use force to bring change to others. That culture would not see its use of force as wrong, even if many tens of thousands died and suffered as a result. Having a self-image of moral superiority combined with the means to enforce it, such a culture may regard itself as the only culture that had the right to use overwhelming force. Rather than using military force as self-defense, that culture would use war as a means to enforce its will in the world. Of course, many cultures have done this throughout history and the prosecution of war without cause of legitimate self-defense is precisely the traditional idea of an unjust war. In response, the ethical philosopher who maintains that the Principle of Reciprocity is a universal, will argue that if one nation grants itself the right to wage war against those who have not attacked it, then we ought to endorse that right for all nations. Of course, no nation wants to do that. When a culture proclaims itself to be the sole possessor of the right to wage non-defensive war on the basis of its moral superiority to other cultures, we have a clear failure of the Principle of Reciprocity. Such a culture will be moving steadily towards another form of relativism; one far more radical and dangerous than cultural relativism. Of course, such an observation is based in part on claims about the consequences of both actions and principles. One of the great ethical theories of the modern age is strongly based on the matter of consequences.

**Consequentialism**

One way to approach philosophical ethics is to recognize that an individual’s actions may affect other people. All of our actions and perhaps even our beliefs and thoughts have consequences. A consequence is a change in the world that occurs as the result of some action. Often people speak of consequences of actions as if they were purely negative or involved with punishment (e.g. “You need to learn to accept the consequences of your own behavior.”) In the ethical sense the concept of consequences is much broader and less fixed in terms of value judgment. The consequences of your actions may be to save lives (e.g. by giving money to Save the Children) or to make someone happy (e.g. by paying them a sincere compliment). Some actions cause death (e.g. drunk driving) or cause people mental pain (e.g. making a rude comment). Please note that these descriptions have not yet drawn any conclusion as to the value of these consequences or the actions that caused them. In philosophical ethics it is not sufficient to rest on conventional moral standards or gut feeling about value judgements. It may seem obvious to you that saving lives is good and causing death is bad. Moral philosophers do not rest at that sense of the obvious. They want to know and be able to say explicitly with sound reason what it is that makes an action good or bad.

A powerful class of ethical theory is called **Consequentialism** because it bases the moral value of actions and principles on the practical value of the consequences of those actions and principles. Many consequentialists look for natural values in the world. Pleasure and pain are natural values that are commonly referenced by consequentialists. Humans, like most living beings, naturally
seek pleasure and avoid pain. Pleasure and pain are caused by conditions in our world. Our actions can cause changes in the world that lead to conditions that cause pain or cause pleasure. Thus, giving money to Save the Children leads to an alleviation of hunger in one or more kids. Hunger is a condition that causes intense pain, so reducing that pain has a positive value. Drunk driving causes a large percentage of traffic accidents. Being in an accident is a condition that causes many sorts of pain to many people. Victims lose their health or lives, families lose their loved ones. One might argue that being drunk is pleasurable and driving home from the bar is more convenient and cheaper (hence more pleasurable) than taking a taxi. The consequentialist will take these values into account and weigh the difference. Is the amount of pleasure gained from a one night drunk equal to or greater than the amount of pain suffered by parents who lose their child in a car accident caused by the drunk driver? This is a matter that requires reasoned analysis, which the consequentialist philosopher will provide. If it turns out that the avoidable death of a child is more painful than the inconvenience of taking a taxi home, then the conclusion will follow that the actions of drunk driving are morally wrong and the principles (beliefs) that lead someone to drive drunk are unjustified. Such an analysis can be applied to almost any sort of action.

At this point you might want to point out that not all pain is to be avoided and not all pleasure is to be sought. The natural values of pain and pleasure are not that simple. Some philosophers have made the same point and have developed a version of consequentialism that takes the problem of the subjective values of pain and pleasure into account. This ethical theory is called Utilitarianism. 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill was one of the originators of Utilitarian ethics. Mill provides a sophisticated analysis of pain and pleasure as subjective values. He notes that a rational being would seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in total over the whole period of a life. This requires accepting some pain if it is a means to attaining a greater pleasure. Thus, people who recognize the value of diet and exercise to health will limit the immediate pleasures of some foods and accept the minor pain of exercise in order to obtain the far greater pleasure of lifelong health. Mill also recognized that not all forms of pleasure are the same. There are physical pleasures, emotional pleasures, intellectual pleasures, and even spiritual pleasures. The word “pleasure” connotes something transient and trivial to some people, but Mill intends that concept to cover a much larger area of human experience. On Mill’s expanded version, parents take pleasure in seeing their children thrive and thinkers take pleasure in learning something new. Pleasures of these sorts can reach a high point of human aspiration. Mill’s Utilitarianism recognizes that we may make a calculated choice of accepting sacrifice and discomfort in order to attain the highest and most sublime pleasures that nature and humanity have to offer.

The Utilitarian motto is; “The greatest good for the greatest number.” In order to make ethical choices we must weigh how the consequences will impact all those who will be affected. If the combined impact is on the side of the greatest good – which is the most pleasure – then the
action and the principles informing it are morally justified. If the action will cause more harm than good on balance, then it is not justified, no matter how much pleasure and power it brings to the person who carries it out. Utilitarianism is a powerful theory and we can find many current examples where public policies are defended by greater good arguments.

Ideal Values
Another approach to ethics is to develop a concept of the ideal condition of the individual person. If we can say what an ideal life for a person would be like, then we will be able to figure out what principles would produce that condition. 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant described ethics as the striving of the individual for their ideal condition - (as the contemporary commercial has appropriated); to be the best that one can be. Kant recognized that the essential quality to all ethical choice is freedom of the will. If a person is not free to choose, then they cannot have any ethical value one way or the other; if not free, we are mere machines. Kant called the sort of freedom needed for moral choice “autonomy.”

Many people suppose that freedom consists in the absence of restrictions, such as “being able to do whatever I want.” This idea is known as the libertarian view of personal freedom. On this desire-based view of freedom, it would appear that morality and law are the enemies of freedom because they involve restrictions. Picturing freedom as a following desire and wants makes moral values purely subjective. Different people have different wants and desires. To impose a set of desires on anyone would be oppressive to their liberty. Some wants are held in common by many people, in which case competition arises and laws are created to mitigate the conflicts. Once again, complete freedom is shown to be unattainable unless one has only obscure desires in isolation from others.

The libertarian view misses a crucial point: we do not choose our wants and desires. The preferences, wants, and desires that you have as a person were largely given to you without any choice on your part. You inherited, learned, or acquired them along the way, probably in childhood. We might be able to cultivate a desire, given the right conditions. But even in that case we do not choose the conditions that determine which desires can be active in us. The type of freedom that follows from “doing whatever I want” is not really freedom at all. It is just the absence of restriction on one mechanical process among many. If your desires change (say due to hormonal alterations over time), then the conditions of your freedom change. However it goes, you do not have much choice in the matter.

Kant’s concept of autonomy seeks to define the exact conditions under which human beings can attain true freedom in which personal, conscious choice is the basis of action. Autonomy means self-governed. Kant recognized that freedom is not a matter of the absence of rules. Rather, freedom is the ability to choose our own rules and to follow them no matter what outside pressures seek to influence us otherwise. Creating and following one’s own moral principles is
to be self-governed. It is the ultimate responsibility and loyalty to oneself. It is only in this self-directed autonomy, argues Kant, that genuine human freedom is possible.

If choosing one’s own principles - guides to future choice and action - is necessary to personal freedom, what basis are we to choose these principles on? Kant points out that we must choose principles that are capable of being held and acted on under any conditions and with complete consistency. He is seeking to find the realm of choices in which the human individual may reach her/his highest potential, which coincides with perfect freedom. A principle that allows for practical application with complete consistency will be universal. It will be a principle that can be held under any conditions, including those conditions experienced by other people. As Kant puts it, such a condition is one that I am willing to “will as universal law” or accept as a general law of the universe. It will apply to everyone equally, under any conditions. It is not that we try to impose that principle on others, but that we hold to it as it if were a universal law, like the law of gravity.

In making the bold stipulation of universality, Kant finds that many common motives for action will not qualify as autonomous principles. For instance, someone may say “OK. I’ll choose my main principle to be always doing what gives me the most pleasure.” A person who tries to live by this principle will find that they run into self-contradiction and cannot keep to it consistently. For example, accepting the loss of a momentary pleasure and may be necessary to seeking a greater and future pleasure. In other cases we can see that some pleasures run the risk of great future pain and loss. In order to live according to this principle have to choose among our pleasures, and the principle does not tell us how to make that choice at all. Perhaps you can see in this example a type of criticism that Kant is liable to have for Utilitarianism. In fact, Kant’s ethics, known as Deontology, is direct challenge to all forms of consequentialism. Kant maintains that the consequences of our actions are not the determinant of their moral value. Only our principled intention is well enough in our own power to count as the basis for moral value.

Kant’s ethical theory is immensely influential on present thought. The movement to define and protect universal human rights, such as made in the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, owes much to Kantian theory. In the present study and practice of ethics in the Western cultures, Kantian theory and Utilitarianism form the main guides to law and moral thought.

**Philosophy as Thinking about Thinking**

In this essay we have briefly considered a number of philosophical topics, ideas, and theories. The purpose in presenting these to you has been primarily to give relevant examples of what philosophers are traditionally and currently occupied with. Some of these ideas may intersect with your own and as you continue the study of philosophy you will encounter these ideas again.
We must recognize that philosophy is so open and self-reflective an activity that it even takes itself as a subject of inquiry. One of the primary questions of philosophy is; “What is philosophy?” Throughout history different thinkers have given different answers to that question. In the Twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger posed an answer that continues to resonate today. He said; “Philosophy is thinking about thinking.” In this we have the idea of a mind that regards itself. A consciousness that makes itself both subject and object. A human individual who is capable of investigating her/his own belief system. Heidegger provides an excellent conception of the activity of philosophy that is most useful for anyone who is entering the study of the philosophical for the first time.