

Continental Perspectives

Chapter 4

Learning Objectives

- After reading this chapter, you will be able to:
 - 4.1 Explain Continental philosophy versus other approaches to ethics.
 - 4.2 Discuss Nietzsche's claims about the role of reason in morals.
 - 4.3 Articulate Sartre and Beauvoir's claims that ethics are ambiguous and always personal.
 - 4.4 Critically analyze the relation of ethics to politics in Marx and the existentialists.

Schools of Philosophy

- **Continental philosophy** is a very broad category of philosophy that gained popularity in the 1970s.
 - It is a term still used mainly by the Anglophone philosophers who invented the term, that is, by most philosophers in the United Kingdom and the United States.
 - It describes something other than **analytic philosophy**, and it is in fact an interesting historical feature of the field of philosophy in general as well as of ethics in particular.

Nietzsche on Moral Systems

- "Morality is neither rational nor absolute nor natural. The world has known many moral systems, each of which advances claims of universality; all moral systems are, therefore, particular, serving a specific purpose for their propagators, or creators, and enforcing a certain regime that disciplines human beings for social life by narrowing our perspectives and limiting our horizons." Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche

- People are not created equal. Given this basic inequality in our natural abilities, it follows that there will be an unequal distribution of rights and liberties.

Friedrich Nietzsche "What is Noble"

- Slave morality vs. Master morality
- The weak hold the Slave Morality
 - Claims all are equal, all deserve fairness.
- The powerful hold the master morality.
 - A Morality of nobility where cunning and pride are held in highest regard. Denies equality. Nietzsche claims that the wool has been pulled over our eyes, equality & fairness are a lie.

The Improvers of Mankind

- "My demand upon the philosopher is known, that he take his stand beyond good and evil and leaven the illumination of moral judgment beneath himself. This demand follows from an insight which I was the first to formulate: that there are altogether no moral facts."
- The statement above seems to indicate that Nietzsche is an amoralist.

There are no Moral Facts

- Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are not realities. ... Moral judgments, like religious ones, belong to a stage of ignorance at which the very concept of the real and the distinction between what is real and imaginary are still lacking; thus, truth at this stage designates all sorts of things which we today call imaginings.

Kierkegaard, Faith and Morality

- **Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)** already had emphasized the excruciatingly personal nature of the choices human beings make and the existential discomfort of making those choices.
- The Danish philosopher's celebrated "leap of faith," the way he described personally choosing to believe in God for no good reason other than his choosing to do so, describes not a one-time life event but rather simply the authentic way to face life.

Jean-Paul Sartre

- "Existentialism and Humanism"
 1. existence comes before essence.
 2. Man is free - that is he possesses free will and, as such, is necessarily free
 3. Each man determines his own morality.

Being,

- Our existence is a phenomenon we are both creating and witnessing, but there's a catch: Other people are witnessing it as well.
- They misrepresent and objectify us, the way we misrepresent and objectify them.
- Yet we are all responsible for our lives. If we pretend that it's not our fault, that we couldn't help it, that it is beyond our control, we are in bad faith.

Simone de Beauvoir

- The Ethics of Ambiguity
- Life has no fixed meaning
- Humans have no assigned purpose or function
- "The goal is not fixed once and for all; it is defined all along the road which leads to it."

Denying Freedom

■ "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison."
Simone de Beauvoir

Camus and Absurdity

■ Camus never meant to claim that the world is absurd. The world is a thing, neither absurd nor rational. What is absurd is our presence in the world given that we keep asking "Why?" as the world remains and always will remain silent. The Enlightenment's faith in reason falls apart: There is no reason; there is only action. Praxis precedes theory, as Marx pointed out. Existence precedes essence, so ethics precedes ontology and metaphysics. Every moral choice is personal: We are defined by what we do. We are what we make of ourselves.
