Absolute Idealism left distinct marks on many facets of Western culture. True, science was indifferent to it, and common sense was perhaps stupefied by it, but the greatest political movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Marxism—was to a significant degree an outgrowth of Absolute Idealism. (Bertrand Russell remarked someplace that Marx was nothing more than Hegel mixed with British economic theory.) Nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, theology, and even art felt an influence. The great Romantic composers of the nineteenth century, for example, with their fondness for expanded form, vast orchestras, complex scores, and soaring melodies, searched for the all-encompassing musical statement. In doing so they mirrored the efforts of the metaphysicians, whose vast and imposing systems were sources of inspiration to many artists and composers.

As we have said, much of what happened in philosophy after Hegel was in response to Hegel. This response took different forms in English-speaking countries and on the European continent—so different that philosophy in the twentieth century was split into two traditions or, as we might say nowadays, two “conversations.” So-called analytic philosophy and its offshoots became the predominant tradition of philosophy in England and eventually in the United States. The response to Hegelian idealism on the European continent was quite different, however, and is known (at least in English-speaking countries) as Continental philosophy. Meanwhile, the United States developed its own brand of philosophy—called pragmatism—but ultimately analytic philosophy became firmly entrenched in the United States as well.

In this chapter we will concentrate on Continental philosophy; Chapter 9 will cover analytic philosophy and pragmatism.
Within Continental philosophy may be found various identifiable schools of philosophical thought: existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and critical theory. Two influential schools were existentialism and phenomenology, and we will begin this chapter with them.

Both existentialism and phenomenology have their roots in the nineteenth century, and many of their themes can be traced back to Socrates and even to the pre-Socratics. Each school of thought has influenced the other to such an extent that two of the most famous and influential Continental philosophers of the last century, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), are important figures in both movements, although Heidegger is primarily a phenomenologist and Sartre primarily an existentialist.

**EXISTENTIALISM**

Some of the main themes of existentialism are the following:

- Traditional and academic philosophy is sterile and remote from the concerns of real life.
- Philosophy must focus on the individual in her or his confrontation with the world.
- The world is irrational (or, in any event, beyond total comprehending or accurate conceptualizing through philosophy).
- The world is absurd, in the sense that no ultimate explanation can be given for why it is the way it is.
- Senselessness, emptiness, triviality, separation, and inability to communicate pervade human existence, giving birth to anxiety, dread, self-doubt, and despair.
- The individual confronts, as the most important fact of human existence, the necessity to choose how he or she is to live within this absurd and irrational world.

The existentialists do not guarantee that this *existential predicament*, as it might be called, can be solved. What they do say is that without utter honesty in confronting the assorted problems of human existence, life can only deteriorate—that without struggling doggedly with these problems, the individual will find no meaning or value in life.

Now, many of these themes had already been introduced by those brooding thinkers of the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer (see previous chapter), Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche. All three had a strong distaste for the optimistic idealism of Hegel—and for metaphysical systems in general. Such philosophy, they thought, ignored the human predicament. For all three, the universe, including its human inhabitants, is seldom rational, and philosophical systems that seek to make everything seem rational are just futile attempts to overcome pessimism and despair.
Søren Kierkegaard [KEER-kuh-gard] (1813–1855) scorned Hegel’s system, in which the individual dissolves into a kind of abstract unreality. By contrast, Kierkegaard emphasized the individual and especially the individual’s will and need to make important choices. Where Hegel was abstract to a degree rarely found outside, say, mathematics, Kierkegaard was almost entirely concerned with how and what the individual actually chooses in the face of doubt and uncertainty.

For Kierkegaard, existence in this earthly realm must lead a sensitive person to despair. Despair, Kierkegaard held, is the inevitable result of the individual’s having to confront momentous concrete ethical and religious dilemmas as an individual. It is the result of the individual’s having to make, for himself and alone, choices of lasting significance.

Kierkegaard defined three types of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These correspond to what English philosophy professor Ray Billington has called the life of the observer, the life of the follower, and the life of the initiator. The “aesthetic” life is dominated by impulse, emotions, and sensual pleasures and does not truly involve making choices. The “ethical” life does involve making choices, but those who live this life make choices on the basis of some kind of moral code, which they in effect fall back on as a sort of crutch. But at a higher and much more difficult plane, that of the “religious,” individuals realize that they must decide all issues for themselves. They face the agony of having to rely on their own judgment while never knowing whether this judgment is correct. The despair one faces at this level is overcome only by a “leap of faith,” that total and infinite commitment to God.

Some of Kierkegaard’s most important philosophical works, Either/Or (1843), Philosophical Fragments (1844), and The Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846), were published under pseudonyms.
According to Kierkegaard, despair is the *sickness unto death* and is the central philosophical problem. Is there anything in this world or outside it to which the individual can cling to keep from being swept away by the dark tides of despair? This, for Kierkegaard, is the fundamental question. His eventual conclusion was that nothing earthly can save a person from despair. Only a subjective commitment to the infinite and to God, not based on abstract intellectualizing or theoretical reasoning, can grant relief.

Kierkegaard emphasized the theme of the irrationality of the world in opposition to Hegel’s belief in its utter rationality. The earth, Kierkegaard thought, is a place of suffering, fear, and dread. Of these three, dread, according to Kierkegaard, is the worst because it has no identifiable object or specifiable cause. Dread renders us almost helpless to resist it. Kierkegaard regarded with disdain the idea that philosophy should be concerned with general or ideal “truths” and abstract metaphysical principles. Philosophy must speak to the anguished existence of the individual who lives in an irrational world and who must make important decisions in that world.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** [NEE-cheh] (1844–1900) read Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and became convinced that the world is driven by cosmic will, not by reason. Nietzsche rejected Hegel’s idealism and all similar rationalist metaphysics. However, he disagreed with Schopenhauer as to the nature of the cosmic will. For Nietzsche, the world is driven and determined by the will-to-power. However, according to Nietzsche, Western society had become increasingly decadent. People had come to lead lives largely devoid of joy and grandeur. They were enslaved by a morality that says “no” to life and to all that affirms it. They had become part of a herd, part of a mass that is only too willing to do what it is told. The herd animal, he held, is cowardly, reactionary, fearful, desultory, and vengeful. The mediocrity of Western civilization, he believed, was a reflection of these qualities. Only the rare and isolated individual, the Superman, or *Übermensch*—a famous concept in Nietzsche’s philosophy—can escape the triviality of society.

The Superman, according to Nietzsche, embraces the will-to-power and overthrows the submissive and mediocre “slave” mentality that permeates society and dominates religion. In his embrace of the will-to-power, the *Übermensch* not only lives a full and exciting life but creates a new, life-affirming morality as well. He creates rather than discovers values. God, whom the meek and compassionate worship as the source of values, is just simply “dead.”

Nietzsche also believed we have no access to absolute truths—such things as Plato’s Forms and Kant’s a priori principles of knowing. Indeed, he believed there are no facts, only interpretations. We will discuss a recent development of this idea in a later chapter when we encounter Jacques Derrida, a deconstructionist.

Metaphysics is difficult for those who believe there are no facts, and Nietzsche’s philosophy is consciously antimetaphysical. Nevertheless, Nietzsche did subscribe to one metaphysical concept, “the eternal recurrence of the same.” This is the theory that what happens recurs, exactly the same, again and again. Those with the slave mentality despise their lives and have a deep resentment for most everything that happens. They long to escape this life and hope that some afterlife will provide a modicum of happiness and fulfillment. They would look
with horror and regret on the idea that what happens recurs again and again. The Übermensch, by contrast, affirms and celebrates life and bends it to his will. Having no regrets, he would relish the idea that life would happen again and again in exactly the same way.

Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer signaled that the smug self-satisfaction of nineteenth-century European philosophy—and culture—camouflaged emptiness and decadence. Their concern for the situation of the individual person; their disdain for abstract, remote, and (in their view) meaningless systems of thought; their denial of the rationality of the world and the people within it; their awareness of a vacuity, triviality, and pettiness within human existence; their efforts to find a reason for not despairing entirely—these themes spread rapidly into belles lettres (literature) as a whole in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Expressionism expressed disenchantment with the established life of the bourgeoisie and its culture and values and sought to break out of the straitjacket of worn-out ideas and safe lifestyles. A sense that life is meaningless and empty, that the individual is alone and isolated and unable to communicate with others except on the most trivial of levels, permeated the thinking of the intellectuals and literati of the time and has persisted in art, literature, and philosophy until today.
Another persistent theme in twentieth-century literature pertains to the horror of coping in an absurd world—a world in which there is no apparent reason why things happen one way and not another. The characters in the stories and novels of Franz Kafka (1883–1924), a Czech whose mother tongue and the language in which he wrote were German (a fact itself suggestive of human dislocation), invariably find themselves thrust into a situation they do not comprehend but in which they must nevertheless act and be judged for their actions. Nor are they certain that the situation in which they find themselves is not one of their own making. Kafka’s parable *The Metamorphosis*, for example, tells of an ordinary salesman who supports his sister and aging parents. One day the salesman awakens at home to find that his body has been changed into that of a giant insect. He does not know why this has happened, and he will die without finding out. At first he is treated compassionately by the other family members, on whom he is of course dependent, but soon they resent his not supporting them and eventually come to regard him as a nuisance as well as an unwelcome family secret. At one point, pieces of fruit thrown by a frustrated and irate family member become embedded in his body and grow infected. Slowly but inevitably, the metamorphosed man loses heart and dies. Kafka presumably thought the story represented to some extent the fate of all human beings.

### Psychoanalysis

Other themes in twentieth-century literature and philosophy have their origin in psychoanalysis, a psychological theory and therapeutic method developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Ancient Greek philosophers placed reason on a towering pedestal, viewing it as the ultimate standard of truth. “Man is a rational animal,” Aristotle stated. Right action, Greek thinkers held, is action subject to review by the high court of reason. Freud offered an alternative concept. According to Freud, the real causes of our decisions and behavior lie deep below the level of deliberate, rational thought or consciousness. One behaves as one does, Freud believed, not because one makes rational decisions but because one is subject to unconscious drives that acquire their shape during childhood. Freud explained these drives by using the stories and characters of ancient mythology. He referred, for example, to the Oedipus complex, after the Greek mythological character Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father to have sex with his mother. In the words of Adam Phillips, Freud “housed the violent and licentious Olympian gods inside our heads and made us act out all over again their ancient, irreconcilable disputes.”

Freud was influenced by Schopenhauer and mentioned him more than any other philosopher. Schopenhauer believed that a dark ground determines most human behavior, a force he identified as the blind and purposeless cosmic will in each of us. Freud, too, thought that we are not conscious of the real source of behavior, which he described in terms of the id (Latin for “it”)—the raging sea of

---

hidden drives, irrational impulses, forbidden desires, and animal instincts that Freud translated by means of ancient mythology. According to Freud, it is because we are dominated by the unconscious that human behavior is destructive both to self and others. As with Schopenhauer, Freud believed that civilization can be rescued only if we come to understand the subterranean forces underlying human behavior.

Nietzsche also influenced Freud. Freud, too, viewed God as an illusion, a mere reworking of one’s human father in superhuman form. However, where Nietzsche believed that the prevailing Judaeo-Christian worldview—a spent, anti-body, anti-life, anti-pleasure mentality—had turned people into its slaves, Freud located the psychological enslavement of humanity in human self-delusion. The truth of one’s being, Freud theorized, is withheld via denial, repression, and projection. In place of reality comes a fantasy universe of wishful thinking that punishes us mercilessly through the superego—roughly speaking, a combination of conscience and social pressure that leads us to pursue such impossible ideals as utter honesty, absolute truth, eternal love, and perfect happiness.

According to Freud, through psychoanalysis (which is something like a Socratic search for truth undertaken by a patient with the help of the analyst), the patient gradually reveals, and thus learns about, his or her deepest fears, desires, and conflicts. Although psychoanalysis can help a patient discover the causes of anguish and anxiety and can help the person deal with them in a more proactive, intelligent manner, it is a slow, arduous, open-ended process that (like a Socratic dialogue) never discloses “absolute truth.” It can, however, lead to a profound deepening of one’s understanding and existence.

The other two great practitioners of psychoanalysis likewise expressed philosophical themes. Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) developed an analysis of patients based on the notion of archetypes. Jungian archetypes are akin to Plato’s Forms, which (according to Plato) are the reality underlying all changing things. Alfred Adler (1870–1937) analyzed patients on the theory that actions are motivated by one’s perception of one’s defects and are attempts to compensate for them. This tends to result, Adler thought, in overcompensation and many attendant psychic problems. Adler’s theory is reminiscent of Socratic theory that love is a lack and an attempt to overcome that lack. It also is reminiscent of Aristotle’s notion of God as a final cause of human actions in that we seek godlike perfection.

Theories of psychoanalysis were influential on later Continental philosophy for various reasons, perhaps most notably in bringing forth the idea that we are fundamentally ignorant of our own nature. Psychoanalysis also influenced subsequent Continental philosophy in suggesting that absolute truth, honesty, and happiness are illusory and unattainable ideals that, in fact, make life difficult. The psychoanalysts also emphasized praxis, the application of theory to real life, and rooted their theories in concrete cases and the real experiences of patients. The emphasis on praxis is characteristic of much subsequent Continental philosophy.

Another contribution of psychoanalysis was the understanding of human life as an organic process from birth to death, in which early life determines adulthood. According to this view, problems currently experienced more than likely have roots in traumatic events in a person’s childhood. The novelist Marcel Proust observed that we come most alive and experience the deepest happiness when we
remember past events and relationships. Psychoanalysis tends to see this remembering in terms of becoming conscious of one’s anxieties and their origins in infancy. The psychoanalytic view is that, paradoxically, by dealing with psychic pain and trauma consciously, the patient can experience the deepest pleasure and self-realization.

TWO EXISTENTIALISTS

Existentialism as a philosophical movement was something of a direct reaction to perceived social ills and was embraced by artists and writers as much as by philosophers per se. So it is not surprising that two of the greatest existentialist philosophers, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, wrote drama, novels, and political tracts as well as philosophical works. Both also thought it important to disseminate their ideas into society as a whole in the hope of having some direct influence. Both were involved in the French Resistance during World War II against the terror of German fascism. Both thought—despite their belief in the absurdity of life—that responsible social action is necessary, as is an understanding of the socio-political forces at work in the world.

Camus and Sartre are by no means the only existentialist philosophers. Other famous existentialists include Gabriel Marcel and Simone de Beauvoir in France (discussed in Chapter 14), Karl Jaspers in Switzerland, Martin Heidegger in Germany (whose work in phenomenology is discussed later in this chapter), Miguel
There is a big difference between a novel or a poem and a philosophical essay. Still, themes and ideas that might loosely be described as philosophical are encountered throughout the world’s great literature. Literature, after all, personifies human perspectives, thoughts, aspirations, values, and concerns. Often it is an immediate response to the current human situation and human needs. For example, beginning in the late nineteenth century, various European writers began to challenge the values of their culture and emphasized the idea that the individual is alone and isolated. Existentialism began this way, and the main themes of the movement, such as absurdity and meaninglessness, were only later thematized and delineated by writer–philosophers such as Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir.

The extent to which literature is or contains philosophy is itself a philosophical issue of controversy and substance. However, we can mention several literary approaches or viewpoints or “takes” on life that qualify in obvious ways as philosophical. The first might be described as a viewpoint based on absence. This way of thinking is based on the idea that the world is radically defective in that it is incapable of providing human beings what they truly need to be satisfied and/or happy. Examples of such writers include Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett. Such writers take a position on human nature and needs, though they do so implicitly rather than explicitly.

A second basic literary approach is based on fullness. This viewpoint sees life as immeasurably rich and bountiful. Life is to be lived all out, and every moment intensified and enjoyed. This is the traditional bailiwick of Romantics such as Goethe, Nietzsche, and Lord Byron. Goethe wrote, “If you want to create something, you must be something.” American examples of this approach to life and literature include the poetry of Walt Whitman and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. More contemporary examples would be Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin.

A third literary approach is the tragic stance. Here, life for whatever reason is tragic at its best and pathetic at its worst. The underlying pessimism in the plays of Sophocles and the tragedies of William Shakespeare are considered by many the very height of Western literature and culture. *Oedipus Rex, Hamlet,* and *King Lear* have not been surpassed for their dramatic power and truth telling. Shakespeare powerfully suggests this stance in Hamlet: “To be or not to be, that is the question.” The plays of the Swedish writer August Strindberg and the films of Ingmar Bergman are powerful contemporary variations of the tragic stance. Two examples of this approach by American writers are Arthur Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956). The tragic stance is related to the first viewpoint: the fundamental philosophical question, Camus asserted, is whether there is any reason not to commit suicide.

A fourth literary approach to life is the comic vision. Life here is seen as a comedy, a kind of cosmic joke. It is better to laugh at life than to cry. As Erasmus wrote in the fifteenth century, “The highest form of bliss is living with a certain degree of folly.” Erasmus thought that folly is not difficult to find but surrounds us everywhere in our everyday lives. A more modern writer who recognized the absurdity of life yet refused to be defeated by it was Eugene Ionesco. He wrote, “To become conscious of what is atrocious and to laugh at it is to become master of what is atrocious.” A potent example of this attitude in American literature can be found in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22.* There are similarities here with Stoicism, covered in Chapter 10.

A fifth approach to life through literature is developed by Martin Heidegger in his interpretations of poets like Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Georg Trakl. This literature, in the view of Heidegger, is the pursuit of the unknown, the unthought, and the unsaid. The poetic thinker’s task is to go out into the darkness and experience the human condition in the deepest way possible.

A sixth literary approach uses the medium to provide rules, maxims, and suggestions as to how life ought to be lived. There is the whole genre of coming-to-maturity or growing-up novels in literature, which provide lessons for the young and the not so young. Actually, almost all significant literature
Literature and Philosophy (continued)

includes depiction of the consequences of actions and moral lessons. The examples of such writers are numerous. We will mention only two of the greatest. The writings of Cervantes are a veritable storehouse of proverbs and wise sayings, such as, “Never stand begging for that which you have the power to earn.” Another writer known for his didactic potency is Charles Dickens. He wrote, for example, “Reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.” Literature can provide the average reader with an initial access to philosophy and deeper questions in life. Heinrich Heine’s Siddhartha is a classic example of a novel about how to become a noble, even heroic, person. For a while there, Robert M. Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance was something of a cult novel and continues after three decades to be read by young people who are interested in knowing how Zen, and Eastern philosophy generally, can provide a model for living well in the present. Another fictional work that has been widely read and that has introduced many to the history of philosophy is Jostein Gaarder’s Sophie’s World. Here whole swaths of Western philosophy are presented in an approachable and readable way that also relates them to contemporary life and its problems.

Albert Camus

Albert Camus [kah-MOO] (1913–1960) grew up in poverty in Algeria and fought in the French Resistance against the Nazis. He saw much suffering, waste, and death even before the war; perhaps not surprisingly, the principal philosophical question for him was, Is there any reason not to commit suicide? Camus believed that this question arises when a person stops deceiving himself or herself and begins seeing the world without preconceived illusions (see the box “Life Is Absurd” on page 162).

Many people, Camus believed, live their whole lives and die without ever seeing things as they really are. More specifically, instead of seeing the “tragic nature of life,” they waste their lives in “stupid self-confidence.” That is, although they in fact spend their lives in or near despair in an absurd world that continually frustrates true human needs, they mask the fact with a forced optimism. And the more “profitable” such false optimism is, the more entrenched it becomes. In Camus’ view, for many of us self-deception has become a dominant mode of being. This implies, as well, that often we are strangers to ourselves and to our own inability to meet our fundamental needs.

What are these basic needs? According to Camus, there are two: the need for clarity or understanding and the need for social warmth and contact. Unfortunately, however, we live in an absurd world, a world in which these basic human needs are unmet. The need for clear understanding of the world founders on the “opaqueness and density of the world”; indeed, it founders on the very fact that the
**Existentialism in European Literature**

As we said in the preceding box, starting in the late nineteenth century, some European artists began to challenge the culture and values of their society. In various ways, their works expressed their sense that life is meaningless and empty and that the individual is alone and isolated. A sampling of literature from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries shows some of the ways in which those themes were presented.

• **“Notes from the Underground”** (1864), a story by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, tells how an imperfect society can waste the lives of its best members. The “underground man” lives in a society that prefers and rewards mediocrity. Hence his intelligence, sensitivity, and strength of character are neither needed nor wanted. He is condemned to watch second-rate compatriots surpass him and achieve success while his own superior talents languish unused. He is left with a life of bitterness, hopelessness, and shame. His sole pleasure consists in acts of spite and revenge, more imaginary than real.

• **“The Death of Ivan Ilyich”** (1884), a story by Leo Tolstoy, provides a powerful and moving example of the meaninglessness and futility of life. Ivan Ilyich had led what he thought was a successful, busy, ambitious life. But when he learns that, though still in the prime of life, he has an incurable and fatal disease, he begins noticing that his wife and family members are really only concerned about the inheritance and that his fellow workers have already begun jockeying to replace him. He sees that no one really cares about him or has any genuine sympathy for his situation. He cannot understand the insincerity and cruelty of others, including that of his own family, and he cannot understand God’s cruelty and His absence in time of need. Above all, Ivan cannot understand why he is so alone, abandoned to suffer and die. Has he done something deserving of such punishment? Ivan exclaims, “I am not guilty,” but Tolstoy adds that Ivan “is not certain it is so.”

• **The Trial** (1925), a novel by Franz Kafka, explores the idea that we can feel responsible—or even be responsible—for the situations in which we find ourselves (and whose causes we certainly do not understand). A man, Joseph K., is arrested, convicted, and executed without ever being able to find out what crime he was supposed to have committed. Nor is he conscious of having committed any crime. Yet such is his sense of self-doubt that he is never sure he does not deserve to be condemned.

• **The Bald Soprano** (1950), a play by Eugène Ionesco, is in the dramatic tradition known as “theater of the absurd.” Two strangers meet at a dinner party and enter into conversation. Slowly they discover that they had sat in the same train compartment five weeks earlier, live in the same city and house, and both have a daughter with one red eye and one white eye. Ultimately, to their delight, they discover that they are husband and wife.

• **Waiting for Godot** (1953), a play by Samuel Beckett, explores the inability of humans to communicate with one another. Two tramps, Didi and Gogo, wait in a desertlike environment for someone named Godot to arrive, who will tell them what to do. They talk only to pass the time, not because they have anything to say. They seem often to be talking at the same time on entirely different subjects without either one noticing. And it does not matter, for it does not interrupt the emptiness of the words.

world is absurd and consequently provides no sufficient reason for why things happen one way and not another.

The second essential need, the need for human warmth and contact, also remains unfulfilled, Camus thought. Humans in this violent age tend to remain strangers to one another (as well as to themselves); they live solitary existences in which relationships are matters of convention rather than of mutual sharing and
Life Is Absurd

One of Camus’ principal theses is that life as we find it is absurd. The notion of absurdity implies that there is no ultimate reason that things are the way they are. It also implies that life is unjust and frustrates human needs. Most important, perhaps, that the world is absurd seems to mean, for Camus, that it provides no absolute or necessary basis of value. That we must make choices and decide how to act in a valueless and absurd world is often called the “existential predicament.”

understanding. The absurdity of life in frustrating essential human needs means that hoped-for happiness often turns to misery and despair—even though many hide this tragedy from themselves behind a façade of baseless hopes.

Camus likened life to the fate of Sisyphus in the myth of the same name. Sisyphus had provoked the wrath of the gods and was condemned to roll a huge stone up a hill, only to see it roll back down again. This act repeated itself forever. Human beings, according to Camus, are similarly condemned to lives of “futile and hopeless labor” without reasonable hope of fulfilling their true needs. No matter how hard we try to live a just and meaningful existence, it is unlikely that our efforts will lead to lasting results.
In this context it may easily be understood why Camus considered the question of suicide to be a primary philosophical issue. Why indeed should one wish to continue living under such circumstances as Camus has depicted? Nevertheless, Camus regarded suicide as unacceptable. Suicide, he thought, is a kind of weak-minded acquiescence to an unjust destiny. Camus believed, perhaps paradoxically, that by struggling against the Sisyphean fate to the end, by rebelling against the absurdity and tragedy of life, it is possible to give life meaning and value. His position indeed is that only through this struggle with an absurd world can the individual achieve fulfillment, solidarity with others, and “a brief love of this earth.”

Increasingly, Camus focused his concern on the grotesque inhumanity and hideous cruelty of a world torn asunder by war and Nazism. Civilization, he thought, certainly with some justification, is suffering from a “plague” of epidemic proportions, a plague that kills many and sickens all. (Perhaps Camus’ most famous work was *The Plague*, 1947.) In such an unjust world, one finds oneself committing violent acts merely to survive. Camus viewed the world as, in effect, sponsoring an ongoing competition in murder, as a place in which it is difficult to raise a finger without killing somebody. Capital punishment, he thought, is just one example of how the “decent citizen” is reduced to the level of a murderer. And in outright warfare the morality of violence exceeds control and comes into the open.

Camus wrote that “one cannot always live on murders and violence.” By living out the values of the lowest animals, the individual is delivered up to the merciless power of despair and cynicism. Camus loathed the “absolute cynicism” of modern society that, he implied, drove humans to desperation and prevented them “from taking responsibility for their own life.”

Thus, Camus came increasingly to insist that each individual must spend his or her life fighting the plague—that is, the degeneracy of the world. Each must resist the temptations offered by cunning and violence; what is called for, he thought, is a “revolt” against the existing “order.” Perhaps as a way of fighting the plague, Camus’ thinking after the war became increasingly concerned with social and political issues. This represents a shift from his early works, which are focused much more strictly on the concerns of the individual.

But Camus thought that the revolt against a revolting world must be “measured” and limited. What Camus means is made clearer in his play *Caligula* (1944), in which the Roman emperor Caligula is presented as an example of a man who discovers the implicit cruelty and viciousness of human existence. In order not to fall victim to this evil, Caligula revolts against it in an unmeasured way, through his own acts of cruelty and viciousness. Such an unmeasured reaction was unacceptable to Camus; it meant becoming more bestial than the other beasts. In short, for Camus, the violence of the world does not excuse or justify violence in response.

Thus, the best that is possible for the individual, Camus implied, is a measured revolt wherein he or she spends life resisting violence and injustice. The effort, he maintained, must be predicated on the assumption that “any mutilation of mankind is irrevocable.” The individual must fight for justice and liberty and against all forms of tyranny: “Let us die resisting,” he wrote. Yet we must have no illusions or false optimism about the possible results of our action. For it may well be that nothing will improve: in an absurd world, nothing is guaranteed.
Jean-Paul Sartre

Albert Camus was agnostic, maintaining that he did not know whether or not there is a God. Jean-Paul Sartre [sartr] (1905–1980) was atheistic. A human being, Sartre said, is abandoned, by which “we mean that God does not exist.”

And according to Sartre, the abandonment of humans—that is, the nonexistence of God—has drastic philosophical implications. Basically, there are four (and after you read about them, you might read the box “Is Sartre Only for Atheists?”).

First, because there is no God, there is no maker, and no such thing as a divine conception of a human being in accordance with which the individual is created. This means, Sartre thought, that there is no such thing as a human nature that is common to all humans; no such thing as a specific essence that defines what it is to be human. Past philosophers had maintained that each thing in existence has a definite, specific essence; Aristotle, for example, believed that the essence of being human is being rational. But for Sartre, the person must produce her or his own essence, because no God created human beings in accordance with a divine concept. Thus, in the case of human beings, Sartre wrote, “existence precedes essence,” by which he meant very simply that you are what you make of yourself.

The second implication of the nonexistence of God is this. Because there is no God, there is no ultimate reason why anything has happened or why things are the way they are and not some other way. This means that the individual, in effect, has been thrown into existence without any real reason for being. But this does not mean that the individual is like a rock or a flea, which also (because there is no God) have no ultimate reason or explanation. Rocks and fleas, Sartre would say, have only what he calls “being-in-itself” (in French, être-en-soi), or mere existence. But a human being, according to Sartre, not only exists, that is, has being-in-itself, but also has “being-for-itself” (être-pour-soi), which means that a human being, unlike an inanimate object or a vegetable, is a self-aware or conscious subject that creates its own future. We will return to this point shortly.

Third, because there is no God and hence no divine plan that determines what must happen, “there is no determinism.” Thus, “man is free,” Sartre wrote, “man is freedom”; in fact, he is condemned to be free. Nothing forces us to do what we do. Thus, he said, “we are alone, without excuses,” by which he meant simply that we cannot excuse our actions by saying that we were forced by circumstances or moved by passion or otherwise determined to do what we did.

Fourth, because there is no God, there is no objective standard of values: “It is very troubling that God does not exist,” Sartre wrote, “for with him disappears every possibility of finding values . . . there can no longer be any good a priori.” Consequently, because a Godless world has no objective values, we must establish or invent our own values.

Consider briefly what these various consequences of our abandonment entail. That we find ourselves in this world without a God-given “human nature” or “essence”; that we are active, conscious, and self-aware subjects; that we are totally free and unconstrained (and unexcused) by any form of determinism; and that we must create our own values—these facts mean that each individual has an awesome responsibility. According to Sartre, first of all, we are responsible for what
we are. “Abandonment implies that we ourselves choose our being.” Second, we
must invent our own values. And third and finally, because “nothing can be good
for us without [also] being [good] for all,” in inventing our own values we also
function as universal legislators of right and wrong, good and evil. In choosing for
ourselves, we choose for all. “Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we had
supposed it, for it involves all mankind.”

This responsibility for oneself and thus for all humankind, Sartre thought,
we experience as anguish, and it is clear why he maintained that this is so: our re-
sponsibility is total and profound and absolutely inescapable. You might perhaps ob-
ject that many people, perhaps even most, certainly do not seem to be particularly

Is Sartre Only for Atheists?

If God does exist, then technically speaking we are not “abandoned.” But some of the main problems
that arise from abandonment seem also to arise merely if we cannot know whether God exists. For if
we do not know whether God exists, then we do not know whether there is any ultimate reason why
things happen the way they do, and we do not know whether those values we believe are grounded in
God really do have objective validity.

In fact, even if we do know that God exists and also know that values are grounded in God, we still
may not know which values are grounded in God: we may still not know what the absolute criteria and
standards of right and wrong are. And even if we know what the standards and criteria are, just what
they mean will still be a matter for subjective interpre-
tation. And so the human dilemma that results
may be very much the same as if there were
no God.

Nonatheists should not dismiss Sartre too hastily.

Jean-Paul Sartre studied philosophy
at the École Normale Supérieure. He
also studied the philosophies of Husserl
and Heidegger and spent one year in
Berlin. While still a graduate student,
he met Simone de Beauvoir, who later
played a key role in the early phases
of the women’s liberation movement,
especially with her famous book, The
Second Sex (1948). Their friendship
and mutual support lasted until Sartre’s
dead—though in the opinion of his-
torian Paul Johnson, “In the annals of
literature, there are few worse cases of a
man exploiting a woman.” (Sartre never wrote any-
thing about their relationship.)

During World War II, Sartre served in the French
army, became a German prisoner of war, escaped,
and worked in the Resistance move-
ment. Throughout his life he supported
political causes and movements, includ-
ing the French Communist Party. In
1951, he tried unsuccessfully to found a
new political party, radically leftist but
noncommunist in orientation.

Sartre’s most famous works in-
clude the novel Nausea (1939), the
play No Exit (1944), and the philo-
sophical treatise Being and Nothingness
(1943). In 1964 Sartre declined the
Nobel Prize in literature, citing “per-
sonal reasons.”

When Sartre died, fifty thousand people
marched behind his coffin through the streets of
Paris. He was indeed a national treasure.
anxious, let alone anguished. It is true, Sartre admitted, that many people are not consciously or visibly anxious. But this merely is because they are hiding or fleeing from their responsibility: they act and live in self-deception or inauthenticity, what Sartre called “bad faith.” Further, he said, they are ill at ease with their conscience, for “even when it conceals itself, anguish appears.”

It is not difficult to understand why one might seek to avoid shouldering one’s responsibility to oneself and thus to others, for as Sartre depicted it, this responsibility is overwhelming. But in Sartre’s view something else also contributes to the difficulty of this task: one does not know what to choose, because the world is experienced as absurd. It is experienced as absurd, Sartre maintains, because, since God does not exist, it lacks necessity—it lacks an ultimate rhyme or reason for being this way and not that way. The world, therefore, is experienced as fundamentally senseless, unreasonable, illogical, and, therefore, “nauseating.” It calls forth both revulsion and boredom. It is “perfectly gratuitous” (gratuità parfaite) and often just simply too much (de trop).

Nevertheless, according to Sartre, it is only through acceptance of our responsibility that we may live in authenticity. To be responsible, to live authentically, means intentionally to make choices about one’s life and one’s future. These choices are made most efficaciously, Sartre maintained, by becoming “engaged” in the world and by selecting a fundamental project, a project that can mobilize and direct all of one’s life energies and permit one to make spontaneous choices. Through this project, in short, the individual creates a world that does not yet exist and thus gives meaning to his or her life.
So Sartre’s metaphysics (or antimetaphysics), which stood opposed to the belief in God, determinism, necessity, and the objectivity of values, in effect leaves the human individual in what may plausibly be called an absurd situation. There is nothing that one must do; there is nothing that must be done. To find meaning in life, the individual must create his or her world and its values by making authentic choices. These choices first take the form of intentions directed toward future events. Then they become actions of an engaged being in a world of people, a political (and politically troubled) world. The choices that we make are made for all humankind and are, therefore, in this limited sense “absolute” ethical principles. Although we initially find ourselves in an absurd world not of our choosing, we can remake that world through our choices and actions, and we must do so, as difficult as that may be.

Sartre and Kant on Ethics

“I choose myself perpetually,” Sartre wrote. By this he meant that we each are in a continual process of constructing ourselves and our values or ethics. And Sartre believed that when a person determines something to be right for himself or herself, that person is also determining it to be good for all.

This universalization of individual choices is reminiscent of Immanuel Kant’s supreme precept of morality, the categorical imperative, according to which you must only act in such a way that the principle on which you act could be a universal law. Kant, however, as we will see in Part Two, grounded the categorical imperative and hence all morality in reason, which he thought determines a priori what is right and wrong. Sartre, however, maintains that there is no a priori moral law and that Kant’s formal law is inadequate as a guide for concrete action in everyday life. It is rather what a person does that in fact determines his morality. “In choosing myself, I choose man,” Sartre said.

It is perhaps arguable, however, that this principle (“in choosing myself, I choose man”) is for Sartre a universal principle underlying morality.

You Are What You Do

According to Sartre, you create yourself through your choices. But be aware that, for Sartre, these self-creating choices are not found in mere “philosophical” abstractions or speculations. The choices that count, for Sartre, are those that issue forth in actions. “There is reality only in action,” he wrote, “man is nothing other than the whole of his actions.”

This means that, according to Sartre, no hidden self or true you lies behind your deeds. If, for example, in your actions you are impatient and unforgiving, it is a fiction for you to think, “Well, if others could see into my heart, they would know that in reality I am patient and understanding.” If you are cowardly in your deeds, you deceive yourself if you believe that “in truth” or “deep, down inside” you are courageous. If you have not written great poetry, then it is an illusion for you to believe that you nevertheless have the soul of a great poet.
It is easy to see why Sartre believed that his doctrine horrified many people. Many people think of their behavior as but poorly reflecting their true character, which they believe is in some way superior to the character that displays itself in their actions. Those who think this deceive themselves, according to Sartre.

This exposition of Sartre’s thought focuses on his understanding of what might be called the existential predicament. His thinking evolved over time, and he became increasingly concerned—like Camus—with social and political issues. These interests and his fascination with Marxist philosophy led to a modification of his existentialist stance, but we can do no more in this book than mention this. We have also not dealt with his epistemology, his aesthetics, or his views on psychoanalysis.

**PHENOMENOLOGY**

This impressive-sounding word denotes the philosophy that grew out of the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In brief, phenomenology interests itself in the essential structures found within the stream of conscious experience—the stream of phenomena—as these structures manifest themselves independently of the assumptions and presuppositions of science.

Phenomenology, much more than existentialism, has been a product of philosophers rather than of artists and writers. But like existentialism, phenomenology has had enormous impact outside philosophical circles. It has been especially influential in theology, the social and political sciences, and psychology and psychoanalysis. Phenomenology is a movement of thinkers who have a variety of interests and points of view; phenomenology itself finds its antecedents in Kant and Hegel (though the movement regarded itself as anything but Hegelian). Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, argued that all objective knowledge is based on phenomena, the data received in sensory experience. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, beings are treated as phenomena or objects for a consciousness.

What are phenomena? It is difficult to convey precisely what is meant by the term, but it may help for you to consider the distinction between the way something is immediately experienced and the way it “is.” Place a penny on the table before you, look at it, and concentrate on your experience as you look. The penny-in-experience changes its shape and size as you move your head. Of course you are accustomed to assuming that there is a second penny “beyond” this changing penny-in-experience, the so-called “real” penny. You must ignore this assumption. Forget about the “real” penny, and focus on the penny-in-experience. Indeed, don’t restrict your attention to the penny-in-experience. Contemplate the table-in-experience, the room-in-experience. Consider your entire experience at the moment. And when you do this, ignore your inclination to suppose that there is a second world (the “real” world) lying beyond the world-in-experience. Congratulations: you are now practicing the phenomenological method. Notice that, as long as you limit your attention to the world-in-experience, you can have certain knowledge. The world beyond experience,
the “real” world assumed by natural science, is sense here, is a world in which much is unknown and doubtful? But the world-in-experience, the world of pure phenomena, can be explored without the same limitations or uncertainties.

Edmund Husserl

The first great phenomenologist, **Edmund Husserl** [HOO-surl] (1859–1938), attempted to rekindle Europe’s waning faith in the possibility of certainty by proposing a universal phenomenology of consciousness, a “science” that studies the structures that are the same for every consciousness. Accordingly, he developed **transcendental phenomenology**, whose purpose it was to investigate phenomena without making any assumptions about the world. To investigate phenomena in this way is to “bracket” or “exclude” one’s presupposition about the existence or nature of an “external” or “physical” or “objective” world. Husserl called this process **phenomenological reduction**, and you just did it above. Its purpose is to examine the meaning produced by pure impersonal consciousness and to describe the human “life-world” in terms of those essences (which all human beings share) found within conscious experience.

This sounds a bit like psychology, but Husserl distinguished transcendental phenomenology from regular psychology, which approaches the mind with the assumptions and methods of the other natural sciences in their study of the German Autobahn began in 1931, the year Edmund Husserl published a detailed phenomenological exploration of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations*. Roughly, intersubjectivity is imagining yourself in another person’s shoes.
“objective” world. It (Husserl’s phenomenology) also sounds a bit like traditional idealistic metaphysics, in which everything is reduced to thought. But that tradition at least invokes the dualistic worldview of the natural sciences in order to deny it. Phenomenology, in theory, simply explores conscious experience without making any metaphysical assumptions.

Martin Heidegger

In any event, Husserl believed phenomenology opens up for scrutiny a realm that escapes the uncertainty and conditional status of the empirical world, and he called for a “return to the things themselves” (i.e., phenomena). Martin Heidegger [HY-dig-ger] (1889–1976) was stimulated by Husserl’s call to return to the things themselves and by Husserl’s major work, Logical Investigations (1900). Heidegger, too, was convinced that it was necessary to look at things with fresh eyes, unshrouded by the presuppositions of the present and past. He, too, wanted rigorously to ground things in a deeper source of certainty. But for Heidegger, this source is not phenomena, as it was for Husserl, or anything subjective at all. On the contrary, for Heidegger, the ultimate source is Being itself.

Although Being is continuously manifesting itself in things, according to Heidegger, Being itself has been forgotten. Humans have been caught up in their own ideas. Being has been reduced to a world of “objects” that are manipulated and dominated by human “subjects” through a series of human-made logics. Logic is equated with truth when in fact, according to Heidegger, it is only a means to control and use things after human designs; that is, logic is logistics.

Heidegger believed that it is both arrogant and destructive to assume that humans are the masters of nature or to follow Protagoras’s dictum, “man is the measure of all things.” This assumption of the absolute power of humanity was for Heidegger the real cause of the cultural destitution and social dissolution within the twentieth century. Heidegger thought that we live in an intellectually impoverished (dürftig) time, and that it is likely to become worse until we abandon our presumptuousness and return to the wisdom inherent in Being itself. The return must involve listening to Being instead of toying with things arbitrarily.

According to Heidegger, we are basically ignorant about the thing that matters most: the true nature of Being. Our lives are a kind of Socratic search for this lost and unknown source of all things. Consciousness of the priority of Being would mean a new beginning for philosophy as well as for Western civilization, he held.

Heidegger, therefore, initially sought to establish a scientific study of Being as the root of all meaning and necessity in things. This effort broadened out later and became a quest for an even more direct approach to Being itself. Early on—for example, in his first major work, Being and Time (1927)—Heidegger’s ideas still contained much that is Husserlian and Kantian in approach. He still sought true knowledge in a priori structures found in the human mind. It is only in his later thinking—that he had what he called a fundamental “turning about”—that he sought to uncover Being directly, beyond the a priori categories or structures of human perception and thought. He did so without assurance that any absolute certainty about Being itself is even possible.
It is usually with reference to his earlier work that Heidegger is sometimes called an existentialist. Heidegger himself resisted this appellation. Yet he was very much influenced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and the concern expressed in his early works with such existentialist themes as fear, dread, meaninglessness, and death is quite evident. Sartre studied in Germany for a brief time in the 1930s and was influenced by Heidegger. Sartre attributed the concept of abandonment to Heidegger, and Sartre and Heidegger both were concerned with the concepts of bad faith, authenticity, a life’s project, and others.

Still, in decisive ways, Heideggerian and Sartrian philosophies are dissimilar. Heidegger never did abandon his belief in Being as the basic principle of philosophy, whereas for Sartre individual existence was of paramount importance. Sartre believed that, as a consequence of the nonexistence of God, nothing about Being is necessary; Heidegger believed that Being is absolutely necessary. Politically, Sartre considered himself a Marxist and accepted much of the Marxist view of historical events, whereas Heidegger was not in any sense sympathetic to the Marxist worldview. All in all, Heidegger and Sartre philosophically are quite different, despite the superficial resemblance.

At the heart of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is the notion of *Sinn* (sense, meaning), the absence of which in life was said to be the problem of human existence. For Heidegger, the human being is thrown into the world and soon experiences both fear and dread when confronted with forces beyond understanding. The better part of human life, he maintains, needs to be used in “head-breaking,” that is, in attempting to discover what the appearances mean—that they suggest and hide.

Further, humans are “beings-in-the-world,” which means that they can be open only to what is within the horizons of their world. They exist and are conscious within a world with other beings, but the meaning of human relationships is
at first but dimly perceived and poorly understood. As a consequence of their lack of insight and understanding, many humans live ungenuine and inauthentic lives. They do not make adequate or appropriate choices for themselves because they do not understand who they are or what they are confronting. And although they may experience unease living in a world beyond their comprehension, they make too little effort to extend their comprehension. They suffer from a kind of “primitive” being, which Heidegger refers to as everydayness, and fail to fulfill their real potential. Thus, Heidegger invoked the concept of everydayness to explain why human beings continue to lead unthinking lives.

Another typical existential theme connected by Heidegger with an everyday existence is an inauthentic mode of communication, namely, chatter. Speech is reduced to a meaningless flood of words that camouflages fear, prevents understanding, and precludes any meaningful communication. Nothing truly meaningful is ever said or allowed to be said.

An authentic existence can be found, according to Heidegger, only if one can understand oneself as a totality. And seeing oneself as a whole can happen only by facing the hard fact that one is mortal. We are, Heidegger said, “beings-onto-death.” By facing death, we can see and delineate the limits of our being. We begin to see the limited amount of time yet available and begin to realize we must not waste it.

The innermost nature of the human being, according to Heidegger, is caring—a concern for beings in the world. This caring takes place over time. And thinking must do so as well. Thus, for Heidegger, we are essentially temporal beings.

According to Heidegger, human thinking is “ecstatic,” which means it is directed toward an anticipated future. The most effective way of embracing one’s future, he thought, is by throwing oneself open into Being. This project (Entwurf) opens the person to the fundamental truth of Being that has been forgotten. Therefore, the individual who has been thrown into the world finds her or his ground and truth in the openness and light of the truth of Being itself.

As noted earlier, Heidegger thought that the cultural and intellectual poverty of the twentieth century was a direct result of the pervasive assumption that the value of things is solely determined by human intelligence and human will (the assumption that the human is the measure of all things). This assumption or metaphysical stance, he thought, has led not only to individual loneliness, alienation, and unfulfillment but to social destructiveness as well. For Heidegger, this metaphysical point of

Do people use cell phones to chatter?
view, which he perceived as having been entrenched in Western civilization since Plato, assumed the superiority of Ideas over any physical reality existing “outside” the mind. In Heidegger’s opinion, Nietzsche’s will-to-power, whereby the will becomes the absolute determiner of the value of things and of oneself, represented the philosophical culmination of this Platonic metaphysics.

Poetry  According to the later Heidegger, instead of imposing our thought on things, we must think in a quiet, nonimpositional way so that we can catch a glimpse of Being as it shows itself. In contrast to others in the phenomenological tradition, Heidegger believed that thought cannot impose itself on Being because Being makes thought possible. What is required, therefore, he said (in contrast to the existentialists), is a new kind of thinking in which humans look to Being itself for enlightenment and not merely to themselves. This kind of thinking occurs, according to Heidegger, in the best poetry. Poetic thinking can uncover the as-yet unseen, unthought, and unspoken. Therefore, he said, systematic philosophy, with its grandiose schemes, with its mind–body and other dualistic splits, with its metaphysics and metaphysical traditions, must give way to this more original kind of thinking. Through this deeper way of thinking, Heidegger said, we may at long last rediscover the depth of what has been forgotten—Being itself.

Heidegger wrote essays about many poets, including Hölderlin, Rilke, Trakl, and others. But he also wrote poems that suggest how the poet might bring a glimmer of light to the darkness within existence. For example:

When the early morning light quietly grows
above the mountains . . .

The world’s darkening never reaches to the
light of Being.

We are too late for the gods and too early for
Being. Being’s poem, just begun, is man.

To head toward a star—this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a single
thought that one day stands still like a star
in the world’s sky.

But to enter into the abyss of Being, for Heidegger, is a difficult, long, and solitary undertaking. It requires patience and courage, too. He wrote,

All our heart’s courage is the echoing response
to the first call of Being which gathers our
thinking into the play of the world.²

It is the poet, for Heidegger, who ventures out into the unknown to find the “unique thought” that will bring the necessary light for the coming time.

Eastern Philosophy  Especially later in his life, Heidegger grew interested in Eastern philosophy and especially the philosophy of Lao Tzu (see Chapter 15). Perhaps Heidegger’s new way of thinking—listening to Being—represents a coming together of Eastern and Western philosophizing. Certainly there are common currents and themes. Both believed that “nature is not human-hearted” (Lao Tzu) and that what is called human “knowledge” is mostly ignorance. Both felt that “those who care will be cared for” (Lao Tzu). What is necessary, according to both, is to take nature [Being] as a “guide.” And it is as Lao Tzu suggested: “In the clarity of a still and open mind, the truth will be revealed.”

Emmanuel Levinas

Born in Kaunas, Lithuania, Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) was the son of a bookstore manager. Levinas, understandably, became an avid reader, especially of classic Russian literature and the Hebraic Bible. In 1923 he went to Strasbourg (Germany) to study philosophy and focused on the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas was mainly responsible for introducing phenomenology into France. During World War II his parents were killed by the Nazis, and he himself was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, he took up a number of academic posts, culminating in a professorship at the Sorbonne. His principal writings center around two areas of concern: Talmudic commentaries and ethics, understood in the broader sense of being aware of what and how we humans exist in the world.

Martin Heidegger, as you know from what we have written already, had made a radical critique of the whole history of Western metaphysics interpreted as a form of Platonism. Western metaphysics represented, for Heidegger, a devolutionary process that ended in Nietzsche’s nihilism and the complete forgetting of Being itself. Heidegger not only declared the end of metaphysics but also attempted to establish a new way of thinking about Being that he initially called ontology.

Levinas based his critique of Heidegger mainly on Heidegger’s major early work, Being and Time (1927). In stark contrast with Heidegger, Levinas wanted philosophy to break out of the stranglehold of Being. Levinas tried to establish a philosophy rooted in the notions of radical otherness and unbridgeable separateness. Philosophy begins, he believed, with the horrible experiences of our otherness (alterity). Other people exist as unovercomable alterity. Time, language, and even existence itself is experienced as other. And God, for Levinas, exists as Absolute Otherness, a separateness never to be breached. True meaning and understanding of ourselves, for Levinas, can only be reached by a meeting with this radical Other in all its strangeness. The attempt to meet with the Other represents an act of transcendence and is the key human event. The Other exists “prior to any act” whatsoever.

Thus, for Levinas, ontology (the study of Being) represented the wrong-headed attempt to reduce this irreducible otherness to sameness, to reduce the Other to a mere object for consciousness. The project is doomed because the Other exists prior to ontology. Instead of starting with Being and trying to explain beings, we must begin with beings in their separateness and otherness. In particular, we
must confront other humans in their invisibility and incomprehensibility. The Other remains a puzzle but a puzzle that can nevertheless reveal secrets.

The secrets of the Other both reveal and hide themselves in the human face (le visage). The face, for Levinas, is our epiphany into the Other. First of all, the face of the Other throws into question the “I” that we have constructed in our alienation from the Other. To know ourselves, we must know the Other. We are therefore “hostage” to the Other for our being and for our understanding of ourselves.

The Other, for Levinas, is the infinite in the individual self. As encountered in the form of the face, it solicits us to posit ourselves for this Other. It is that which makes communication possible. It opens us up to the transcendent, to the Absolutely Other, to the infinite, to God and to His Law. This takes us to the realm of Levinas’s transcendental ethical philosophy. For Levinas, ethics is prior to ontology. The responsibility of thinking is always in response to an unfulfilled and ultimately unfulfillable obligation to the Other.

The Good, for Levinas, is therefore prior to the true. Our primary responsibility is for the Other, and that responsibility trumps even our obligation to ourselves and to the world of things. It is an obligation of self-sacrifice to the Other, an obligation to the infinite. In meeting the Other, we find our own meaning, the “answer” that we are.

This vigilance toward the Other grounds our being and represents the original form of openness to the world. The concomitant forgetting of self leads to real communication and justice. Levinas offers the Hebraic Bible as a model of ethical transcendental philosophy. The Absolute Other to which we are responsible is God or the Most High. By studying the written Law, our obedience to God ruptures our egoism as we respond to God’s commandments. This allows us to attain true freedom.

Levinas had a profound influence on French thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (discussed earlier in this chapter) and, as we will see, Jacques Derrida.

---

**AN ERA OF SUSPICION**

“My experiences,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in his posthumously published confessional called *Ecce Homo*, “entitle me to be quite generally suspicious of the so-called ‘selfless’ drives, of all ‘neighbor love’ that is ready to give advice and go into action.” In the last third of the twentieth century, diverse Continental voices were raised against what they saw as suspicious assumptions about the meaning of right and wrong, the nature of language, and the very possibility of human self-understanding. Some Continental philosophers have been suspicious about Western metaphysical systems that they claim lead to the manipulation of nature or that set up a certain ethnic or cultural perspective as absolute truth. Some voices have raised suspicions about the common assumption that language in some way represents external reality. Still others claim to find deep ideological biases in even the most “neutral” philosophical observations.
Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has challenged the legitimacy of some of the rational principles assumed by the human sciences. French philosopher Michel Foucault explored the deeply ingrained social power systems that shape how social institutions deal with the sexuality of their members and with those who are sick, criminal, or insane. Jacques Derrida developed the technique of deconstruction in literary and philosophical criticism to show, he said, that language meanings cannot be “tied down” and that, as a result, claims that certain passages express the “truth” become suspicious indeed. Finally, American philosopher Richard Rorty, deeply influenced by Continental philosophy and the American pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, proposed a new task for philosophy. Because the discipline could never find “the truth,” it must be used in the service of human beings to extend one’s horizons, one’s possibilities.

Jürgen Habermas

**Jürgen Habermas** [HAHB-ur-mahs] (1929— ), a professor at the University of Frankfurt, is one of many thinkers influenced by the critical approach of the Frankfurt School (see box, page 177). In this context “critical” does not necessarily mean “negative” but rather “reflective” or “thoughtful.” This goes far beyond the reflection a physicist might bring to the results of a failed experiment (“What went wrong? Is there a hidden variable I have not accounted for? Is my theory faulty?”). The kind of reflection critical theory emphasizes is reflection on the assumptions of science or philosophy. For instance, empirical science approaches the world with a view to finding lawlike regularities in the things it examines; the measure of knowledge thus becomes the predictive power of the experimental method. Underlying the practice of empirical science is the assumption that its findings are independent of the observer (or, if not, then the presence of the observer can be corrected for). When the experimental method is used on the human being, it is no surprise that what emerges is a picture of a thing (a human thing) that also follows lawlike regularities and for which more or less sophisticated predictions can be made.

The tendency in modern technocratic society, Habermas says, is for this description of experimental science to become definitional of all knowledge. Although logical positivism (as we will see in Chapter 9) has been sharply criticized, its influence is still felt in the normal, ongoing scientific enterprise. But Habermas points out that “positivistic science” is only one way of looking at the world, and it is no surprise that such a perspective would claim to find “objective facts” that would make it possible for human beings to exert control over nature. Yet such a perspective, says Habermas, is inappropriate for the investigation of mutually shared meanings we experience in the everyday human world in which we live. Positivistic science treats human beings as objective things; what is needed is an approach to knowledge that treats the human being as a subject, one not isolated from other subjects but, on the contrary, interacting with them. This interaction takes place in a domain that allows the sharing of intersubjective experiences and that provides contexts of history, art, literature, and language itself that enable us to understand one another. (Imagine a visitor who begins putting asphalt in his mouth...
after you suggest, “Let’s eat up the street.” He does not understand that you mean that fast-food restaurant a block away, but it is likely he will learn fast.

This “practical” interest each of us has in understanding one another, Habermas says, is the realm of a science he calls historical/hermeneutical. (Hermeneutics deals with the principles of interpretation—of the Bible, of other texts, and of the language of human interactions.) He emphasizes that in this “practical” science, the individual cannot be treated as an objective unit; on the contrary, my human identity is to a greater or lesser extent the creation of human language and of the society into which I am born. Through this society and language, I gain a “preunderstanding” of others in my quest for mutual self-understanding; that is, I cannot understand myself if I cannot understand the words and actions of others. The meanings of those words and actions give me a context for making sense of myself in the human world.

But, for Habermas, there is a second kind of knowledge that is also inappropriate for the positivistic sciences. Habermas calls this “emancipatory knowledge,” and it is the concern of critical theory. It is the work of critical theory to make
explicit the controlling ideology of a political or social order. “Ideology” misrepresents and distorts the truth about the existence and use of arbitrary power throughout a society. The roots of ideology go deep into the heart of what a society takes to be knowledge. For example, a social order may be blind to its own fundamental belief that the method of positivistic science, which reduces the human being to the status of a thing for purposes of study, is the surest road to truth. In the realm of the practical, such a reductionistic ideology can be seen, say, in the treatment of a poem as a single object, independent of the society that produced it, to be studied just for itself. Habermas would agree with Marx that ideology produces reification; that is, reification takes human acts or properties, objectifies them, and then treats them as independent of the human world. In a capitalist society, for example, money is the reification of human labor and is in the end used against the laborer. But Habermas is critical of Marx’s own reduction of human art and literature—Marx called them the “superstructure”—to the “base” of strict materialism. Thus, Habermas’s own critical theorizing is Marxian—in the critical spirit of Marx—but not Marxist.

For Habermas, critical theory can bring a kind of freedom or emancipation from the chains of ideology as those who practice the method come to reflect on their own most deeply held assumptions and come to see that they are false. Ultimately, such emancipation would change society and the way human beings communicate one with another. Habermas proposed a theory of communicative competence in which what he called the ideal speech situation supplies the basis for rational (that is, nonideological) communication. The ideal speech situation, in which persons are free to speak their minds and listen to reason without fear of being blocked, is a norm of language itself, he said, and is presupposed in every
discourse. The person who lies, for example, does so with the assumption that there is such a thing as speaking the truth (otherwise, the concept of a lie would be meaningless). In a paper published in 1970, Habermas declared that “insofar as we master the means for the construction of an ideal speech situation, we can conceive the ideas of truth, freedom, and justice, which interpret each other—although of course only as ideas. On the strength of communicative competence alone, however, . . . we are quite unable to realize the ideal speech situation; we can only anticipate it.” Recent work by Habermas has focused on the rise of countercultural groups, feminism, and various liberation movements and whether they constitute the beginnings of the kind of free society he envisions.
Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault [foo-KO] (1926–1984) was intensely suspicious of philosophic or scientific truth claims, especially claims by the human sciences (such as psychology and sociology) to have discovered something true—that is, objectively true—about the human being. At first, Foucault thought of himself as an archaeologist, digging through historical strata to lay bare the discourses that shaped societies (and shape our own). Discourse here is a word that describes how people talk, the shape they give to the multitude of interactions within a society, and how they act as a result. It is Foucault's point that a study of such discourse reveals not the steady march of science in its smashing of superstition (that image itself is a kind of superstition) but rather the substitution of one invented reality for another, neither more nor less “true.”

For example, the old view of disease as an outside “evil power” that attempted to kill the body was replaced in the late eighteenth century by the discourse of professionalized medicine, in which disease was spoken of as internal to the body. The proper role of medicine was not to cast out invading evil spirits but physically to cut out diseased flesh. But the “success” of such surgery has come at the price of turning ourselves into mere objects in need of fixing up. Medical technology can sustain the human body for a long time if in our discourse it is seen as some complex machine, but the image of a machine, which permeates our thinking, effectively reduces the human being to a mere mechanism, an object. The meaning (or lack of meaning) this image gives to human existence is not truer than the ancient view, just other. The dominant view of death (or of insanity, or criminality) is part of a discourse that—lo and behold!—finds (that is, creates) a never-ending parade of sick people, the insane, the criminal.

In his “archaeological” period, Foucault’s work seemed to owe something to the structuralist movement in France, although he would disavow any connection. Foucault claimed to have found in his archaeological method a series of discontinuous “created realities,” or epistemes, that serve in each era as the ground of the true and the false. But since these epistemes are a social given, there can be no appeal to any absolute truth of things (unless “absolute truth” is part of the particular episteme, but that would mean such a concept is merely a construct of social discourse and not “absolute” at all). Though the nature of the epistemes cannot be spelled out here, suffice it to say that Foucault’s program is decidedly anti-Hegelian. Where Hegel saw the working out of history as the Absolute Reason becoming self-conscious, Foucault saw history as a series of discontinuities, one following the next but with no hint of true progress.

Yet Foucault’s own project was brought into question by the implications of the archaeological method. It assumes a kind of objectivity on the part of the researcher and his “findings,” but such objectivity, Foucault came to believe, was mere illusion. After all, if Foucault was himself working from within a particular episteme, no objective history of other epistemes would even be possible. Rather than abandon his relativistic stance, Foucault abandoned archaeology. Instead, beginning in the 1970s, he devoted himself to what Friedrich Nietzsche had earlier called genealogy.
For Foucault, **genealogy** did not commit one to a universal theory or to a particular view of the human subject. The emphasis in genealogy was not knowledge (as it had been in archaeology) but power. In his later books Foucault was less concerned with the language-worlds created by various societies than with the “micro-practices” of the body within a given society. This is not simply the physical body but the lived body, an embodied consciousness. For example, one of the features of the embodied person is ability to dominate others; therefore, it is possible to trace the development (the genealogy) of various laws against assault. A court sets up its own rules and acts on them and calls it justice; the practice of the court is just what justice is, but justice is really an illusion for a reordering of power relationships. Genealogy does not provide any theories to explain what is going on; it simply evokes the small practices and social habits that constitute you and us, illuminating how such practices express the working of the power of the body. Genealogy is not prescriptive but descriptive.

---

**PROFILE: Michel Foucault (1926–1984)**

Foucault told a group of American philosophers in Berkeley, California, in April 1983 that when Jürgen Habermas visited him in Paris, Foucault “was quite struck by his observation of the extent to which the problem of Heidegger and of the political implications of Heidegger’s thought was quite a pressing and important one for him.” Habermas interpreted Heidegger as a German neoconservative and Heidegger’s Nazism as somehow connected with Heidegger’s own philosophical positions.

Foucault told the interviewers that he believed there was “a very tenuous ‘analytic’ link between a philosophical conception and the concrete political attitude of someone who is appealing to it; the ‘best’ theories do not constitute a very effective protection against disastrous political choices.” But, Foucault added, “I don’t conclude from this that one may say just anything within the order of theory, but, on the contrary, that a demanding, prudent, ‘experimental’ attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is.”

Before he died on June 25, 1984, of toxoplasmosis-produced lesions on the brain as a result of AIDS, Foucault was engaged during most of his academic career in a project that attempted to chart the power relations by which societies exclude, lock up, or institutionalize the insane, the prisoner, the homosexual—those persons society defines as “other.” Unlike Habermas, Foucault denied that societies could ever free themselves from such exclusionary forces; no “ideal speech situation” was possible.

Foucault himself was something of a scandal to “polite” French society. One biographer writes of the philosopher’s sadomasochistic erotic practices, his appearance in public wearing leather clothes, his open affection for men, and his fondness of the gay bathhouses of San Francisco.

Structuralism versus Deconstruction

**Structuralism** is a methodology that seeks to find the underlying rules and conventions governing large social systems such as language or cultural mythology. It hearkens back to Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** [so-SIWR] (1857–1913), who emphasized the study of the language system itself (*langue*) rather than particular speech (*parole*). Saussure was concerned with the “deep structures” of language common to all speakers. He saw linguistics as the study of signs, which he defined as a combination of the *signifier* (the physical thing that signifies) and the *signified* (that which is signified). A sentence is a sequence of signs the meaning of which depends not only on the order of the signs (“I can go” vs. “Can I go?”) but also on the contrast of each sign with other signs in the language that are not present. Thus, the “I” in “I can go” contrasts with other possible subjects: she, he, you, and so on. It is the relationship between the “I” and these other signs not present that gives the “I” its meaning because our understanding of “I” takes place with the linguistic system and its interrelationships as background. How the “I” differs from other subjects gives the sign its meaning. Notice here that the emphasis Saussure makes is on the internal linguistic system and its infrastructure; it is of little concern to him whether a given sentence expresses something true about the outside world.

The French anthropologist **Claude Lévi-Strauss** [LAY-vee-STROWSS] (1908–) adapted Saussure’s methods and applied them to his ethnographic research. Lévi-Strauss was interested in finding the underlying structures of thought in the myths of nonindustrial societies and in human communities generally. Characteristic of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach, as shown, for example, in *The Savage Mind* (1962; English translation 1966), is the search for a group of rules or “laws” that accounts for the social complexities of even so-called primitive cultures. Cultures (and literary works) were seen as systems of signs the meaning of which could be found in the particular relationships of signs with other signs in the system itself. The implication is that the individual person is very much a construct of the underlying, impersonal rules of the system.

**Jacques Derrida**

The analysis of sign systems of various types, from advertising slogans to animal communication, is now called **semiotics** (from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning “sign”); most of the structuralist methodology fits within this “science of signs.” But is such a science really possible? That is, are meanings within language or cultural systems stable enough to provide a definitive interpretation of texts or rituals arising from those systems? In the late 1960s, French philosopher and literary theorist **Jacques Derrida** [day-ree-DAH] (1930–2004) said the answers were “no.” He maintained that no such stable meanings were possible and that no definitive meaning of a text could ever be established. In fact, the very notion of a “definitive meaning” implied certain unproven (and unprovable) assumptions about texts and language.

Derrida’s **deconstructive method** is to lay bare those assumptions about language, to “question” the text about possible multiple meanings, and in so doing
to show what he calls the **free play of signifiers**. By this Derrida means that the writer of a word “privileges” that word for a moment; this “privileging” becomes the medium for the play of the signifier—*différence*—rather than any background of a fixed linguistic system (which, according to Derrida, does not exist). This is reminiscent of the Heraclitean tradition that “you cannot step into the same river twice”; only now it means “you cannot step into the same language twice.” Because meaning can occur only as experience, our experiences are constantly overriding (“overwriting”) the dictionary definitions of words, effacing those definitions, which in turn are also in flux. A printed dictionary gives the false impression that language has stable meanings, whereas those meanings are continuously “at play” and changing. The use of a word not only goes beyond the dictionary definition but also “effaces” those forces at work that act just beyond the horizon of consciousness. These “forces” are no more available to us than Kant’s *Ding-an-sich*, or thing-in-itself (see Chapter 7). From the perspective of deconstruction, then, there are no extralinguistic connections available to anchor meanings within language.

The use of a word at one moment implies at least a slightly different background context than the use of the word at another time, and thus a difference in meaning. But precisely what this difference is can never be pinned down because even to ask a question about a change in meaning is to change a meaning. Derrida put it this way in a speech in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland: “The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the
result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the
game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset.” But now, says
Derrida, there has come (in deconstruction) a rupture of the metaphysical center
(whether it be Plato’s unchanging Forms or some other metaphysical conception
that has no “play,” no give). “This [rupture] was the moment when language in-
vaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or
origin, everything became discourse . . . that is to say, a system in which the central
signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present out-
side a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends
the domain and the play of signification infinitely.”

Derrida’s comments recall Saussure’s system of “differences,” but Derrida
takes Saussure’s observation to its logical extreme: because all things intelligible to
human beings must pass through their language system to be understood, they in-
evitably become “texts.” Thus, the meaning of, say, the transcendental Forms can
be found only through an exploration of the continual play of signifiers as Plato is
interpreted and interpreted again. No ultimate meaning can be found—what Plato
really meant, what a Form really is—because, if all human understanding comes
through textuality, there is no ultimate meaning to be found.

Thus, Derrida is suspicious of any claim to final interpretation (he calls such
claims absolutely ridiculous). He wants to break down the binary thinking of the
structuralists (and others), who tend to privilege the first term in each dyad:
male/female, white/black, mind/body, master/slave, and so on. Derrida suggests that
the first term has significance only in relation to, and only because of, the second
term. That is, a master can be a master only if there are slaves; the existence of the
master is dependent on the existence of the slave. Derrida’s method seeks to bring
to the foreground the less privileged terms and thus the implicit assumptions
embedded within language systems.

Derrida did not use his deconstructive method merely to throw into question
the assumptions of structural linguists like Saussure and linguistic analysts like
some of those in the analytic tradition. He also used it to attack the structural
anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Derrida tried to show that Lévi-Strauss
failed to see history as a gradually evolving process. Derrida also believed that
there is no basis for making myths into a fixed, coherent system; therefore, the
philosopher cannot be an “engineer” who finds unifying elements within myths.
Myths have no single unitary source; hence, interpretation of them is not scientific
but rather a product of the imagination. Myths have no authors and no single source
and cannot give rise to scientific knowledge.

Derrida also criticizes Lévi-Strauss’s preference for the past and its presumed
natural innocence. New structures of development are seen as catastrophes by
Lévi-Strauss. Play, which is a positive element of change for Derrida, is seen by
Lévi-Strauss as a disruptive force that is ruinous of origins and archaic forms
within society. Derrida is much closer to Nietzsche in not being attached to origins
in actively interpreting society. It is much more important to think what has yet to

---

3 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” in Writing and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago
be and what has yet to be imagined. Thinking must enter the realm of the unknown, the monstrous, the terrifying, the as-yet unformed and unformulated.

Derrida’s critique of linguistic structuralism and of structural anthropology represents but a part of his thinking. His deepest forays into philosophy concern the metaphysical. Here his thinking is most influenced by Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. He most tellingly used his deconstructive method to attack Husserl’s transcendental idealism.

Derrida started his critique by agreeing with Heidegger that metaphysics had been reduced to onto-theology, or a metaphysics according to which all beings stem from a divine logos. *Onto-theology* is a term used by Heidegger to describe the development of metaphysics since Plato. Metaphysics has increasingly come to reduce being into beings and the highest and first being, or God. Since Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead,” modern metaphysics has sought to find structures of absolute certainty in human subjectivity and logic. For Heidegger, this has meant that metaphysics is at an end because it has forgotten *being* entirely and has replaced it with a sterile logic and human hubris. Derrida sees this artificial reduction of metaphysics to a supposed transcendental, absolutely certain logic. You may recall the word *transcendental* as referring to Immanuel Kant’s idea that consciousness structures sense-data into spatio-temporal objects that are related to one another by cause and effect and other principles. Husserl attempted to ground human knowing in a transcendental science of logic or on a universal phenomenology of consciousness (see earlier in this chapter). Derrida elaborated on this development as a *logocentrism*, and this term is meant to apply to Heidegger’s thinking as well. The logocentric worldview is based on a nostalgia for an original state of full being or presence that is now lost. Beings are held to derive their structure and meaning from a divine logos similar to the *logos* Heraclitus first posited in the sixth
century B.C.E. *Logos* has many meanings in Greek, such as “word,” “speech,” “thought,” “reason,” but for Heraclitus and later thinkers, it is the principle and source of order, necessity, and rationality in the universe. Logocentrism is based on a preference for a stable, hierarchical world of necessary being. The necessity and transcendence of such a world is available only to a few rare persons who are capable of thinking transcendentally. Derrida used the deconstructive method to uncover unfounded assumptions and the artificial oppositions on which logocentric thinking is based.

Much of Derrida’s critique of Western thinking concentrates on the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl had sought a purer and more authentic science of metaphysics. To achieve purity and absolute certainty in knowing, Husserl sought a transcendental consciousness that is beyond any particular, individual consciousness. Phenomenology was to be based on *eidetic structures*, or ideal objects that had the same kind of certainty and clarity as geometrical concepts. The word *eidetic* stems from the Greek word *eidos*, which refers back, among other things, to Plato’s Ideas or Forms, which are taken to be true, perfect, permanent, and nonphysical. These essences, or eidetic, transcendental structures, must be distinguished from empirical structures available through sense-experience.

Husserl sought to find a nonempirical, transcendental form of consciousness. He wanted language to have an ideality of meaning as well as a pure, logical grammar. Truths do not need to be represented using empirical content; they can be directly intuited. But for Derrida, there is no direct intuition of these truths; there is only mediated, representational knowledge that is dependent on linguistic structures. He further claimed that truth does not take place prior to language but rather depends on language and temporality for its existence. Idealization of language as well as idealization of original content means the death of existent things. Transcendental philosophy such as Husserl’s leaves out and cannot deal with human finitude and historical change. Such things as death, metaphor, and imaginative creativity cannot be taken into account. Derrida develops contingent or historically changeable concepts and ways of dealing with aspects of language and thinking that Husserl left undeveloped. Derrida thought that these changing, uncertain aspects of things are not on the periphery of language use and metaphysics but rather constitute their very core. Only through the playful use of language will the interaction between the presence and absence of things, as well as between their certainty and uncertainty, enter consciousness.

Thinking and language can never be closed systems of absolutely certain, transcendental concepts. Rather, they should be open ended, if temporally limited. They must in some way be capable of dealing with things’ uniqueness—their changeability, uncertainty, and incompleteness. The claims of deconstruction are much more modest, but they can affect reality in a more positive way. Derrida’s philosophy is a plea for reason to be used in the realms of metaphysics, anthropology, and linguistics. He further extends this procedure to the realms of politics, ethics, and psychology. In a way, he is the Socrates for the twentieth century, forcing a recognition that most claims of absolute knowledge are full of contradictions and untenable.

Derrida’s books include *Of Grammatology* (1967; English translation 1976) and *Writing and Difference* (1967; English translation 1978).
Gilles Deleuze

Gilles Deleuze [jeel-duh-LOOZ] (1925–1995), one of the important figures in contemporary Continental philosophy, wrote on so many different topics—film, literature, logic, politics—that it is difficult to summarize his philosophy. We shall focus on the one thing that stands out most, though: the notion of multiplicity, and the affirmation of multiplicity in whatever field Deleuze was studying. Deleuze made the study of multiplicity the centerpiece of his thought. Specifically, he claimed that any unified or singular entity, any “one,” is abstracted from an original multiplicity. This view of the “one” in relation to the “multiple” led Deleuze to be suspicious of any claim that anything, any “one,” is transcendent or beyond the multiple (we will explain what this means shortly). Transcendence in general is one of the great enemies of Deleuze’s philosophy, so it is no wonder that Deleuze was generally critical of Plato. Plato, you will remember, in effect claimed that the world we perceive is an illusion, the shadows in the cave (see Chapter 3). The real world, according to Plato, is found in a transcendent realm of Forms (an ideal realm of things beyond the appearances we sense directly). Now, Deleuze thought this was exactly 180 degrees backward. Plato should have said the multiplicity of appearances is the real thing, and the Forms?—there are no Forms. This view is very close to Nietzsche’s, to whom Deleuze was greatly indebted. Consider, for instance, the chair on which you are seated. For Plato, the chair’s reality lies in the fact that it participates in an ideal Form. Deleuze thought of the chair as essentially interconnected with the room, its function, its role in human lives and society, and so forth.

Also like Nietzsche, Deleuze thought that the philosophical method—the way philosophy goes about doing things—ought to be changed. To criticize traditional philosophy, Deleuze used the model of a tree. Often, he claimed, philosophers study things as if they were trees. How so? Well, many times philosophers presume that what they are thinking about is something that is clear, distinct, and well organized. However, Deleuze would claim that this is an idealized view that neglects how things really are. This approach to things is not able to consider multiplicity correctly. To correct this approach, Deleuze proposed thinking of things in terms of rhizomes rather than trees. Rhizomes are plants that tend to grow horizontally rather than vertically. Rather than sending their roots deep into the ground, and rather than being clearly unified and distinct entities, rhizomes spread out, growing up and all over things that are in their way, getting tangled up with other rhizomes. Think of grass, or of ivy climbing up and over whatever it comes across. If philosophers approach things as rhizomes, they will come up with a very different picture of how things are.

Consider how a tree-based approach to a study of language would differ from a rhizome-based approach. A tree-based approach would study language the way you probably studied it in high school. You break language down into categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives), and you study the rules for forming grammatically correct sentences. While this way of studying language may help you speak a language correctly, does it accurately reflect the way you speak? A rhizomatic approach to language would point out how “proper English” is only one way in which English is spoken—and a very rare one at that! We rarely speak clearly and in a grammatically correct way (even if we should). We stutter, mumble, leave sentences incomplete; our subjects and our verbs don’t agree. Indeed, with Deleuze’s rhizomatic
approach to language, you might be led to ask whether English is even one language (an assumption that a tree-based approach would make). Is there really one “English”? Who speaks it? The Queen of England?

Deleuze’s rhizomatic approach to language would point out that English is really a multiplicity of dialects, and so-called “proper English” is merely one dialect—one little part of a larger rhizome—one that tries to achieve dominance over other dialects. Furthermore, each of us speaks any number of different versions of English. We speak one way with our friends, another way with our family, another way at school, and yet another way at work. While the rules we use for speaking may be similar in each case, there are important differences in the kinds of words we use, the tone of voice we employ, and perhaps even in the way we hold our bodies when we speak. These kinds of things a rhizomatic approach to language would focus on: it would consider not only language itself but also such things as the voice and the body that are intertwined with our use of language.

This rhizomatic approach to language illustrates Deleuze’s main philosophical concern. We are always tempted to turn things into “ones,” into discrete entities, and to consider them in abstraction from their relations with other things. Philosophy should instead address multiplicity and difference. Deleuze applied this

---

PROFILE: Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995)

Born in Paris, Deleuze had a typical academic career, and, although as a philosopher he advocated difference and change, he rarely traveled and seemed to lead a very sedate life. He is often characterized as a philosophical outsider, and for several reasons. His interests were not typical of his day: for example, he was always interested in British empiricism (which has never been too popular in France), and he preferred writing about the “minor” thinkers in the philosophical tradition, thinkers who tend to be overlooked: like the Stoics, Spinoza, and Henri Bergson. (Bergson [1859–1941] was another important French philosopher, most famous for tracing the relationship between free will and the subjective experience of time.) Deleuze was also never an adherent of any of the major philosophical movements in twentieth-century France: existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, and postmodernism. This makes his philosophy idiosyncratic, but few would deny its influence. Indeed, Michel Foucault once wrote, “Perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian.”

Deleuze wrote some of his most famous books with a colleague, Félix Guattari. While the books Deleuze wrote on his own tended to be studies of single philosophers, the books he wrote with Guattari were much more political in orientation and more sweeping in scope. The most famous of these is Anti-Oedipus, which was very influential on the young, politically oriented generation of French students in the early 1970s. Anti-Oedipus argues that desire should not be seen as something that lacks what it desires (as has been argued since Plato). Desire is instead something like a “machine”—it links up with things that are outside it. Deleuze and Guattari study the kinds of things desire links up with. Sometimes these are things that restrain desire, such as social institutions, the family, the church, or the military. One of the most important claims in Anti-Oedipus is that desire can actively seek its own repression. But desire can also link up with things that take it into uncharted territories. Deleuze and Guattari prefer to see desire doing this and try to find ways in which desire can be helped to make such new and transgressive links.

Deleuze is considered one of the major players in postmodernism. His books include: Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962), Difference and Repetition (1968), and The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque (1988).
approach to literature, film, politics, psychoanalysis, and other things. The details are often difficult, but this should give you an idea of one of the most important aspects of the underlying perspective.

**Alain Badiou**

**Alain Badiou** [uh-LANE-Buh-DEEW] (1937– ), once a troublemaker in some of Deleuze's courses, is, like Deleuze, primarily interested in thinking about multiplicity. Like Deleuze, he claims there is no transcendent “one”: infinite difference is all there is. However, Badiou raises an objection to Deleuze’s approach to the multiple and accuses Deleuze of being a closet monist (*monist* means “one-ist”). Even though Deleuze did not want to say that “all is one,” Badiou charges that Deleuze’s philosophy treats the multiple as if it were a singularity–totality: something like a “one-all,” which is a term Deleuze sometimes uses.

Badiou argues that it is impossible to totalize everything that exists. In fact, what exists is “infinite”: indeed, it is “infinitely infinite.” The topic of infinity is something that sets Badiou apart from most contemporary Continental philosophers, who believe that infinity is something abstract, something that we cannot imagine and cannot even think about. For a long time, and since Heidegger especially, an emphasis in Continental philosophy has been on finitude: considering how knowledge is finite and limited, and arguing in some cases that the finitude of our knowledge is based on our own mortality. Badiou points out that, despite the fact that we are mortal and cannot ever have any experience of infinity, mathematicians have been thinking about and working with infinity (especially in set theory) for over a century. Philosophers have fallen far behind them. Badiou suggests that philosophers should again start looking at what mathematicians are doing, as they did in Plato’s day. This may lead philosophers to think very differently about *being*.

Another important topic in Badiou’s philosophy, as well as Deleuze’s, is the notion of the *event*. In ordinary language, an event is just a term for anything that happens, but in Deleuze and Badiou’s philosophies, *event* takes on special meaning. It refers to those rare moments at which one is led to question the concepts and beliefs one has always relied on. Events, according to Badiou, come in four varieties: events in science, politics, art, and love. For example, in science Einstein’s development of the theory of relativity was a scientific event that forced scientists to think differently. Love, which arises from an encounter with another person, can also be seen as an event that forces one to change one’s habits, one’s usual attitudes and beliefs. Badiou attempts to come up with a philosophy of the event that studies how people in different walks of life struggle to remain faithful to an event that has changed them.

**Richard Rorty**

American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was suspicious of the traditional claims of philosophy itself to have the methods best suited to finding “truth.” He adopted the way of American pragmatism exemplified by William James and John Dewey (see Chapter 9) and applied it to the role of literature in society.
The “best” literature, Rorty said, can open to its readers new possibilities for constructing a meaningful life. Some philosophical writing falls into this category (Rorty offered the example of Derrida), but philosophy has no monopoly on helping a person extend the possibilities of life. Rorty characterized himself as a liberal ironist, adhering to the tradition of political liberalism in the public square (which offers us the freedom to pursue private projects) and irony in the private sphere (in which our “absolute” values are human constructs and in which we must live with meanings we have ourselves created).

In his later years, Rorty sought to combine American liberalism with Continental literature and philosophy through the medium of pragmatism. Heidegger, he said, was a brilliant thinker, but chance events played a great role in Heidegger’s personal choices and commitments. If it had been otherwise, Heidegger might have come to the United States before investing in Nazi ideology and might thus have lived a wholly honorable life. As it was, said Rorty, Heidegger was “a coward, a liar and the greatest philosopher of the century.” What is important now is that Heidegger can function as an example: “What binds early to late Heidegger,” wrote Rorty, “is the hope of finding a vocabulary which will keep him authentic—one which will block any attempt to affiliate oneself with a higher power, . . . to escape from time into eternity . . . . He wants a self-consuming and continually self-renewing final vocabulary. . . . Reading Heidegger has become one of the experiences with which we have to come to terms, to redescribe and make mesh
with the rest of our experiences, in order to succeed in our own projects of self-creation. But Heidegger has no general public utility." That is, said Rorty, Heidegger fails as a public philosopher because in part he succumbs to a tendency to claim that those words that are meaningful to him ought to be meaningful to others. But in the private sphere, Heidegger offers an example of a philosophy professor who quested after authenticity—an example that Rorty, for one, could take to heart.

However, let’s get back to Rorty himself and consider exactly what his “pragmatism” amounts to. Rorty’s main thesis seems to be this.

We tend to think of evolution or God or nature as having made us into something like machines that accurately photocopy the world around us, provided we are objective and approach the world with “an unclouded mental eye or a rigorous method.” In other words, we tend to think that, provided we are objective, the “truth” will force itself on us. In Rorty’s language, we tend to think inquiry is “constrained” by the world out there. Rorty, however, thought that objectivity is but a fiction and the idea of the truth is a myth. Why? Because “there is no method for knowing when one has reached the truth, or when one is closer than before.”

We might think of it this way. Culture A has its standards of what counts as evidence, reasonableness, knowledge, and truth. Rorty referred to cultures as “conversations” and to the standards of evidence, reasonableness, knowledge, truth, and so forth as “constraints on inquiry.” If people from culture (or “conversation”) A think they have arrived at the truth, they have done so only vis-à-vis their own culture’s constraints on inquiry. But have they reached the truth? Only if their “constraints”—that is, standards or evidence and so forth—are correct. Unfortunately, there is no way people can step outside their perspective to evaluate their constraints/standards. And the question, “Are the constraints/standards of culture A correct?” is meaningless from within culture A. It is something like asking, “Is the Constitution constitutional?” So people in culture A cannot know when they have reached the truth, if knowing the truth requires an objective viewpoint beyond their own.

Likewise, it is meaningless for the people in culture B to wonder if culture B’s constraints/standards are correct. Of course, people in either A or B can evaluate the constraints/standards of the other culture. But that still does not tell them whether their own constraints/standards are correct. This means, ultimately, that nobody can say whether she or he has reached the truth, except in the sense of truth held in one’s own culture. Truth, then, is whatever “survives all objections within one’s culture.” Thus, Rorty wrote, “the only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false.”

Rorty also referred to the standards of evidence, reasonableness, knowledge, and truth as “starting points” and described his pragmatic view that standards are relative to one’s culture by saying that the starting points are “contingent.” Philosophically, Rorty said, our choice is “between accepting the contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade that contingency. To accept the contingency of starting-points (i.e., to accept the relativity of evidence, reasonableness, truth, etc.) is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance.” This was Rorty’s way of saying we are bound by the standards of our culture.
Those who have tried to evade this contingency, according to Rorty, must maintain that we are copy machines (our word, not Rorty’s) that, when functioning rightly, photocopy or apprehend the truth. Plato thought we apprehend the truth at the top of the divided line (see Chapter 3); Christians, when we tune into the voice of God in the heart; and Descartes and his followers, when we empty the mind and seek the indubitable (see Chapter 6). After Kant, Rorty said, philosophers have hoped to find absolute truth by exploring the a priori structure of experience (see Chapter 7).

If we give up trying to evade the “contingency of starting points,” then “we shall lose what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort.’” However, “we may gain a renewed sense of community.” Further, “our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made.”

Thus, Rorty concluded, “what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.” These views can be found in Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982).

---

**Selection 8.1**

*Existentialism and Humanism*

Jean-Paul Sartre

This is a pretty clear and straightforward explanation of what existentialism is, followed by examples and illustrations.

What is this that we call existentialism? . . . Actually it is the least shocking doctrine, and the most austere; it is intended strictly for technicians, and philosophers. However, it can easily be defined. What makes the matter complicated is that there are two kinds of existentialists: the first who are Christian, and among whom I will include Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, of the Catholic faith; and also, the atheistic existentialists among whom we must include Heidegger, and also the French existentialists, and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they think that existence precedes essence, or, if you wish, that we must start from subjectivity. . . .

What does it mean here that existence precedes essence? It means that man exists first, experiences himself, springs up in the world, and that he defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is not definable, it is because he is nothing at first. He will only be [something] afterwards, and he will be as he will have made himself. So, there is no human nature, since there is no God to think it. Man simply is, not only as he conceives himself, but as he determines himself, and as he conceives himself after existing, as he determines himself after this impulse toward existence; man is nothing other than what he makes himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what we call subjectivity. . . .

Man is at first a project which lives subjectively, instead of being a moss, a decaying thing, or a cauliflower; nothing exists prior to this project; nothing is intelligible in the heavens, and man will at first be what he has planned to be. Not what he may wish to be. . . . If existence really precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first step of existentialism is to show every man [to be] in control of what he is and to make him assume total responsibility for his existence. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not [only]
mean that man is responsible for his precise individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. . . . When we say that man determines himself, we understand that each of us chooses himself, but by that we mean also that in choosing himself he chooses all men. Indeed, there is not one of our actions which, in creating the man we wish to be, does not [also] create at the same time an image of the man we think we ought to be. To choose to be this or that, is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, for we can never choose evil; what we choose is always the good, and nothing can be good for us without [also] being [good] for all. . . .

This enables us to understand what some rather lofty words, like anguish, abandonment, despair mean. As you will see, it is quite simple. First, what do we mean by anguish? The existentialist readily declares that man is [in] anguish. That means this: the man who commits himself and who realizes that it is not only himself that he chooses, but [that] he is also a lawgiver choosing at the same time [for] all mankind, would not know how to escape the feeling of his total and profound responsibility. Certainly, many men are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anguish, that they are fleeing from it; certainly, many men believe [that] in acting [they] commit only themselves, and when one says to them: “what if everyone acted like that?” they shrug their shoulders and reply: “everyone does not act like that.” But really, one should always ask himself: “what would happen if everyone did the same?” and we cannot escape this troubling thought except by a kind of bad faith. The man who lies and who excuses himself by declaring: “everyone does not act like that,” is someone who is ill at ease with his conscience, because the act of lying implies a universal value attributed to the lie. Even when it conceals itself, anguish appears. . . .

And when we speak of abandonment, an expression dear to Heidegger, we mean only that God does not exist, and that we must draw out the consequences of this to the very end. . . . The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks that it is very troubling that God does not exist, for with him disappears every possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven; there can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it; it is not written anywhere that the good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie, since precisely we exist in a context where there are only men. Dostoyevsky has written, “If God did not exist, everything would be allowed.” This is the point of departure for existentialism. Indeed, everything is allowed if God does not exist, and consequently man is abandoned, because neither in himself nor beyond himself does he find any possibility of clinging on [to something]. At the start, he finds no excuses. If, indeed, existence precedes essence, we will never be able to give an explanation by reference to a human nature [that is] given and fixed; in other words, there is no determinantism, man is free, man is freedom. Moreover, if God does not exist, we do not find before us any values or orders which will justify our conduct. So, we have neither behind us nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any justifications or excuses. We are alone, without excuses. It is what I will express by saying that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he has not created himself, and nevertheless, in other respects [he is] free, because once [he is] cast into the world, he is responsible for everything that he does. . . .

To give you an example which [will] allow [you] to understand abandonment better, I will cite the case of one of my students who came to see me in the following circumstances. His father was on bad terms with his mother, and moreover, was inclined to be a collaborator. His older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940, and this young man, with feelings somewhat primitive but generous, wanted to avenge him. His mother lived alone with him, quite distressed by the semi-betrayal of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and found consolation only in him. This young man had the choice, at that time, between leaving for England and enlisting in the Free French Forces—that is to say, to forsake his mother—or to stay near his mother and to help her [to] live. He fully realized that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance—and perhaps his death—would cast her into despair. He also realized that, in reality, [and] concretely, each action that he performed with regard to his mother had its surety in the sense that he was helping her to live, whereas each action that he might perform in order to leave and fight was an ambiguous action which could be lost in the sands, to answer no purpose. For example, leaving for England, he might remain indefinitely in a Spanish camp, while passing through Spain; he might arrive in England or in Algiers and be placed in an office to keep records. Consequently, he found himself facing two very
different kinds of action: one concrete, immediate, but applying only to one individual; or else an action which applied to a whole [group] infinitely vaster, a national community but which was by that reason ambiguous, and which could be interrupted on the way. And, at the same time, he hesitated between two kinds of ethics. On the one hand, an ethic of sympathy, of individual devotion; and on the other hand a wider ethic but whose effectiveness was more questionable. He had to choose between the two. Who could help him to choose? Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says: “be charitable, love your neighbor, devote yourself to others, choose the hardest way, etc.…” But which is the hardest way? Whom must we love as our brother, the soldier or the mother? Which has the greatest utility, the one [which is] definite, to help a definite individual or a nation? The one [which is] definite, to help a definite individual to live? Who can decide it a priori? No one. No written ethic can tell him. The Kantian ethic says: “never treat others as [a] means, but as [an] end.” Very well; if I remain near [with] my mother I will treat her as an end and not as means, but by this same action, I risk treating those who fight around me as a means; and conversely if I go to rejoin those who are fighting I will treat them as an end, and by this action I risk treating my mother as a means.

If these values are vague, and if they are still too broad for the specific and concrete case that we are considering, it remains for us only to rely on our instincts. This is what this young man tried to do; and when I saw him, he said: “basically, what counts is the sentiment; I ought to choose that which actually pulls me in a certain direction. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her—my desire for vengeance, my desire for action, my desire for adventures—I [will] stay near her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for my mother is not sufficient, I [will] leave.” But how [do we] judge the weight of a feeling? What constituted the worth of his feeling for his mother? Precisely the fact that he stayed for her. I may say, I love this friend enough to sacrifice such a [certain] sum of money for him; I can say it, only if I have done it. I may say: I love my mother enough to remain with her, if I have remained with her. I can determine the worth of this affection only if, precisely, I have performed an action which confirms and defines it. Now, as I require this affection to justify my action, I find myself caught in a vicious circle.

Further, Gide has said very well, that a feeling which is acting and a feeling which is real are two nearly indiscernible things: to decide that I love my mother by remaining near her, or to act a part which will make me stay for my mother, is nearly the same thing. In other words, the feeling is constituted by the actions that we perform: I cannot then consult it in order to guide myself according to it. What that means is that I can neither seek for in myself the authentic state which will push me to act, nor demand from an ethic the concepts which will allow me to act. At least, you say, he went to see a professor to ask his advice. But, if you seek advice from a priest, for example, you have chosen this priest, you already knew, after all, more or less, what he was going to advise you. In other words, to choose the adviser is still to commit yourself. The proof of it is what you will say, if you are a Christian: consult a priest. But there are priests who are collaborators, priests who wait for the tide to turn, priests who belong to the resistance. Which [should you] choose? And if the young man chooses a priest who is a member of the resistance, or a priest who is a collaborator, he has already decided [on] the kind of advice he will receive. Thus, in coming to see me, he knew the reply that I was going to make to him, and I had only one reply to make: you are free, choose, that is to say, invent. No general ethic can show you what there is to do; there is no sign in the world. The Catholics will reply: “but there are signs.” Let’s admit it; it is myself in any case who chooses the meaning that they have.

Abandonment implies that we ourselves choose our being. Abandonment goes with anguish. As for despair, this expression has a very simple meaning. It means that we will restrict ourselves to a reliance upon that which depends on our will, or on the set of the probabilities which make our action possible. From the moment when the possibilities that I am considering are not strictly involved by my action, I must take no further interest in them, because no God, no design can adjust the world and its possibilities to my will. Quietism is the attitude of men who say: “others can do what I cannot do.” The doctrine that I am presenting to you is exactly opposite to quietism, since it claims: “there is reality only in action.” It goes further [than this] besides, since it adds: “man is nothing other than his project, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, thus he is nothing other than whole of his actions, nothing other than his life.” According to this, we can understand
why our doctrine horrifies a good many men. Because often they have only one way of enduring their misery. It is to think: “circumstances have been against me, I was worth much more than what I have been; to be sure, I have not had a great love, or a great friendship, but it is because I have not met a man or a woman who was worthy of it. I have not written very good books because I have not had the leisure to do it. I have not had children to whom to devote myself because I did not find a person with whom I could have made my life. [There] remains, then, in me, unused and wholly feasible a multitude of dispositions, inclinations, possibilities which give me a worth that the simple set of my actions does not allow [one] to infer.” Now, in reality, for the existentialist there is no love other than that which is made, there is no possibility of love other than that which manifests itself in a love; there is no genius other than that which expresses itself in works of art. The genius of Proust is the totality of Proust’s works; the genius of Racine is the set of his tragedies, beyond that there is nothing. Why [should we] attribute to Racine the possibility of writing a new tragedy, since precisely he did not write it? In his life a man commits himself, draws his own figure, and beyond this figure there is nothing. Obviously, this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not had a successful life. But, on the other hand, it prepares men to understand that only reality counts, that the dreams, the expectations, the hopes allow [us] only to define a man as [a] disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as useless expectations; that is to say that that defines them negatively and not positively. However, when we say “you are nothing other than your life,” that does not imply that the artist will be judged only by his artworks, for a thousand other things also contribute to define him. What we mean is that man is nothing other than a set of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the whole of the relations which make up these undertakings.

**SELECTION 8.2**

**The Myth of Sisyphus**

*Albert Camus*

[Camus begins by asserting that I know only that I and the world outside me exist; the rest of supposed knowledge is mere “construction.” (Especially interesting is his view that trying to define or understand himself is nothing but water slipping through his fingers.) He ends with observing how absurd it is that the heart longs for clear understanding, given the irrationality of everything.]

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: “I know that!” This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor or these silences, this nobility or this viliness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself. In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth. Socrates’ “Know thyself” has as much value as the “Be virtuous” of our confessionals. They reveal a nostalgia at the same time as an ignorance. They are sterile exercises on great subjects. They are legitimate only in precisely so far as they are approximate.

And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes—how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is
Part One • Metaphysics and Epistemology: Existence and Knowledge

SELECTION 8.3
A Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas: Fundamentalism and Terror*

Giovanna Borradori

[Selections 8.3 and 8.4 are excerpts from interviews about the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, two influential Continental philosophers. The interviews are conducted by philosopher Giovanna Borradori, a specialist in the philosophy of terrorism. Although this is not technical philosophy, it will give you a good idea of the thinking of the two men. Habermas notes that September 11 could be called the first historic world event.]

Borradori: . . . [O]ur topic is terrorism, which seems to have taken up new meaning and definition after September 11.

Habermas: The monstrous act itself was new. And I do not just mean the action of the suicide hijackers who transformed the fully fueled
airplanes together with their hostages into living weapons, or even the unbearable number of victims and the dramatic extent of the devastation. What was new was the symbolic force of the targets struck. The attackers did not just physically cause the highest buildings in Manhattan to collapse; they also destroyed an icon in the household imagery of the American nation. Only in the surge of patriotism that followed did one begin to recognize the central importance the towers held in everyone’s imagination, with their irreplaceable imprint on the Manhattan skyline and their powerful embodiment of economic strength and projection toward the future. The presence of cameras and of the media was also new, transforming the local event simultaneously into a global one and the whole world population into a bemused witness. Perhaps September 11 could be called the first historic world event in the strictest sense: the impact, the explosion, the slow collapse—everything that was not Hollywood anymore but, rather, a gruesome reality, literally took place in front of the “universal eyewitness” of a global public. God only knows what my friend and colleague experienced, watching the second airplane explode into the top floors of the World Trade Center only a few blocks away from the roof of his house on Duane Street. No doubt it was something completely different from what I experienced in Germany in front of the television, though we saw the same thing.

Certainly, no observation of a unique event can provide an explanation per se for why terrorism itself should have assumed a new characteristic. In this respect one factor above all seems to me to be relevant: one never really knows who one’s enemy is. Osama bin Laden, the person, more likely serves the function of a stand-in. Compare the new terrorists with partisans or conventional terrorists, for example, in Israel. These people often fight in a decentralized manner in small, autonomous units, too. Also, in these cases there is no concentration of forces or central organization, a feature that makes them difficult targets. But partisans fight on familiar territory with professed political objectives in order to conquer power. This is what distinguishes them from terrorists who are scattered around the globe and networked in the fashion of secret services. They allow their religious motives of a fundamentalist kind to be known, though they do not pursue a program that goes beyond the engineering of destruction and insecurity. The terrorism we associate for the time being with the name “al-Qaeda” makes the identification of the opponent and any realistic assessment of the danger impossible. This intangibility is what lends terrorism a new quality.

Surely the uncertainty of the danger belongs to the essence of terrorism. But the scenarios of biological or chemical warfare painted in detail by the American media during the months after September 11, the speculations over the various kinds of nuclear terrorism, only betray the inability of the government to at least determine the magnitude of the danger. One never knows if there’s anything to it. In Israel people at least know what can happen to them if they take a bus, go into a department store, discotheque, or any open area—and how frequently it happens. In the U.S.A. or Europe one cannot circumscribe the risk; there is no realistic way to estimate the type, magnitude, or probability of the risk, nor any way to narrow down the potentially affected regions.

**Borradori:** Philosophically speaking, do you consider terrorism to be a wholly political act?

**Habermas:** Not in the subjective sense in which Mohammed Atta, the Egyptian citizen who came from Hamburg and piloted the first of the two catastrophic airplanes, would offer you a political answer. No doubt today’s Islamic fundamentalism is also a cover for political motifs. Indeed, we should not overlook the political motifs we encounter in forms of religious fanaticism. This explains the fact that some of those drawn into the “holy war” had been secular nationalists only a few years before. If one looks at the biographies of these people, remarkable continuities are revealed. Disappointment over nationalistic authoritarian regimes may have contributed to the fact that today religion offers a new and subjectively more convincing language for old political orientations.

**Borradori:** How would you actually define terrorism? Can a meaningful distinction be drawn between national and international or even global terrorism?
Habermas: In one respect, Palestinian terrorism still possesses a certain outmoded characteristic in that it revolves around murder, around the indiscriminate annihilation of enemies, women, and children—life against life. This is what distinguishes it from the terror that appears in the paramilitary form of guerilla warfare. This form of warfare has characterized many national liberation movements in the second half of the twentieth century—and has left its mark today on the Chechnyan struggle for independence, for example. In contrast to this, the global terror that culminated in the September 11 attack bears the anarchistic traits of an impotent revolt directed against an enemy that cannot be defeated in any pragmatic sense. The only possible effect it can have is to shock and alarm the government and population. Technically speaking, since our complex societies are highly susceptible to interferences and accidents, they certainly offer ideal opportunities for a prompt disruption of normal activities. These disruptions can, at a minimum expense, have considerably destructive consequences. Global terrorism is extreme both in its lack of realistic goals and in its cynical exploitation of the vulnerability of complex systems.

Borradori: Should terrorism be distinguished from ordinary crimes and other types of violence?

Habermas: Yes and no. From a moral point of view, there is no excuse for terrorist acts, regardless of the motive or the situation under which they are carried out. Nothing justifies our “making allowance for” the murder or suffering of others for one’s own purposes. Each murder is one too many. Historically, however, terrorism falls in a category different from crimes that concern a criminal court judge. It differs from a private incident in that it deserves public interest and requires a different kind of analysis than murder out of jealousy, for example. Otherwise, we would not be having this interview. The difference between political terror and ordinary crime becomes clear during the change of regimes, in which former terrorists come to power and become well-regarded representatives of their country. Certainly, such a political transition can be hoped for only by terrorists who pursue political goals in a realistic manner; who are able to draw, at least retrospectively, a certain legitimation for their criminal actions, undertaken to overcome a manifestly unjust situation. However, today I cannot imagine a context that would someday, in some manner, make the monstrous crime of September 11 an understandable or comprehensible political act.

Borradori: Do you think it was good to interpret this act as a declaration of war?

Habermas: Even if the term “war” is less misleading and, morally, less controvertible than “crusade,” I consider Bush’s decision to call for a “war against terrorism” a serious mistake, both normatively and pragmatically. Normatively, he is elevating these criminals to the status of war enemies; and pragmatically, one cannot lead a war against a “network” if the term “war” is to retain any definite meaning.
naming: a date and nothing more. When you say “September 11” you are already citing, are you not? You are inviting me to speak here by recalling, as if in quotation marks, a date or a dating that has taken over our public space and our private lives for five weeks now. Something fait date, I would say in a French idiom, something marks a date, a date in history; that is always what’s most striking, the very impact of what is at least felt, in an apparently immediate way, to be an event that truly marks, that truly makes its mark, a singular and, as they say here, “unprecedented” event. I say “apparently immediate” because this “feeling” is actually less spontaneous than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine. “To mark a date in history” presupposes, in any case, that “something” comes or happens for the first and last time, “something” that we do not yet really know how to identify, determine, recognize, or analyze but that should remain from here on in unforgettable: an ineffaceable event in the shared archive of a universal calendar, that is, a supposedly universal calendar, for these are—and I want to insist on this at the outset—only suppositions and presuppositions. Unrefined and dogmatic, or else carefully considered, organized, calculated, strategic—or all of these at once. For the index pointing toward this date, the bare act, the minimal deictic, the minimalist aim of this dating, also marks something else. Namely, the fact that we perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way this “thing” that has just happened, this supposed “event.” An act of “international terrorism,” for example, and we will return to this, is anything but a rigorous concept that would help us grasp the singularity of what we will be trying to discuss. “Something” took place, we have the feeling of not having seen it coming, and certain consequences undeniably follow upon the “thing.” But this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it’s talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, le 11 septembre, September 11. The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy—a name, a number—points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about.

This is the first, indisputable effect of what occurred (whether it was calculated, well calculated, or not), precisely on September 11, not far from here: we repeat this, we must repeat it, and it is all the more necessary to repeat it insofar as we do not really know what is being named in this way, as if to exorcise two times at one go: on the one hand, to conjure away, as if by magic, the “thing” itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism, and this is true for the repetition of the televised images we will speak of later), and, on the other hand, to deny, as close as possible to this act of language and this enunciation, our powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterize, to think the thing in question, to get beyond the mere deictic of the date: something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don’t know what. For however outraged we might be at the violence, however much we might genuinely deplore—as I do, along with everyone else—the number of dead, no one will really be convinced that this is, in the end, what it’s all about. I will come back to this later; for the moment we are simply preparing ourselves to say something about it.

I’ve been in New York for three weeks now. Not only is it impossible not to speak on this subject, but you feel or are made to feel that it is actually forbidden, that you do not have the right, to begin speaking of anything, especially in public, without ceding to this obligation, without making an always somewhat blind reference to this date (and this was already the case in China, where I was on September 11, and then in Frankfurt on September 22). I gave in regularly to this injunction, I admit; and in a certain
sense I am doing so again by taking part in this friendly interview with you, though trying always, beyond the commotion and the most sincere compassion, to appeal to questions and to a “thought” (among other things, a real political thought) of what, it seems, has just taken place on September 11, just a few steps from here, in Manhattan or, not too far away, in Washington, D.C.

I believe always in the necessity of being attentive first of all to this phenomenon of language, naming, and dating, to this repetition compulsion (at once rhetorical, magical, and poetic). To what this compulsion signifies, translates, or betrays. Not in order to isolate ourselves in language, as people in too much of a rush would like us to believe, but on the contrary, in order to try to understand what is going on precisely beyond language and what is pushing us to repeat endlessly and without knowing what we are talking about, precisely there where language and the concept come up against their limits: “September 11, September 11, le 11 septembre, 9/11.”

We must try to know more, to take our time and hold onto our freedom so as to begin to think [about] this first effect of the so-called event: From where does this menacing injunction itself come to us? How is it being forced upon us? Who or what gives us this threatening order (others would already say this terrorizing if not terrorist imperative): name, repeat, rename “September 11,” “le 11 septembre,” even when you do not yet know what you are saying and are not yet thinking what you refer to in this way. I agree with you: without any doubt, this “thing,” “September 11,” “gave us the impression of being a major event.” But what is an impression in this case? And an event? And especially a “major event”? Taking your word—or words—for it, I will underscore more than one precaution. I will do so in a seemingly “empiricist” style, though aiming beyond empiricism. It cannot be denied, as an empiricist of the eighteenth century would quite literally say, that there was an “impression” there, and the impression of what you call in English—and this is not fortuitous—a “major event.” I insist here on the English because it is the language we speak here in New York, even though it is neither your language nor mine; but I also insist because the injunction comes first of all from a place where English predominates.

I am not saying this only because the United States was targeted, hit, or violated on its own soil for the first time in almost two centuries—since 1812 to be exact—but because the world order that felt itself targeted through this violence is dominated largely by the Anglo-American idiom, an idiom that is indissociably linked to the political discourse that dominates the world stage, to international law, diplomatic institutions, the media, and the greatest technoscientific, capitalist, and military power. And it is very much a question of the still enigmatic but also critical essence of this hegemony. By critical, I mean at once decisive, potentially decisionary, decision-making, and in crisis: today more vulnerable and threatened than ever.

Whether this “impression” is justified or not, it is in itself an event, let us never forget it, especially when it is, though in quite different ways, a properly global effect. The “impression” cannot be dissociated from all the effects, interpretations, and rhetoric that have at once reflected, communicated, and “globalized” it from everything that also and first of all formed, produced, and made it possible. The “impression” thus resembles “the very thing” that produced it. Even if the so-called “thing” cannot be reduced to it. Even if, therefore, the event itself cannot be reduced to it. The event is made up of the “thing” itself (that which happens or comes) and the impression (itself at once “spontaneous” and “controlled”) that is given, left, or made by the so-called “thing.” We could say that the impression is “informed,” in both senses of the word: a predominant system gave it form, and this form then gets run through an organized information machine (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media, and so on). This informational apparatus is from the very outset political, technical, economic. But we can and, I believe, must (and this duty is at once philosophical and political) distinguish between the supposedly brute fact, the “impression,” and the interpretation. It is of course just about impossible, I realize, to distinguish the “brute” fact from the system that produces the “information” about it. But it is necessary to push the analysis as far as possible. To produce a “major event,” it is, sad to say, not enough, and this has been true for some time now, to cause the deaths of some four thousand
people, and especially “civilians,” in just a few seconds by means of so-called advanced technology. Many examples could be given from the world wars (for you specified that this event appears even more important to those who “have never lived through a world war”) but also from after these wars, examples of quasi-instantaneous mass murders that were not recorded, interpreted, felt, and presented as “major events.” They did not give the “impression,” at least not to everyone, of being unforgettable catastrophes.

We must thus ask why this is the case and distinguish between two “impressions.” On the one hand, compassion for the victims and indignation over the killings; our sadness and condemnation should be without limits, unconditional, unimpeachable; they are responding to an undeniable “event,” beyond all simulacra and all possible virtualization; they respond with what might be called the heart and they go straight to the heart of the event. On the other hand, the interpreted, interpretative, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us believe that this is a “major event.” Belief, the phenomenon of credit and of accreditation, constitutes an essential dimension of the evaluation, of the dating, indeed, of the compulsive inflation of which we’ve been speaking. By distinguishing impression from belief, I continue to make as if I were privileging this language of English empiricism, which we would be wrong to resist here. All the philosophical questions remain open, unless they are opening up again in a perhaps new and original way: what is an impression? What is a belief? But especially: what is an event worthy of this name? And a “major” event, that is, one that is actually more of an “event,” more actually an “event,” than ever? An event that would bear witness, in an exemplary or hyperbolic fashion, to the very essence of an event or even to an event beyond essence? For could an event that still conforms to an essence, to a law or to a truth, indeed to a concept of the event, ever be a major event? A major event should be so unforeseeable and irruptive that it disturbs even the horizon of the concept or essence on the basis of which we believe we recognize an event as such. That is why all the “philosophical” questions remain open, perhaps even beyond philosophy itself, as soon as it is a matter of thinking the event.

### Checklist

To help you review, here is a checklist of the key philosophers and terms and concepts of this chapter. The brief descriptive sentences summarize the philosophers’ leading ideas. Keep in mind that some of these summary statements are oversimplifications of complex positions.

#### Philosophers

- **Alain Badiou** agreed with Deleuze that infinite difference is all there is; charged Deleuze with treating multiplicity as a single totality. 189
- **Albert Camus**, emphasized the absurdity of the world and the inability of the individual to meet genuine human needs within it. 160
- **Gilles Deleuze** believed that multiplicity, rather than identity or oneness, is the basic principle of philosophy. 187
- **Jacques Derrida** was an influential French deconstructionist. 182
- **Ferdinand de Saussure** was a Swiss thinker who laid the foundations for modern linguistics. 182
- **Michel Foucault** was a French philosopher who provided a critique of conventional social attitudes regarding madness and sexuality. 180
- **Sigmund Freud** originated psychoanalysis, which claims to explain behavior in terms of unconscious drives and early childhood experience. 156
- **Jürgen Habermas** was one of the major German contributors to critical theory. 176
- **Martin Heidegger** emphasized the importance of returning to Being itself independent of the mental categories we assign to it. 170
- **Edmund Husserl** was the first great phenomenologist. 169
- **Søren Kierkegaard**, a nineteenth-century philosopher, rejected the Hegelian idea of a rational universe and anticipated some of the themes of existentialism. 153
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. To what extent are we responsible for the situations in which we find ourselves? When does responsibility begin?

2. Can humans communicate with one another? (Do not assume that communicating is the same as talking.) Are people ever really not strangers? Explain.

3. If there is no objective right and wrong, good and bad, then how should we determine how to live?

4. Suppose you set a goal for yourself and then achieve it. What do you do then—set other goals and achieve them? Why bother?

5. Are any goals inherently better than others? Why or why not?

6. What is “bad faith,” and how do we recognize whether we have it?

7. Do we live in an absurd world?

8. Explain the myth of Sisyphus. To what extent is this situation an accurate depiction of life?

9. What does it mean to say that we are abandoned?

10. Does a belief in God rescue us from the existential predicament?

11. What does Sartre mean by saying that we are condemned to be free? What does he mean by saying, “I choose myself perpetually”? And what does he mean by saying, “In choosing myself, I choose man”?

12. Do you think it is true that most humans live inauthentic lives?

13. Is most human conversation really “chatter”? Is most of your conversation really chatter?

14. Can having a “fundamental project” save us from a “lost life”? Explain.

15. Do human beings use language, or does language “use” human beings? Discuss.

16. Do all oppressed groups suffer? Are all groups that suffer oppressed?

17. How much do you think the metaphors we use influence the way we look at the world? What reasons can you give for your view?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS


Michael Inwood, *Heidegger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). A useful introduction to the earlier and later thought of Martin Heidegger, including such themes as truth, being-in-the-world, time, and authenticity.


John Lecet, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1994). Covers Continental philosophers from structuralism to postmodernity, as well as other thinkers.


