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Philosophers and their Philosophies

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Abstract

This essay journeys through the minds of philosophers past and present, seeking the wisdom most useful for a world losing its moral and spiritual bearings. Beginning with modern thinkers — from MacIntyre's moral virtues and Chomsky's political realism to Nussbaum's human dignity and Žižek's existential atheism — the work sets a contemporary baseline before turning to earlier masters such as al-Farabi, Kant, Kierkegaard, Gibran, Descartes, and Safavi. Each is examined not merely as a historical figure but as a living conversation partner, their insights weighed against the demands of today's fractured world.

The essay argues that the philosopher's task is not abstract speculation but moral navigation — finding an ethical compass that reconciles freedom with responsibility, justice with mercy, and intellect with love. After a broad comparison, the author concludes that the teachings of **Seyed Salman Safavi**, whose synthesis of Sufi spirituality and philosophical reasoning places mercy, unity, and self-transformation at the heart of moral life, and **Søren** Kierkegaard, whose insistence on subjective truth, faith, and the

courage of possibility restores dignity to the human spirit, together offer the most complete response to the confusion of modern times. The message is clear: philosophy's true purpose is not to win arguments but to heal the human spirit — to bring order, compassion, and meaning to a world adrift in chaos.
Keywords: Philosophy, Seyed Salman Safavi, Søren Kierkegaard, Modern philosophers, Wisdom, Morality, Justice.

Introduction

Philosophy, in its simplest sense, is the love of wisdom — but wisdom, as this essay suggests, is not merely knowing what is true; it is knowing *how to live*. From the ancient Greeks to today's global thinkers, philosophers have sought to answer the same enduring question: *How should we live well in the face of uncertainty, suffering, and change?*

This work begins with a look at several modern philosophers whose influence still shapes the moral and political conversations of our time — MacIntyre, West, Butler, Nussbaum, Chomsky, Singer, Appiah, and Žižek. Their ideas form a baseline for the world we now inhabit: one concerned with justice, identity, freedom, and truth. Against this background, the essay explores the thinking of earlier and diverse philosophers — Heschel's compassionate theology, al-Farabi's ideal city, Nietzsche's will to power, Kant's moral duty, Gibran's poetic humanism, Descartes's rational inquiry, Safavi's synthesis of Sufi spirituality and philosophical insight, and Kierkegaard's existential faith.

The purpose here is not to crown one as "greatest," but to discern whose philosophy best helps us live meaningfully amid the disorder of modern life. The essay's author approaches philosophy as a moral practice rather than an academic discipline — an art of discernment in a time of chaos. Through reflection and comparison, he finds that while every thinker offers a fragment of truth, two stand out as beacons: Seyed Salman Safavi, whose blend of Sufi mysticism and

philosophical clarity insists that mercy must outweigh justice and that true change begins within the self; and Søren Kierkegaard, whose exploration of anxiety, freedom, and faith reclaims the depth of human subjectivity.

The essay thus closes where it began — with the idea that philosophy is not about abstract systems but about living wisely. Its ultimate message is that the good life is found in the balance between mercy and justice, between the self and society, and that love, humility, and dialogue are the true measures of wisdom.

Keywords: Philosophy, Seyed Salman Safavi, Søren Kierkegaard, Modern philosophers, Wisdom, Morality, Justice.

Philosophies Shaping Our World Today

There are countless philosophers in the Western tradition alone. When you bring in the Arab and Persian, the Chinese and Indian, and others, you genuinely start to motor along. But here we will compare a few of the preeminent philosophers that influence major proportions of the world's population today. And who are the preeminent philosophers? Well, that is subjective. If you confined yourself to contemporary philosophers there are many eminent names. Here are just a few, a selection of modern philosophers as a baseline against which we can compare:

❖ Alasdair Macintyre (born in Scotland 1929) believes that politics should be a practice with internal goodness, but as it is practiced now the emphasis is on external goodness. Some win, others lose; there is no good achieved that is good for the whole community; cheating and exploitation are frequent, and this damages the community as a whole. His is a moral philosophy rooted in ancient Greek thought, emphasising the development of virtuous character traits rather than

focusing on specific outcomes. He suggests that a virtuous person, by possessing good character, is more likely to act morally.

❖ Cornel West (born in America 1953) describes himself as a "non-Marxist socialist" (because he does not view Marxism and Christianity as reconcilable). This black American once famously said, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." Effectively he believes that justice without mercy (justice as retribution) is not justice. West abhors all forms of chauvinism and xenophobia. He writes, "Afrocentrism, a contemporary species of black nationalism, is a gallant yet misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile . . . misguided because — out of fear of cultural hybridization and through silence on the issue of class . . . and a reluctance to link race to the common good — it reinforces the narrow discussions about race."

❖ Judith Butler (born in America 1956) is a feminist philosopher. She suggests that gender does not come from a rooted identity inside us, but that it only exists through our actions, and the actions of others in society towards us. "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed". Her concept of gender as a social construct, influenced third-wave feminists' understanding of gender and sexuality. First-wave feminism focused on securing women's right to vote and legal equality, while second-wave feminism expanded the focus to address broader issues of gender inequality, including social, cultural, and economic issues. The third wave emerged as a response to the perceived shortcomings of second-wave feminism, which was seen as focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women. Butler encourages women to embrace their individuality, sexuality, and personal choices, rejecting rigid gender roles. What we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity is an act, a performance, one that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality (rather than merely being the "fault" of and imposed by men).

❖ Martha Nussbaum (born in America 1947) who developed the capabilities approach to well-being, which asks “What is each person able to do and to be?” dependant on freedom, and opportunity. Here, "freedom" refers to the ability of a person to choose one life or another, and opportunity refers to social, political, and/or economic conditions that allow or disallow individual growth. Nussbaum asserts that all humans (and non-human animals) have a basic right to dignity.

❖ Noam Chomsky (born in America 1928) has a theory known as Universal Grammar, which posits that humans are born with an innate, universal capacity for language acquisition, including a pre-programmed understanding of basic grammatical structures, rather than solely learning language through environmental exposure. He does not regard Artificial Intelligence as a threat in quite the same way many do, stating, “As an AI, I am a machine learning model that has been trained on large amounts of text data, and I don't have personal experiences or feelings.” He also works in political activism, stating “If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all.” He believes that in democracies in which the compliance of citizens cannot be maintained by force, compliance requires propaganda. The establishment must make ordinary people believe that vesting control in the hands of a minority is to their benefit. This project involves enlisting the help of intellectuals such as journalists and academics who disseminate and interpret political information for the public. Noam Chomsky argues that this task has proved remarkably easy. Chomsky believes that it is the task of the responsible intellectual to provide ordinary people with the information they need to draw their own conclusions and to make their own decisions about political issues. Other philosophers bear the clear stamp of Chomsky’s influence. One such is Gene Sharp (1928 – 2018) whose ideas on nonviolent resistance have inspired generations of activists. His thoughts are based on the idea that there is a dichotomy of power, the leader and the subject, and the leader’s power is attained from the compliance of the subjects. By extracting this compliance - through non-violent resistance, civil action, strikes,

protests etc., the subjects can withdraw their power and therefore make change.

❖ Peter Singer (born in Australia 1946) argues that the right to life is tied to a being's capacity to hold preferences. Singer argues in favour of abortion rights on the grounds that foetuses are neither rational nor self-aware. “If a person does not have a desire to live that could be thwarted, killing her does not involve any wrongdoing”. Thus, for example, voluntary euthanasia should be legalized. Humans have an obligation to take whatever actions have the best outcomes overall, even if it means violating the rights of a smaller group. This would not just make it permissible for governments to kill one person to save many, it would make it obligatory. He is an atheist philosopher who has consistently demanded we humans respect the lives of nonhuman animals. Perhaps the world's most prominent philosopher of ethics, Singer argues that, as it has been shown that human beings evolved from other animals, any ideas we have about the superiority of human beings over non-human animals are misguided. Singer asserts that if all beings, not just humans, have interests that must be considered, then that principle opposes not only racism and sexism, but also speciesism. He does not therefore eat meat because of “the way that the meat industry causes an immense amount of animal suffering,” on the other hand he is not an absolute vegetarian, for example he says he has, “No objection to eating oysters – I don't think they can suffer – and oyster farming is quite an environmentally sustainable industry.”

❖ Quami Anthony Appiah (born in England 1954) is a philosopher of mixed Ghanaian / British heritage who argues that the notion of biological race is conceptually problematic and criticizes what he sees as the tendency to overstate the importance of race as a component of individual identity. Appiah describes cultural imperialism as something invoked by cultural preservationists that try to monopolize culture and impose their own upon others. People are not "blank slates" to be overwritten by Western culture. Appiah advocates Cosmopolitanism as a reasoned appeal for mutual respect

and understanding among the people of the world. The two extreme positions regarding the clash of cultures are integrationalism as practiced in France whereby there is an attempt to subsume all sub cultures into French culture – and multiculturalism as practiced in Britain whereby there is an attempt to allow different cultures to exit alongside each other as in single faith separate schooling for Muslims, Jews, Protestants and Catholics. The cosmopolitanism that Appiah advocates is no new idea. Cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412 B.C.), the founder of the Cynic movement in Ancient Greece. It was said that when Diogenes was asked where he came from, he answered: “I am a citizen of the world (kosmopolitês)”. Essentially, cosmopolitanism means respecting different cultures and indeed nurturing them to a degree not compatible with the French intergrationalist approach, without allowing them to become stumbling blocks to the pursuit of a society that places an equal value on everyone as might be the case in societies like the United Kingdom where schooling is often not integrated.

❖ Slavoj Žižek (born in Slovenia 1949) is the eccentric, populist Marxist philosopher who once said, “You can never get rid of me - All the ice in the world cannot kill a true idea”. He regards ideology as ideas writ large. Thus, ideology also has a material component, or something to support it like an organization, and it also comes to interact in our social world, where it starts to feel natural. For Žižek, ideology is our reality. He is somewhat cautious about mere existentialism which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will. "I would prefer not to," on the other hand, is an affirmation of a negation, an assertion of a non-predicate. This subtle distinction is essential to Žižek's theory of free choice. By saying "I would prefer not to," we are not simply refusing an option; we are creating a gap, a space for new possibilities to emerge. Though a militant atheist, he asserts that the universal love disavows that which is unlovable in human nature, and that love must in some sense be an autonomous decision (simply, that love cannot

be commanded). Žižek has, in passing, expressed his dislike of Nietzsche. Nietzsche challenges romantic conceptions of erotic love with the claim that love "may be the most ingenuous expression of egoism." Nietzsche proposes that love is close to greed and the lust for possession. Žižek believes love is a choice.

The above is no comprehensive or agreed list. It is subjective. There is no way to assess the world's most influential or preeminent philosophers unless you conducted a straw poll and asked people to vote. It is almost tempting to do just that, to ask people who in their view were the world's most inspirational philosophers. The top ten. But you would still produce a largely subjective list of the world's most preeminent philosophers. However the above do represent the breadth of thinking of modern preeminent philosophers. That being the case they are our baseline against which we measure others. Which others? The following is a selective list of preeminent philosophers of all time. Again, it is a subjective list. And again, it is no agreed list. But again, it does represent a list that indicates clearly the breadth of philosophical thinking through the ages. Of course, philosophical thinking is a broad house within which there are many mansions. Remember after all that the word philosophy, when translated from the source in the Greek language, means quite simply, friend to or lover of "wisdom". Here is our selected list of preeminent philosophers that we will analyse to illustrate the breadth of philosophical thinking of all time:

- Abraham Joshua Heschel
- Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi
- Friedrich Nietzsche
- Immanuel Kant
- Kahlil Gibran
- René Descartes
- Seyed Salman Safavi
- Søren Kierkegaard

And yes, personal inclination has coloured the above list. But yes also, it does unquestionably represent something of the breadth of thinking of philosophy through the ages. First we will look at each individually, then compare them to our baseline of contemporary philosophers. Then compare them to each other. Taking them one by one, before comparing them with our baseline and with each other, we start with Heschel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw in Poland and lived to the age of 65 from 1907 to 1972. He was a Jewish rabbi. Whereas theology is usually concerned with "the content of believing," Heschel is primarily concerned with the "act of believing." The starting point of Heschel's approach is his refusal to regard God as the object of human cognition. Speculation, therefore, is ruled out a priori. This is close to the Christian theological approach of a Deus absconditus or "hidden God"[1] which refers to the concept of the fundamental unknowability of the essence of God and was central to the belief of thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. Having said which, Heschel does have views as to the nature of God. Heschel puts forward as a central idea in his theology that the prophetic view of God is best understood not as anthropomorphic (that God takes human form) but as anthropopathic — that God has human feelings. Heschel is notable as a proponent of the "Nachmanidean" school of Jewish thought - emphasising the mutually dependent relationship between God and man[2] - as opposed to the "Maimonidean" school in which God is independent and unchangeable.[3] According to Heschel neither perspective should be adopted in isolation, but rather both are interwoven with the other.

Heschel places particular importance on the Sabbath, which he believes carries those that keep the Sabbath[4] beyond space, beyond civilization. He regards the Sabbath as the consummate symbol of faith, at least for the Jew. It is not a way out of the world but "a way of being within and above the world." It is a day of "rest" in the sense

of harmony and peace, peace between man and man, peace within man. Heschel strongly believes in the importance of time in human life, and he explains how the Sabbath helps people both to manage their time well and to improve the quality of their lives.

Heschel aimed, through his writing and teaching, to shock modern people out of complacency and into a spiritual dimension. He wrote, "Self-respect is the root of discipline: The sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself."

Heschel advocates the "religious imperative to unite human beings through justice, shared humanity, and mutual respect." He believed that no religious community could claim a monopoly on religious truth. He became a symbol of the marriage between religion and social justice. It was his social consciousness that led him to participate in and vocally and visibly support the civil rights movement and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

HESCHEL AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: In some respects, Heschel´s attitude to social justice mirrors that of Noam Chomsky. It is hard to speculate as to what Heschel might think of Israel´s current actions in Gaza, but his belief in shared humanity would sit uncomfortably with the ideology of Jewish exceptionalism that underpins the thinking of many of those in governance in Israel today and presumably, like his fellow Jew Chomsky, he would have been deeply disturbed and would have expressed that disquiet. In many respects Heschel shares the multiculturalist approach of Appiah. His philosophy in that respect mirrors the old Arab adage, "Live and let the other live", more commonly expressed in English as "Live and let Live". But there is also some resonance with the thinking of Žižek whose emphasis on free will as an autonomous choice is close to Heschel´s emphasis on the importance of the ability to say "no".

Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi

Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi[5] was born in Kazakhstan and lived to the age of 80 from c.870[6] to 950. He founded Islamic political philosophy. Al-Farabi expounded his philosophy in a book, *The Ideal City* (al-Farabi, 942) which he completed in Damascus, in the year 331 Hijri.

AL-FARABI ON SOCIETY: Al-Farabi was interested in founding a city which embodied the main principles on which his philosophy and vision was built: morality, happiness, and respect for the Creator of the universe. Al-Farabi fleshes out a model of this ideal city as an applied outworking of the principles which he describes as "gathering people together in the city with the intention of cooperating on the things which grant happiness", and states that it "resembles a healthy body in which all the organs cooperate to give the animal life and safeguard it".

In the section on the human need for fellowship, Al-Farabi talks of the importance of 'human gatherings' and of the human's innate need for his/her own people.

He speaks of a global government which deals out justice and produces happiness across the inhabited world. He later discusses the government of a nation, then the particular traits of a city with a just government ('city', here, is taken to merely mean a 'territory' within a nation).

Farabi looks forward not back. His thinking is a precursor of that of the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, who wrote centuries later that, "Life is a series of collisions with the future; it is not the sum of what we have been, but what we yearn to be. The type of human being we prefer reveals the contours of our heart."

AL-FARABI ON LEADERSHIP: Al-Farabi also sets out to determine the attributes that should be displayed by the leader of the ideal city. Here, he separates natural attributes from acquired ones. The natural attributes being:

A leader should be able bodied, have sound understanding, be a visionary, be astute, express himself well and love knowledge. The leader should not be greedy, should appreciate sincerity and sincere people, love honour and dignity, love justice and those who show it, and show animosity towards those responsible for injustice and oppression. The leader should act justly (and be persuadable when it comes to acting justly) and be unshakable when it comes to opposing oppression or unfairness. And importantly, this leader should be courageous.

As for the acquired attributes which Al-Farabi demands that the leader possess, he suggests:

The leader should be wise, knowledgeable and very resourceful. The leader should have a positive vision of the future and be able to lead and guide well and show steadfastness in his actions. Then, he adds to all these attributes a spiritual characteristic, namely that the leader should have an effective mind, or as he puts it: “This person is only complete if he becomes discerning and rational in deed.”

Al-Farabi then expands on the character of his leader in the context of his ideal city by saying, “This is how the ideal city should be: all its members should take their leader as their prime example in all that they do”. This means that the happiness of the city (based as it is on self-fulfilment and self-reliance), is dependent on the appointment of an exemplary leader. This leader becomes the ideal human, both discerning and supremely rational. Al-Farabi does not see this as in any way miraculous, he does not see it as unachievable but rather as completely doable, once human beings raise themselves to the level of an ‘effective mind’. Here Farabi’s thinking may be more aspirational that practical. He ignores the key problem that the Spanish political philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, was to highlight centuries later in his book “The Revolt of the Masses”, that of the tension between liberty and authority.

Al-Farabi’s city is thus a city built on a foundation of wisdom, knowledge, justice, reason and cooperation; it is a city which has

created its leader in its image. The city cherishes its values and expects its leader to embody these values and reflect them in his actions in daily life. The people then aspire to mirror their leader's actions in their daily life.

AL-FARABI ON WAR: Al-Farabi describes war as the greatest evil to afflict mankind. He was the first commentator to lay out the law of unequal growth. He said, "War was born in the spirit of acquisition and commerce". He considered war the by-product of a model of economic and social development between nations and not as stemming from an intrinsic instinct for evil in people's make-up. He did not see war as a seed buried in the human soul, as do many theorists of war.

Albert Camus, while looking at the pools of blood left behind by the Second World War said, "We used to wonder where war lived, what it was that made it so vile. And now we realize that we know where it lives . . . inside ourselves." This perhaps nihilist explanation relates acts of hostility and incidents of cruelty to the original constitution of the human soul itself and has been deeply embedded in Western thought since the 17th century. Many scholars have contributed to its acceptance beginning in the 17th century with the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who related the act of war to human nature, to the Dutch philosopher Spinoza who came to the conclusion that wars were the sure result of the victory of the forces of evil and impulsiveness over the forces of reason and logic in the depths of the human soul.

Saint Augustine stated that the tendency towards evil in the human soul could be held responsible for bloodshed. He accounts for evil by going back to the original sin of Adam before he left paradise, explaining that evil was then passed on to his descendants once he was expelled. Its religious context aside, this explanation agrees with what students of ethology – the study of animal behaviour - have begun to affirm, namely that aggression and the inclination to kill, whether at the individual or collective level, is an innate and inherited

inclination which comes from the survival instinct. This theory was then transferred to humankind where this inclination was seen as an instrument for the perpetuation of the species as it grew, developed and ascended.

If wars are caused by instinct or a natural predisposition and can be explained in this way, the eradication of war would mean the eradication of a facet of human nature; a task which enters the realm of the impossible. Equally, this notion does not provide an explanation of peace which is a basic human need.

The search for a mechanism to prevent the outbreak of wars has always been a pressing issue. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was author of the Social Contract, which provided the basis for the alliance between states with the aim of renouncing war. And the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant who, taking up the ideas of Rousseau, presented a theoretical vision based on the idea that people form a single family for whom reason is the law and morality the constitution.

However, Al-Farabi's work remains the most developed and conclusive explanation of war in terms of the events and economic and social changes that surround and prompt it. Al-Farabi did not trace war back to a dark side of the human soul. He linked the phenomenon of war and the use of armed force with what he called 'the spirit of acquisition'.

Farabi believed that people are intrinsically good. God grant that he is right and that the rationalists, Albert Camus, Thomas Hobbes, Spinoza, Saint Augustine and the rest, are utterly and completely wrong, and that we are not mere predictable animals.

FARABI AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: Farabi´s emphasis on global government with a "gathering together" of people in a common purpose of greater happiness smacks more of utilitarianism rather than the cosmopolitanism advocated by the likes of Appiah. The problem with utilitarianism is that it may arguably work well on

a global scale it is less successful at Farabi´s city state level where consequences can include the demeaning of the other, the outsider, as per for example, the self-serving nature of the parochial utilitarianism practiced by Israel and the consequences for their brothers the Palestinians. That said, Farabi´s thought, despite possible shortcomings, does respect the autonomy of the individual that Žižek advocates. The problem with Farbi in practice is that it could result in the kind of cultural imperialism that can happen with utilitarianism where the greater good overwrites the individual need or choice. Furthermore Farabi´s emphasis on the leadership leaves little space for the dichotomy of power that underpins Chomsky´s school of political thought. What Farabi advocates is arguably in essence a kind of elected benign dictatorship, which is all well and good if it works out. One could say on the evidence of the poor standard of current world government, that democracy as practiced in a country like the United States of America is little better than benign dictatorship as practiced in a country like the Sultanate of Oman (and arguably worse). But who is to guarantee that dictatorship is benign? Evidently, quite often it is not. Farabi´s ideal leader is of course ideal and indeed wonderful. A great outcome if you can get it. That is not to say that the template is unworthy. Leaders could and should aspire to be the kind of people Farabi says they should be, that is for sure. There is clearly something of Nussbaum in Farabi with the shared emphasis of Nussbaum and Farabi on a right to human dignity. Certainly Alasdair Macintyre´s emphasis on virtuous character traits has much of Farabi about it. And Cornel West´s emphasis on non-Marxist socialism really does bear the stamp of Farabi. However, where Farbi is particularly ahead of his time in his description of war as the greatest evil to affect mankind. Chomsky and indeed Singer (with his emphasis on the sanctity of life) have something of the imprint of Farabi. Many modern leaders would do well to consider well what Farabi has to say on this subject.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (15 October 1844 – 25 August 1900) was a German philologist, philosopher, poet and composer. He is best known for his three-word remark, “God is dead”.

Nietzsche’s main philosophy centres on the idea of affirming life in the face of nihilism, nihilism being a belief that life lacks inherent meaning or purpose.[7] He emphasized the individual’s capacity to create their own values and live authentically, rejecting traditional moral frameworks and the notion of absolute truth.

NIHILISM AND THE DEATH OF GOD: Nietzsche believed that the decline of religious faith, what he called the death of God, led to a crisis of meaning and purpose in the world. He saw nihilism (the belief that all values are baseless) as a consequence of the loss of traditional moral frameworks. Nietzsche believed that God becomes meaningless because ethical codes can still have force without a theistic justification. Though in essence a believer in free will, Nietzsche rejects the traditional notion of free will because it typically functions to instil guilt, thereby fostering a passive attitude to the world (the rule of the “Thou shall nots”).

WILL TO POWER: Nietzsche posited that a fundamental driving force in the universe is the will to power, which encompasses the drive for growth, self-overcoming, and the assertion of one’s own values. He argued that there is no objective truth, and all knowledge is shaped by individual perspectives and interpretations. Nietzsche rejected the idea of universal moral truths, arguing that morality is a social construct and that different cultures and individuals have different values. Nietzsche's scepticism toward the Christ of the Gospels stemmed precisely from the fact that he knew the portrayal of Jesus as powerful through love, sacrifice, and righteousness fundamentally contradicted his ideal of power, which is expressed through transcending personal limitations. Nietzsche suggests that the will is central to man’s existence: without it we would die.

ÜBERMENSCH (OVERMAN): Nietzsche advocated a future where individuals overcome the limitations of traditional morality and

embrace their own creative potential. The Übermensch is a figure who embraces life in all its complexities, including its suffering and challenges. Nietzsche emphasized the importance of finding beauty and meaning in the world, even in the face of suffering and tragedy. He believed that individuals should strive to make their lives a work of art. Nietzsche believed that the world is full of suffering and that it lacks any overall purpose or meaning. However, he thought that our ability to deal with this suffering, to endure hardships and overcome them, is an important and valuable exercise of our power and character. Traditional values are, according to Nietzsche, "ascetic" or "life-denying". They involve a devaluation of those parts of human existence, such as struggle, suffering, hardship, and overcoming, that are capable of giving rise to greatness. Indeed, he even believed that suffering is necessary to achieve greatness rather than something to be avoided.

Nietzsche argues that there are two fundamental types of morality: master morality and slave morality. In master morality, "good" is synonymous with nobility and everything powerful and life-affirming.

In slave morality, the meaning of "good" is the antithesis of everything powerful, which itself is relabelled "evil". This inversion of values develops out of the ressentiment[8] the weak feel toward the powerful.

NIETZSCHE AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: How different Nietzsche is. He represents an alternative approach to dealing with suffering. A sort of refreshing defiance. In a sense Nietzsche is close to Žižek. They are both life affirming atheists. But then they take very different paths.

With Žižek the emphasis is on overcoming through love. With Nietzsche the emphasis is on overcoming through power. Were he to think of it, Nietzsche would no doubt agree with Appiah and Butler regarding the tendency to overstate the importance of race. But would he care about ideologies like cosmopolitanism based on the wellbeing

of all? Yes arguably Nietzsche believes in universal wellbeing, but wellbeing through overcoming suffering through assertiveness. Singer is similarly an atheist philosopher who also believes in some degree in carving out your own path. But for Singer it is a path that respects the right to life of the other. For Singer respecting the other, even the nonhuman animal, is of the utmost importance. For Nietzsche that would be fine if that was your thing and it empowered you, if it was your own moral choice. But it is your choice. It is not a question of what you should do, but rather what you would do. He wouldn´t care, as does Nussbaum, about the other´s right to dignity.

Nietzsche would care about your own right to dignity. The difference being that for Nietzsche it is all about "me". Nietzsche would therefore accept and endorse the assertive feminism of Butler whilst denying the socialism of West or the collective freedoms argued for by Chomsky. Nietzsche has a sort of carpe diem approach. On the other hand, Macintyre´s emphasis on good character traits at a personal level would be something Nietzsche might respect. For Nietzsche as for Macintyre, you carve your own path. But for Nietzsche the overcoming is done through power, not necessarily "goodness" (unless "goodness" happens to be "your bag").

In a sense Nietzsche´s approach is very tribal. You look after you and yours, victory through strength, defiant strength in a cruel world. It is a "batten down the hatches" philosophy for tough times. But it would be a rough, tough, macho world if everyone adhered to it. Still, it is tempting. There is many a leader, many a politician, who might not avow Nietzsche but who take his path. Machiavelli would in a sense be Nietzsche translated into a political philosophy. And yes a world based on Machiavelli´s ruthlessness might be a better world because Nietzsche and Machiavelli both believe, I would argue, in ruthlessness with purpose, whereas what we see in the world today is arguably political ruthlessness that promotes wellbeing for nobody, not even the perpetrator, merely chaos. The world´s ruthlessness is that of the schoolyard bully. And such pointless machismo is not something that even Nietzsche would advocate.

Immanuel Kant

Born in Königsberg, Germany, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is one of the central figures in modern philosophy. Kant emphasised what he called “transcendental idealism,” a distinction between what we can experience (the natural, observable world) and what we cannot (“supersensible” objects such as God and the soul). Kant argued that we can only have knowledge of things we can experience. However Immanuel Kant believed in God, a God who is omnipotent and exists outside our experience. Kant argued that belief in God and the afterlife are presuppositions of moral thought, not just assumptions but necessary for understanding morality.

Kant believed actions should be judged according to whether they adhere to a valid rule rather than the outcome of the action. Thus Kant believed in duty and obligation, judging the morality of an action based on whether it adheres to a set of rules or principles, regardless of the consequences. In Kant's view, the sole feature that gives an action moral worth is not the outcome that is achieved by the action, but the motive that is behind the action. Thus for example he claims that lying is always wrong, no matter what. Kant’s approach can be problematic, most obviously because it is human nature to consider the consequences before acting.

Kant believed what makes humans moral beings is the fact that we are free and rational creatures. To treat someone as a means to your own ends is to not respect this fact about them. Thus for example to give a girl candy could be a good thing to do but to give a girl candy in order to have sex would be bad. Without human freedom, thought Kant, moral appraisal and moral responsibility would be impossible. Kant believes that if a person could not act otherwise, then his or her act can have no moral worth. Kant emphasises respecting the inherent dignity of all rational beings. In essence, Kant advocated what is

often called the Golden Rule which is "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But Kant believed that the Golden Rule had to be applied universally, for example over-indulgence was fundamentally the act of being immoral to oneself. The harm it did to others was merely collateral damage. In his theory of virtue Kant maintained that proper self-respect requires one to avoid drunkenness, gluttony, and servility and that respect for others is incompatible with arrogance, defamation, and ridicule. He also held that respect, together with love, is an essential element in friendship.

KANT AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: There are some who live life in the manner advocated by Kant. I have encountered many in the adherents of Moral Rearmament, an ideology my late father flirted with at one point in his life, as have I. It can be a brutalist approach involving the superficial cruelty of what the adherents of MRA call the four absolutes, Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Selflessness, and Absolute Love. The most difficult, in practice, is Absolute Honesty which leaves a lot of raw wounds in its wake. The most obvious instance in my experience being that of a close female friend of mine who had a brief affair in the course of an otherwise faithful and loving marriage and insisted on telling her husband. Her marriage, astonishingly, survived. Mine in similar circumstances would not have. Here in my view lies the paradox in Kant. Absolute Selflessness in a Sermon on the Mount type of worldview, clashes with Absolute Honesty. Honesty can be very selfish sometimes. Are there modern philosophers cut from the same cloth as Kant? Well yes, in some degree. Macintyre has much of Kant about him, with his ruthless approach to personal purity of action in the political sphere. It would be refreshing to find modern politicians with Kant´s approach. Or would it? We have seen some of the brutality of this approach with the #MeToo movement, a global campaign against sexual violence which has done a lot of good but has also left a lot of victims in its wake as false and exaggerated allegations victimise too as no stone is left unturned. Perhaps Chomsky could be said to be cast in the same mould as Kant, at least in regard to his ruthlessness with himself. As a Jew outspokenly critical of the actions of the State

of Israel, he pays a price for his Absolute Honesty. Žižek´s idea that love must be an autonomous decision also has something of Kant about it. Žižek is of course an atheist and therefore distinctly different in approach from Kant. But his emphasis on choice is very close to that of Kant. Even Butler, the feminist philosopher, has a measure of Kant about her when she insists that your sexuality is your choice. When all said and done, Kant is refreshing; but refreshing at a price.

Khalil Gibran

Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), usually referred to in English as Kahlil Gibran, was a Lebanese Christian artist, writer and poet born in the town of Bsharri, in the far north of Lebanon, who spent most of his latter years in America where he died young aged 48. He is also considered a philosopher, although he himself rejected the title.

He believed in a world without frontiers in which love and respect for the other were prerequisites which demanded surrender without reservation. He also believes strongly in living in the moment. "Yesterday is but today´s memory, and tomorrow is today´s dream," he once said. He also stated, "Your daily life is your temple and your religion."

Although brought up as a Maronite Christian, Gibran, as an Arab, was influenced not only by his own religion but also by Islam, and especially by the mysticism of the Sufis. In 1923, Knopf published *The Prophet*, which would become Gibran's most famous work, (Gibran, 1926). Though not met with critical praise or early success — the book was never reviewed by the New York Times, for example, and sold only twelve hundred copies in its first year — the book became a phenomenon.

This exquisitely beautiful book is reminiscent in some ways of the work of the great poet philosopher, Rumi,[9] and echoes his approach to love which suggests that our task is not to seek for love, but merely

to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. Every page of “The Prophet” is inspirational, for instance on love Gibran says, “Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself. Love possesses not nor would it be possessed; For love is sufficient unto love. And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course. Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself.” In essence, Gibran encourages humility and trust in the natural unfolding of love, rather than trying to force or control its path.

Gibran advocates a sort of carpe diem approach to life, and was noted for his many aphorisms such as:

- Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don´t matter and those who matter don´t mind.
- No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.
- Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.
- You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Much like Rumi, Gibran´s philosophy revolves around the concept of spiritual awakening and the realization of our true nature. He encouraged individuals to seek union with the divine and transcend the limitations of the ego.

GIBRAN AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: Neither Gibran himself, nor indeed most philosophers, would call Gibran a philosopher. And yet were Gibran not a philosopher, is Rumi then a philosopher? Where do you draw the line? Gibran´s thinking has had more influence in the Western World than any single individual philosopher in history. He set out to write “one book that would change the world” and he succeeded with the publication of “The Prophet”. In that sense at least he stands head and shoulders above other contemporary philosophers. With an estimated sale of more than eleven million copies it is far from the best-selling book of all time. The honours there go to authors like J.K. Rowling and Tolkien.

But the Prophet is undoubtedly the bestselling quasi-philosophical work of all time. Like Macintyre, Gibran emphasises the importance of personal virtue. But unlike Kant, he cares profoundly about outcomes. He has something of Cornel West´s approach to universal love that does not differentiate between colour or creed. Perhaps that is the Sufi influence on Gibran´s thinking, and perhaps in part a reaction to his upbringing in ultra sectarian Lebanon. Like Nussbaum, Gibran emphasises the personal right of the other to dignity, and the need for a "space between" you and the other you love, whether that be your child or your partner. He is very much a universalist with his belief in a world without frontiers, and had he lived in more recent times he would undoubtedly have endorsed Appiah´s form of cosmopolitanism. Like Žižek, for Gibran love is a choice. But for Gibran love involves total sacrifice when that love is for a partner of the opposite sex or for God. Gibran´s work, much like Rumi´s, is a celebration of love. Perhaps his influence is waning now. We now live in what the singer Madonna calls a "material world". But for the post war baby boomer generation, his influence was immense.

René Descartes

René Descartes (1596 – 1650) was a 17th century French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician. He advocated the concept of mind-body dualism: the belief that the immaterial mind and the physical body are two entirely distinct entities made of contrasting substances. His last words are supposed to have been "Ca, mon am, il faut partir" (so, my soul, it is time to part). Descartes considered the body and the soul to be ontologically separate but interacting entities, each with its own particular attributes. Only the body can actually die, the soul cannot stop existing. Descartes is famous for his statement, "Cogito Ergo Sum", or "I think, therefore I am." The statement implies that while other knowledge could be a figment of imagination, deception, or mistake, the very act of doubting one's

own existence served as proof of the reality of one's own mind; there must be a thinking entity (or self) for there to be thought.

Descartes's philosophical exploration of God´s existence was intertwined with his work on the nature of mind and body, ultimately leading him to the conclusion that God is distinct from humans and that the human soul is separate from the body. The soul, or mind (res cogitans), is defined by its ability to think, be conscious, and possess understanding. The body (res extensa) is a physical, material entity, and Descartes believed that the soul and body are separate but interact. Descartes recognises three innate ideas: the idea of (infinite) God, the idea of (finite) mind, and the idea of (indefinite) body. Descartes believed that once we accept the concept of a perfect God, we are unable to rationally deny the existence of that entity. He separated the mind (finite) from the will (infinite). He believed that the will is seemingly infinite in its capacity to choose, while the intellect is finite in its ability to comprehend. This difference is a source of error, as the will can choose to judge things that are not clearly and distinctly understood.

Descartes' view on free will is often described as compatibilist, meaning he believed that freedom is compatible with determinism. He maintained that even when the will is influenced by external causes, it still retains the capacity to choose. However, Descartes proceeds to talk about how in order to truly be free, one must do his best to resist deception and know what can truly be known.

Descartes advocated a provisional moral code to live by while rethinking his views:

1. to obey the rules and customs of his country and his religion and never take an extreme opinion;
2. to be decisive and stick with his decisions, even if some doubts linger;
3. to try to change himself, not the world.

Descartes uses the apple analogy to represent the human mind´s collection of beliefs, which he claims are similar to the apples in a basket. Just as a person might worry about rotten apples contaminating the entire batch, Descartes believes it is crucial to examine all beliefs for potential flaws or falsehoods. He had four rules for thinking:

1. accept nothing as true that is not self-evident,
2. divide problems into their simplest parts,
3. solve problems by proceeding from simple to complex, and
4. recheck the reasoning.

He did this through a process where he systematically questioned all his beliefs, including those based on senses, reason, and even divine knowledge. This doubt was not meant to leave him in complete scepticism, but rather to clear the way for a rigorous examination of the truth, aiming to find indubitable truths upon which to build a robust belief system.

DESCARTES AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: Descartes view that in order to truly be free, you must do your best to resist deception and know what can truly be known, brings to mind the very similar view of Chomsky who believes that it is the task of the responsible intellectual to provide ordinary people with the information they need to draw their own conclusions and to make their own decisions about political issues. In this as in many ways, Descartes is refreshing. He addresses the existential issue of the soul or mind of man in a way few modern philosophers do. Whether he is correct is less important than the fact that he helps us to think about this important issue in an intellectually challenging way rather than just a blind, “I believe” or “I don´t believe”. Descartes’ emphasis on trying to change yourself rather than change the world is a little reminiscent of Macintyre´s emphasis on virtuous character traits without great concern about outcome. This could be dangerously close to Nietzsche. Nusbaum is more attractive if you are a believer that consequences matter. But Descartes emphasis on free thinking and a rigorous examination of

the truth is healthy. Like Žižek, Descartes views are life affirming in this regard. But his essential question is one he really leaves unanswered and is bound up in the phrase, “Cogito ergo sum”. So you think therefore you are – but what are you? Descartes views you as a being with functions such as “volition, cognition, memory, imagination, and reason.” The Australian philosopher Singer might regard you as being no more or less important than other life forms. But Descartes seems to give a certain pre-eminence to the self. For Descartes, much like the feminist Judith Butler, you are what you choose to be. Descartes was a man in search of indubitable truths. His mission in life was to build a robust belief system. He may not have completed the task but he has given us the tools to attempt to do the same ourselves.

Seyed Salman Safavi

Ayatollah Seyed Salman Safavi (born in Isfahan in 1959) is an Islamic scholar and professor of philosophy. and head of the Safavid order of Sufi Islam. The Safavid order was founded by Safi al-Din Ardabili (1252-1334), a Sufi mystic. The Safavids, known for their spiritual charisma and piety, gained significant influence in Ardabil, Iran, which eventually led to the establishment of the Safavid dynasty.

Seyed Salman Safavi’s thinking is much influenced by the intellectual approach of Mulla Sadra (1571 – 1635) and the spiritual approach of the poet philosopher Rumi (1207 – 1273).

❖ Mulla Sadra believed that existence is the one and only reality. Existence and reality are therefore identical. Existence is the all-comprehensive reality and therefore cannot be denied. Therefore, existence cannot be negated. As Existence cannot be negated, it is self-evident that Existence is God. God should not be searched for in the realm of existence but is the basis of all existence. There are

consequences to this approach including that all of creation is alive and that it is within God that we live and move and have our being.
❖ Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī once said, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." According to Rumi, true wisdom and enlightenment come from within. He emphasised the importance of self-reflection, self-awareness, and the transformation of one's inner being. Rumi's teachings on inner transformation highlight the need to let go of attachments, ego-driven desires, and negative emotions.

Safavi once summarised his worldview thus:[10]

There are three questions:

- Where do we come from?
- Why are we here?
- Where are we going?

Why is there existence rather than not existing?

We all belong to God and we will return him. Our origin is from Allah. There is no nationality, no religion, in our beginning, no man and woman, no poor and rich. And there is now a pain of separation. All of us have this pain. A pain of separation between creation and creator. However, everything starts with mercy and kindness. The major manifestation of Allah is mercy and kindness to humankind.

Ask yourself "Who am I?" at the end of the day when you go to bed. Take away your mask and look at yourself. And first and foremost at that time, worship God alone. Worship is a mix of knowledge and love. You may worship:

- God
- Nature
- Society
- Yourself

You may not worship Power or Money or Reputation.

Always seek justice. There is a beginning to life but there is no end. The consequences of our behaviour will always be with us. Exchange the life you have for one based on valuing God and that will give you an eternal positive life.

Always be better today than you were yesterday. If you behave arrogantly then punish yourself before God punishes you. If you show off today then tomorrow be silent.

All should have a positive role. God owns all wealth. There is just one solution to the world's problems and it is dialogue. War is not the solution. It is the problem. The solution is just dialogue based on accepting the difference between you and I.

I must change myself if I wish to change the world. When you become a Sufi, you have a light within and wherever you go, you deliver that light. Practice will affect purpose. Practice makes perfect.

SAFAVI ON TOLERANCE: Safavi emphasises the need for tolerance, particularly since the emergence of extremely intolerant groups on the scene in the Middle East. He claims that today, Sufi orders[11] are the most important barrier against religious fundamentalism, such as Daesh, the Taliban and Al-Qaida. Safavi notably suggests, "The world today is dark because we do not practice tolerance. For a better world, we must practice tolerance individually and socially. Tolerance means treating people well beyond their religion, culture and nationality."[12]

SAFAVI ON MERCY AND JUSTICE: Safavi's perspective on forgiveness and kindness is that mercy is the cure for today's world plagued with violence, divisions, oppression, and cruelty. And, if there is a conflict between justice and kindness, Safavi believes that forgiveness and benevolence (Ihsan) should take preference over justice. Ihsan, benevolence, is a socially selfless good deed that a person does which is more than his duty and that means that he receives less than what

is his right. Ishan is higher than ordinary goodness and somewhat higher than justice. However, rather sadly, Safavi does not believe such principles can easily be extended to governance even though they hold true at the personal level. "As individuals perhaps we can learn something from the Sufi teachings and bring mercy and kindness to the forefront of our minds and use these values. However, state governments and big corporations use justice to gain power and control over others and forgiveness and kindness will get them nowhere. If forgiveness and kindness were used by all governments and corporations, then peace could prevail above all, but in today's world you must be ruthless to protect yourself and to gain power and control."[13]

SAFAVI ON PRAYER: Safavi defines prayer as one of the ways of spiritual interaction with God. He claims that: "Prayer is a means to return an expression of love to God. Prayer is the essence of worship. Prayer means: God, I love you. Prayer means that you are not alone. Prayer means God's door is open to everybody. Prayer means God hears your voice. Prayer means that God has given permission to you to talk to Him. Prayer means that when all doors are closed to you, God's door is open to you. Prayer means the spiritual connection of you to God. God hears the voice of the supplicant. True prayer is based on knowledge, love, purity, supplication, and a desire to be close to God. "Prayer" in the mystical view is beautiful, but is not result-oriented. "Prayer" has intrinsic value. The beauty of "prayer" is manifested when it does not revolve around results. The success of prayer is the result of loving care and attention."

Safavi states that prayer can correct many of the world's ills. "The motivation for prayer is the love of God. In prayer, God is asked to correct both personal and social issues." Safavi emphasises the importance of praying for the reform of moral, spiritual and social affairs of all the people of the world. "Prayer is not just words, but prayer with behaviour gets more attention from God. Prayer is the attention of the heart to God. Prayer is the way to communicate with God. Prayer is the way to save man from loneliness. Prayer reduces

anxiety and depression. Prayer is hopeful. In today's world, which is full of injustice, war and oppression, Prayer is a way to give hope to oppressed people today. God is the protector of the innocent. The oppressive power of the oppressors is victorious in the short term, but they fail in the long run of history, and they are the losers in this world and the next world."[14]

SAFAVI ON GLOBAL PEACE AND SECURITY: Safavi states that in the age of the global village and the explosion of information, it is not possible to impose a culture and a way of life on all human beings, so instead of trying in vain to Americanize the whole world, we should move towards accepting the diversity of cultures and accepting its logical consequences, "Peaceful coexistence is a value and a goal."

On a global scale, efforts to create justice, equality, peace, security, and development are examples of "goodness". Whilst Safavi believes that by contrast any kind of cooperation that leads to corruption, depravity, and oppression must be avoided.

"Human beings are like one family, and all are equal in the principle of human dignity and dignity, without any discrimination in terms of race, colour, language, sex, religious beliefs, political affiliation, social status. No one is superior to the other, except in piety and charity. Excellence in piety, good deeds, and knowledge is not a license to infringe on the rights of other human beings. The individual and society have rights and duties." In the relationship between the rights of the individual and society, the principle of "no harm and no harm" prevails.

Government does not have the right, "To infringe on the inherent and fundamental rights of human beings. Government should be for the development of human beings, not for the violation of their rights. The laws of governments and international forums should not conflict with the inherent rights of human beings. Such laws have no religious and legal validity and human beings have the right to ignore them. Man is a citizen of God's city in the first place, so governments do

not have the right to enact laws that contradict divine values. Men and women are equal in human dignity and have an independent civil and financial personality."[15]

SAFAVI ON DEATH: One of the more interesting aspects of Safavi´s teaching is his teaching on death. To quote directly from a commentary on one of his lectures on the subject:[16] "There is no binary concept of heaven and hell as a consequence of external judgement. We ourselves create heaven and we create hell and our actions and behaviour in this world will echo into the next level or manifestation of our being.

"For Sufis there are four relationships that must be fully lived and fully nurtured prior to our death. These relationships are to the self, to society, to nature and to the sacred super-nature that has different names in different traditions but in Islam is Allah. Sufism teaches that we need to have a just and constructive relationship with all four of these components of our earthly existence. So there is a very deep connection between how we live before we die and how we will live after it.

"The most important of these relationships is that to society. If our relationship to our society is built on justice and goodness then the next level of being will reflect this. If we behave unjustly to our society or to people, whoever we are - politician, businesswoman or man, man of religion – this will equally rebound on us. What we are creating in our lives is the heaven or the hell of our own actions, and this conduct determines our pain or our comfort as we transcend from our earthly being to the next manifestation. Our action determines our being – its beauty or its ugliness – and remains with us. The deep connection between this life and the next is held within a fundamental understanding of the unity of existence from which thousands of manifestations emerge. Each human life is a manifestation of the divine unity rather than separated from it, and this can enable us to shape our identity and to choose to live according to that unity of self, society, nature and the divine. In the sense that all are manifestations

of the one, there are no divisions in the abundant diversity of humanity - none is above another - and our conduct towards others should embody this fact.

“In the manifestations of existence, the lowest state is that of the material world. This material world is a temporary state and the Sufi understanding is that is not ‘real’ but simply the manifestation of which we are aware and which we therefore believe is real. Believing it is not only real but absolute can degrade the individual into believing that reality is the exercise of his own dominion manifested in material accumulation and dominance. In this understanding, war is an inevitable consequence of the imagination asserting that individual reality and its corporeal existence is primary and real. Without an understanding and acceptance that it is actually the lowest state of being, humans cannot be free from time and space and will thus perpetuate the darkness of their own time and space.”

SAFAVI AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: Though Safavi and Žižek differ profoundly in so much as one is a believer and the other an atheist, they both emphasise the importance of love as an autonomous choice. Safavi´s teaching shares much with that of Cornel West. They both emphasise the pre-eminence of mercy over justice and the need to regard all people, regardless of race or creed or gender, as of equal value. Safavi also echoes Appiah´s cosmopolitanism in his emphasis on the need to regard humanity as one family within which you should not impose one culture on another. Safavi does not share Singer´s utilitarianism, nor his vegetarianism, nor his atheism. But he does share his sense of the unity of all life and places a similar emphasis on the importance of respecting all life. There is much of Chomsky in Safavi´s teaching in so much as they share a cynicism about governments and their pursuit of power. Safavi shares little with Butler and Nusbaum however. That said, like Butler, he regards men and women as equal in every regard and he shares Nusbaum´s respect for all, though not perhaps her view that choice is “constrained” by opportunity. For Safavi you are responsible for your own destiny. The buck stops with you. There is a touch of Macintyre

in Safavi´s emphasis on the idea that to change the world you must change yourself. But for Safavi there is an emphasis on outcomes that perhaps Macintyre lacks. Safavi places a prime importance on the relationship between the individual and society in a way in which, arguably, some modern philosophers do not.

Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) was a Danish theologian, poet and philosopher who was the first existentialist philosopher. Kierkegaard argues that the human self is a composition of various aspects that must be brought into conscious balance: the finite, the infinite, a consciousness of the "relationship of the two to itself," (i.e. the relationship of the finite and infinite respectively to the self) and a consciousness of "the power that posited" the self (i.e. God). For Søren Kierkegaard, free will is a profound and complex concept, not merely the ability to choose between options but the capacity to make ethical and moral decisions, often involving a "leap of faith" beyond reason. He emphasised the importance of anxiety as a compelling factor in this process, highlighting the dizziness of freedom when facing the possibilities of choice. Kierkegaard said "the things we fear the most have already happened to us", pointing to the anticipatory thoughts that create unfounded fear in our life (anxiety) and the catastrophic thinking that tends towards a shrinking world defined by our own need for a comfort zone. We have already survived much of what we fear. Kierkegaard believed that anxiety and despair were essential to the human experience. He asserted that human beings must make choices based on free will despite their anxiety. For Kierkegaard, true individuality is called selfhood. Becoming aware of our true self is our true task and endeavour in life and an ethical imperative, as well as preparatory to a true religious understanding. Individuals can exist at a level that is less than true selfhood.

Kierkegaard places emphasis on individual existence as a constant process of becoming and further emphasis on the associated concepts of authenticity, commitment, responsibility, anxiety, and dread. Kierkegaard emphasises the concept of “subjective and objective truths”. Kierkegaard believes that the task of becoming a self requires “inwardness” or “subjectivity”, and that merely amassing objective knowledge or taking a detached perspective on intellectual questions by itself leads one away from selfhood.

Kierkegaard saw Christianity not as a set of doctrines, but as a way of life. He emphasised individual responsibility and the importance of faith in one´s relationship with God. He believed in a transcendent God. Kierkegaard argued that a divine command from God transcends ethics. This means that God does not create human morality, that it is up to individuals to create morals and values. A religious person must be prepared for a command from God that would take precedence over all moral and even rational obligations. Kierkegaard himself clearly believed in a life after death but he staunchly refused to describe it or allow it to become a source of wish fulfilment. Indeed, Kierkegaard reminds us that in ordinary human terms death is the only finality. and certainty, an uncertain certainty because it can strike us down at any time. The dead return to dust, to nothing, their efforts to leave any lasting form of immortality of name behind them are frustrated by the hand of time.

He once said, “If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility!”

The most common criticism of Kierkegaard is that he is an irrationalist, i.e. that he denies that reality (truth) is objectively true and operates according to rational principles. Many find comfort in Kierkegaard´s most famous, though slightly cryptic, quote: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

KIERKEGAARD AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: Kierkegaard would no doubt have endorsed Žižek´s theory of free choice were he alive today. Žižek believes by saying "I would prefer not to," we are not simply refusing an option; we are creating a space for new possibilities to emerge. And Kierkegaard cherished new possibility as the optimum potential outcome of choice. But Kierkegaard is no Macintyre. Whereas Macintyre seems to believe in a set of perfect virtues in the classic sense, Kierkegaard leaves it up to you to define your moral path. But he is no Nietzsche either and would undoubtedly have endorsed Appiah´s multiculturalism but would have regarded it as an objective truth and in some way therefore less important than the subjective truth of your personal attitude to issues like race. Indeed Cornel West is closer to Kierkegaard in this respect. Kierkegaard clearly shares a respect for life with thinkers like Singer but he does not share Singer´s utilitarianism. For Kierkegaard, you make your values, you stand by them, unless God cuts in and tells you different. As for the female philosophers, Kierkegaard would not have had much time for Nussbaum´s view that choice is constrained by opportunity. He might regard it as an objective truth but he would see no justification for allowing it to constrain subjective action. He might have liked Butler though. Her view of sexuality is subjective and therefore fits with Kierkegaard´s approach though he might not share her opinions. One contemporary philosopher that Kierkegaard would undoubtedly have liked is Noam Chomsky. At face value Chomsky and Kierkegaard represent opposite ends of the pole. Chomsky is concerned with what society is doing, Kierkegaard is concerned with what the individual is doing. But look closer. What Chomsky cares about is that you examine the facts, yes, but that you then stand up for your subjective belief. Chomsky is all about personal freedom of choice and enabling the opportunity for choice in others. Kierkegaard would have liked him.

Conclusion

If this were an exercise in comparative philosophy, we would now be examining these different philosophical traditions from diverse cultures and societies. We would aim to identify similarities, differences, and cross-cultural influences, fostering a deeper understanding of global philosophical discourse. But it is not.

Rather this is an exercise in extracting or finding the best path, the most helpful philosophical approach, for a student or disciple who lives in today´s challenging world, a world in which many are profoundly disturbed by the prevalence of chaos, both in politics and in personal morality. To do so assumptions must be made and this must be done unashamedly or any such exercise is futile.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662) put forward the argument, often referred to as Pascal's Wager, that suggests that it is rationally advantageous to believe in God, even if there is no certainty of God's existence, because the potential rewards of belief outweigh the potential losses. This then is our first assumption.

Our second assumption is radical and it is not one to which the reader may personally subscribe. It is that Noam Chomsky is correct. Here we are not talking about his theory that language acquisition is largely an innate process. We are talking about his assumption that compliance requires propaganda. The establishment must make ordinary people believe that vesting control in the hands of a minority is to their benefit. This project involves the exploitation of a dichotomy of power between the leader and the subject, and the leader’s power is attained from the compliance of the subjects. We are assuming that in today´s world chaos prevails which fosters an environment in which the dichotomy of power is abused by the establishment. Hence for example, collateral damage in war is accepted in an almost unprecedented degree on the basis of utilitarianism. The second assumption is that we seek order rather than chaos.

The third assumption is a major one, and an assumption to which many of the wounded and vulnerable may not wish to subscribe. It is

the assumption that mercy is more important than justice. It is the assumption, therefore, that love and kindness have prime importance.

So what we seek is a philosophical approach that enables us to deal best with a worldview based on our three assumptions.

The perspective of Khalil Gibran is of course beautiful but it is not comprehensive enough to deal with the complexity of the bric bats thrown at us in today´s world. Perhaps you do not want complexity. Perhaps simplicity and sacrifice are what you seek. Then Gibran may be for you. But it means that you must retreat from the threshing floor and step aside from today´s brutal world.

Then we have Imanuel Kant´s view that the best approach is to honour duty and obligation without sullying that duty with over concern about outcomes. But this surely is a dangerous approach. An approach in which you may help your own survival but at the expense of humanity at large, especially if you regard that duty as parochial. Kant´s approach, when translated onto the national stage, can become selfishly utilitarian. The modern nation of Israel´s approach to dealing with the Palestinian issue could be regarded as “Kantian”.

Next let´s look at Nietzsche, whose concept of a future where individuals overcome the limitations of traditional morality and embrace their own creative potential is attractive. His idea that there is a master mentality and a slave mentality is echoed in Marx, who suggested that people are either Hammers or Anvils. But clearly if we place prime importance on a world predicated on love and mercy, then Nietzsche is not useful. Nietzsche´s self-centred view may be useful in moments of crisis but it would be a miserable world if everyone lived by it.

So what of Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi? Is he too to be rejected? Yes, I think, given our criteria. Farabi is reminiscent of the “City on the Hill” approach of modern socialism in some respects, or perhaps more actually of Jesus of Nazareth´s “Sermon on the Mount” approach. Farabi sets the bar high. Farabi gives us a framework for a

perfect world to which we can aspire. Aspirations are one thing. Without hope, after all, life becomes unsavoury. But of itself is a political ideology of this kind sufficient to deal with the personal challenges a chaos filled modern world throws our way? Arguably no. We need a more comprehensive teaching to hitch our wagon to.

Then we have the beautiful Abraham Joshua Heschel with his anthropopathic view of God as having human feelings. And he may be right if we are indeed created in the image of a God within whom we live and move and have our being. His view that self-respect is paramount is also attractive. Heschel may be a star to steer by but he is not our everything, given the need for a broad all-encompassing ideology of our relationship with a society that is, in many respects, falling apart, a society that has lost ethical direction. Heschel is charming and quite probably correct. But he is not, of himself, sufficient, in setting down a doctrine to live by.

René Descartes next. Descartes' view "Cogito Ergo Sum", could equally be stated "Vivo Ergo Sum". It is a useful starting point but little more. Similarly, his view of the soul is important from a believer´s perspective but also is little more than a starting point and leaves much unanswered. Descartes's view on free will is interesting in so much as he believed that freedom is compatible with determinism. A view that most believers would echo. However, his belief that you must change yourself rather than change the world is rather disheartening in today´s environment and saying you should devise your own moral code is sort of dodging the bullet.

We have examined eight philosophers in modest depth and ruthlessly dismissed six, albeit acknowledging that there is much that is admirable and thought provoking in elements of their teaching. We are left with two: Seyed Salman Safavi, and Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

These two are each in their different ways particularly important. Each is a major force.

As author, I must admit a bias in regard to Seyed Salman Safavi. He is my "Marjah" i.e. my teacher, though I confess to be a mere now and again pupil. If there is a downside to Safavi it is that he channels much of Sufi teaching without putting a truly original spin on it, though he does give it his own flavour. Perhaps his teaching on Death is unique in some degree. What is useful about Safavi is that his thought is comprehensive. He tells us that war is wrong, that mercy trumps justice, that pride is wrong and that hell and heaven are our own constructs. As for many, for Safavi the Gaza war has been personally challenging. It should perhaps have reinforced his view that mercy trumps justice, given the lack of mercy shown by Israel. But for Safavi as for many Muslims, the war has perhaps increased his sense of isolationism, his "us against the world" feeling, which in turn may yet colour his ideology. There are elements of Safavi´s teaching that are not writ large and perhaps need greater expression. I personally know him to teach others to care for themselves, mental self-preservation, even if doing so means you go against societal norms. This because he DOES expect you to be strong enough to attempt to change the world. This makes him of particular value as a "Marjah" or teacher. For Safavi your personal interaction with society is of the utmost importance as too is your personal wellbeing. The two stand back-to-back.

Last but not least, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. What a beautiful thinker. We are all aware of the significance of anxiety in our decision making but few philosophers truly acknowledge it. Kierkegaard is so right when he says, "the things we fear the most have already happened to us". Some might be tempted to question his suggestion that amassing subjective knowledge is in some way counterproductive. But how right Kierkegaard is to see Christianity, and by extension all religion, not as a set of doctrines, but as a way of life. And how lovely many would find his assertion that a religious person must be prepared for a command from God that would take precedence over all moral and even rational obligations. His emphasis on the importance of creating new possibilities is a song of hope that more of us need to sing. He is a beautiful philosopher.

And Finaly:

This of course begs the question, what matters most of all? Each individual must answer that for himself but I would stand with the answer I suspect Safavi would give. What matters most of all is your relationship with society. Perhaps mass media gives an answer in the fictional character Luther Stickell's last words in the recent blockbuster, "Mission: Impossible - The Final Reckoning", written by Christopher McQuarrie who also co-wrote the screenplay for the film. The script delves into the nature of work and its impact. Luther concludes by saying, in the course of a closing monologue that could be a message to us all: “The world is still here and so are you . . . I hope, in time, you can see this life is not some quirk of fate. This was your calling. Your destiny. A destiny that touches every living thing. Like it or not, we are masters of our fate. Nothing is written. And our cause, however righteous, pales in comparison to the impact of our effect. Any hope for a better future comes from willing that future into being. A future reflecting the measure of good within ourselves. And all that is good inside us is measured by the good we do for others. We all share the same fate -- the same future. The sum of our infinite choices. One such future is built on kindness, trust, and mutual understanding, should we choose to accept it. Driving without question towards a light we cannot see. Not just for those we hold close, but for those we'll never meet.”

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[1] The term is derived from the Old Testament, specifically from the Book of Isaiah: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isaiah 45:15).
[2] Nachmanides (1194–1270) declared that “all our affairs, whether they concern masses or individuals, are miraculously controlled, and that nothing can be attributed to nature or the order of the world.”
[3] Maimonides (1138–1204), believed that one ought to contemplate God's works and to marvel at the order and wisdom that went into their creation. When one does this, one inevitably comes to love God and to sense how insignificant one is in comparison to God. The principle that inspired his philosophical activity was that there can be no contradiction between the truths which God has revealed and the findings of the human mind in science and philosophy.
[4] The Sabbath is a weekly day of rest or time of worship referred to in the Bible as the seventh day. It informs a similar occasion in several faiths. Observation and remembrance of Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments ("Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy").
[5] Known in mediæval Latin texts as Alfarabius or Avennasar.
[6] AH 257. In the context of the Islamic calendar, AH stands for Anno Hegirae, which translates to in the year of the Hijra, marking the years since the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.
[7] Being nihilistic is also closely related to the political philosophy of anarchism, a belief that all social structures need to be destroyed before a new, better society can be developed.
[8] “Ressentiment”, refers to a deep-seated resentment, envy, or hatred, often directed towards an external source. This feeling is rooted in a sense of weakness or inferiority.
[9] Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, or simply Rumi, was a 13th-century poet, Hanafi faqih, Islamic scholar, Maturidi theologian, and Sufi mystic born during the Khwarazmian Empire.
[10] From a meeting at Initiatives of Change, London, on 17 July 2017
[11] In particular, the Shazeliyeh order in Egypt, Mawlawiyeh in Turkey, Qaderiyeh in Bosnia and Kurdistan, and the Safavid order. Safavi states these have an in important role in moderating the religious space of these societies and preventing the young being attracted to fundamentalist readings of Islam.
[12] Speaking at a debate to mark Iraq´s National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence on 6 March 2022.

[13] Mercy and Justice in Sufism, a discussion with Ayatollah Safavi, commentary by Abby Steedman, July 5, 2022
[14] From an online Ramadan lecture on the Sufi approach to prayer given by Ayatollah Salman Safavi on 24 March 2024.
[15] From an article by Ayatollah Seyed Salman Safavi, exploring the potential of Islamic teachings to provide a theoretical framework for global peace and security in the 21st century. Published on 26 March 2025.
[16] From Valerie Grove´s "Nature Strikes Back" commentary. See: https://naturestrikesback.com/the-sufi-approach-to-death