

CHAPTER 4

PERSONAL MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

From our investigations so far, two moral domains have been delineated: (1) the personal/interpersonal domain, and (2) the social/political domain. Within each of these domains, two general orientations to the practice of ethics can be defined: (1) Ethics understood as a conscious, *rational decision-making process*, and (2) Ethics understood as a guide to *personal moral growth and development*. Although we can talk about these two orientations separately, you should keep in mind that in practice they almost always work together.

The present chapter (Chapter 4) is focused primarily on the personal growth and development orientation to ethics within the personal/interpersonal domain. We will investigate the theoretical moral frameworks that best embody and support this orientation and define human subjectivity from this point of view.

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The rationalist, decision-making orientation within the personal/interpersonal domain presumes a modernist, liberal understanding of human subjectivity. The moral theories associated with it will be the subject of our investigations in the following chapter (Chapter 5).

The personal growth and development approach to ethics is especially compatible with four moral theoretical frameworks: **Virtue Ethics, Self-actualization theory, Phenomenology and Existentialism.** These theoretical moral perspectives focus on helping you to become the kind of person you want to be as you go about living your life every day, striving to live the best possible life and achieve your life goals. Each of these four theories provides a specific perspective on and understanding of the nature, function, and coming-to-be of the moral subject—you and me. They each define a version of the moral self and a process that accounts for the appearance and meaningfulness of that self.

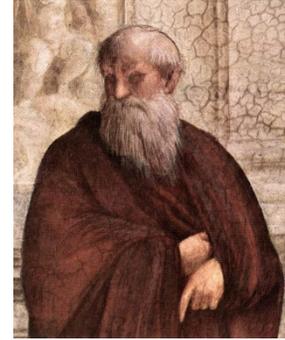
Think about this as you read through this chapter: Which of these theoretical versions of moral self-creation do you find most useful for understanding your own self-development and the world in which you live?



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Virtue Ethics and Self-creation

Imagine that your Self is like a big piece of rough-hewn granite that you are given to carve into a finished work of art. You are both the sculptor *and* the sculpted work of art—which is how it really is, isn't it? By chipping away here and chipping away there, over time, you create your Self as a perpetual-work-in-progress. From the perspective of Virtue Ethics those little “chippings” as you create yourself are the specific practices of virtue in your pursuit of moral excellence. By pursuing and practicing the moral virtues you create your moral self like an artist creating a ‘work of art’. Virtue ethics involves you creating yourself. This idea is reflected in the work of the Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus:



Plotinus (205-270 CE)

In *Enneads* I 6, 9, Plotinus writes,

Go back inside yourself and look: if you do not yet see yourself as beautiful [i.e., as participating in the Idea of Beauty], then do as the sculptor does with a statue he wants to make beautiful; he chisels away one part, and levels off another, makes one spot smooth and another clear, until he shows forth a beautiful face on the statue. Like him, remove what is superfluous, straighten what is crooked, clean up what is dark and make it bright, and never stop sculpting your own statue, until the godlike splendor of virtue shines forth to you.... If you have become this, and seen it, and become pure and alone with yourself, with nothing now preventing you from becoming one in this way, and have nothing extraneous mixed with your self... if you see that this is what you have become, then you have become a vision.

Commenting on this passage, Andrew Taggart interprets the words of Plotinus within the perspective of virtuous self-development. Taggart says:

Thus, on this analogy, removing the inessential reveals to one the ‘godlike splendor of virtue.’ The technique (by which I mean: spiritual exercise) does not mean modeling oneself upon another; it is not about accepting oneself as one is; it is not about willing oneself to be other than one’s nature would allow; it is not mimicry. None of these but the slow, attentive, and gentle ‘chiseling away’ of one’s vices, one’s clumsinesses, and one’s uglinesses with the result that one can, only now, participate in the Idea of Beauty. Look to the coursenesses. Let them all go. Then will you not espy a vision close-up or from afar since now it is that ‘you have become a vision.’ You are mystical art.¹

¹ Andrew Taggart, <https://andrewjtaggart.com/2014/02/08/plotinus-on-sculpting-the-self/>

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It is understood from the perspective of virtue ethics that you can become a continuously more virtuous person through the practice of specific virtues. This means that you are more likely in the future to act consistently with the virtues you practice because the practice of being virtuous creates character traits. Practicing virtue ethics is like going to the gym. If you get there and do the exercises, you will get toned. Not a huge amount of reflective thinking required. It is mostly about repetitive and consistent *practice*.

From the perspective of personal moral growth and development, virtue ethics makes the general claim that if you practice specific acts of a specific virtue (like acts of courage or patience or kindness, for example) until acting in those ways becomes *habitual*, then you will develop a corresponding *trait** of that moral virtue that will now be a permanent part of your moral “character”—a *character trait*.

* Personality or character **traits** reflect people's characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Personality traits imply consistency and stability—someone who scores high on a specific trait like extraversion is expected to be sociable across different situations and over time.

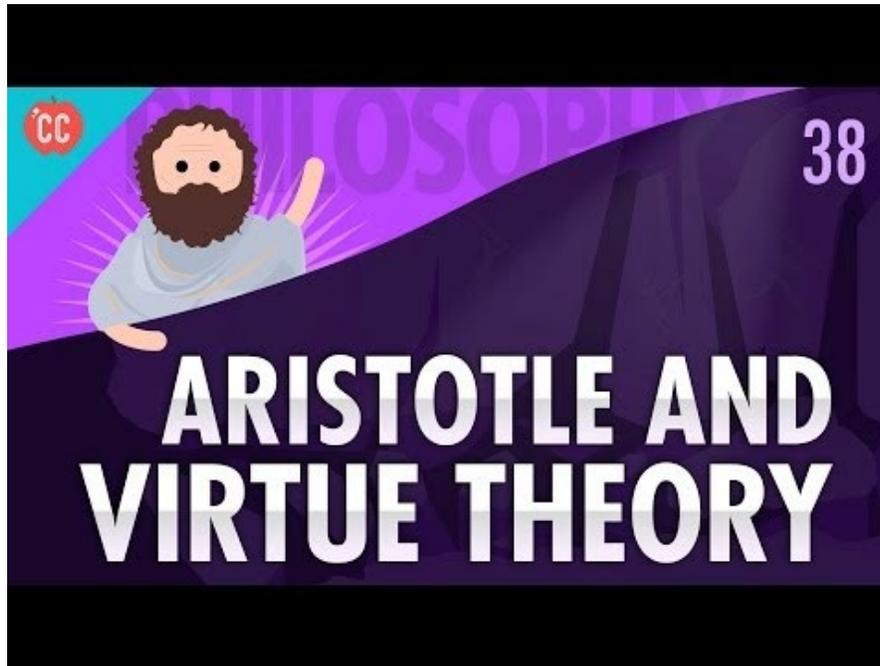
Virtue ethics is a **teleological moral theory** because it involves the belief that every human being has a natural end, (*telos*), goal, or purpose in this life which involves the actualization or the realization of the highest ‘function’ of a human being. According to Aristotle, the highest human functioning would involve using your rational intelligence to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*). Exactly what is meant by “happiness” is open to some interpretation, but Aristotle thought it was definitely *a kind of activity* (like creative thinking) rather than a passive end state (pleasure).

Every rational being seeks happiness as an end or goal in life naturally. That is, they want to live the best possible life. It is more than just feeling good. The ultimate end or goal of virtue practice is creating a moral self through concerted practice that will complete you or actualize you most fully as a whole and complete human being. When you have this ultimate good, you will ‘be all that you can be’. You will have fulfilled your purpose for being, that is, your purpose in life.



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Aristotle argued that each moral virtue is a kind of *mean* or average between two corresponding vices (extremes). For example, the virtue of courage is a mean between the two vices of cowardliness and foolhardiness, where cowardice is the disposition to act more fearfully than the situation deserves, and foolhardiness is the disposition to show too little fear for the situation. Courage is thus the mean between the two: the disposition to show the amount of fear appropriate to the situation but to charge ahead nevertheless in a reasonable fashion. Watch the video (9:22) below which presents a good summary of virtue ethics theory and practice.



Virtue ethics, self-realization achieved through virtue practice, is still a popular approach to ethics today and is in widespread common usage. This orientation to ethics practice has been incorporated into many approaches to self-development and psychological schemes for self-improvement. You will see it reflected in Abraham Maslow's Self-actualization theory which we will consider in the next section.



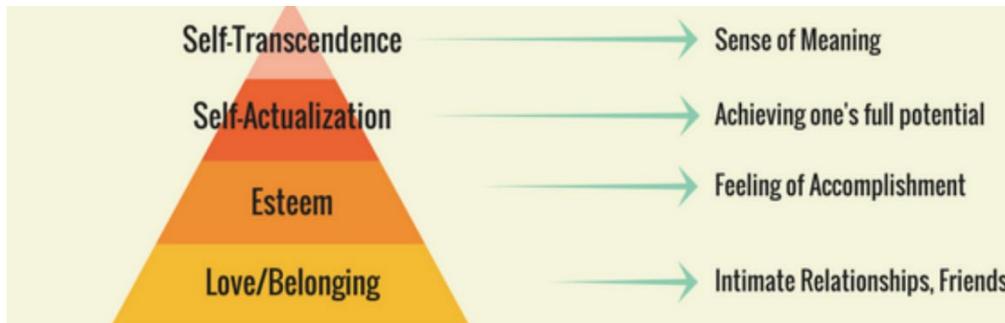
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Self-actualization theory



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) was an American psychologist who is perhaps best known for his 'hierarchy of needs' pyramid. This heuristic device provides a roadmap for what I think of as everyone's natural desire to live the best possible life. We are naturally motivated to get our needs fulfilled, and as we fulfill lower needs, possibilities for the fulfillment of higher needs automatically become possible.



Maslow's self-actualization theory reflects the general orientation of virtue ethics in that it focuses on your individual, personal achievement of moral excellence as a life goal. In both perspectives, this is accomplished through a concerted effort of practice. In virtue theory, personal moral growth and development focuses on the practice of creating virtuous habits through targeted, repetitious practice of various virtues.

In Self-actualization theory, personal moral growth and development is conceived in terms of need-fulfillment. It starts with the practice of fulfilling the most basic needs we have and moving toward the fulfillment of our most spiritual need, self-transcendence.

All human beings, as a part of the human condition, are confronted with the same hierarchy of needs that they naturally strive to fulfill. Not everyone gets equally far up the need- fulfillment pyramid, however. Only an elite group make it to full self-actualization, according to Maslow; even fewer to self-transcendence.

Characteristics of self-actualizing and self-transcending persons

What might a self-actualizing or self-transcending person look like? Of course, it isn't possible to give a definitive profile, but Maslow's broad sketch of the self-actualizing type is revealing and helpful to see what he is talking about.

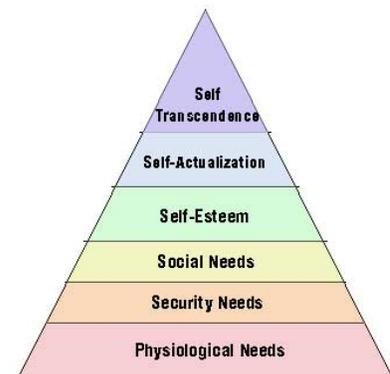
Self-actualizing types of people perceive reality efficiently and can tolerate uncertainty when necessary. They accept themselves and others for who and what they are. They tend to be spontaneous, with a well-developed sense of humor. They look at life objectively, are often very creative, and are resistant to value enculturation (going along with the crowd), but without being ostentatiously unconventional.

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Self-actualizers are well-balanced people with a great love of life and concern for the welfare of other people. They prefer to establish a few deep, meaningful interpersonal relationships, have a definite need for privacy, maintain strong moral standards, and enjoy occasional ‘peak experiences’ like having a great new insight, creative inspiration, or solution to a problem.

Self-actualizing people tend to experience life in a childlike way, according to Maslow, with full absorption and concentration, willing to try new things instead of always sticking to safe paths. They are more likely to listen to their own thoughts and feelings when evaluating experiences instead of the voice of tradition, authority, or the majority. They avoid pretense and game-playing, and tend to be honest, responsible and hard-working. They are willing to ruthlessly examine their own beliefs, values, and actions, and they admit their shortcomings once they see them and try to change.



Maslow's Modified Hierarchy Of Needs Including Spiritual Needs

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Above all, self-actualizing persons who have achieved the highest level of motivated need-fulfillment undergo a clear shift away from a focus on their own self-interest and its development, and 'transcend' toward a motivational focus that puts the welfare of others before their own welfare. In short, they become less egoistic and more altruistic, or self-transcending.

Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, sleep. Physiological needs are the physical requirements for human survival. Physiological needs are most fundamental and must be fulfilled first.

Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear. According to Maslow, humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups, regardless whether these groups are large or small.

Love and belongingness needs - friendship, intimacy, trust and acceptance, receiving and giving affection and love. Affiliating, being part of a group (family, friends, work) and knowing that you are loved. Humans need to love and be loved by others

Esteem needs - achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, self-respect, respect from others. People have a need for stable self-respect and self-esteem. Maslow noted two versions of esteem needs: a "lower" version and a "higher" version. The "lower" version of esteem is the need for respect from others. This may include a need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention. The "higher" version manifests itself as the need for self-respect.

Self-Actualization needs - realizing your personal potential, self-fulfillment; seeking out personal growth and peak experiences. Maslow describes this level as the desire to accomplish everything that one can, to become the most that one can be. Individuals may perceive or focus on this need very specifically. The fulfillment of this high-level need must encompass the whole person.

Self-Transcendence needs - In his later years, Maslow explored a further dimension of needs he labeled self-transcendence, while criticizing his own vision on self-actualization. The self only finds its actualization in giving itself to some higher goal outside oneself, in altruism, care for others, and spirituality. Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness and moral responsiveness to oneself, to others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the entire cosmos. This achievement would be the highest possible accomplishment of personal moral growth and development. Self-transcending types of persons, in Maslow's sense, go beyond the self-actualization inherent in Virtue Ethics, and strive to live a way of life that includes helping others achieve their best as well.

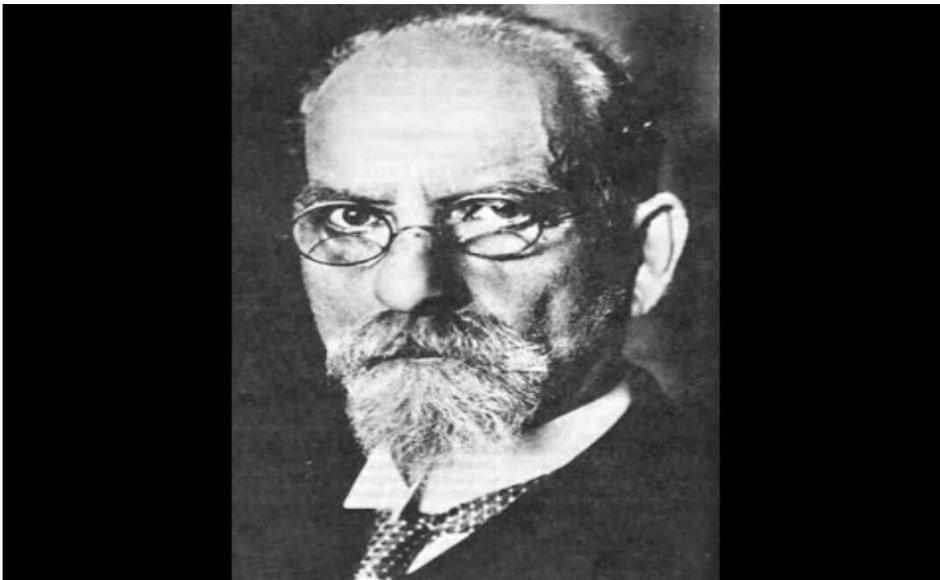
How Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Impacted Work Management Theory in the U.S. (4 minute read)



Phenomenology: method and practice

Phenomenology (from Greek *phainómenon* "that which appears" and *lógos* "to study") involves the philosophical investigation of your subjective experience or your consciousness of phenomena (how things appear to you in your experience) and the necessary conditions for the possibility of you having those experiences. Basically, it entails a careful, bias-free description of your experiences of things, ideas, situations, etc., anything you experience.

Founded in the early years of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and later expanded by a circle of his followers, phenomenology should not be thought of as a unitary philosophical movement or research method in a rigid, scientific sense. Rather, different phenomenologists share a family resemblance in their approach to the practice of phenomenology, but also embody significant differences in their work.



Video: E. Husserl & the Adventure of Phenomenology (11:59)

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Phenomenology is not a doctrine, nor a philosophical school, but rather a style of thought, a method of seeing, an open and ever-renewed description of subjective experience, having different, yet equally successful, results.

Phenomenology is by its nature very personal and perspectival. This may disorient anyone wishing to define the meaning of phenomenology objectively once and for all. Phenomenology makes it clear that meaning is not a static phenomenon. Meaning is subjective and always requires interpretation.

Phenomenology practice focuses on your subjective experience as the source of meaningful insights and understanding about your interpersonal value orientation with others and with the world. The phenomenological approach to investigation of consciousness inspired many thinkers, especially in creative and artistic practices, because it opened up the rich field of subjective experience for purposeful reflection and first-person articulation. This is the method that underlies the basic structure of this textbook, *Intro to Ethics*.

Check out this article for a brief phenomenology of gravity. It illustrates how we should investigate words to question the meaning that is supposedly conveyed by those words. Think you know what gravity “is”? Read this article: [We don't know what gravity is](#)

The practice of Phenomenology can be understood as both a contemporary method or style of philosophical investigation and as an existential philosophical practice that is *distinctly different from either the rational or the empirical approaches to reflection and research in ethics*. Phenomenology does share some of the features of both rational analysis and empirical demonstration, and it certainly values these two research approaches while yet being distinct from them.

Thus, phenomenology can be thought of as a third way of investigating the self and the world that sort of weaves in between the rationalist and empirical approaches. To get a better understanding of this let's look a little closer at the empiricism and rationalism.

Empiricism	Rationalism
Knowledge is derived from experience/experimentation.	Knowledge is derived from reason and logic.
Experimental science is the paradigm of knowledge.	Mathematics is the paradigm of knowledge.
Experimental science cannot produce certainty.	Genuine knowledge is certain because it is rational, not empirical.

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The problem with Empiricism and Rationalism

Empiricism

Empiricism and empirical research reduces complex human phenomena to objective, quantifiable categories capable of being tested, measured, and evaluated through experimentation (as we saw with psychologist Paul Piff's research regarding the impact of wealth and social position on attitudes about greed). This empirical reduction entails certain problems.

First, empiricism tends to miss the real nature of what it is supposedly investigating. Why? Because it objectifies what it studies and, thus, necessarily distorts it in order to study it.

Take greed, for example. **Greed is never just "greed" pure and simple.** It is always *your* greed or *my* greed or someone's, at some time, in some unique life circumstances, to some extent or other, regarding certain desires and goals that are manifested in a certain way, etc. This or that specific act of greed is always situated uniquely, whereas Piff's supposedly empirical idea of "greed" is abstract and universal. Thus, it is impersonal and, actually, non-existent in reality.

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The fact is that no two existential value orientations about greed, of any two persons, are ever exactly the same. Empirical research is less sensitive to individual differences than is phenomenology and thus often misses the real, existential value and significance of what it is investigating.

Thus, secondly, regarding human-focused research, empiricism risks depersonalizing and dehumanizing the dynamic and ultimately incomprehensible and unique existential individuality of human beings—you and me in our actual, lived, unique everydayness. This is what Emmanuel Levinas, a student of Husserl, and other Existential philosophers will strive to describe in their work. More about existentialism and professor Levinas below.

Rationalism

On the other hand, **rational analysis** strives to eliminate emotions, sentiment, gut-responses, hunches and passions from their natural place as integral parts of the moral decision-making process. This results in a false, unrealistic, narrow, and sterile view of human nature and the moral person. As a result, both approaches to moral research, Empiricism and Rationalism, miss connecting to the unique subjectivity of the everyday existential person (you and me!) for whom alone morality makes any sense. Humans are more than just rational agents or actors.

Phenomenology begins precisely in the experience of your own unique moral subjectivity where it will be shown to be a method for seeing insightfully, developing insightfulness, and practicing moral development.

Phenomenology

As indicated above, it is difficult to say exactly what phenomenology “is” once and for all. It is more of a style of thinking and perceiving rather than a specific, rule-governed method for doing philosophical research. The key difference from other styles of thinking is that phenomenology focuses on the first-person experience of the subject (the meaningfulness of the subject’s experience, of *your* personal experience) as the primary source of research ‘data’ ... like what you are experiencing right now as you are reading this text.

The discipline of phenomenology, then, may be defined initially as the study of the structures of your experience or consciousness, including all the ‘contents’ therein, that is, all the cognitive and affective phenomena of your experience. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena.” **Phenomena (plural) or a phenomenon (singular) are the appearances of things to your consciousness, or things as they appear in your experience, what you see, feel, taste, hope for, fear, love, etc.** Phenomena are constituted or appear in your consciousness as the *meaningfulness* they have for you in your direct experience of them. In short, phenomena are all the meaning-full contents of your subjective, conscious experience.

Your conscious, subjective experience is the starting point of phenomenology, but conscious experience always shades off into less consciously experienced phenomena. We are only vaguely aware of things in the margin or background of our attention, and we are only implicitly aware

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of the wider horizon of things in the world around us outside of that. So, in a sense, the whole world (even the whole cosmos) is logically implicated in any subjective experience.

Conventional morality, as I suggested above, often functions invisibly in the zone of implicit awareness, rather than being something we are always consciously aware of. We make most of our moral judgments throughout the day automatically and are only half-conscious of doing so, if that. This is similar to how, in practical activities, which are governed by tacit knowledge, like walking along a road, hammering a nail, riding a bike or speaking our native tongue, we are not explicitly conscious of our habituated patterns of action since we are thoroughly immersed bodily and existentially in that experience. ‘I’ don’t really *have* such experiences; I *am* those experiences. Experientially, there is no separation between “me” and “riding the bicycle” in the **lived experience** of riding it. An effort of reflection about my riding the bicycle is necessary to accomplish that theoretical separation of me, the rider, from the act of riding.

Reflection, from a phenomenological perspective, takes the form of an unbiased description of your subjective experience. You know you have this right when what you say equals what you mean to say. Check out the exercises at the end of this chapter for how to go about doing this.



Video: Phenomenology and Commodity Culture (12:00)

The above video, “Phenomenology and Commodity Culture,” demonstrates the difference between the kind of moral values underlying a materialistic, commodity-driven cultural consciousness (all-too-common these days!) and the moral values underlying a phenomenological approach to the meaning and purpose of life. I strongly encourage you to watch this video and make an effort to understand the argument that is presented in it.

The distinction between a materialistic or ‘realistic’ perspective and a phenomenological perspective is a fundamental distinction weaving its way through the entirety of this text, *Intro to Ethics*.

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Existentialism: Authenticity and Self-creation

Phenomenology had a huge impact on the existentialist philosophers. You can see the influence of phenomenological philosophy on Existentialism's practice in the work of the well-known existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) studies about the human condition.

Sartre's ideas were articulated in numerous philosophical and non-philosophical books and articles. Using Husserl's phenomenological approach (which he learned from Emmanuel Levinas), Sartre describes how life appears to everyday existential consciousness (you and me), and what must be the necessary underlying conditions for that consciousness to appear as it does.



In Sartre's experience of what it is like for you or me to find ourselves existing in the world, certain key, essential features stand out. Experientially, Sartre claims, we all find or experience ourselves as being **"thrown" into a world** which initially is absurd and senseless. We didn't choose to be here. We simply find ourselves already being here. How is it that we have appeared in the world here and now? What is the meaning of this? There are no clear and certain answers to these existential questions, which is exactly the meaning or sense of Sartre's phrase that we are "thrown into the world."

We also find ourselves **"condemned to be free,"** Sartre says. What he means is that we cannot escape the exercise of our absolute and unconditional freedom. Human beings are radically free, whether they like it or not, according to Sartre. Consequently, we all *must* (are 'condemned' to) make moral choices. And, our choices will create our self and a meaningful life of one kind or another for us. Our choices will determine who we are, for better or worse. There is no way to avoid this.

Choice situations confront us in life that cannot be avoided, like Sophie Zawistowski's repugnant choice depicted in William Styron's novel (and Oscar-winning film) *Sophie's Choice*. You *must* make choices and you must live with the consequences of your choices for the rest of your life since they will determine the entire course of your life and how close it comes to being the best possible life, or not. That is the existential situation.

Sophie's Choice depicts how tragic freedom can be when choice situations are forced upon us in which neither choice is something we want. Watch the video clip below from *Sophie's Choice* (Meryl Streep won an Academy Award for her performance as Sophie). Note the existentialist

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themes, complex emotional content, Sophie's pleas for special consideration because she is a Christian and not a Jew (hence the sick irony of the 'privilege' she is given) and, most importantly, pay attention to your own cognitive and affective responses as you watch. The action takes place on the unloading dock at the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Sophie, who is Polish, not Jewish, has been arrested because she was caught with a contraband ham she had gotten for her sick mother. It was forbidden to have meat. She has just gotten off the train at Auschwitz. (Warning: a tense and emotionally charged scene.)

Sophie's Choice - The "choice" scene (5:00)



You may try to skip any possible tragedy in your life by avoiding a difficult choice. But that may not be possible, as with poor Sophie. And even if it were possible to avoid or evade making a difficult moral choice, it would be **“bad faith,”** or **inauthenticity** Sartre asserts, that is, a moral cop-out, putting your self-creation in the hands of someone else's decision-making rather than shouldering the burden of free choice yourself. To be morally “authentic,” that is, a self in harmony with itself, *we must take responsibility for the choices we make, no matter what.*

According to existential philosophy, your moral choices constitute or make you into the kind of person you are. This is a heavy, inescapable burden for the solitary existential individual. We are cut off from others because of our freedom, existentialist claim. To be free means we are not influenced by others.

In addition, within the framework of your everyday life, you never have absolute certitude that you made the correct moral choice (contrary to the supposed certitude claimed in the rationalist and empirical approaches). Why? Because there is no absolute standard by which to measure the moral correctness of our choices, according to existentialism. In Styron's novel, *Sophie's Choice*, for example, poor Sophie is haunted all of her life by the choice she was forced to make that day on the loading platform at Aushwitz, which, ultimately, will lead her to despair.

Part of the existential condition in Sartre's view is that by being “pure freedom” we never catch up with our self. We never achieve identity with our self. And, the same radical existential freedom that separates us from our self, also leaves us separate from one another, and, thus, for Sartre, in conflict with one another for dominance and control interpersonally and socially.

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This essential separateness of the existent (the individual person) leaves Sartre's version of existentialism open to the charge of solipsism (being isolated and closed off to others) and a lack of satisfactorily accounting for inter-subjectivity and co-operative community-building. This led Sartre to proclaim that "hell is other people." The same freedom that is the source of our personal, moral authenticity also necessarily separates us absolutely from others within Sartre's existential framework.



"Why I like Existentialism" by Eric Dodson (16:55)

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For Sartre, existential *authenticity* means taking responsibility for *my* choices only, to the full extent of *my* freedom. Thus, both Husserl and Sartre have difficulties accounting for the possibility of a positive conception of inter-subjectivity and our relations with others. Emmanuel Levinas, a student of Husserl and contemporary of Sartre, attempts to resolve this problem by arguing that human moral subjectivity *is*, itself, *intersubjective*, always already connected to others. Levinas makes the radical claim that your and my individual subjectivity comes into being out of and *as* a pre-conscious responsiveness to the otherness of the Other, the fact that others always will remain others. What does all that mean?



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Beyond freedom: responsibility for the Other

Emmanuel Levinas

In a series of complex phenomenological texts, Professor Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) argues that we are essentially connected to the Other. Why is “Other” capitalized? Levinas wants to indicate that the “Other” is not the other empirical person exactly, not the person you can shake hands, not the empirical person you see and know. The person you know has already been reduced to an empirical object in your consciousness. But persons are not objects.

Rather, ‘the Other’ is the other person insofar as she always remains truly *other* for me and is not thought to be equal to my cognitive, perceptual representation of her; i.e., not equal to who I *think* she is. The Other is precisely the other person insofar as I am unable to comprehend her fully and reduce her to an objective category in my mind, a representation of her, believing that I then know “her” in some objective, definitive sense.

According to Levinas, this objectification of Others does a certain existential damage to their true being. Another way to put this is that the Other is that dimension of human being that disrupts the consciousness that is trying to reduce it to objective categories, which it resists infinitely. We are never able to know anyone fully and completely.

In Levinas’ radical phenomenological way of seeing, the Other always breaks out of my attempt to objectify her or his otherness and reduce that otherness to a conceptual representation in my mind that ‘captures’ it, dominates it and controls it. The Other challenges my totalizing and objectifying consciousness in the simple, straightforward face-to-face relation. Ultimately, Levinas points to the human face as an example of what is an incomprehensible ‘object’ or a

perception that cannot be fully objectified without doing a kind of spiritual damage to that person. The human face is something more than the sum total of eyes, ears, nose, mouth, etc. It is transcendent.

The face can be harmed because it is naked and vulnerable, yet that very vulnerability of the face ‘commands’ me to “Do no harm!” This moral imperative in the face of the Other is the origin of morality for Levinas. The face speaks the first law of morality: Do not kill me!



Hanging out with Professor Levinas at his home in Paris, 1989.

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By Philip Ivanhoe

The Dehumanization of Facial Recognition Tech in China Today

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Face is particularly important in East Asian societies, such as China, and found in two related forms. The first and more popular conception, *mianzi* (面子), primarily concerns wealth, social status, position, power and prestige; the second, *lian* (臉), concerns moral character and behaviour. A person can have *mianzi* – eg, status, position, etc – but lack a corresponding level of *lian* – eg, be regarded as morally bad. A complete lack of *lian* erodes and eventually undermines one's *mianzi*, while someone with great *lian* will have considerable *mianzi*.

In contemporary Chinese society the question of face has taken a new and disturbing form that profoundly affects these more traditional, Confucian-inspired conceptions. China's rapidly expanding network of surveillance cameras increasingly relies upon AI-aided facial-recognition technology to achieve much of its primary mission: to keep track of, record, control and modify the behavior of its citizens.

Within this system, 'face' really has nothing to do with traditional conceptions of moral or social status – at least, their ideal forms; it is not about how one views oneself or how the members of one's community regard one. Instead, it is to be an object under the gaze of a systematic government surveillance system established by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and guided by increasingly sophisticated AI. My primary interest is what this does to the traditional notions of *mianzi*, *lian* and related ideas about virtue, but I will also note an unanticipated implication that the new mass surveillance carries for the CPC, an implication that betokens a more general concern with the ethics of AI.... [Read More](#)

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Infinity shines forth in the incomprehensibility and the spiritual inexhaustibility of the face of the Other, Levinas argues. This incomprehensible and infinite 'presence' exposed in the face of the Other thus calls upon or 'commands' the totalizing consciousness of rationalism and empiricism not to objectify the vulnerable otherness of the Other, not to reduce the Other to an object that can be controlled and manipulated, as if this representation were the real thing itself. The Nazi soldier in the Sophie's Choice video clip presents a



Incredible honor to have a drink with this renown philosopher!!!

good example of this dehumanization. "I would like to get you in bed," the soldier says, reducing Sophie immediately to a sexual object. This would be a first violence done to the Other, reducing them to an object. After this initial, depersonalizing violence, anything is possible, all the way up to Auschwitz, in Levinas' view. It is what made the Holocaust possible. Numerous members of Levinas' family were murdered in the Nazi concentration camps and the Holocaust was never far from his mind.



Brief overview of Levinas' philosophy (11:49)

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The horror of this dehumanization is revealed in the inhuman choice imposed upon Sophie by the totalizing (totalitarian) consciousness of Nazi Fascism. Only the vulnerable face of the incomprehensible Other stands between what happened at Auschwitz and the possibility of it happening again. It is the sheer naked vulnerability of the face of the most vulnerable that ‘commands’ moral restraint—commands it of me before I even know it. It is out of this responsiveness that “I” emerge. The vulnerability of the face makes the most fundamental of moral claims upon me: It says *Do not kill me!* Morality is born along with subjectivity in this pre-conscious ‘challenge’ of the Other and my pre-conscious responsiveness to it. Morality *is* this responsiveness, in Levinas’ view. It is this originary, inter-subjective responsiveness to the otherness of the Other that is the origin of moral subjectivity.

How does the moral Self emerge from this pre-reflective responsiveness to the Other? Prior to consciousness, before we have developed an individual identity, an “I” or subjective consciousness, we are connected to the Other from birth (or even before birth!) in a sensible, pre-reflective responsive inter-subjectivity, which is fundamentally an ethical or moral orientation of responsiveness to the Other, a being-for-the-Other. This is happening with you and me right now, all the time. It is from out of the context of this pre-conscious responsive or responsible inter-subjectivity, through the effort of individuation, the effort of making ‘somebody’ out of myself, that the existential subject strives relentlessly to become an “I” — i.e., a subject, a somebody, a Self...an ongoing, dynamic process of identity-formation which, ambiguously, never fully achieves its goal even as it strives for this. And it can be hampered by what happens that is outside of its control.

Caught up in this important and necessary process of individuation, we forget and become insensitive and blind to our original response-ability for and essential connection with the Other, a responding that happens all the time nevertheless, whether we acknowledge it or not. The poor, the vulnerable, the disenfranchised are always knocking at the door of your heart. Thus, Levinas’ ethical phenomenology is meant to recall us to this deep, inalienable, original, inter-subjective connection of being for-the-Other that is the very origin of our own individual moral subjectivity, happening all the time every day. It is an exorbitant, pre-conscious, pre-rational responsiveness which, ultimately, Levinas will simply equate with Love.

Thus, in Levinas’ curious formulation, subjectivity *is* inter-subjectivity. Truly, we are all in this together from Levinas’ moral phenomenological perspective. We are bound together by a primordial loving responsiveness, and we are thus interdependent or ‘co-dependent’ with one another for the creation of our ongoing, dynamic sense of self.

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A Brief Overview of Chapter 4

Two ways to approach an understanding of the practice of ethics can be distinguished. One approach focuses on ethics as a process of **rational moral decision making**. The other focuses on ethics understood as **a process of personal moral growth and development**. The first orientation answers to the question "What should I do?" The second answers to the question "What kind of person should I be?" In reality, these are two aspects of morality understood as a wholistic and existential frame of reference geared toward living the best possible life. Certainly, we need to and do make rational moral decisions based on moral principles derived from moral theories, but this should (and does) happen within a more general existential framework of personal moral development in the service of living the best possible life and being the best person I can be.

In Chapter 4 we looked at moral theories that are especially attuned to personal moral development and being the best person you can be. In Chapter 5 we will look at moral theories that are more attuned to rational moral decision making and deciding what I should or should not do.

In conjunction with Chapter 4, you should watch the video clip from the movie *Sophie's Choice*, if you haven't seen it already. You should try to see how Existential themes are reflected in this dramatic video clip. The video depicts a confrontation between Sophie and a sadistic SS officer on the train platform at Auschwitz. Sophie, a Christian, grew up in Poland. Her father, a professor, supported the Nazi program. Sophie disagreed with him and thought she was no better than the Jews. But in her confrontation with the SS officer at Auschwitz (after he initially sees her in a degrading, dehumanizing manner as a mere sex object), she pleads her case as a Christian for special treatment. With sadistic irony, the officer extends her a morally repugnant 'privilege'. Look for Existential themes....

There are also connections between this scene and the ideas of moral subjectivity we have been investigating in chapters 3 and 4. In his criticism of the modernist subjectivity that is reflected in the Ethics of Justice, Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is precisely this objectifying modernist consciousness that made Auschwitz possible. The dehumanizing objectification of human beings—inherent in modernist consciousness, according to Levinas—reaches its most degrading form in

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the horror of the Nazi's "final solution"—the extermination of the Jews, misfits, homosexuals, etc.

On the other hand, Sophie depicts elements of the Ethics of Care. She was caught by a Nazi patrol in occupied Poland bringing a ham to her sick mother, at great risk to herself since it was forbidden for residents to have meat, and was arrested for this altruistic act of care. On the platform at Auschwitz, clutching her frightened children to her, she is the very picture of care and concern for others, oppressed by the brutal and uncaring rationality of totalitarianism all around her. The outcome of the scene seems to depict what can happen when the Ethics of Justice is not held in check by the Ethics of Care. Think about that.

Virtue Ethics, Self-actualization theory, Phenomenology and Existentialism all have something in common concerning their understanding of what it means to be a human being. Each of these theories starts off with an empirical understanding of human beings without ever accounting for how that empirical person came to appear on the empirical scene, i.e., how they got to be a person in the first place. In other words, the fact of human beings is taken for granted, as if it is already clearly known what it means to be a human being, as if it is not necessary to consider the meaning of human nature. Phenomenology and Existentialism anticipate this question, however, as the two videos on phenomenology included in this chapter make clear. Emmanuel Levinas, on the other hand, focuses on this question directly.

Levinas argues that we get to be a human being through a pre-reflective, pre-rational, and pre-conscious, affective (i.e., felt), intuitive relation of responsiveness to the Other, a moral responsiveness that is more consistent with an **Ethics of Care** than with the **Ethics of Justice**. We cannot see this pre-conscious responsiveness directly (empirically) but we can see situations for which this must be the very condition for the possibility of that situation; and, therefore, an actuality. The parent-child relation is a good example of this, Levinas argues. The mother's pre-conscious responsiveness to the child is what configures her as a mother. It is what makes it meaningful to be a mother. Thus, Levinas' ethical phenomenology is not only a theory about the 'origin' of human morality, it is also a theory about the origin of human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. Levinas argues that my subjectivity (how it is meaningful for me to be who I am) is based on or derived from inter-subjectivity (a pre-conscious connectedness with the Other). In short, we are all connected before we know it. We are all in this together.

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[Note: I understand that all of this may be a little hard to comprehend right off. That is perhaps because it cannot be comprehended fully by a totalizing, modernist, reflective consciousness. Yet, it can be experienced and described phenomenologically in its incompleteness. If you have ever fallen in love...if you have ever suffered the death of a loved one...if you ever given birth or taken on the responsibility of parenting, if you have ever sacrificed deeply for a friend...then you already know in your gut and your heart what Levinas is trying to articulate.]



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PRACTICE

TERMS TO KNOW

- Virtue Ethics
- self-actualization
- self-transcendence
- phenomenology
- existentialism
- character
- character trait
- virtue as mean
- self-actualization
- hierarchy of needs
- phenomenological reductions (see video)
- phenomenology and commodity culture (see video)
- authenticity
- bad faith
- the Other
- the moral subject

TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. How does Virtue Ethics approach the question of personal moral development?
2. What are some of the similarities between Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and Maslow's self-actualization theory.
3. Virtue theory begins with the idea that human beings have a natural end or purpose in life. What would you say is your own purpose in life as you understand this?
4. What does the term "moral excellence" mean to you?
5. Explain what Aristotle was talking about when he likened virtue to the mean between two extremes.
6. How would you explain to an intelligent friend that what Maslow means by "self-actualization" is very similar to what Aristotle means by the practice of virtue?
7. Maslow sees "self-transcendence" as the ultimate goal of personal moral growth and development along a path of need fulfillment, a goal that even goes beyond self-actualization. What is self-transcendence exactly and how important to you is it to achieve this moral value orientation?
8. When you read Maslow's descriptions about self-actualizing and self-transcending types of people, how do you feel that you compare to this generalized description? Do you know anyone who seems to embody these types of characteristics? Is it meaningful to want to become like this type of a person?
9. How would you describe your own social world and the norms and values that structure it? What persons or groups are a part of your social world? Are you an insider or an outsider? How important do you feel your relation to your social world is for your sense of self? How do you see where you stand in relation to your social world?
10. Phenomenology says that you should look to your experience in order to determine the meaningfulness of things. Pick a phenomenon—being a student in college, for example—

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and do a phenomenological examination of it. Describe your experience of being a student in college carefully and thoroughly, following out leads that arise and articulating as fully as you can how 'being a student' is meaningful to you. How is your understanding of what it means to be a student unique to you? Such a phenomenological investigation could be written out in the space of a paragraph or a book. If everyone who reads this text were to do this exercise, why would no two of these phenomenological descriptions be the same?

11. Are you a blamer or a responsibility-taker? Do you tend to think that when bad things happen to you it is someone else's fault? Do you ever notice a tension between what existentialism calls "authenticity" and "bad faith" play out in your life?
12. Do you think that our basic relationship with others is structured primarily by conflict or co-operation?
13. What causes the existential subject to be isolated and separate from other subjects? In what sense is this a problem for Existentialism?
14. How does Levinas' understanding of the moral subject overcome the solipsism of the existential understanding of the human subject?

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Watch the video clip from the movie *Sophie's Choice*, where she is confronted with the horrible choice she must make that gives the novel its name. (You can find a short synopsis of William Styron's great American masterpiece and the 'choice' scene from the movie online [here](#)).

What existential themes are illustrated in the video clip? (Hint: For example, how does Sophie find herself "thrown" existentially into this situation? Other existential themes?) Also, from the perspective of Emotional Intelligence, you should track your own emotions as you watch the clip, noting the extent to which your emotions drive your moral judgments. Finally, make an effort to separately empathize with Sophie, the SS officer, the daughter and son. How are they feeling? Do you feel resistant to empathize with any of them? Sympathetic? What else? How do you feel about your own emotional response? What would you do if you were in Sophie's horrific situation? Can you think of any other ways the various perspective on the moral self presented in this chapter can help to make sense of this phenomenon? Watch the clip several times. Note the differences in your responses. Put yourself imaginatively into the situation. What does it feel like to be there on the platform at Auschwitz?

SCENARIO EMPATHY EXERCISE

What should Kathy do?

Kathy W., a sales rep for a large, international educational materials supply corporation, was achingly close to making her million-dollar sales goal — only \$1,000 short. This year her company was offering a special bonus.

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If she made her sales goal by the end of the year, it would mean a fat \$10,000 bonus check and a happy trip to the bank to finance a dream home she'd recently found. Other sales reps among the twenty-five or so in Kathy's division, also were close, and one had already made the bonus. The books would close in just a few more days, but at the end of the year her clients had exhausted their budgets and weren't in a buying mood. And she had no new clients in sight.

One possible hope popped into her mind: inner-city Lincoln High School. Its students, who often had to share textbooks, could really use her company's multimedia educational aids, but Lincoln had no discretionary budget for new teaching materials. What if Kathy donated the money to this needy school for the purchase, and put herself over the magic quota?

Or perhaps she could offer partial "donations" to close sales at several schools. She would then surpass her quota goal with room to spare. The Lincoln school or other needy schools would gain immensely valuable educational programs that would help them serve their students, her company would pick up sales revenue, and she would meet her sales quota. Even better, she would earn a cool \$10,000 on an investment of \$1,000.

At first thought, this seemed like a win-win solution. But the idea needled Kathy's conscience. The more she thought about it, the more something about it bothered her. Yet if she didn't close this "sale" — one which would help out disadvantaged students — she wouldn't make that bonus, and her dream house would remain out of reach. She found herself wondering, "What should I do?"

What do YOU think Kathy should do? How confident do you feel that your judgment is the morally correct one? Is what you think Kathy should do the same as what you feel she should do? What would you really do if you were in her situation.

