



# Contributions of Western Moral Thinkers and Philosophers

**For Prelim:** [Citizens](#), [Education](#), [Courts](#), [Distribution of Resources](#), [Executives](#), [East India Company](#), [Liberty](#), [Sanitation](#).

**For Mains:** Relevance of Western Moral Thinkers and Philosophers in Modern Times

## Who was Socrates?

### ▪ About:

- **Socrates** (469-399 B.C.E.) is generally acclaimed as the father of [Western philosophy](#).
- He exhibited the philosophical attitude of **distanced and unaffected** intellectual reflection, moral courage, spirit of an educationist, etc.

### ▪ Philosophy of Socrates:

#### ◦ Socrates view on life:

- For Socrates, it wasn't just about knowing how to gain power, but about understanding how to live our lives rightly.
- Rather than knowing what constitutes life, it was more important to know what constitutes a 'good' or '[virtuous life](#).'
- The objective of life is to lead a '**good life**.' And in order to lead a good life, we should have '**the knowledge**' of 'good life.'
- In the words of Socrates, "**Unexamined life is not worth living.**"

#### ◦ Socrates view on knowledge:

- For him, the **awareness** of one's **ignorance** was the first stage in order to acquire knowledge.
- In a Socratic sense, such a person was already 'wise'.
- The virtue (**excellence or knowledge**) cannot be taught or learned according to Socrates, it can only be drawn out for such a knowledge is **already within us**. Thus, lecturing does no good.

## Who was Plato?

### ▪ About:

- **Plato** is the well-known [Greek philosopher](#) and student of Socrates.
- He was a **student of Socrates** and the **teacher of Aristotle**.
- Plato wrote on a wide variety of topics including mathematics, ultimate reality, ethics, and politics.
- Plato is known as the '**father of political philosophy**' since he was the first person (in the Western world) to give an elaborate theory of [state](#) and [politics](#).

### ▪ Philosophy of Plato:

#### ◦ The Theory of The Philosopher King:

- The biggest contribution of Plato is '[The Theory of The Philosopher King](#).'
- According to him, that **state is ideal, where philosophers are the rulers**.
- In the words of Plato "Unless political power and philosophy meet together there can be no rest from troubles for states, nor for all mankind."

- **View on Knowledge:**
  - In ***The Republic***, Plato uses the story of the "**allegory of the cave**" to illustrate the **three different levels** of understanding and help us illustrate the difference between **illusion (ignorance) and real knowledge**.
  - People prefer to live in the **den of ignorance**, and develop their **comfort zone**. However, it is the **duty of a teacher** to push them forcibly out of the **cave** and show them the **reality**.
- **View on Justice:**
  - He suggests that **justice** is the **greatest good** that people can attain **individually** and **collectively**, and all of his theories point in this direction.
- **View on State:**
  - The purpose of Plato is to create an **ideal state of perfect justice**.
  - According to Plato, justice denotes a **virtue** or a **state of excellence**, characterized by reason in the soul dominating over courage and appetite.
  - He suggests that a **just state** is one where the **philosophers rule** and other classes perform the **functions** in **accordance** with the nature of their **soul**.
  - According to Plato, "justice is the greatest good that people can attain as individuals and as members of a political community."
- **View on Education:**
  - Imparting **education** is one of the most important functions of the state.
  - Education is the primary means of **socialization**.
  - The education system plays a critical role towards making obedient **citizens**.
  - He favored a system of **state-sponsored education** (universal education).
  - He emphasized the study of **mathematics and logic** which develops the **rational** faculties of mind.
- In ***The Republic***, Plato says that the **soul** has **three parts**, corresponding to **Reason** ( or wisdom), **Courage, Appetite**.

## Who was Aristotle?

- **About:**
  - He is known as the **father of Political Science**.
  - Aristotle's book ***Politics*** made an important contribution in the development of political philosophy.
  - He is also regarded as the originator of many important ideas like the **rule of law**, **deliberative democracy**, etc. in Western history.
- One of his prominent statements on the theory of state is "**Man is by nature a political animal.**" It means nature has not made man in such a way that he can live without state.
- **Philosophy of Aristotle:**
  - **Theory of Revolution & Justice:**
    - His theory of justice is based on **practical considerations**, unlike Plato's very abstract theory of justice.
    - He said "It is unjust to treat equal unequally and it is equally unjust to treat unequal equally."
    - He discussed justice in **two dimensions**:
      - **Rectificatory Justice:** It is linked to the system of **grievance redressal**, administered by **courts**. He gives the **principle of proportion** i.e., penalty should be in proportion to the harm done.
      - **Distributive Justice:** It is linked with the **distribution of resources**, honors, awards etc. State should reward the person in proportion to his **contribution** to society. A person whose work is **more important** for society ought to **get more**.
  - **Rule of Law:**
    - The **rule of law** represents the **limitations** on the powers of **executives**.
    - Executive has to act according to the law, they cannot act in an **arbitrary manner**.

## Who was Jeremy Bentham?

- **About:**
  - **Jeremy Bentham** (1748—1832) was the father of **utilitarianism**.
  - **Utilitarianism** is a moral theory that argues that actions should be judged **right or wrong** to the extent they increase or decrease human **well-being or 'utility'**.
- **Philosophy of Jeremy Bentham:**
  - **Utilitarianism:**
    - He advocated that if the **consequences** of an action are **good**, then the act is **moral** and if the consequences are **bad**, the act is **immoral**.
    - As a self-proclaimed **atheist**, he wanted to place **morality** on a firm, secular foundation.
    - This doesn't mean we can do whatever we like. Importantly, for Bentham, it is not just one's own happiness or pleasure that matters.
      - He notes, "Ethics at large may be defined, the art of directing men's actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness."
      - The moral agent will perform the action that **maximizes happiness** or pleasure for **everyone involved**.

## Who was John Stuart Mill?

- **About:**
  - **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) was an influential philosopher, economist, politician, and senior official in the [East India Company](#).
- **Philosophy of John Stuart Mill:**
  - **Utilitarianism:**
    - Expanding on philosopher Jeremy Bentham's original doctrine, John Stuart's Mill's utilitarianism has **three basic tenets**:
      - Pleasure or happiness is the only thing that has true, **intrinsic value**.
      - Actions are right insofar as they promote happiness; wrong insofar as they produce unhappiness.
      - **Everyone's** happiness counts **equally**.
    - **'Happiness'** means **pleasure and the absence of pain**; by 'unhappiness' means pain and the **lack of pleasure**.
  - **View on freedom:**
    - He **defended** classical liberal ideals such as the **freedom of individuals** against absolute state power, and the importance of **free speech and disagreement**.
    - Published in 1859, John Stuart Mill's **On Liberty** is one of the most celebrated defenses of free speech ever written.

## Who was Jean-Jacques Rousseau?

- **About:**
  - **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712 - 1778 CE) was a philosopher of the 18th century who mostly lived and was active in **France**.
  - His political philosophy influenced western Europe, including aspects of the [French Revolution](#) and the development of modern political thought.
  - Rousseau's **Discourse on Inequality** and **The Social Contract** are cornerstones in contemporary political thought.
- **Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:**
  - **View on State of Nature:**
    - He suggested that the **state of nature** wasn't all that bad, proposing that the people in it were **self-sufficient, fairly solitary by choice**, sympathetic to others, and **peaceful**.
    - Since morality hasn't been invented yet, they are innocent and incapable of being **malicious**.
    - Importantly, people in the state of nature are free in that they can follow their **own will** all the time, and the various sources of **inequality** haven't been invented yet.
    - He argues that it is only when we move into society that human nature becomes **corrupted**, and many of the **vices and evils** we know all too well can flourish.
  - **View on Private property:**

- Private property, a concept enabled by society, earned Rousseau's ire for promoting greed and egotism.
- **Social Contract:**
  - His alternative is to create a social contract that will allow all members of the society to be **as free as they were in the state of nature**.
  - It will ensure that everyone is **equal before the law** that they create.
  - The key to Rousseau's social contract theory, and his biggest idea, is a take on the **"general will."**
    - The general will is the will of the entire body politic, which exists independently of the will of any one member or any group of people that comprise it.
    - All laws and actions the state undertakes must be in line with it.

## Who was Thomas Hobbes?

- **About:**
  - Thomas Hobbes is an **English** political philosopher best known for his contribution to **social contract theory**.
- **Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes:**
  - **Individualist theory:**
    - According to Hobbes, man is **individualistic by nature** and social only out of necessity. Hobbes is a scholar of **Possessive Individualism**.
    - Individualism means man is prior to state, it means **self-interest is supreme**.
    - According to him, the **right to life** is so sacred that man can even kill another person for the protection of his life. Means right to life includes **right to self-defense**.
  - **View on State:**
    - The most important purpose, for which the state exists, is **preservation of life**. The state which cannot protect life is a **failed state**.
    - State is an institution which has **monopoly** over the use of **coercive force** on a **territory**. Any other organization using force is not permissible.
  - **View on Social Contract:**
    - In the state of **nature**, there was **no security of life**, it was the state of war, life was nasty, poor, brutish and short. Hence for the sake of security of life, man enters into the **contract** and creates the **state**.
    - The most important function of the state is the **protection of life**. Right to life is the **supreme right**. Even the state cannot take the life of man in an **arbitrary manner**.
  - **View on Liberty:**
    - Hobbes does not prefer **liberty**. According to him, extreme liberty results in **anarchy**. In the state of anarchy, there is no guarantee of even the right to life.
    - When authority of state is **absolute**, man has no freedom to act according to his choice.
    - Man is under **compulsion** to act according to the law. Man will be **punished** in case he does not act according to law.

## Who was John Rawls?

- **About:**
  - John Rawls was an **American** moral and political philosopher in the **liberal tradition**.
  - He condemned **utilitarianism** because he opined that it paves the way for governments to function in ways that bring happiness to a majority but ignore the wishes and rights of a **minority**.
- **Philosophy of John Rawls:**
  - **View on Justice:**
    - He is best known for his political-philosophical publication **A Theory of Justice (1971)**.
    - The very purpose of Rawls introducing the theory of justice was to find a way to create a **well-ordered society** having following **two elements**:

- Advance the good of its members and effectively regulated by a public conception of justice.
- All people accept and know that all other people accept the same principles of justice and that the basic social institutions satisfy those principles.
- Rawls described two kinds of circumstances of justice objective and subjective circumstances.
  - **Objective Circumstances:**
    - It refers to circumstances that give rise to a situation in which the members of a society **co-exist** in some identifiable territory and are of some **comparable strengths and weaknesses** so that no one has an edge over another.
    - The most significant objective circumstance of justice is the one in which the **resources** available to a society are **moderately scarce**. If the resources are too abundant or too scarce, there will not be enough scope for **social cooperation**.
  - **Subjective Circumstances:**
    - It refers to circumstances that give rise to a situation in which few members of the society have **conflicting interests** in the resources available.
    - When such interests contradict the mutually advantageous social cooperation, a **need for justice** arises.
- **Two principles of justice:**
  - The members of a society would be led by **reason and self-interest** to agree upon the following two principles of justice:
    - **The Principle of Equal Liberty:** As per the principle of **equal liberty**, all the people in the society must be given certain liberties that are basic for **human existence**. Such liberties can not be infringed at any cost, even if they may cause greater benefit to a larger mass of people. Some of the basic liberties as stated by Rawls were the **freedom of speech, assembly, thought and conscience**, liberties required to secure the **rule of law, sanitation, wealth, and health**.
    - **The Principle of Difference and Fair Equality of Opportunity:** Rawls' second **principle of justice** states that social and economic **inequalities** are to be arranged so that they are both:
      - **To the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.** It is also called the **difference principle**. It provides that in case of an **unequal distribution** of wealth and income, the inequality must be such that those that are worst off are still better off than they would be under any other distribution.
      - **Attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.** It is also called the **fair equality of opportunity principle**. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to compete for the public or private offices or positions that they wish for. This includes providing **education, and healthcare**.

## Who was Immanuel Kant?

- **About:**
  - **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) was a **German enlightenment** thinker who is widely regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the modern world.
- **Philosophy of Immanuel Kant:**
  - **View on Freedom:**
    - Kant's understanding of **moral freedom** and of **moral principles** has been central to discussions of morality.
    - Freedom, for Kant, is thus not the **"freedom"** to follow one's inclinations. Instead, freedom implies **morality**, and **morality implies freedom**.
    - To act morally is to act **"autonomously,"** meaning to act according to the law that

one gives oneself.

◦ **Concept of Categorical Imperative:**

- In the ***Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals***, Kant outlines his fundamental ethical principle, which he calls the **“Categorical Imperative.”**
- The moral principle is **“imperative”** because it **commands**, and it is **“Categorical”** because it does so **unconditionally**, that is, irrespective of the particular inclinations and circumstances of the actor.
- This moral principle is given by **reason** and states that we may act only in such a way that the **maxim of our action**, i.e. the principle governing our action, could be willed as **universal law**. For example, one is forbidden to act on the maxim “lie whenever it provides an advantage” because such a maxim would destroy trust among humans, and with it the possibility of gaining any advantage from lying.
- Those who act on non-universalizable maxims are caught in a kind of **practical contradiction**.
- People must always **respect humanity** in ourselves and others by treating humans always as **ends in themselves**, and never merely as a means.

◦ **View on Politics:**

- Kant’s political philosophy is **entwined** with his **moral philosophy**. Political activity is ultimately governed by moral principles based on **human autonomy**.
- Human freedom and dignity must be **respected**, and this is possible only within a **constitutional state** governed by law, which protects the **civil rights** of individuals.
- When executive and legislative powers are invested in a single body, the government becomes **despotic** because law is no longer **universal** but is determined by a **particular will**.
- **Direct democracies** thus are inevitably despotisms because the **majority oppresses** the minority rather than acting according to **universal law**.
- Kant abjures the idea that subjects ought to revolt against existing governments to create more perfect ones.
  - He regards any **“right to revolution”** as incoherent because **states** are the only existing **embodiment of right**.
  - Instead, Kant argues that subjects always have a duty to **obey their governments**, though they may use their public reason to criticize them.
  - He puts in his essay **“Perpetual Peace,”** that the problem of civil government can be solved even for a **race of devils**, if they are intelligent.

◦ **View on International Relations:**

- Kant argues that a state of **perpetual peace** is required morally.
- For **perpetual peace** to occur, all states must possess a republican civil **constitution**, participate in a **union of states**, abolish standing armies, and refuse to take on national debts for war, among several other conditions.
- As individuals and states pursue their interests through the medium of growing **commerce**, they find that **war is incompatible with profit**. States will thus avoid war in order more effectively to pursue wealth.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

### **Mains :**

**Q.** “A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true.” – Socrates (2020)

**Q.**What does the quotation mean to you? “An unexamined life is not worth living”. – Socrates (2019)

**Q.**“In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence and energy. And if they do not have the first, the other two will kill you.” – Warren Buffett. What do you understand by this statement in the present-day scenario? Explain. (2018)

**Q.**“Great ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or

very bad acts. It all depends on the principles which direct them.” - Napoleon Bonaparte. Stating examples mention the rulers (i) who have harmed society and country, (ii) who worked for the development of society and country. **(2017)**

**Q.**Given below are three quotations of great moral thinkers/philosophers. For each of these quotations, bring out what it means to you in the present context:

1. “There is enough on this earth for everyone’s need but for no one’s greed.” Mahatma Gandhi.
2. “Nearly all men can withstand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”—Abraham Lincoln.
3. “I count him as a braver who overcomes his desires than he who overcomes his enemies.”—Aristotle.

**Q.**What does the following quotations mean to you?

“Life doesn’t make any sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, it is better for us all.”- Erik Erikson

PDF Refernece URL: <https://www.drishtias.com/printpdf/contributions-of-western-moral-thinkers-and-philosophers>

