

Lesson 10

Non-Western Philosophy

In dark Africa, people always dance because they feel. "To dance is to discover and to re-create, to identify oneself with the forces of life." It is, at any rate, the highest form of knowledge. The reason of classical Europe is analytic through utilization, the reason of the African Negro, intuitive through participation.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, "On Negrohood"

[I]t doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean that we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. . . .

Malcolm X, 1964

Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

Abigail Adams, 1776

Beyond The Western Tradition

As we observed in the previous lesson, most of the philosophers mentioned throughout this book have something in common: they are white and male. (Saint Augustine and Confucius are among the few exceptions, and Augustine's African origins are rarely explored in most philosophical discussions.) They also share a philosophical tradition that begins in ancient Greece and develops through Judeo-Christian theology and the rise of science in Europe. In this book so far, although we have primarily focused on philosophical problems rather than figures as such, we have mainly traced this tradition and stayed within its bounds. But there is much more to philosophy and the story of human thought.

The great ideas of Western philosophy are found in a well-preserved written, argumentative, and more or less scientific, or at any rate literalist tradition—that is, one that demands literal truth in philosophy and does not rest content with metaphor or allegory. Philosophers who did not make their way into print (or who were not lucky enough to have Plato as a student or Aristotle as an admiring commentator) disappeared from the tradition. Thinkers who did not engage in active argument with the tradition were often ignored. (Thus, the mystical and esoteric tradition in the West is often confined to footnotes.) And nonliteral, nonscientific explanations of life and the universe through myth, heroic legends, and nonmonotheistic religions were dismissed as, at best, primitive or prephilosophical. The result is the rather well-defined list of problems and sequence of philosophers that we have (mainly) discussed in this book. It is an admirable and noble tradition, but it is not the only one.

India and southern Asia have an ancient philosophical tradition—or actually, several traditions—dating back at least as far as the Western tradition, and there is a philosophical tradition in China

that also stretches back thousands of years. Moreover, there is persuasive evidence that thriving schools of philosophy existed in the Americas and North Africa before the arrival of Europeans. Living oral traditions in Africa and many South Pacific islands have been passed down from generation to generation, and virtually every civilization we have ever heard of has some articulated conception of its origins and its place in the universe. It is therefore important that we not be so arrogant or provincial as to define “philosophy” to include only the ideas of ancient Greece and medieval and modern Europe.

A fuller view of philosophy should take into account the philosophical perspectives of those outside the West. In this lesson, we cannot hope to become more than casually acquainted with the various philosophical traditions of the world. But what we can do is to become aware of the peculiarities and limitations of our own ways of thinking and, especially, see how that thinking has been shaped and perhaps even distorted by the particular features of our tradition. Throughout the lesson, we will take a peek at authors and perspectives not usually included in standard Western philosophy courses.

In some instances, we may discover familiarities and contributions we might not have expected—for example, similarities between Confucian ethics in China and Aristotelian ethics in ancient Greece. We may recognize the enormous interaction of European Christian thinkers with medieval Arabic, Jewish, and Persian philosophers, many of whom interpreted and kept ancient Greek and Roman philosophies alive during that long period during which they were denounced as pagan by the very Western tradition that would later claim them as exclusively its own. In many instances, however, what we will notice are the enormous differences between our own thinking and the thoughts of others. Chinese philosophy, for example, is largely concerned with analogies and analogical thinking, what we would call metaphorical comparisons, rather than a logic of evidence and inference as such. The use of stories to make philosophical points is a staple of Chinese philosophy. In contrast, Western philosophy, at least recently, has shunned “anecdotal evidence” in favor of a more scientific model for ascertaining the nature of reality.

We will begin our brief tour of philosophy beyond the West by considering some of the challenges involved in broadening our philosophical horizons. After noting the close connections between religious and philosophical traditions in most cultures, we will proceed to survey some of the important themes and issues in several traditions: native American philosophy, African philosophy, Latin American philosophy, Middle Eastern philosophy, South Asian philosophy, and East Asian philosophy.

The Challenges of Broadening Our Horizons

It would seem, perhaps, as if all that would be necessary to revise and expand the canon of philosophy would be to assign more books in our classes and extend our reading lists—with books by African-Americans, third-world philosophers, Native Americans, women, and other neglected philosophers. We could add some Indian philosophy, some Chinese philosophy, some Arabic or ancient Egyptian philosophy, and that, of course, is exactly what many of the current philosophical reformers are doing. But the project of inserting non-Western philosophy into the curriculum is more challenging than it may initially appear. Many of the texts that defined entire traditions are inaccessible because war and disease wiped out the entire culture, because the texts

themselves were destroyed (as was the case in Mesoamerica), or because there never were any written texts, only oral traditions that have sometimes been grotesquely distorted or have disappeared (the situation of much traditional African philosophy).

Some have also alleged that the influence of the mainstream Western tradition has been so great that it has pervaded or transformed every other tradition that we might try to read, with the result that an “authentic” voice from another tradition is impossible to find. Some advocates of an African philosophy, for example, rightly complain that every attempt at such philosophy is already contaminated by the harsh history of colonialism and slavery, and that an authentic African perspective is no longer available to us.

A very different kind of problem is presented to us by Chinese philosophy. China has energetically protected its own traditions, sometimes even sealing itself off from the West, precisely to avoid the sort of compromise and contamination that have destroyed the original cultures and ideas in other parts of the world. But the Chinese have thus remained so distinctive that, even if we read the Chinese texts, we have great difficulty entering into the context within which those texts are comprehensible. Furthermore, the language is so different that it frustrates any attempt at mere translation. Chinese is wonderfully ambiguous, a feature of the language beloved and admired by Chinese scholars and philosophers but frowned on by many Western thinkers and frustrating to Western translators. In a sense, therefore, the texts are available to us and can be easily added to any reading list, but this does not mean that we will understand them or the world of which they are such an important part.

One of the most important and challenging projects for today’s philosophers and philosophy students is to expand the number of contexts in which they feel comfortable and familiar. But it has also become more important to understand one’s own texts and traditions differently, to understand the relation between a text—even in mathematics, epistemology, or religious philosophy—and its social and cultural context, and perhaps also the social and political position of its author and its initial readers. Western philosophers of race and feminist philosophers have emphasized the importance of recognizing the role of culture—often sexist and racist culture—in shaping our tradition’s philosophical formulations.

As we have seen, much of philosophy consists of self-reflection, an attempt to understand oneself and one’s place in the world. But it may do one little good—and perhaps a great deal of harm—to be forced to understand oneself in *another culture’s* categories. As we noted in the last lesson, some female philosophers object that they have been forced to think of themselves in philosophy in male terms and therefore as inferior or inadequate men (literally Aristotle’s conception of women). Third world philosophers similarly object that they have been forced to view themselves philosophically in Western terms and therefore as philosophically naive, primitive, or merely as developing societies. In our efforts to gain awareness of other philosophical traditions, we should endeavor not to impose our categories on them. Instead, we should try as far as possible to understand their philosophical positions in light of their starting points and concerns, which may differ from ours, even while recognizing that our own standpoint will inevitably affect our interpretations.

Other Cultures, Other Philosophies

It is no easy task to understand the philosophy of another culture. If some of the concepts of Western philosophy seem a bit strange to the average American student, at least the ways of thought and thinking of which they are a part are quite familiar. The examples (usually) strike home. The questions sufficiently resemble those with which we have grown up to make sense, even if they sometimes seem extreme or strange. (For example, “Is my mind or soul distinct and separable from my body?” or “How can God allow evil in the world?”) But to understand another culture’s philosophy in any depth, we would really have to submerge ourselves in that culture as well. Philosophy is never a completely detached, timeless, or placeless set of ideas. It always has its roots in the people who ask the questions and seek the answers. The styles and subjects of philosophy vary from society to society. Although we can be confident of always finding some familiar similarities—after all, we are all human beings and face some of the same basic problems in life—we will always be struck and sometimes stopped by the differences.

Just as much of Western philosophy gets its background and impetus from our religious traditions, so the source of culturally diverse philosophies is often found in different religious traditions. In India, for example, philosophy is much more difficult to distinguish from religious thought than it is in the modern, more secular traditions of the West. In many cultures in Africa, China, and many islands of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, for example, religion is itself much less abstract, much more human than it has seemed in philosophical discussions in the modern West. Not only are its deities anthropocentric (a charge that can be made regarding many understandings of the Judeo-Christian God). A most important ingredient in the religion and philosophy of these regions is one that plays a very small role at best in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, namely, the notion of the **ancestor**.

In many cultures, one’s ancestors are considered, with varying degrees of literalness, to still be present and influential in ongoing life. In traditional African cultures, for example, ancestors form an essential part of every community. “The family” refers not only to living members, but also to deceased ones. This is true in the traditional Mexican understanding of the family as well. In China, tremendous emphasis is placed on the ancestral family and the community. While the ancestors are revered, less emphasis (if any) is placed on a godhead. Confucius and the Buddha, the founders of two of the world’s great religions, are not deified as Jesus is in Christianity. Just as some of the great religious traditions are not, in the Western sense, theistic, some of the great philosophies of the world begin with a very different set of concepts from those that have defined Western philosophy since Plato.

In what follows, we present a brief introduction to the various famous and influential philosophical traditions from some of the world’s great cultures. But before we begin, consider the box “Clash of Cultures,” a statement by the well-known Japanese philosopher-psychiatrist Takeo Doi, who finds himself puzzled by one of the most ordinary gestures in American life. Similarly, we should find ourselves feeling somewhat out of place in our initial exploration of other philosophical traditions.

Native American Philosophy

In much of North America and in Africa, a major problem was that cultures had oral rather than written traditions (as did Greece, before the pre-Socratic philosophers we have discussed). But this meant that when the cultures died out or were overwhelmed by colonial conquerors, their history and philosophy usually died with them. Consequently, we do not know how long civilizations existed in Africa or the Americas or when or how they developed. We do not know the age of the abandoned ancient cities of the central African rain forest or how long the Navajo, the Hopi, the Ojibwa, the Apache, the Seminoles, the Iroquois, and hundreds of other Native American tribes lived in the northern Americas. Archaeological evidence shows that North America was populated thousands of years ago, and it is quite clear that Africa was populated from top to bottom tens of thousands of years ago. The fact that indigenous cultures in these places seem to lack a history and philosophy reflects the lack of written records. What we do know and are learning, however tentatively, about these indigenous cultures is, nevertheless, rich and fascinating. We can only indicate our growing awareness with a few general points here.

Native American tribal societies, despite their differences, typically adopted a philosophical perspective that we in the West are just now beginning to appreciate. On this view, human beings have not been placed here on earth to “have dominion” over all other creatures and things, as promised in Genesis and reiterated by English philosopher Frances Bacon (1561–1626). We are a part of the earth, dependent on it, and it is dependent on us. We have ecological responsibilities, and the world around us, “nature,” is not just a resource or a source of aesthetic fascination.

Instead, we have moral responsibilities to the earth and to other creatures. Native American tribes typically consider the natural world as a manifestation of “the Great Spirit,” although the Great Spirit is not understood anthropomorphically. (Anthropomorphic gods do appear in mythological accounts, but these are also manifestations of the Great Spirit.) Human beings should treat the earth with reverence, which involves caring for and respecting it. We are caretakers of the earth, but we do not own it. Accordingly, on this view, we should not treat land as private property.

Animals, too, have moral dignity and should be treated, in effect, as persons. The hunting tribes among Native Americans acknowledged the debt that they had to the creatures that provided their food. In their view, killing other creatures is not a right but a necessity that should provoke gratitude and reverence. Saying prayers and thanking one’s quarry may strike most supermarket shoppers as a bit odd. Still, the consciousness of the fact that another creature has been killed for one’s benefit might better be seen as a fundamentally humane gesture. The act of prayer in thanksgiving reflects a feature common to most Native American traditions—the tendency to see everyday life as sacred, as part of a great spiritual circle.

African Philosophy

Africa contains hundreds of different cultures, of course—indeed, hundreds of different languages. Nevertheless, a good deal of precolonial African philosophy can be characterized by

means of the twin notions of *tribalism* and a special sense of *identity with nature* (concepts that apply to Native American societies as well).

Tribalism establishes an individual's identity and significance as a person only in the context of his or her family and community. This idea may sound odd to those in the contemporary West who have relinquished such familial and **communitarian** sensibilities in favor of a radical individualism. But for those who live such a communitarian philosophy (and this would include the Confucian cultures of Asia as well as the many tribal societies of the Americas and the South Pacific), an isolated individual lacking the concrete presence and intangible ties of kinship would be understood as hopelessly lost or effectively dead.

Traditional African tribes tend to view personhood as something acquired over time through becoming part of one's community. To become a full-fledged person is an achievement. Birth and death do not mark the person's beginning and end. A newly born baby is not yet a full person, whereas a deceased person who lives in the memory of his or her descendants is a person still, despite physical death. Initiation rites are crucial to achieving full membership in most tribal communities and thus becoming a full person. Similarly, throughout a person's life span, rites and ceremonies keep the individual's life in rhythm with the community's.

The Western conception of an individual, atomic soul for each person is alien to the thinking of most traditional Africans. In some tribes, such as the Yoruba (now mostly in Nigeria) and the Lugbara (now mostly in Uganda), the communal basis for personhood is reflected in a conception of the human being as composed of multiple spiritual elements, all of which are essential to the person's life. So far are the Yoruba from believing in an isolated individual soul that they believe that ancestors' souls can return in their descendants (sometimes even their grandchildren). In light of this sense of identity, members of African tribes typically emphasize the worship of ancestors, who are considered living inhabitants of the spirit world, capable of assisting their descendants.

African tribal societies (and many Native American ones as well) also often embraced **animism**, the belief that nature embodies numerous vital forces, sometimes understood as souls, that manifest ancestors who are no longer individually remembered. Nature, for most traditional Africans, is full of living forces. Spirits dwell throughout nature. Human beings can interact with them to some extent, either utilizing their powers or driving them elsewhere. The African conviction that human beings are intimately connected to nature is part and parcel of the traditional belief that nature is essentially spiritual.

In recent decades, many African thinkers have reconsidered their relationship to the philosophical tradition of Europe, which tended to colonize their philosophies along with their political and economic lives. Some have attempted to apply philosophical thought to the unique problems of African societies in the wake of colonialism. They have sometimes appealed to traditional ideas and values as resources for reconstituting societies that had been undermined or torn apart by colonialism. In this turn to tradition for resources to revive societies that had been damaged, they bear some resemblance to Confucius.

Other African thinkers have asked whether there is an authentic African philosophy and how philosophy in Africa should be approached. Both culturalist and universalist positions are represented among African philosophers. **Culturalists** claim that a philosophy always arises in a concrete social context to address that context's specific problems. At the same time, **universalists** contend that philosophy involves the same concerns and the same methods wherever it is practiced. Culturalists would include thinkers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), who sought to celebrate African difference from Europe. Senghor was one of the initiators of the “Negrohood” or “negritude” movement, which claimed that black Africans and their descendants had a spiritual unity, based on their relating to the world primarily through participation and emotion, in contrast with the European dependence on disinterested thought. Although Senghor's views did encourage self-affirmation on the part of Africans, his views were criticized for basing his cultural analyses on race, and for reinforcing the stereotypical view that Africans are less rational than Europeans. Other African thinkers have used different grounds for defending pan-Africanism, the belief in African solidarity and commonality. What Africans have in common, they claim, is a consequence of a shared history of colonialism and the problems they face in the aftermath.

Many culturalists among African philosophers argue that philosophy need not be expressed in writing to be genuine. Some attempt to explicate the philosophical positions implicit in traditional tales, myths, and practices (including artistic practices). Others who insist that philosophy must critically assess traditional beliefs think that simply itemizing and elaborating on traditional beliefs does not amount to philosophy. Nevertheless, they claim that Africa has traditionally had sages who not only mastered their cultures' worldviews but also assessed them critically. These thinkers were true philosophers, whether or not their views were expressed in writing.

The universalists, by contrast, claim that African philosophy is no different in its methods or aims than philosophy elsewhere in the world. Some of these insist that philosophy must be written, so that formulations of views are sufficiently stable to lend themselves to criticism. Many universalist philosophers acknowledge that the specific concerns of African philosophers are related to their postcolonial problems. But they do not think that African philosophy is restricted to these issues, and many address concerns in European and American philosophy, not necessarily topics of particular pertinence to Africans.

Latin American Philosophy

Contemporary Latin American philosophers share some similar concerns with their African counterparts, and these grow out of two common circumstances: the absence of written records and the history of colonialism. In many cases, the cultures of the Americas had records, but colonizers destroyed them, often along with the civilizations themselves. The Aztecs of Mexico, for example, had a thriving school of philosophers called *tlamatinime* (which means “knowers of things”). But all we have left are fragments of their teachings, largely because their Spanish conquerors deliberately burned most of their books.

At the core of Latin American philosophy (in what is now Mexico and central South America) was a belief in three levels of time and reality—ordinary, mythical, and divine. The mythic and

divine levels of reality exerted tangible influences on the ordinary plane of human experience, and they did so at predictable times. This belief motivated detailed attention to the construction of calendars and to astronomical observation. The balance between the different orders of reality was sufficiently fragile that human beings had to assume responsibility for maintaining the cosmic order. The continued existence of the universe itself depended on human actions and rituals, particularly on humans' willingness to sacrifice themselves. The Mayans and the Aztecs believed that blood was the fundamental life force.

Such beliefs, taken together, suggest the logic behind the best-known and most horrifying of ancient Aztec rituals, bloody human sacrifice on an enormous scale. Similarly, the Mayan kings and queens regularly pierced themselves and lost enough blood to cause them to have visions. They understood such relatively modest sacrifice as repayment to the gods, who had sacrificed themselves to create the world. For the Aztecs, the sacrifice was far less modest, involving wholesale killing of the best youths of their society along with captured enemies. It has been suggested that one reason the warrior Aztecs lost so badly to the Spanish invaders was that, in desperation, they sacrificed so many of their best young warriors to the gods who had seemingly turned against them. Thus, philosophy can be both the undoing and the strength of a great civilization.

After the Spanish invasion, philosophy in Latin America was, for a long time, dominated by European traditions. The initial European philosophical import was the Scholastic tradition (a dialectical tradition that sought to apply reason to the elucidation of Christian teachings). Much later, **positivism**, first developed by nineteenth-century French thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857), became attractive to some thinkers in Latin America who objected to the way that Christian thought had been used to justify imperialism. Positivism was a completely secular movement that sought to set aside religious and metaphysical accounts by explaining human behavior entirely in terms of natural laws. Social scientists should determine what these laws are, and then society should be organized in accordance with them. Positivism had not only a theoretical but also a practical impact by providing the guiding principles behind political regimes in Mexico and Brazil. (In practice, the two regimes were quite different in character. In Mexico, the government utilized positivistic principles to assert its own totalitarian authority, while in Brazil positivism served a progressive agenda, geared to economic and technological development.)

Some thinkers in the former Spanish colonies, however, objected to the idea that scientific laws could account for all of human behavior. Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), for example, complained that positivism did not acknowledge the importance of emotion, especially emotion experienced in connection with music and the other arts, for organizing our knowledge and putting us in touch with the rhythms of our world. Besides being a philosopher, Vasconcelos promoted education and literacy generally, serving at times as Minister of Public Education in Mexico, as well as directing the National University of Mexico.

In addition to Scholasticism and positivism, a third European philosophical movement that became influential in Central and Latin America was Marxism. The wide disparity in wealth and power between the poor and the rich in Latin America has prompted many thinkers to address questions of social justice, and some have found in Marxism useful analytic categories for

considering political and economic issues. Others, however, have found Marx's analysis too focused on the historical conditions of industrialization in Europe and on the prospects for international revolution to help address the specific circumstances of the descendants of those once colonized by the Spanish.

The issue of whether European models are appropriate for thinking about problems within these formerly colonized nations has itself become a significant recent debate in Latin American philosophy, much as in Africa. Some Latin American thinkers are universalists who argue that there is no particular reason why European models would be unserviceable in Latin American contexts. Other Latin American philosophers are culturalists, among them Peruvian thinker Augusto Salazar Bondy (1927–1974), who argue that Latin American philosophy should develop its own philosophical identity in light of its distinctive concerns. One philosophical movement that has attempted to do so is called the **philosophy of liberation**, developed in Argentina in the 1970s. The philosophy of liberation seeks to address the needs of the disenfranchised by philosophizing from their viewpoint and articulating ways to bring about social change toward a more just state of affairs.

Middle Eastern Philosophy

The Middle East was one of the cradles of civilization and the birthplace of not only the three most influential Western religions, but some of the first great philosophies as well. The ancient capitals of Babylon, Assyria, and Persia, for example, nurtured systems of ideas that eventually gave rise to many of our own concepts in philosophy and religion. The ancient Persian religion of **Zoroastrianism**, for example, is generally recognized as a precursor to the other great Western religions and to many of our central philosophical conceptions (for example, the basic opposition between good and evil). The Middle East was also responsible, during medieval times, for keeping many of the great ideas of ancient Greece and Rome alive when they were dormant or suppressed in Europe. At the height of the medieval period, the interchange between Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers was so intense that it is often hard to separate the various innovations and influences.

Islam, the third and latest of the three great Western religions, developed a theology and an accompanying philosophy that were in every way as profound and detailed as those of the other two. Although we often collapse the various cultures of the Muslim world into a single concept of "Arabic," there were and still are vital differences among them, some of them not "Arab" at all. In Persia, for example, there is an active tradition of theology and philosophy that goes back to Zoroaster. With the spread of Islam in the seventh century, Persia, along with its Arabic neighbors, turned to theology and questions that were also being asked by the Christians in Europe.

Medieval Islamic philosophers were conversant with ideas from ancient Greece and drew on them in their own thinking. Many of these thinkers were influenced by, and elaborated on, ideas from Aristotle, in particular, which they attempted to integrate with the teachings of Islam. Among them was Al-Kindi (circa 800–866), from present-day Iraq, who made use of Aristotle's ideas about causality to articulate his views about the relation between God and the natural world. One of his views was that only God acts in a full sense. All other beings act only in a

secondary sense. God created the world from nothing, but everything else comes to be through a chain of causes and effects that God set in motion. Even our current activity depends on God's action.

Another Islamic thinker who considered God's relation to creation was the Persian philosopher Ibn-Sina (or Avicenna, as he came to be known in the West, 980–1037), an innovator in medical science as well as in philosophy. Ibn-Sina characterized God as pure thought, who, in his creation, “emanates” lesser intelligences. In other words, created beings flow forth from God's activity as pure thinking.

A central issue in medieval Islamic thought concerned whether reason or revelation should have primacy in coming to know the truth. al-Farabi (died circa 950), who was born in Turkestan, defended the primary importance of the intellect. His commentaries on Aristotelian logic were controversial for their apparent efforts to establish truth apart from revelation. Although al-Farabi considered revelation important as well, he did consider reason the most important means for attaining knowledge, and he defended it as the faculty of discernment on which the good ruler would rely. Ibn-Rushd (or Averroes, as he came to be known in the West, 1126–1198) sought to demonstrate that revealed truth and the conclusions of reason coincide. He points out that the Qur'an (the Islamic scripture) itself encourages the use of speculative reason. Not only did these Arabic thinkers draw on earlier thought from the “Western” tradition; they themselves were important contributors to later Western thought through their influence on Thomas Aquinas.

In *Wisdom of the Throne*, the sixteenth-century Persian thinker **Mulla Sadra** (approximately 1571–1641) reflects on these questions of God's relation to the world and the relative importance of reason and revelation. Sadra argued that God shares his existence with lesser entities in the creation of the world. Drawing on an image used by twelfth-century philosopher Al-Suhrawardi, Sadra compares God's creation to light that spills from its source to illuminate other things. God's existence is eternal, but God has allowed his existence to overflow to grant limited existence to the beings within the world. God's existence is also manifested in each particular thing, though in a limited way. Sadra contends that the intellectual pursuit of truth and mystical experience must complement each other, and, ideally, the philosopher should engage in both.

South Asian Philosophy

The oldest philosophical text (even older than the Old Testament) was written in India, possibly as early as 1500 BCE. It is the *Rig-Veda*, a book of hymns that reflect on the origins and ultimate nature of the world and the personality of the gods and goddesses. It was one of many Vedas, or holy books. The philosophy of ancient India is bound up with Hinduism, but, strictly speaking, there is no single set of philosophies—or, for that matter, no single religion—called Hinduism. (*Hindu* is an Arabic word, referring not to a religion but a place, “east of the Indus River.”)

Hinduism refers to an enormous variety of beliefs based on the Vedas. Hinduism is also associated with a particular system of fixed social roles, the caste system, which Vedic philosophy was used to justify.

Traditional Hinduism is populated with fantastic creatures and divinities. A central trinity of gods is fundamental to classical Hindu mythology: Brahma (the creator god), Vishnu (the god who maintains the universe), and Shiva (the god of destruction). But these have come to be understood as faces of one divine reality. (This view that a single divine nature takes a variety of forms is called **henotheism**.) Familiar depictions of Vishnu (some of which show him with a boar's head) reveal a tradition in which the gods routinely take on various forms and manifestations, adopt different personae, serve multiple functions, and accordingly have many different names as well. Vishnu sometimes takes human form, playing a role that helps preserve the world. A god incarnating in human form is called an **avatar**. Krishna, one of the few Hindu divinities familiar in the West, is an avatar of Vishnu.

Throughout ancient Hindu thought we find the enduring themes of renewal, the continuity of life, and the oneness of the universe, however many its manifestations or appearances may be. Later philosophical texts appended onto the Vedas, the Upanishads or Vedanta (some of which are written as early as 800 BCE), further focus on the oneness of ultimate reality, called "**Brahman**" (to be distinguished from the god with a similar name). The theory of Brahman, like the rich mythology of earlier India, is the idea that one reality underlies infinitely many manifestations. The idea that there are many gods, all of whom are manifestations of the same God, is no doubt startling to monotheists and polytheists alike, if they think of being godlike as an inherently stable quality. Indian philosophy will also seem bewildering or incoherent to those who insist not only on the singularity but also on the ultimate rationality of reality and on its unchanging existence. Manifestations of Brahman are unchanging only in the sense that they are always changing.

Traditional Indian thought identifies four aims of human life: material possessions (*artha*), pleasure and love (*kama*), moral and religious duties (***dharma***) specific to one's social position, and spiritual release (*moksha*), the ultimate aim. Moksha is achieved when one transcends the illusions involved in our everyday perspective on the world and recognizes the ultimate reality, Brahman.

The notion of dharma is emphasized in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (literally "song of the Blessed Lord"). The *Bhagavad-Gita* is an important philosophical text embedded in the *Mahabharata*, a great epic poem about two related families in conflict over who should rightfully inherit a throne. The scene described in the *Bhagavad-Gita* occurs just before a battle, when both sides have gathered and await the command to begin. The person selected to give this order is Arjuna, an excellent archer and one of five brothers on one side of the conflict. Arjuna looks out over the field, seeing friends and relatives on both sides, and hesitates to begin a battle that will result in the death of many.

Krishna, the ruler of a neighboring country, is serving as Arjuna's charioteer. Krishna tells Arjuna that it is his duty to begin the battle, for he is a member of the warrior caste. Moreover, the other side has usurped the throne in question by illegitimate means, so Arjuna is also obligated to avenge his family. Krishna also tells Arjuna that he should not fear death, which involves exchanging one body for another, much as one changes clothes.

Krishna then reveals himself to Arjuna as an avatar and advises him to adopt the path of **karma yoga** (the yoga of selfless action). **Yoga**, which literally means “yoke,” is a method of spiritual discipline. According to the *Yoga-sutra*, a compendium of yoga traditionally attributed to Patanjali (second century BCE), yoga aims to still the mind and thus eliminate mental activities that interfere with insight. Traditionally, yoga involved mental and physical practices that were very different from everyday activities. However, the karma yoga that Krishna proposes involves engaging in everyday activities, but with a transformed attitude.

The idea of **karma** (which literally means “action”) is that every action bears fruit. Besides obvious external results, every action leaves residues (or **samskaras**) in the mind, typically in the unconscious mind. Our actions build up tendencies that can become habitual. Although the term “karma” has become fairly familiar in the West, it is often misunderstood as implying that your just deserts eventually catch up with you in this life. Indian philosophy presupposes reincarnation, and the Hindu doctrine of karma does not claim that the fruits of an action will necessarily appear within the same life in which it was performed. The personalities we were born with are shaped by karma from previous lives. We will continue the cycle of rebirth as long as karmic tendencies continue. In Indian thought, however, continuing this cycle is not considered a good thing; instead, it extends one’s distance from the spiritual release that is one’s ultimate goal. In this case, the accumulation of further karma is undesirable.

Karma yoga, as Krishna presents it, involves acting without accruing further karma. The practitioner of karma yoga goes about everyday activities in accordance with the moral law (*dharma*) without concern for the consequences. He or she adopts an attitude of detachment, no longer considering the fruits of one’s action as one’s own possessions, but instead offering the fruits of one’s actions to God, fixing one’s thought on God. By acting without concern to possess one’s actions and their results, one avoids accumulating additional karma. If Arjuna gives the command for battle (which he ultimately does) in the spirit of karma yoga, he will not assume more karma by doing so. He should offer his action to God, and not concern himself with whether the results will be to his liking.

Hinduism gave rise to two other great religions, which developed around the sixth century BCE. The first was **Buddhism**, founded by **Siddhartha Gautama** (“the Buddha,” literally, “the enlightened one,” 566–486 BCE). The other, founded by the Buddha’s contemporary **Mahavira**, was **Jainism**, a religion thoroughly committed to the sanctity of life and to nonviolence (*ahimsa*). Both rejected the caste system, and both focused their attention on the problem of suffering in the world and how to escape, or “liberate,” oneself from it. Buddhists refer to this escape as **nirvana**, which literally means “extinguishing” (that is, extinguishing selfish craving and the suffering it causes) but is understood as blissful. Hindus refer to the ultimate liberation as **mukti**, which they also characterize as involving a state of bliss. For all three philosophies, liberation is achieved through proper living, through ritual practice (for example, yoga), and through meditation.

Central to all three religions is an emphasis on **mysticism**. Mysticism is the conviction of one’s unity with a spiritual reality and the attempt to gain insight into this unity through direct experience. It would be an enormous mistake to think of Indian philosophy, even in its most ancient forms, as *nothing but* mysticism, the favorite excuse of many Western philosophers for

ignoring Indian thought altogether. Indian philosophy uses rational accounts to defend religious views as well as to elaborate on the nature of reality. But the oldest Vedas express skeptical doubts that Brahman can be comprehended through reason or reflection alone. Knowledge of Brahman may come through an all-embracing, unifying mystical experience. The great Buddhist philosopher Na-ga-rjuna (circa 200 CE), however, thought that rationality could be used in the service of this possibility. He used brilliant rational argumentation to undermine his opponents' positions, making them less attached to their own views and more open to nonrational insight.

Buddhism split early in its history into a South Asian version, Theravada Buddhism, which remains dominant mainly in and near India, and which focused attention on personal enlightenment, and an East Asian version, Mahayana Buddhism, which spread to China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, where it became popular among the samurai warriors as Zen. The Mahayana Buddhists insist on the primacy of compassion and regard for the less fortunate. The spiritual aim within Mahayana Buddhism is to become a *Bodhisattva*. Bodhisattvas do not enter nirvana upon attaining enlightenment. Instead, they remain active in the world, as the Buddha did, to help others extinguish suffering.

Reflection on the nature of the self pervades Indian philosophy. On the one hand, there is the conception of the individual soul, *jiva*, which distinguishes each individual as a unique being. Whether or not this *jiva* is ultimately real, however, or in any way sufficiently substantial to survive the death of the body, is a matter of fascinating debate. On the other hand, the self is also referred to as *atman*, which might be understood as the principle of life that exists in every human being. Atman is the same in each individual, implying that we all share the same self. The belief that our individual selves are completely distinct entities is an instance of *maya*, or illusion. Thus, one might see every individual as a *jiva* vitalized by atman, or, quite differently, one might come to see *jiva* as a false self and atman as the true self.

The Vedas make clear, however, that we are not to think of *jiva* and atman as two selves fighting for superiority within a person. The self that we recognize within ourselves is ultimately atman, and atman is not separate from Brahman, the fundamental reality. By looking within ourselves, we discover the fundamental reality that underlies and animates everything. The microcosm of our personal selves and the macrocosm that is Brahman are ultimately identical. In a passage from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a teacher (a *guru*, literally, one who leads from darkness to light) draws his student's attention to the various phenomena in the world—the diverse creatures all animated by the same life, the manifold branches that share the life of a tree, the minute seeds that can grow into a gigantic tree, water in various locations that all has the same taste—and instructs the student in every case, “You are that.” The student's own reality is, in other words, the same reality that gives being to these things.

Buddhists reject the idea of the self altogether. They believe that all of life is impermanent. According to Buddhists, reality consists of a series of momentary existences, and there are no enduring substances. It is only delusion that leads us to believe that our selves have an enduring reality. In fact, there is no permanent self or soul. A human being is just a series of temporary composites of physical form, feelings, thoughts, dispositions, and consciousness (“the **five aggregates**”). (We might compare this view to that of David Hume. See Lesson 6.) There is no underlying substance, a self or soul in addition to this composite. Nor is there a larger eternal

self, what the Vedantists call *atman*. This Buddhist doctrine is termed *anatman*, literally “no atman.” Recognition of the impermanence of the “self” and all objects of desire, according to Buddhists, is a step toward insight and the end of misery.

Jains, by contrast, hold onto the belief in an individual self or soul, not only in human beings but in every living thing. That is why their respect for all life is so uncompromising. They—like many Hindus—believe that human souls may be reborn in animals. Jains take as their primary principle “Do no harm,” and they practice respect for life—all life—even to the point of taking care that they do not crush the insects on the ground beneath them or accidentally inhale those flying in the air.

Both Buddhists and Jains pay special attention to the nature of suffering and liberation from suffering, and their philosophies are centrally concerned with this problem. The Buddha denounced the caste system because it increased human suffering.

The Buddha’s basic philosophy, however, is concerned primarily with the individual’s *inner* transformation, achieved by means of insight into the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism:

1. Life is full of suffering.
2. Suffering arises from selfish craving.
3. Selfish craving can be eliminated.
4. One can eliminate selfish craving by following the right way.

This right way to liberation or enlightenment is called the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, which consists of (1) the right way of seeing, (2) right thinking, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right effort, (6) the right way of living, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right meditation.

Buddhism aims to free oneself from deluded belief in the ego and all that goes with it—desire and frustration, ambition and disappointment, pride and humiliation—and to gain enlightenment and the end of misery. Because of ignorance, we each imagine that we have an individual existence, separate from that of others, and we seek to secure a good situation for this separate existence. But this is impossible. Everything changes and passes away, as the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence (*anitya*) asserts. We cannot sustain any situation, nor is there a distinct self to sustain.

Mahayana Buddhists stress the interdependence of all things in the doctrine of interdependent arising (*prat-ityasamutpa-da* in Sanskrit). Everything that exists in our world exists only in relation to other things, and its relative “existence” is constantly transforming. Our selfish cravings, accordingly, are based on a faulty view of reality, for they presuppose an enduring self that can be catered to. The Eightfold Path offers the practical means to overcome this ignorant understanding. By following it, one learns to perceive things accurately and to construct the right habits of motivation and action. Mahayana Buddhists also describe the status of our egos and the “things” we take so seriously as “empty.” The Buddhist concept of emptiness (*s’u-nyata*) is used in reference to the phenomenal world to indicate its illusory character but also to refer to what underlies it, the Buddha-nature, which is the only reality.

The great Chinese philosopher Confucius (the Latinized name for Kong Fu Zi, “the honorable master Kong,” 551–479 BCE) was active about the same time as the Buddha, Mahavira, and the earliest Greek philosophers. In the sixth century BCE, China was already a highly advanced political culture. It was also a society in turmoil. Confucius’s philosophy, called **Confucianism**, in response to these circumstances, was concerned with harmonious social and political relationships, good leadership, and getting along with others by cultivating personal virtue. The central question in Chinese thought is generally the ethical question of what constitutes the good life. For Confucius, the answer was to live in harmony with other human beings, and his philosophy focuses on “the Way” (*Dao* or *Tao*) to do that.

Confucius proposed that society return to the rituals of an earlier time as a means of restoring social harmony. He suggested that ritual practices enable people to harmonize without coercion. Knowing what is called for, people direct their own energies into dignified interactions with others, gaining a sense of partnership with others in their society. For Confucius, therefore, practicing ritual (*li*) is an important virtue. Ritual is something like a vocabulary for social participation. By knowing the rituals—the way things are done—within one’s society, one can fully participate in the life of the community.

Confucius also called for a sense of nobility based on moral excellence. In his society, important civil positions had been a matter of inheritance. Confucius claimed that aristocracy was a matter of personal character, not birth into the right family. (We have had a similar transformation of the notion of nobility in the Western world. We no longer think the term “gentleman” refers to a person born into an aristocratic family, but instead consider it to refer to a person’s good behavior and manners.) Although Confucius defended traditional principles of succession to the throne, he believed that ministers serving a ruler should be chosen based on their merits, even if this meant elevating a commoner to a position of authority. An itinerant teacher during much of his life, Confucius taught aristocrats and commoners all together, stressing the point that belonging to a prominent family did not impress him as much as the cultivation of a good character.

Confucius advised rulers to be moral exemplars to their citizens. This would involve genuinely acting as a benevolent father toward society. Too many rulers in his own time had failed to do this, instead hoarding the resources they secured through taxation to satisfy their own whims, and paying little attention to the concerns and needs of the people. The ruler who lived up to his role would, according to Confucius, be successful as a leader, for he would have the people’s support. Such a ruler would be the “pole star” of his state, and he would have a kind of moral charisma that would motivate the people to follow his lead, a power completely lacking in those who ruled through coercion.

Confucius did not restrict his attention to rulers, however. He pointed out that the family is the context in which people learn cooperation and other political virtues. Political life begins at home. Ideally, the family should be a model of interpersonal harmony, in which members have distinct responsibilities toward a common aim of meeting the needs of all members. Filial piety,

respect for one's elders, is consequently a profoundly important Confucian virtue. To be filial, Confucius claims, is already a way of participating in the governing of the state.

Whether an official or not, everyone should live up to their roles. Confucius makes the startling suggestion that if he had power within the government, the first item on his agenda would be the "attunement of names." This may sound a bit eccentric, as it initially did to his disciples. Still, this idea is motivated by concern for human relationships, but relationships are actually the primary concern behind it. Attunement of names means that the name we give to something should match the reality. A king should really be a king. A father should really be a father. Part of Confucius's point is that the names for our roles are morally loaded. They indicate obligations we are committed to. These names can help us evaluate whether someone is really living up to their commitments.

Confucius is also concerned about the way language functions as a medium for communication. Human beings relate best when their words mean the same things to all parties. Language enables us to coordinate our plans and intentions. Language that is used misleadingly or in an obscurantist manner fails to do the basic job for which it was designed.

To make sense of Confucius's point, consider some experience when you have had to deal with some bureaucratic office, let's say the parking office on your campus. You have lost your parking permit and need to get a new one. Imagine, first of all, that you do not know where the parking office is located, and that people keep giving you wrong directions to get there. Suppose you eventually find the office and spend some time in line waiting to speak to someone. You finally get to the counter and say what it is you want. The person at the counter says the parking office no longer issues parking permits and that the registrar now handles the process. You say, "But this is the parking office." The person at the counter says, "Yes, but the registrar really likes handling parking permits." A situation like this would not only be frustrating for you; it would indicate a system organized in a way that will mislead everyone who has any need for a parking permit. Language should be an efficient tool of communication, not a mysterious code that only some people are in on. For institutions to run smoothly, words must refer to realities, and in a way that is clear to everyone.

It is easy to imagine that Confucius would object to euphemisms used to make circumstances seem more pleasant than they actually are. When killing innocent people is called "collateral damage," we are not facing up to the real situation. George Orwell made a point that is much in the Confucian spirit in his essay, "Politics and the English Language."

In our time political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets. This is called "pacification." Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry. This is called "transfer of population" or "rectification of frontiers." People are

imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck, or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps. This is called “elimination of unreliable elements.” Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

Confucius would see such euphemisms as an abdication of moral responsibility. We avoid the real circumstances that need to be dealt with if we refuse to let our language name them. Euphemisms aim to obscure even as they pretend to communicate. In a society in which names are attuned, words convey what they purport to convey. People who speak with each other can act in harmony because they share an apprehension of the situation by using the same words to describe it.

Confucius assumed that interpersonal relationships are hierarchical. He did not defend any form of egalitarianism. However, obligations within relationships are reciprocal. A parent has authority over a child, but also an obligation to care for the child. Later in life, the child will have obligations to take care of his or her parents. Someone in authority and a subordinate should each do what is possible to assist the other in fulfilling their respective roles. In general, Confucius urges that everyone consider the situation from the other’s point of view: “Do not do to others what you yourself would not want.” At the same time, by enhancing others, one enhances oneself. The self, as Confucius understands it, is essentially relational. We are who we are because we are related to others, as children, parents, siblings, friends, coworkers, and so forth. The nexus of particular relationships we have with particular others is what makes us who we are.

Around the same time as Confucius, a sage called **Laozi** (or **Lao-Tzu**) argued a very different vision of the Way (Dao, or Tao) to live a good life. According to Lao-Tzu, we achieve the good life by living in accordance with the Way (Dao) of nature. The Dao for Laozi and other like-minded thinkers is the world in its constantly changing entirety. Because of their focus on the Dao in this sense, they are called **Daoists** (or **Taoists**). The Taoists urge us to set our course by attuning ourselves with the dynamic flow of energies within the world. Thus, they attempt to discern the energies and patterns that arise within this cosmic flow and adapt their behavior accordingly.

Having a different sense of the best way to live, the Daoists have some basic disagreements with the Confucians. The Confucians, for example, think that governmental office is a desirable circumstance for pursuing the Way (understood in their sense). The Daoists, on the other hand, think that too often people wear down their health in a quest for political office or influence. From their point of view, social or political status is not worth the strain on one’s body. Health is to be prized above social prominence.

The Daoists also think that the Confucian emphasis on ritual is misguided. The prescribed formulas of ritual make it too easy to go through the motions without being mentally and spiritually present, according to the Daoists. We should respect nature by acting naturally, allowing our own nature to express itself spontaneously. This does not mean that we should do

anything that occurs to us. The Daoists think that we are overly influenced by social conditioning, and we must unlearn tendencies we have developed that obstruct our awareness of both external and internal nature. Again, this contrasts with the Confucian perspective, which emphasizes cultivating oneself through learning from the classics and exemplary figures in one's tradition. The Daoists encourage cultivation, too, but for them this is a return to the condition of unworked wood. Like wood before anyone has worked on it, we should once again employ the powers we had when we operated by instinct, before society gave shape to our habits. (We might see some similarity between the Daoist view of social conditioning and Rousseau's position.)

What is really important is clear perception of reality, according to the Daoists. This requires a receptive mind. Too often, we force our own preconceptions onto things and discover only what we have projected onto them. Even the words we use to describe things can get in the way of real understanding. Once we have a word for something, we feel that we have grasped hold of it. Words are like fishing nets, according to the Daoist Zhuangzi (also Chuang-Tzu); they catch some things, but they allow much to slip through. Words are neither as subtle as reality, nor do they reflect the constant changes that reality undergoes. Even pronouncements about the Dao distort reality, seeming to fix what is continually in flux. According to Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, "The Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name."

The Daoists stress receptivity through many surprising metaphors, including the infant. The infant is almost entirely potential, they suggest, and in that sense is stronger and more virile than the strongest man. A baby is a model of flexibility. Similarly, the Daoists use water as an image for the ideal state. Water conforms to its surroundings. In this respect it is "soft" or "weak," lacking a definite shape of its own. Yet water is strong enough to carve out great canyons, precisely because it does flow exactly where the ground is. The weakness of water is in fact its strength.

The seeming contradictions in such Daoist metaphors (the virile infant, the weakness of water as its strength) reflect an ideal emphasized by Daoists: *wuwei*, which literally means "nonaction." In practice, *wuwei* does not mean literally doing nothing; instead it involves acting nonassertively, taking one's cues from one's situation. Consider the case of driving in heavy, obstructed traffic when you are in a hurry to get somewhere. When you find yourself in this situation, you are likely to feel aggravated, your frustration growing with every passing moment. This experience illustrates the futile expenditure of energy when your own desires do not align with the flow of energy in your situation. The Daoist would say that you are needlessly wasting your vitality. Instead, you would do best to exemplify *wuwei*, not trying to force your will on the environment, but going with the flow.

Again, what seems weak proves to be strong. Adopting the policy of *wuwei* results in tremendous power within the environment. Zhuangzi relates many stories of artists and craftsmen whose skill stems from their allowing the Dao—the energies inherent in the situation—to flow through them. The Dao directs their art.

To see the Daoist point, you might consider skills you have developed, perhaps in sports or in learning to play a musical instrument. In learning a skill, you initially practice particular

movements (batting a ball, practicing fingering on the piano), very deliberately, over and over. When you have actually acquired the skill, however, you can perform the required movements without thinking about them. They seem to just come to you. They are simply there as you act. This nondeliberate acting is the essence of wuwei. The more positive way to characterize this kind of behavior is to say that it is spontaneous (*ziran*), the ideal according to the Daoists. This spontaneous way of being expresses one's inner nature.

Despite their differences, the ancient Confucians and the Daoists shared many views, however. They agreed in their overall emphasis on harmony as the ideal state of both society and the individual, and they insisted on an all-encompassing, or holistic, conception of human life that emphasizes a person's place in a larger context. For both Confucianism and Daoism, the development of personal character was the main goal in life, but the personal was not to be defined in individualistic terms. (For the Confucian, the personal was the social. For the Taoist, the ideal was living in accordance with nature.) Whatever their disagreements about the relative importance of nature and society, the Chinese thinkers were in considerable agreement concerning the need for harmony in human life and a larger sense of the "person" than merely the individual. When Mahayana Buddhism arrived in China early in the first century BCE, despite its being alien in many respects, the Chinese could recognize something familiar in the Buddhist doctrine that the separate self does not exist. Each of these three schools of thought contributed to the Chinese worldview and continues to exert its influence today.