



CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

The phrase “continental philosophy” was first used in the 19th century by British philosophers who wished to distinguish what they saw to be their own tradition of empiricism from the more speculative form of philosophy practiced in mainland Europe. The label stuck, however, and provides a useful distinction between two broad approaches to philosophy, especially in the 20th century.

The rift between the two schools widened with the establishment of analytic philosophy, which was inspired by the work of Bertrand Russell. At the same time, philosophers in mainland Europe were coming to terms with the legacy of a century of German idealism. The continental tradition did not have the empirical roots that British philosophy had, and since the 17th century had been steeped in rationalism and idealism. Where British philosophers developed the pragmatic ideas of utilitarianism and liberalism, a more speculative undercurrent flowed on the continent, rising from the revolutionary ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Marx; through the German idealists Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer; and culminating in the iconoclastic Nietzsche.

In the 20th century, continental philosophers placed even more emphasis on subjective experience. This produced a human-centered approach to philosophy that first appeared in the work of Edmund Husserl, whose “phenomenology” was the basis of a lot of future continental philosophy. Husserl argued that

philosophers should not speculate about things that are beyond our comprehension, but instead focus on the things that we can and that we do experience. Husserl’s ideas were taken up by Martin Heidegger, who proposed that philosophers should study the nature of experience itself. This idea of analyzing subjective experience appealed particularly to French philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading figure of the “existentialist” school of thought. Philosophy was very much a part of the French literary as well as academic tradition, and as such had anticipated the subjective perspective of modern continental philosophy. Sartre and his partner Simone de Beauvoir also developed Heidegger’s idea that we should all aim to live “authentically.” They argued that we have no essential nature and that we should each live according to our own principles.

Other strands of philosophy also emerged from the continental tradition. A combination of the critical approach advocated by Kant and a reinterpretation of Marx’s ideas gave rise to a school of critical theory that tried to counter the rising tide of totalitarianism before World War II. This process of analysis of social and political issues flourished after the war. Michel Foucault, for example, identified ways in which society at large exercises power over individuals. His ideas greatly influenced subsequent structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers, who revealed the extent to which ideas and power are interconnected.



Kinds of truth

At the heart of Kant's transcendental idealism (see pp.66–67) is the idea that it is possible to have knowledge of the world independently of empirical evidence or experience.

***A priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge**

Before Kant, many philosophers had realized that there are two kinds of truth: necessary truth and contingent truth. A necessary truth, such as "Circles are round," is one that is true by definition, so it cannot be denied

without contradiction. A contingent truth, such as "The sky is blue," is either true or false according to the facts. Kant introduced two similar distinctions: first between analytic and synthetic statements, and second between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge.

Types of statements

An analytic statement is one that is necessarily true, or true by definition, whereas a synthetic statement is one that is either true or false according to the facts. The distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, however, concerns how we come to know the truth—whether by reasoning alone or by reference to the facts.

"All bachelors are unmarried."

ANALYTIC
The statement "All bachelors are unmarried" is analytic, since the term "unmarried" is contained in the definition of "bachelor."

"All bachelors are happy."

SYNTHETIC
The statement "All bachelors are happy" is synthetic, since being happy is not contained in the definition of "bachelor."

"2+2=4"

A PRIORI
A priori knowledge is independent of experience and includes analytic statements, but also mathematical propositions, such as "2 + 2 = 4."

"Water is H₂O."

A POSTERIORI
A posteriori statements are dependent on empirical evidence, or experience, and cannot be arrived at through rational reflection.



An analytic statement, like any proposition, consists of a subject and predicate, but its predicate is implicit in its subject. For example, the statement “A square has four sides” is analytic because its predicate (“four sides”) is implicit in its subject (“square”), so it is true by definition. Synthetic statements, however, have informative predicates, which tell us something new about the world. For example, “This square is red” is synthetic, because its predicate (“red”) is not contained in its subject (“square”).

Kant also identified two different kinds of knowledge: *a priori* knowledge, which is known independently of experience, and *a posteriori* knowledge, which is known through experience only. These two kinds of knowledge are expressed in analytic and synthetic statements respectively.

However, Kant also claimed that there is a third kind of knowledge: synthetic *a priori* knowledge (see below), which is both necessarily true (*a priori*) and informative (synthetic).

Synthetic *a priori* truths

Before Kant, it was assumed that all *a priori* knowledge must be analytic—that is, if it is known without any empirical evidence, then it cannot tell us anything new about the world. However, Kant claimed that from *a priori* statements, we can make deductions that are synthetic, which tell us something about the world.

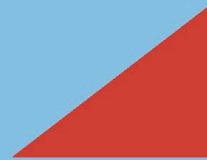
“The interior angles of a triangle add up to 180°.”



SYNTHETIC *A PRIORI*

This statement tells us something about a triangle that is not implicit in its definition and is therefore synthetic. However, it is also an *a priori* truth, since, for Kant, it can be arrived at through rational reflection.

“A triangle is a three-sided shape.”



ANALYTIC *A PRIORI*

The statement “A triangle is a three-sided shape” is analytic: the definition of its subject, “triangle,” is a shape with three sides. It is also an *a priori* truth, since we understand it without empirical evidence.

Synthetic *a priori* judgements

According to Kant, we are born with no knowledge of the world, but we do have innate concepts that enable us to experience the world intelligibly (see pp.66–67). For example, we have *a priori* knowledge of the concepts of space, time, and causality, and these enable us to arrive at scientific and mathematical truths that are both synthetic (informative) and *a priori* (necessary). For Kant, the statement “ $3 + 3 = 6$ ” is a synthetic *a priori* truth, because it is informative (it says more than “ $3 + 3 = 3 + 3$ ”) and can be arrived at through reason alone.





Reality as a process

In the early 19th century, German philosophy was dominated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who regarded reality not only as nonmaterial, but as an ever-changing, dynamic process.

Hegel's dialectic

Following Kant (see pp.66–69), many philosophers adopted the view that reality is ultimately nonmaterial. This view, known as idealism, became a feature of German philosophy in the 19th century and was keenly embraced by Hegel (1770–1831).

For Hegel, since reality is a single entity, the object of philosophical inquiry (the world) and the subject doing the thinking (consciousness) are one and the same thing. This entity is what Hegel calls *Geist* (“Spirit”). He argues that this *Geist* is not static, but is constantly evolving—unfolding into ever more sophisticated forms of itself. One example of this process is our own

understanding of reality—for since we are *Geist*, advances in our understanding are *Geist*'s increasing insight into itself.

According to Hegel, this process of *Geist*'s evolution is dialectical—that is, one in which contradictions appear and vie with each other and find resolutions that in turn create further contradictions. Every thing (such as anarchy) contains its own opposite (such as tyranny), which combine to form a resolution (such as law) in a process that drives historical progress.

Hegel called these aspects of the dialectic the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis respectively—the synthesis being a new, richer phenomenon made up of the other

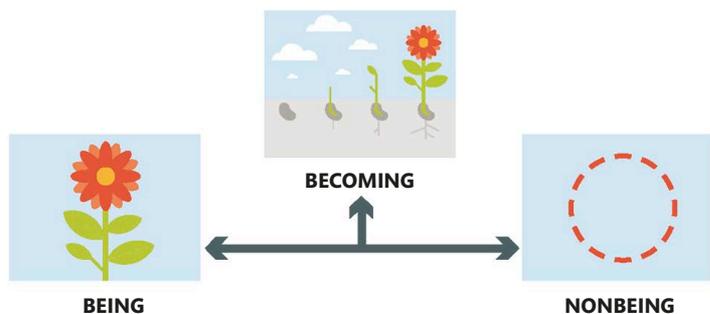
aspects. However, this synthesis contains its own contradiction, or antithesis, so it becomes a new thesis, which resolves itself in a new, more sophisticated synthesis. For Hegel, the whole of history is such a dialectical process—one that is driven by *Geist* returning to itself, having “emptied” itself into time (see box).

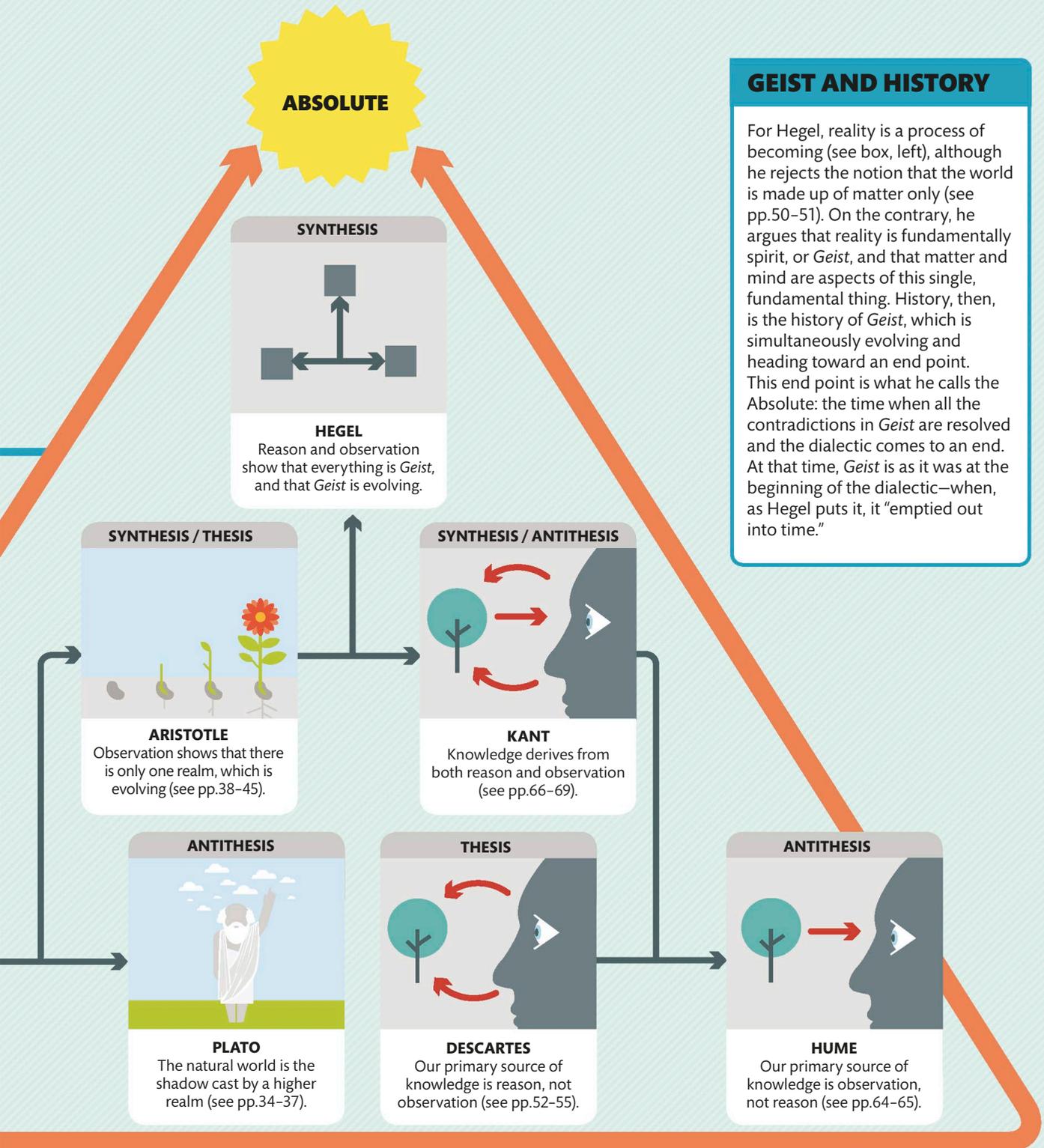
The dialectic

The progress of our ideas follows a dialectical pattern, as thinkers become ever more conscious of the nature of *Geist*. From naive ideas about the substance of the universe, through various explanations of the nature of reality, our ideas evolve until the Absolute is reached and *Geist* becomes conscious of itself as the ultimate reality. According to Hegel, his own discovery of *Geist* is proof that the Absolute is near.

BEING AND BECOMING

For Hegel, no idea or phenomenon exists in isolation: everything, including human history, is bound up in a dynamic process of becoming. Even reality itself is a process. Hegel explains this by asking us to consider the concept of Being: it is impossible to imagine Being without its opposite, Nonbeing, which helps to define it. However, Being and Nonbeing are not merely opposites—they attain their full meaning in the concept of Becoming, which is a synthesis of Being and Nonbeing.





GEIST AND HISTORY

For Hegel, reality is a process of becoming (see box, left), although he rejects the notion that the world is made up of matter only (see pp.50–51). On the contrary, he argues that reality is fundamentally spirit, or *Geist*, and that matter and mind are aspects of this single, fundamental thing. History, then, is the history of *Geist*, which is simultaneously evolving and heading toward an end point. This end point is what he calls the Absolute: the time when all the contradictions in *Geist* are resolved and the dialectic comes to an end. At that time, *Geist* is as it was at the beginning of the dialectic—when, as Hegel puts it, it “emptied out into time.”

ABSOLUTE

SYNTHESIS

HEGEL
Reason and observation show that everything is *Geist*, and that *Geist* is evolving.

SYNTHESIS / THESIS

ARISTOTLE

Observation shows that there is only one realm, which is evolving (see pp.38–45).

SYNTHESIS / ANTITHESIS

KANT

Knowledge derives from both reason and observation (see pp.66–69).

ANTITHESIS

PLATO

The natural world is the shadow cast by a higher realm (see pp.34–37).

THESIS

DESCARTES

Our primary source of knowledge is reason, not observation (see pp.52–55).

ANTITHESIS

HUME

Our primary source of knowledge is observation, not reason (see pp.64–65).



The end of history

Having defined reality as an evolving process—one that is driven by the principles of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (see pp.70–71)—Hegel then argued that history is the evolution of freedom.

Increasing harmony

According to Hegel, reality consists of *Geist* (“Spirit”), which has emptied itself into time, and history is the process of *Geist* returning to itself (see p.71). Because humans are aspects of *Geist*, human history is also *Geist*’s history, and so our progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from tyranny to freedom, are *Geist*’s own evolution. This evolution is characterized by increases in human freedom—because *Geist* is fundamentally free, and history is the process of *Geist* manifesting itself.

Because *Geist* evolves through a dialectical process, so, too, does human society. At any one time, the tensions within society are caused by a thesis (the status quo) vying with a contradictory position—one that promises to deliver more liberty for the people. This tension is resolved in a synthesis, which is the next stage in human history.

In Hegel’s view, the purpose of history is thus the realization of human freedom—a social manifestation of the Absolute, when *Geist* achieves complete self-awareness and everything exists in harmony.

Historical progress

Hegel argued that because reality is not static, but follows a dialectical progression in which *Geist* becomes more self-aware, history develops in a similar way. He traced the development of history from ancient times, pointing out that in each age, conflicting notions of society have produced a synthesis in which there is an increased consciousness of freedom. From the tyrannies that existed in ancient civilizations, through the evolving systems of government in Classical times, to the overthrow of unjust aristocracies, the process has been toward fairer, more liberal societies. These have culminated in the ideal society—which, according to Hegel, is the Prussian state itself.

“The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.”

Georg Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1822)

Rome

Tensions between the Greek and Persian systems lead to the emergence of Rome as the dominant power that gives rights to its citizens.



Persia

Ancient Persia is ruled by an absolute monarch, who oversees a strictly hierarchical and authoritarian state, with little concession to individual liberty.

Tyranny





Prussian state

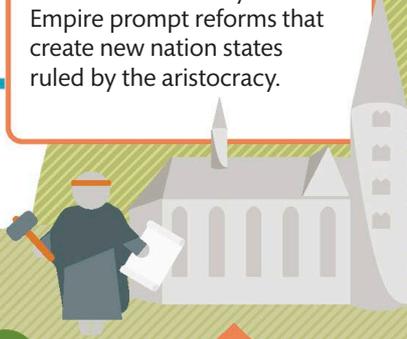
The synthesis of aristocracy and revolution emerges in the form of the Prussian constitutional monarchy. The monarch presides over a form of liberal democracy—an ideal state in which freedom is maximized.



The end of history

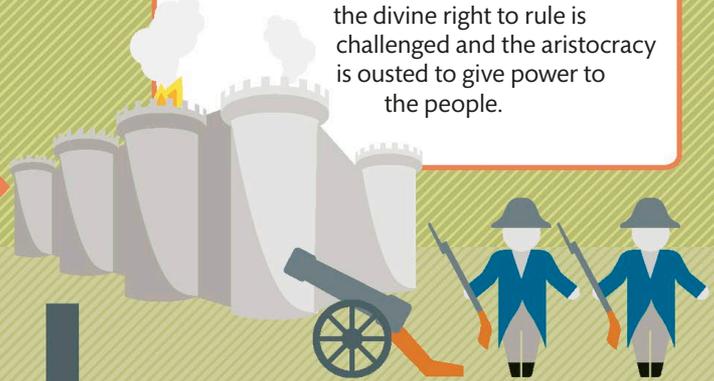
Reformation

Corruption in the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire prompt reforms that create new nation states ruled by the aristocracy.



Revolution

With the power of the Church diminished, the divine right to rule is challenged and the aristocracy is ousted to give power to the people.



Christianity

In contrast to the Roman system, Christianity offers a society based on individual morality and compassion. It is governed by the institution of the Church.



Greece

New forms of society emerge with the establishment of Greek city-states, granting rights to their citizens and even a form of democracy.



THE ZEITGEIST

For Hegel, the process of history is a step-by-step procedure rather than a smooth progression and has distinct periods or ages. At each stage of historical development, *Geist* carries within it the antithesis that will provoke change, but until that emerges, the thesis is the dominant notion. Hegel called this the *Zeitgeist*, the "Spirit of the Age," which is characterized by its own distinctive ideas, conventions, and institutions.



Class conflict in history

As much an economist and sociologist as he was a philosopher, Karl Marx approached the idea of historical progress in terms of the relationship between people and their material conditions.

Materialism and the dialectic

Marx (1818–1883) agreed with Hegel's idea that history is a dialectical process (see pp.70–73). However, he was uncomfortable with the idealism on which Hegel's philosophy was based and eventually dismissed the whole idea of metaphysics. He particularly disliked Hegel's notion of *Geist*, and focused instead on the socioeconomic conditions within societies at each

stage in their development. Marx's dialectic was a materialist one: the prevailing economic structure of each society contains within it its antithesis, and from the tension between the two a synthesis, or different form of society, emerges. Marx saw in this process a means of bringing about change that would eventually resolve all of society's contradictions. He believed that the perfect society was genuinely possible.

The class struggle

According to Marx, it is not *Geist* or even the desire for freedom that drives the historical process, but economic forces—specifically, the tension between those who control wealth and those who do not. Marx claimed that this struggle between the classes has always existed, and that the difference between the master/slave relationships of ancient times and those between what he called the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (see right) is only one of degree. Nevertheless, through the dialectical process, fairer societies have emerged over time. The end-point of history will be the creation of a classless, “communist” society, in which wealth is distributed fairly.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

Karl Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)

Lords

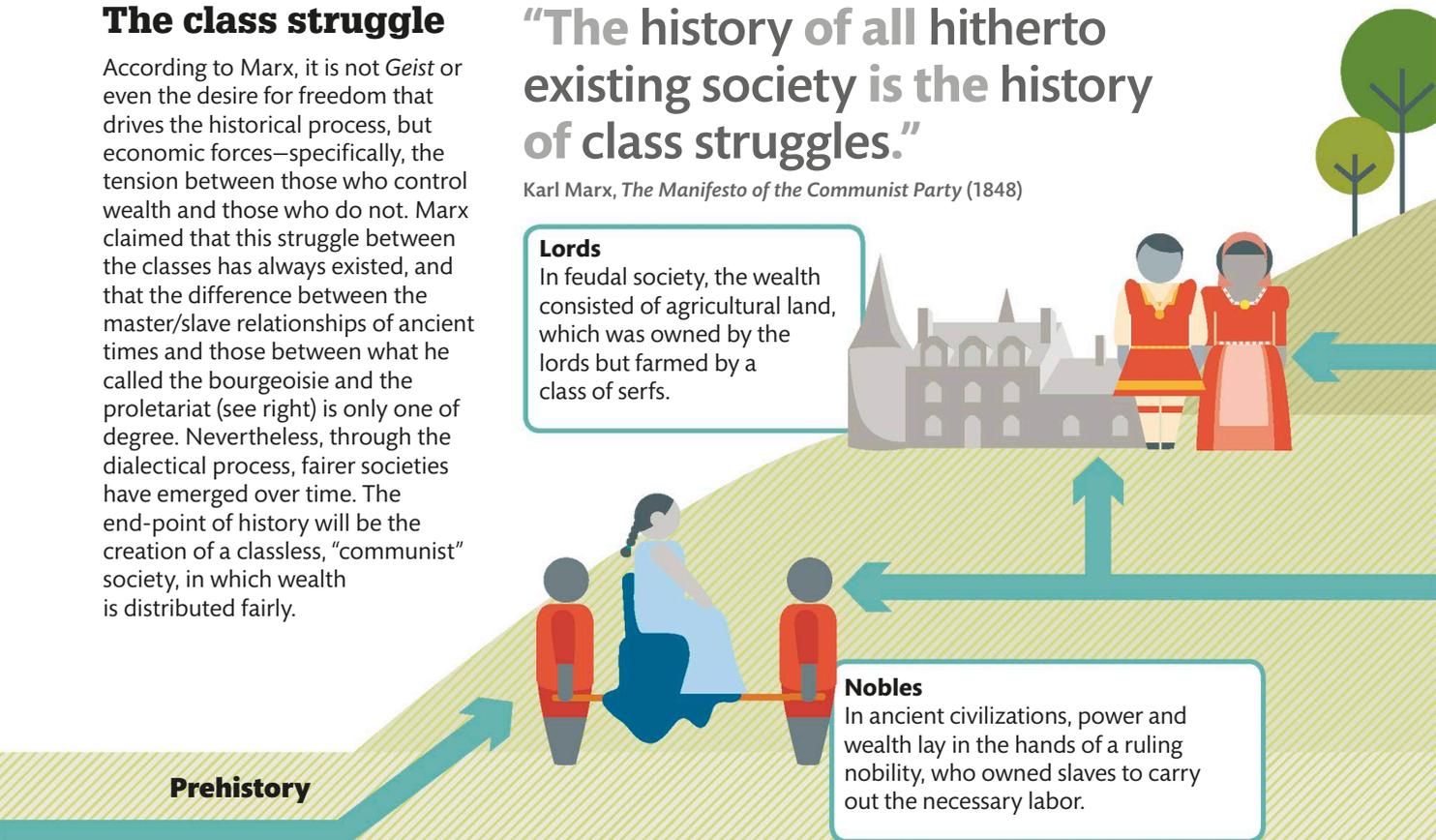
In feudal society, the wealth consisted of agricultural land, which was owned by the lords but farmed by a class of serfs.



Nobles

In ancient civilizations, power and wealth lay in the hands of a ruling nobility, who owned slaves to carry out the necessary labor.

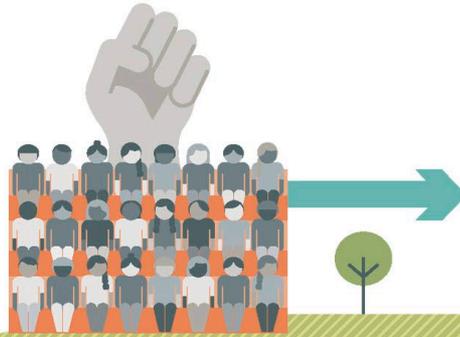
Prehistory





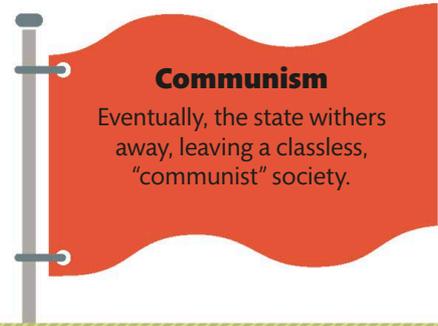
Socialism

One day, the workers will rise up and take control of the means of production (see pp.220-21). In the ensuing "socialist" society, the state ensures that the workers receive a fair share of the fruits of their labor.



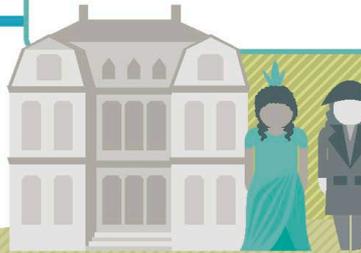
Communism

Eventually, the state withers away, leaving a classless, "communist" society.



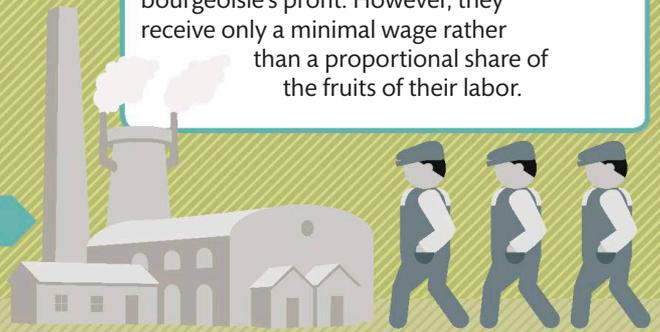
Bourgeoisie

The new ruling class in industrialized society, the bourgeoisie are the capitalist owners of the means of production. They profit from the sale of goods produced by the workers.



Proletariat

The proletariat, or workers, labor in the factories to produce goods for the bourgeoisie's profit. However, they receive only a minimal wage rather than a proportional share of the fruits of their labor.



Serfs

Although not owned as slaves, the serfs tended the land for the lords in return for a small proportion of the produce.



CAPITALISM

At the time when Marx was writing, the Industrial Revolution had created the conditions for a new class, the bourgeoisie—the industrialists and owners of capital. The economic theory of the time was based on Adam Smith's idea of enlightened self-interest, or capitalism. While Marx acknowledged that this was a driver of innovation and growth, he also pointed out its inherent weaknesses, and offered socialism as an alternative.

Slaves

The antithesis of the ruling nobility was the class of slaves. They were the property of the nobles but had no property of their own.





Objects in the mind

The German philosopher Franz Brentano argued that all mental acts—such as thoughts, emotions, and perceptions—are about something, namely an object towards which the mind is directed.

Intentionality

The term “intentionality” was originally used by scholastic philosophers (see pp.46–47), who argued that God exists in reality, as well as in our minds. Brentano (1838–1917) reintroduced the term as part of his theory of consciousness from a first-person perspective and attempted to lay the foundations of a scientific psychology.

In his book, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874), Brentano argued that every thought or mental state we have is about something. When we sense,

remember, imagine, or desire something, we direct our minds toward that thing. For example, we might picture that thing in our mind, we might have an opinion on it, or it might provoke an emotion in us. Brentano named this directing of the mind toward something “intentionality” and called the things toward which we direct our minds “intentional objects.” For Brentano, mental states are about intentional objects, and intentional objects exist inside our minds whether or not they exist outside our minds (as real objects in the physical world).

Mental (intentional) objects

Intentional objects include objects of perception, recollection, or imagination and objects of desire or those toward which we have feelings. These intentional objects exist within our mind whether or not these things exist outside our mind. We can be directed toward one and the same intentional object in various ways: for example, by directly sensing it, remembering it, or having a feeling toward or an opinion about it.

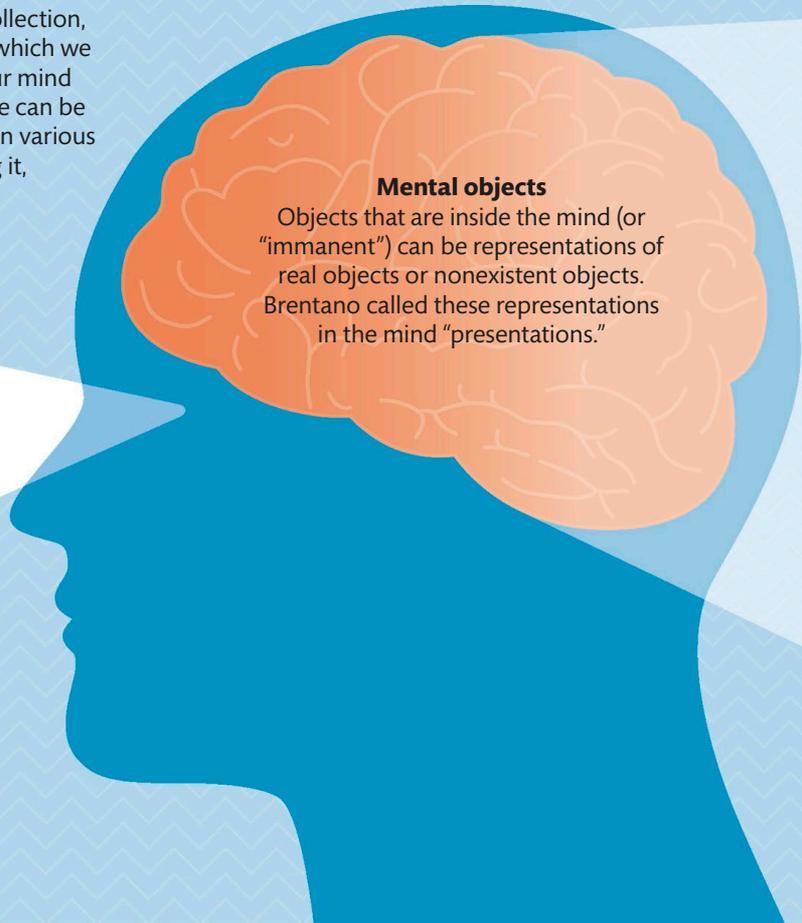


The real

Physical objects exist outside the mind, independently of us. When we sense real objects, they become objects in our minds.

Mental objects

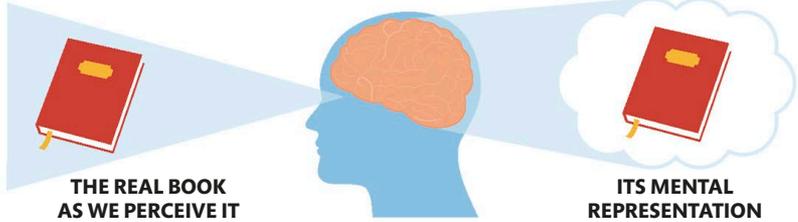
Objects that are inside the mind (or “immanent”) can be representations of real objects or nonexistent objects. Brentano called these representations in the mind “presentations.”



Brentano argued that there can be no unconscious mental acts. This is because we are always aware of the objects toward which our mental acts are directed, and so are always aware of the mental acts themselves. He called the most basic kind of mental phenomena “presentations,” which we have when we picture an object in our minds. Other kinds of mental acts, such as judgments (which involve an affirmation or denial of the existence of objects), desires, and emotions, are based on and require presentations.

DIFFICULTIES WITH BRENTANO'S INTENTIONALITY

A major problem with Brentano's ideas is that he never clearly defined the terms he used to describe consciousness. This means that there has been confusion about the concepts he used to describe mental objects, such as “presentation” and “immanent object.” It is also unclear whether his use of the term “intentional object” refers to the real object or its mental representation.



Experienced objects

Objects that have been sensed or remembered become objects inside our minds: they become mental representations of the real.



Emotions

Emotions and desires are also about things, since they are directed toward an object.



Nonexistent things

Not all mental acts are about real objects. We can have a “presentation” of something that has no counterpart in the real world.



Phenomenology

Founded by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is concerned with phenomena, or things that appear to us. It involves laying aside our assumptions about whether or not external, physical objects exist.

The phenomena of consciousness

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) believed that a scientific approach to the study of consciousness and experience from a first-person point of view would give us definite answers to questions about subjective experience that philosophers had been debating for centuries. He called this approach phenomenology.

Husserl defined phenomenology as the science of the phenomena of consciousness. The standard definition of a phenomenon is something that appears to us—that is, what we experience, mean, or intend. Husserl makes a distinction between phenomena and objects, however. He argues that objects exist outside our consciousness

and beyond the limits of our perception, whereas phenomena are how these objects appear within our consciousness.

Changing attitude

In what Husserl calls our “natural attitude” toward things, we assume that objects and a world beyond our own consciousness exist. We perceive, remember, imagine, and desire what we assume are the objects themselves, but we do not investigate these mental acts of perception, remembering, imagining, and desiring. That is to say that because we assume that the objects themselves exist, we do not examine how these objects appear as phenomena within our consciousness. Husserl argues that we can

Epoché

Science aims to give us certain answers to questions about the world, but scientific findings depend on experience, and experience is subject to assumptions and biases. Phenomenology “brackets out” our assumptions and puts them to one side in an “epoché.” Epoché involves a change of attitude from the “natural attitude” to the “phenomenological attitude.”

In the natural attitude, we assume the existence of external objects. In the phenomenological attitude, we suspend our judgment about the existence of external objects and instead focus on, and describe, our inner experience of these objects. This enables us to grasp the essence of our experience of objects and what makes it possible for us to make sense of them.



- 1 Setting aside assumptions** The phenomenological method requires us to put aside, or “bracket out,” our assumptions and beliefs about external objects. We no longer assume that these objects exist. Instead, we suspend judgment about their existence.

change our attitude and pass from the natural attitude to what he calls the phenomenological attitude. This change in attitude is called phenomenological “reduction” or “*epoché*.”

If we carry out the *epoché*, we lay aside (or “bracket out,” as Husserl calls it) our assumption that objects beyond our consciousness exist. Instead, we focus on our consciousness and how these objects appear as phenomena in our consciousness. For Husserl, this enables us to make a pure description of the contents of our consciousness, free from any assumptions. Our consciousness is not at all empty, but full of the intentional objects (see pp.116–117) toward which we direct our minds.

“Experience by itself is not science.”

Edmund Husserl

PHENOMENOLOGY VS. LOGICAL POSITIVISM

According to logical positivism (see pp.92–93), the only meaningful statements are logical propositions and statements about the physical world that can be verified by observation. Statements that express a subjective opinion or judgment are meaningless. This means that a logical positivist would argue that subjective answers to philosophical questions are meaningless.

For Husserl, logical positivism is flawed because it assumes that fundamental questions and issues about human existence are meaningless, and so unanswerable. Husserl argues that phenomenology can help us answer philosophical problems with the same degree of certainty with which we can answer scientific and mathematical questions. By laying aside all of our assumptions, we can build a secure foundation for knowledge of subjective experience that will enable us to make meaningful philosophical statements about our experience of life.



2 Objects and phenomena

This enables us to distinguish between an object (the chair) and a phenomenon (the chair as we perceive it). We might destroy the chair, but we can still remember or imagine it. The phenomenon can survive the object.



3 Focusing on consciousness

If we reflect on our own perception or memory of a chair, this means we can focus on our inner experience of objects and examine how they appear to us within our consciousness.



Time consciousness

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) argued that time consciousness, or our awareness of time, is the most basic form of human consciousness.

Present, past, and future

To explore how humans experience time, Husserl analyzed an actual moment of consciousness. He used the example of hearing a melody. For Husserl, when we hear a note of a melody at a precise moment, the sound of this note creates a “primal impression,” or a new “now-moment.” This new sound pushes away the most recent moment. As that most recent moment moves into the past, our consciousness holds onto it, so that what is retained takes on the character of being just past and

no longer immediately present. Husserl calls this process of holding onto the recent past “retention.”

Husserl argued that the past of something is made up of a continuity of retentions. This continuity of retentions makes it possible for us to perceive an object as one particular thing rather than as a multiplicity of things or just a messy chaos. Every retention brings with it a further retention. When a present moment of time slips into the past, it becomes connected to a retention of



The flow of time

Husserl argues that the experience of hearing a melody brings together the primal impression of the immediate now; the retention of the immediate past; and protention, or the anticipation of, the future.

“All consciousness is consciousness of something.”

Edmund Husserl



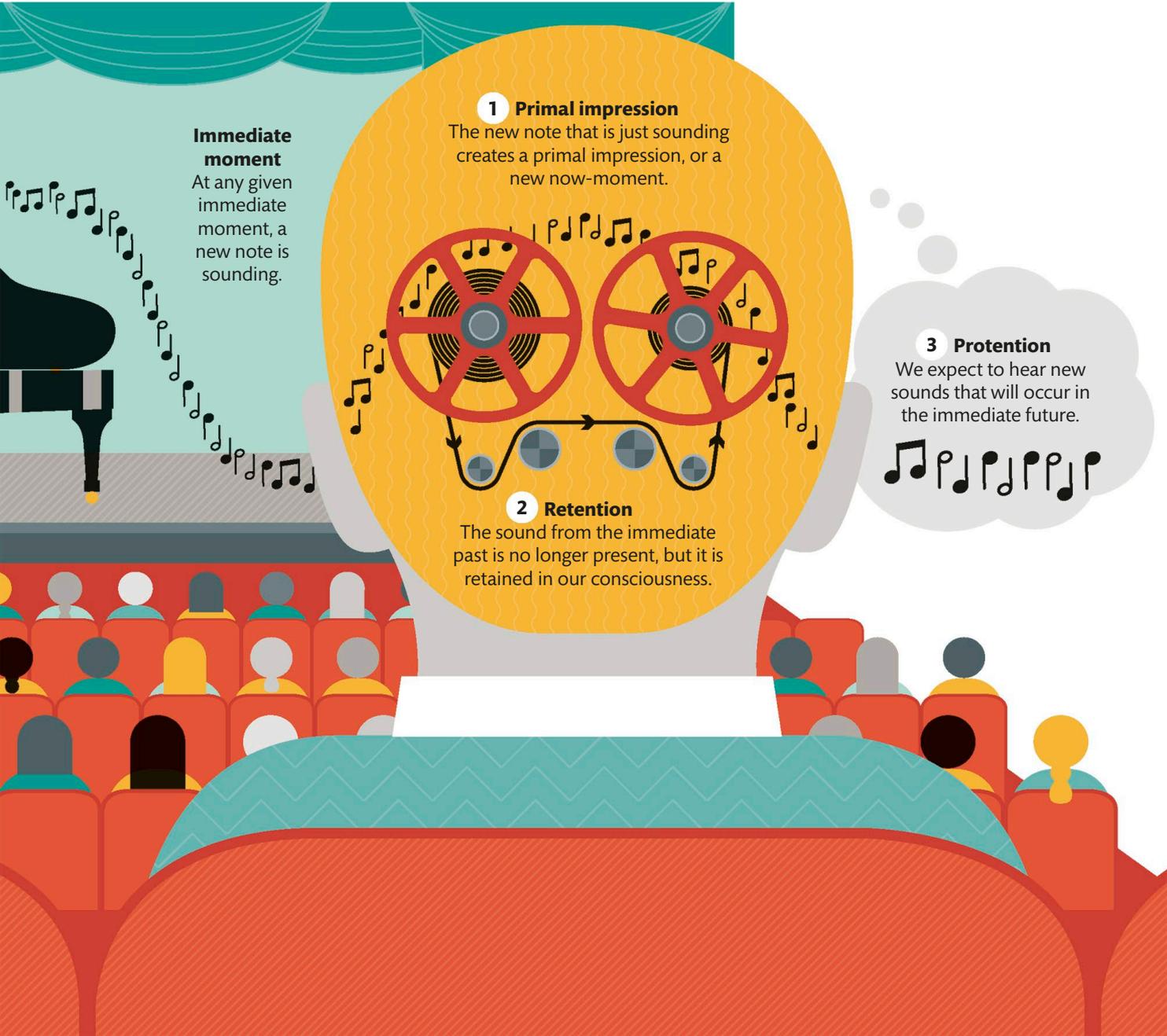


the past moment that immediately preceded it. A chain of retentions, connected with the present moment reaches into the past like a comet's tail. When we hear a melody, we are not only retaining past sounds but also expecting or

even anticipating—by drawing on past retentions—the new sounds that are about to come. Husserl calls this forward-looking aspect of time consciousness “protention.”

For Husserl, the three basic elements of time consciousness—

primal impression (present), retention (past), and protention (future)—allow the immediate present to be connected to the past and the future as humans experience, and are aware of, the passing of time.



Immediate moment

At any given immediate moment, a new note is sounding.

1 Primal impression

The new note that is just sounding creates a primal impression, or a new now-moment.

2 Retention

The sound from the immediate past is no longer present, but it is retained in our consciousness.

3 Protention

We expect to hear new sounds that will occur in the immediate future.



What is it like to be human?

In his form of existentialist philosophy, Martin Heidegger explored what it means to be human, and most importantly, what it is like to exist as a human being living in the world.

Existentialist phenomenology

Heidegger (1889–1976) was influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (see pp.118–119), but he transformed the phenomenological method to address what he believed were more fundamental questions about meaning and being. While Husserl argued that we find meaning by understanding the structure of consciousness, Heidegger argued that we can only find meaning by analyzing what it is like to be human in our day-to-day existence.

Heidegger maintained that various attempts to define the human being as consciousness,

subject, or self, are inadequate because they look at human life from the outside. He argued that in order to understand what it means to be human, we should not ask abstract questions about human

existence, but should think about it through lived experience. Instead of asking “What is a human being?”, we should ask “What does it mean to exist as a human being in this world?”

What to ask

For Heidegger, we can only understand our existence in this world by asking questions about our own experience, such as “What is it like to be human?” Scientific questions, such as “What is a human?”, will not help us to reach this understanding.





Human existence

In Heidegger's view, if we are to understand what it means to say that something is, we need to understand what it means to exist as a human being. This is because humans are the only beings for whom the meaning of existence and being is a question. Animals, plants, and inanimate objects, for example, do not ask questions about their being and reality, but humans do ask such questions. Heidegger argued that "*Dasein*,"

or the state of "being there" in the world is what defines us as humans. We are not isolated subjects cut off from the world that we want to know about, but rather are beings who are "always already" in the world. For Heidegger, to be in the world means to dwell in a familiar environment, and being-in-the-world is both simpler and broader than mere knowledge or perception. It refers to how things we engage with affect our existence and how they make us feel.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

In his book *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger describes the nature of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) by exploring the attitudes of humans who exist in this world toward the various things that they encounter in this world. If humans encounter an object and their attitude toward that object is that it is potentially available for them to use in order to achieve something, then that object is what Heidegger calls "ready-at-hand". If humans merely look at or observe an object without engaging with and using it, then that object is "present-at-hand". In this way, Heidegger takes *human* being as a starting point for asking philosophical questions about being in general.





Life before death

Martin Heidegger argued that it is only possible for us to understand and engage with the things that matter most to us when we live an “authentic” existence and acknowledge our own mortality.

Being-toward-death

In *Being and Time* (see p.123), Heidegger argued that a fundamental human anxiety is our awareness that we are not the source of ourselves, so we do not have absolute power over our destinies. He claimed that this sense of “groundlessness,” or lack of foundation, lies at the heart of our being and that it is connected to our awareness of our mortality. Heidegger called this attitude of living in the face of death “being-toward-death.”

Being-toward-death is not an attitude that occurs occasionally, but is from the outset part of who we are, whether we acknowledge it or choose to ignore it. Heidegger argued that we must genuinely understand our own mortality if we are to live as our authentic selves. By acknowledging death, we acknowledge the outermost limits of our own experience. If we ignore our own mortality, we miss this fundamental dimension of our existence and become preoccupied with banal aspects of our day-to-day lives that are ultimately meaningless, so our existence becomes inauthentic. If we become

aware of death, we reach a deeper understanding of ourselves and what it means to exist and have meaningful and authentic existence.

The call of conscience

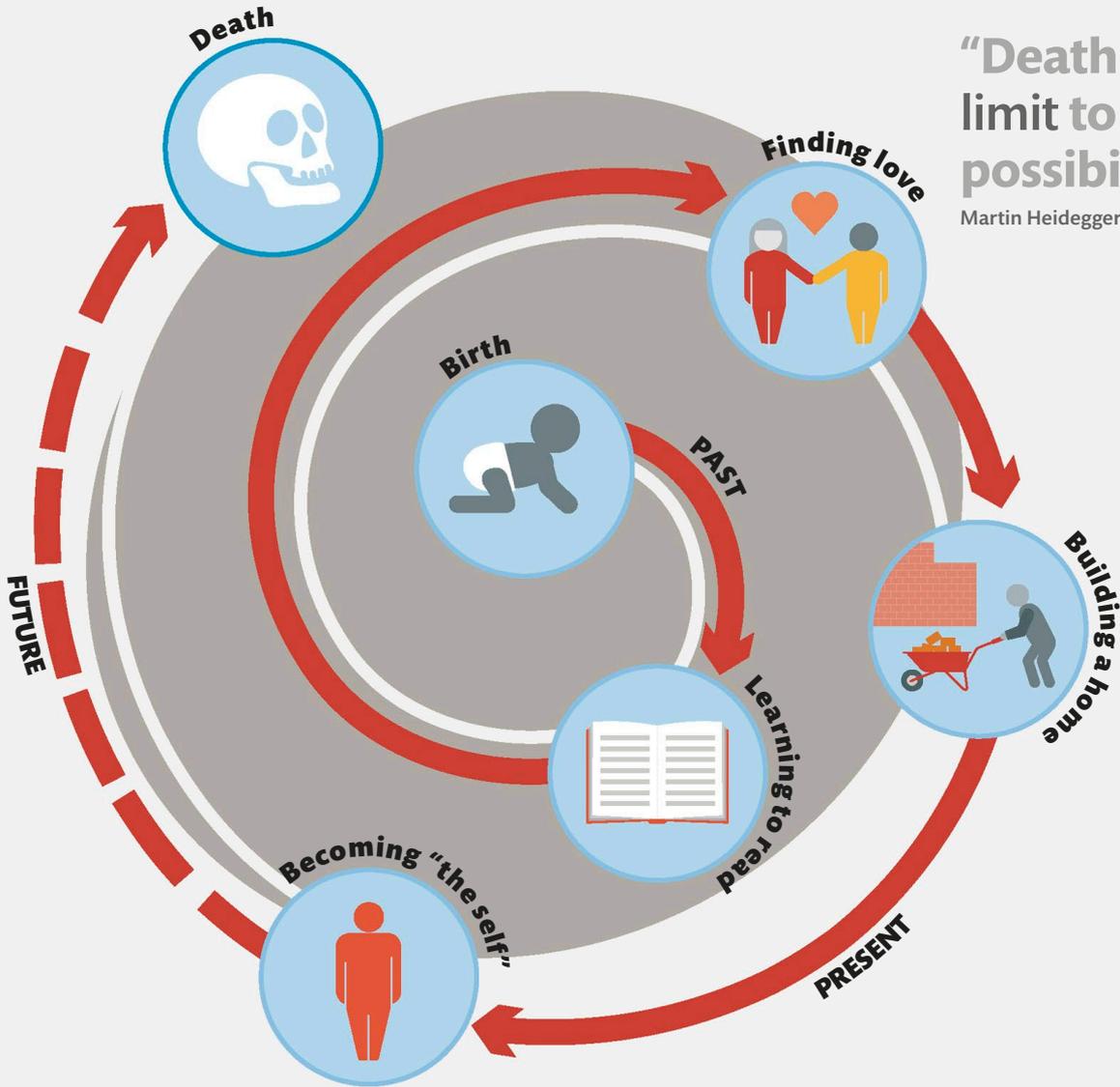
For Heidegger, having a genuine understanding of our own mortality brings us back from our lostness in the world to our own true selves. Achieving it seems to occur spontaneously, but Heidegger claimed that it is prompted by the “call of conscience,” which is being’s most profound communication with itself: conscience cuts through the surface “chatter” of our lives and summons us into the presence of ourselves. It is a call away from the distractions that shield us from the truth—that we are temporary creatures, whose fear of death is relieved by facing it directly.

THE NATURE OF ANXIETY

Heidegger argued that one of the ways in which the authentic self manifests itself is through anxiety, or angst. He contrasted anxiety with fear, which he claimed was always fear of something in particular, such as a snake or a spider: when the snake or spider is removed, the fear disappears. Anxiety, on the other hand, is not a fear of anything in particular; it is a feeling of alienation from the world. This feeling of “groundlessness” is, for Heidegger, the birth of the authentic self—or, as he puts it, of *Dasein* (see pp.122-123), becoming individualized and self-aware. It is the moment in which, distanced from the world and other people, we are free to become ourselves.

Authentic existence

For Heidegger, existence is finite, ending with our deaths, and belongs not just in the present, but also in the past and future, which are interconnected. To understand what it means to exist authentically is to constantly project our lives on to the horizon of our death: to exist as “being-toward-death.” To be is to be in time, and our being is, ultimately, a being-toward-death. But this is not a pessimistic view; instead, it enables us to make sense of the things that matter to us and to prioritize them things over less important things.



“Death is the
limit to our
possibilities.”

Martin Heidegger

Meaning through action and choice

By engaging in plans and tasks that project us toward the future, we make sense of ourselves and the world. Awareness of death as the outermost limit of our possibilities makes us project ourselves toward a future that matters to us. Pastimes and future projects give our life sense and meaning; the authentic self is mindful of the limit that is death, while the inauthentic self would try to ignore it.



Freedom and identity

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that freedom is one of the fundamental things that makes us human, but that we attempt to deny the existence of this freedom by deceiving ourselves and assuming fixed identities.

Being-in-itself and being-for-itself

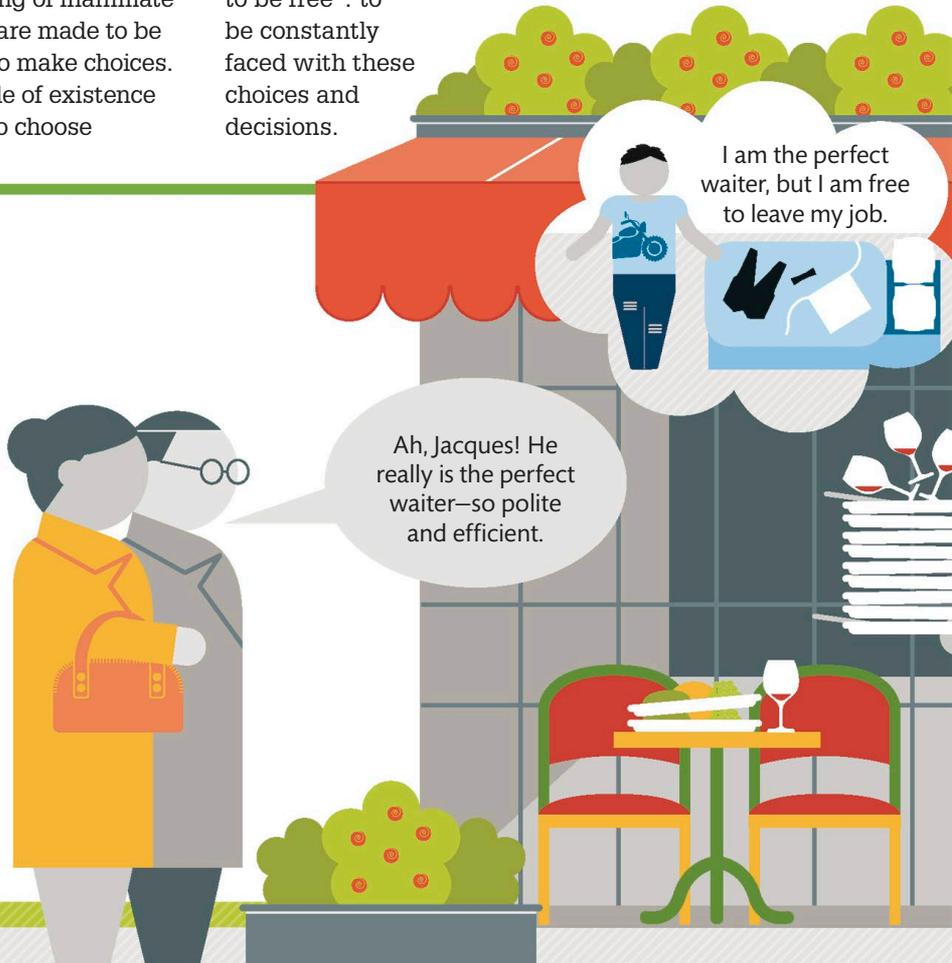
One of the most important contributors to existentialism (the analysis of human existence in the world), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was influenced by and critically engaged with the works of leading phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl (see pp.118–121) and Martin Heidegger (see pp.122–125).

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), Sartre distinguished between different ways of existing. “Being-in-itself” characterizes the being of inanimate objects or animals, which are as they are made to be and lack consciousness and freedom to make choices. By contrast, “being-for-itself” is a mode of existence that has consciousness and freedom to choose

and act. Sartre claimed that humans are distinctive for having both kinds of nature. We have freedom, but, at the same time, our existence is defined by situations and identities that we simply accept, like personal history, age, gender, race, class, or professional status. Sartre believed that freedom is, however, inescapable. We may seek to flee the choices and decisions that come with freedom because we do not want to take responsibility for our actions, but we are “condemned to be free”: to be constantly faced with these choices and decisions.

Playing a role

Sartre illustrates the distinction between existence and essence with the example of a café waiter, who excels in his professional role. Being a waiter seems to be part of his essence—the purpose and identity that are imposed on him—and he seeks to perform the ideal role of a café waiter. Sartre says that the waiter is trying to imprison himself in this role, but this is in principle impossible. This is because humans cannot escape their freedom. The waiter is not just a waiter. His existence—a state of being in which he is free to act as he chooses—is characterized by possibility. For Sartre, a person’s identity cannot be reduced to the roles that that person plays in everyday life. Our existence as conscious, free beings is more important than the roles that we perform, or our essence.





Bad faith

Sartre identified a fundamental kind of self-denial of consciousness and freedom, which he called bad faith. Bad faith is a kind of self-deceit about our freedom to transcend the identities we impose on ourselves.

Bad faith is not, however, lying. In the case of lying, the deceiver and the deceived are two parties. The liar is aware of his intention to lie and does not seek to hide it from himself. In contrast, with bad faith, the deceiver and the deceived are the same person. The deceiver knows the truth, which he conceals from himself, choosing instead to imprison himself in his role. Sartre thought that bad faith is a deep paradox of consciousness: we deny our freedom, but if we were not free, we would not be able to carry out this denial.

EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

For Sartre, existence is the fact of being, while essence is its purpose, function, and definition. For everything in the world created by human beings, essence precedes existence, but for humanity itself, the reverse is true.

Sartre illustrates the distinction between existence and essence with a paper knife. The knife would not have been created if no need for it existed. Therefore, the knife's *essence* must have preceded the knife itself.

As an atheist, Sartre did not believe that a creator god had given humanity an essence. He argued instead that there is no human nature beyond that which we actively define for ourselves.

“Existence precedes essence.”

Jean-Paul Sartre





The “other”

According to Jean-Paul Sartre (see pp.126–127), we cannot view ourselves as separate from other people, or other minds, because we can only become self-aware when we are aware that someone else is watching us.

The problem of other minds

Many philosophers have viewed our relation to other people in terms of the “problem of other minds”: how can we know that other people have minds and think and feel like we do? These philosophers seek to prove that other minds exist, and thus solve the problem of solipsism (the view that I am the only mind that I can know to exist). From

Sartre’s perspective, arguments that attempt to prove or disprove the existence of other minds fail for a number of reasons, the main reason being that they share a view of the “self” as separate from others and a view of other people as objects of knowledge for us.

Sartre challenges these assumptions, arguing that the self is inseparable from others and that our main relation to other people is

a *lived* (immediate, first-personal) experience of them as *subjects* in concrete life situations rather than as *objects* of knowledge. He says that once we realize that other people view us as an object—and label us in any way they choose (see box)—we become aware of ourselves and see ourselves as objects of the other’s gaze.

In Sartre’s view, the existence of others cannot be proven, but we

The other’s look

In Sartre’s view, when we are aware that another person (“the other”) might see us, we do not just notice two eyes directed at us. An open window or the movement of a curtain or door can be manifestations of the other’s look. When we are looked at, we become aware of ourselves as vulnerable. This awareness is not some sort of knowledge; it is a *lived* experience of another person—the experience of feeling vulnerable or ashamed that arises from being seen by that person. We become aware of our own self, as an object, only in relation to the other person. The self therefore has its foundation in the other’s look. Being seen by another is “an irreducible fact” of our being. Sartre concludes that our relation to other people (and their “mind”) is an internal relation rather than a relation between two separated entities: it is a direct, lived relationship rather than a mediated form of objective knowledge.

Objectifying others

For Sartre, we become aware of conscious states such as shame when we are confronted with the gaze of another. To illustrate this, he imagined himself peeping through a keyhole. In this similar example, a man is spying on his partner, who is having an affair with another man. As he watches, he is totally absorbed in what he is doing—he is not explicitly aware of himself. But his look objectifies his partner and the other man.



can and do resist solipsism because we rely on our lived experience of others (how we experience them) to make us aware of ourselves and of how other people view and label us. As we become aware of the labels that other people attach to us, we might apply these labels to ourselves and lose awareness of our freedom (see box). But if we reassert ourselves and our freedom, we gain greater self-awareness.

“Through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other ... I apprehend his being-as-subject.”

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943)

OUR UNEASY RELATION TO OTHERS

According to Sartre, we cannot control the way in which we are seen by someone else. How other people categorize us—as, for example, “nice” or “funny”—is unpredictable, as they can see us as they want to. The other person’s freedom is, as Sartre says, “the limit of [our] freedom.” Other people can attach, in their mind, certain labels to us and our “outside” objective appearance.

By objectifying us in this way, other people rob us of our inherent freedom (our existence as a being-for-itself) and instead turn us into a being-in-itself (see pp.126–127). We see ourselves as vulnerable. This alienates us from ourselves and our possibilities in the world because we lose awareness of our freedom and become restricted by the labels that other people attach to us. We regain our freedom by opposing objectification by others.

Being objectified

Suddenly, the man realizes that another person is watching him. He becomes aware of himself as an object for someone else and of their objectifying gaze. As he has negatively labeled his partner and the other man, so, in turn, the person who has caught him spying labels him.



Finding freedom

Under the gaze of the other person, the man’s self eventually reasserts itself and opposes the other person’s objectification; it seeks to regain and affirm freedom. As the self becomes aware of its freedom, the other becomes an object for the self. The self no longer feels ashamed.





Gender identity

The activist and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) had a huge influence on contemporary philosophy and feminist theory. Her ideas on the framing of woman as man’s “Other” were groundbreaking.

The “Other”

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir examined human consciousness from a first-person, phenomenological perspective, using existential ideas about freedom (see pp.126–127) to address the question of the difference between women and men. She draws a distinction between sex, which is biologically determined, and gender, which is a social construct. Gender has been

used by men to make women their “Other” and to justify traditional views of women as inferior. Men and masculine features are seen as the absolute ideal of the human, whereas women have been characterized as deviant, imperfect, and the inessential “Other.” At worst, the female body has been regarded as weaker than, or inferior to, a man’s—Freud, for example, described a woman as a “mutilated

man.” At best, women have been regarded as a “mystery” in order to justify their secondary, alienated status as a “second sex.”

The lived body

De Beauvoir argued that historically men have used sexual difference as a way of oppressing women—in particular, by requiring them to be passive, caring, and concerned with their appearance. Her argument was

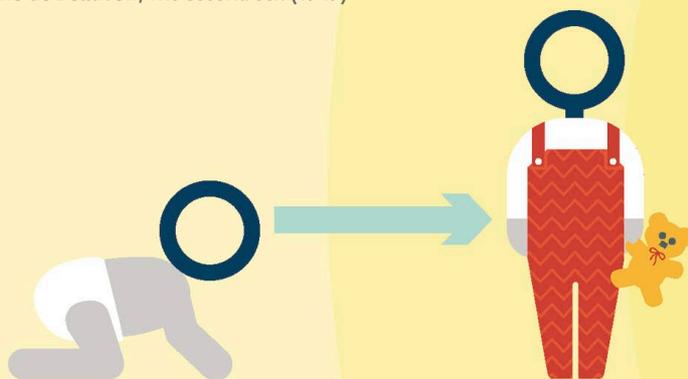
Becoming a woman

De Beauvoir rejected the traditional view that biology determines what we are and that it is a woman’s destiny, for example, to become a mother. She argued that such ideas were invented by men, chiefly for the purpose of subjugating women. Instead, she restated the existential claim that “existence precedes essence,” arguing that we are not born with any particular gender identities and that women are not born women, but only become women through social conditioning.

In other words, women’s nature is not fixed, but is constantly changing and developing. Furthermore, since women have freedom, they have the ability to liberate themselves from the demands that men have traditionally made of them. Her point was not that there are no gender differences, but rather that whatever differences there are should not be used as excuses for treating women as inferior.

“One is not born but becomes woman.”

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)



Infancy

De Beauvoir observed that baby girls do not behave differently from baby boys and that they are not expected to do so.

Early socialization

However, as female infants get older, they are socialized in ways that make them behave like “girls,” doing the things that “girls” stereotypically do.



not that women should be like men, or that sexual differences should be eliminated, but that differences, whatever they are, should not be used to subordinate women.

De Beauvoir saw sex and gender as essential aspects of human life. She argued that our existence is characterized by “being-in-the-world” (see pp.122–123) and shaped by our physical forms: women and men exist as embodied individuals engaged with the world. Her major idea was that embodied existence—and, in particular, the “lived body” (see pp.132–133)—is essentially gendered and sexed.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

Although women cannot be said to be to blame for their domination by men, de Beauvoir claimed that women are sometimes complicit in compromising their freedom. She identified three kinds of women who show what Sartre called “bad faith”—that is, who turn their back on their own essential freedom (see pp.126–127). The Narcissist denies her freedom by seeing herself as an object of beauty; the Woman in Love does so by submerging herself in the love of a man; and the Mystic does so by devoting herself to an absolute idea, such as God.



A WOMAN must assert her own identity to avoid compromising her freedom.



Feminization

As the years pass, girls are feminized further in accordance with social expectations. Typically, they are expected to be passive.



Potential for liberation

By the time they are adults, women have been taught to be mothers and effectively the inferiors of men. De Beauvoir argued that women should see through this conditioning and embrace their own destinies instead.





The lived body

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Martin Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world (see pp.122–123), argued that the way we perceive the world is not purely intellectual but is also shaped by our bodies.

Phenomenology of the lived body

Merleau-Ponty criticized traditional understandings of the human body, namely the “intellectualist” approach and the “empiricist” approach. Intellectualism views the body in terms of our mental representations of it and neglects its material existence, ignoring the fact that the body is made up of matter. This fact becomes obvious when, for example, people encounter physical

obstacles or become ill, or are injured. Empiricism, meanwhile, sees the body as a thing of the natural world but neglects its distinctive intentionality—that is, its conscious engagement with the world.

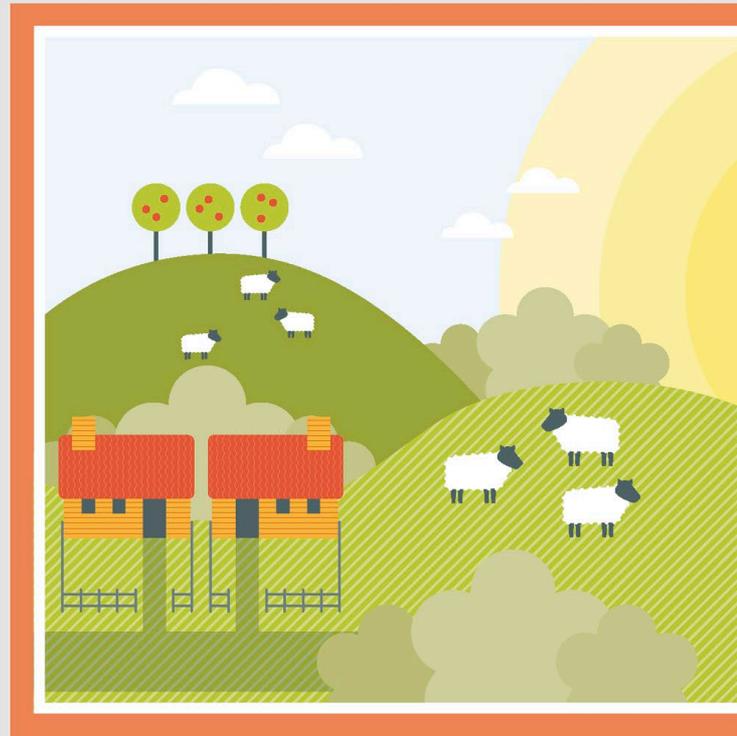
Merleau-Ponty argued that a person's body is not just an object that responds to external stimuli. Instead, he said, it should be thought about in terms of that person's engagement with the world and their ability

Perception as background

Merleau-Ponty took Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world—the idea that to understand existence, we must first consider our own existence within the world we live in (see pp.122–123)—and added to it a new idea about the human body and perception.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty challenges traditional beliefs about perception, arguing that it cannot be properly explained in terms of how sensory data is received and processed (as empiricists claim), nor in terms of thinking about objects and their sensory properties (as intellectualists propose). In his view, perception is a fundamental openness, a background that enables us to discern specific sensory features and that is “prereflective.” For example, we can identify the ringing sound of a phone and reach for it only because we already have a (background) perception of the thing that is a phone; we do not need to reflect on it in order to reach for it, but instead act automatically.

In everyday life, we are neither mere spectators to the world's “show” nor armchair thinkers; we are actively engaged in specific environments. Perception is connected to action and movement. It is not simply produced—by either the physical body or the mind—but instead stems from an entanglement of the lived body and consciousness. For example, a swimmer perceives the water and interacts with it without thinking about it; her body has a consciousness that enables her to swim without reflecting on her movements and how they interact with the water.



Perceiving without thinking

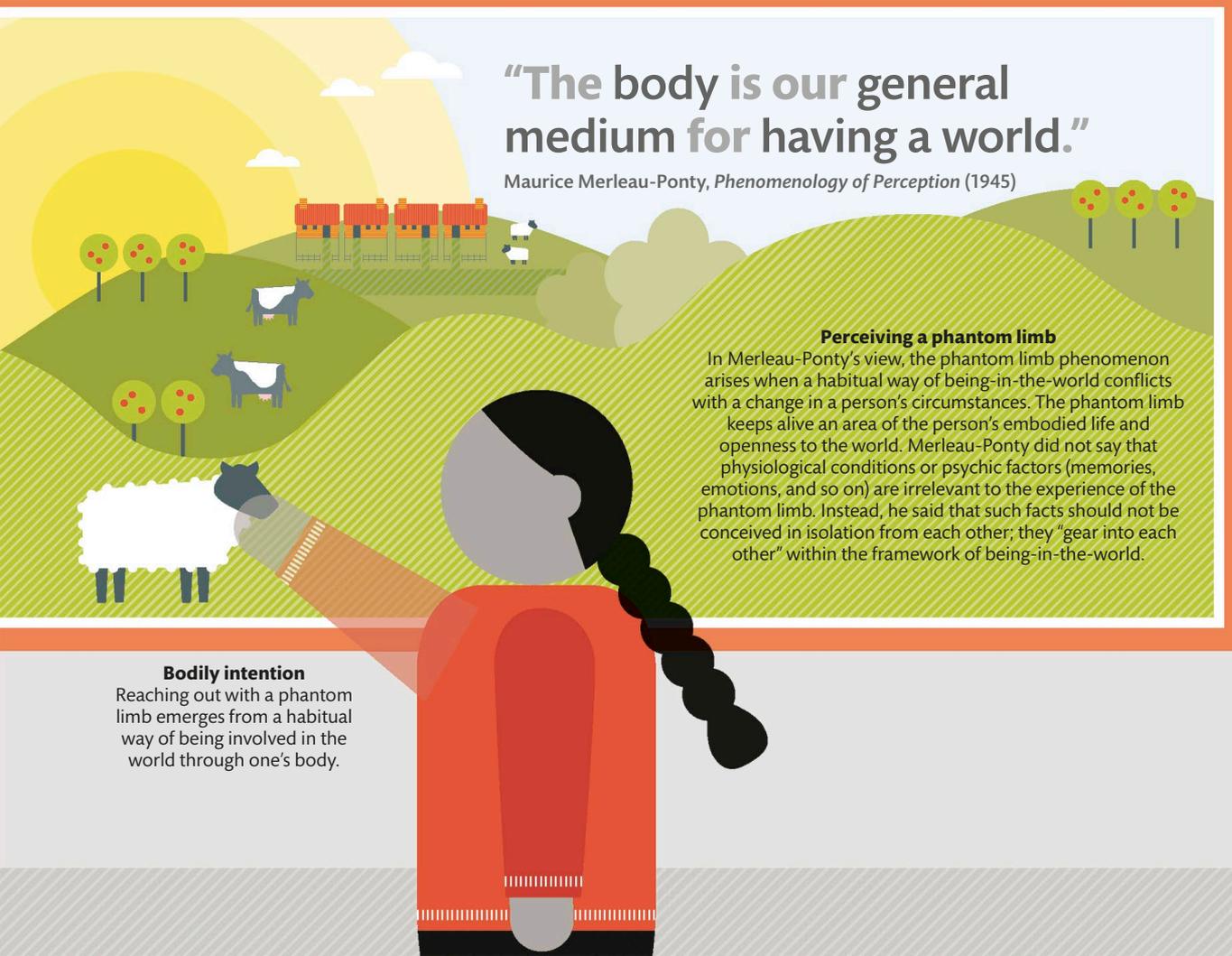
Our perception of things involves an awareness of objects as a whole, including parts we cannot see, such as the interior of a house. This precedes our focusing on particular details.

to act with purpose. The “lived body” (a term first used by Husserl to describe the body as we experience it from a first-personal point of view) is not accessible to us like an object that we can see and touch from all sides, but is always present for us and enables us to access the world. The lived body is not a mere object, but is involved in all aspects of our existence.

The phantom limb

To illustrate this view, Merleau-Ponty used the phenomenon of the phantom limb (where someone who has lost a limb still feels the limb as part of their body). Merleau-Ponty argued that this phenomenon

is neither merely the result of neural connections nor of purely mental processes. The empiricist explanation of the body is insufficient here, for given that the limb is no longer present, it cannot receive stimuli. Also, different patients tend to have different experiences of the condition. The intellectualist explanation also fails because the limb is vividly felt as present—far too vividly for it to have been generated by a mental representation such as a memory. Rather, Merleau-Ponty argued, the phantom limb has its source in the person’s habitual ways of being and acting in the world. For this reason, the intention is still present, even though the limb is not.



“The body is our general medium for having a world.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)

Perceiving a phantom limb

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the phantom limb phenomenon arises when a habitual way of being-in-the-world conflicts with a change in a person’s circumstances. The phantom limb keeps alive an area of the person’s embodied life and openness to the world. Merleau-Ponty did not say that physiological conditions or psychic factors (memories, emotions, and so on) are irrelevant to the experience of the phantom limb. Instead, he said that such facts should not be conceived in isolation from each other; they “gear into each other” within the framework of being-in-the-world.

Bodily intention

Reaching out with a phantom limb emerges from a habitual way of being involved in the world through one’s body.



Critical theory

Developed as a response to the rise of 20th-century capitalist society, critical theory aimed to free individuals from ideological, cultural, and political forms of domination.

Emancipation

Led by a group of scholars based in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1930s, critical theorists examined modern capitalist society, seeking to identify and expose its limitations—in particular, the norms and institutions that define society and that can exert power over individuals. Critical theory attempted to uncover not only sources of domination, but also possibilities for social change, with the eventual practical aim of human emancipation. A “real democracy,” according to Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), leader of the Frankfurt School, is one in which “all conditions of social life that are controllable by human beings depend on real consensus.”

Instrumental rationality

Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) were critical of liberalism and the “instrumental rationality” that seeks to identify efficient means for specific ends, and thus control and manipulate relevant factors in order to reach set goals. They argued that the liberal, capitalist ideologies that are used to promote social, economic, or political progress—resulting, for example, in mass production and rampant consumerism—have led to the decline of the individual. The rationality of liberalism, therefore, needs to be reconsidered for the genuine pursuit of social freedom.

Discursive rationality

More recently, Jürgen Habermas (1929–) argued for a more discursive, collaborative approach to rationality, framing it as a social enterprise to be carried out within the public sphere. He believed that assessing ethical and political norms cannot be the result of detached “armchair” thinking, but can only occur through public discussion, which should be open to all those affected by an issue. This approach emphasizes social diversity and complexity and enables people to be seen as individuals existing independently in their own socio-historical circumstances.

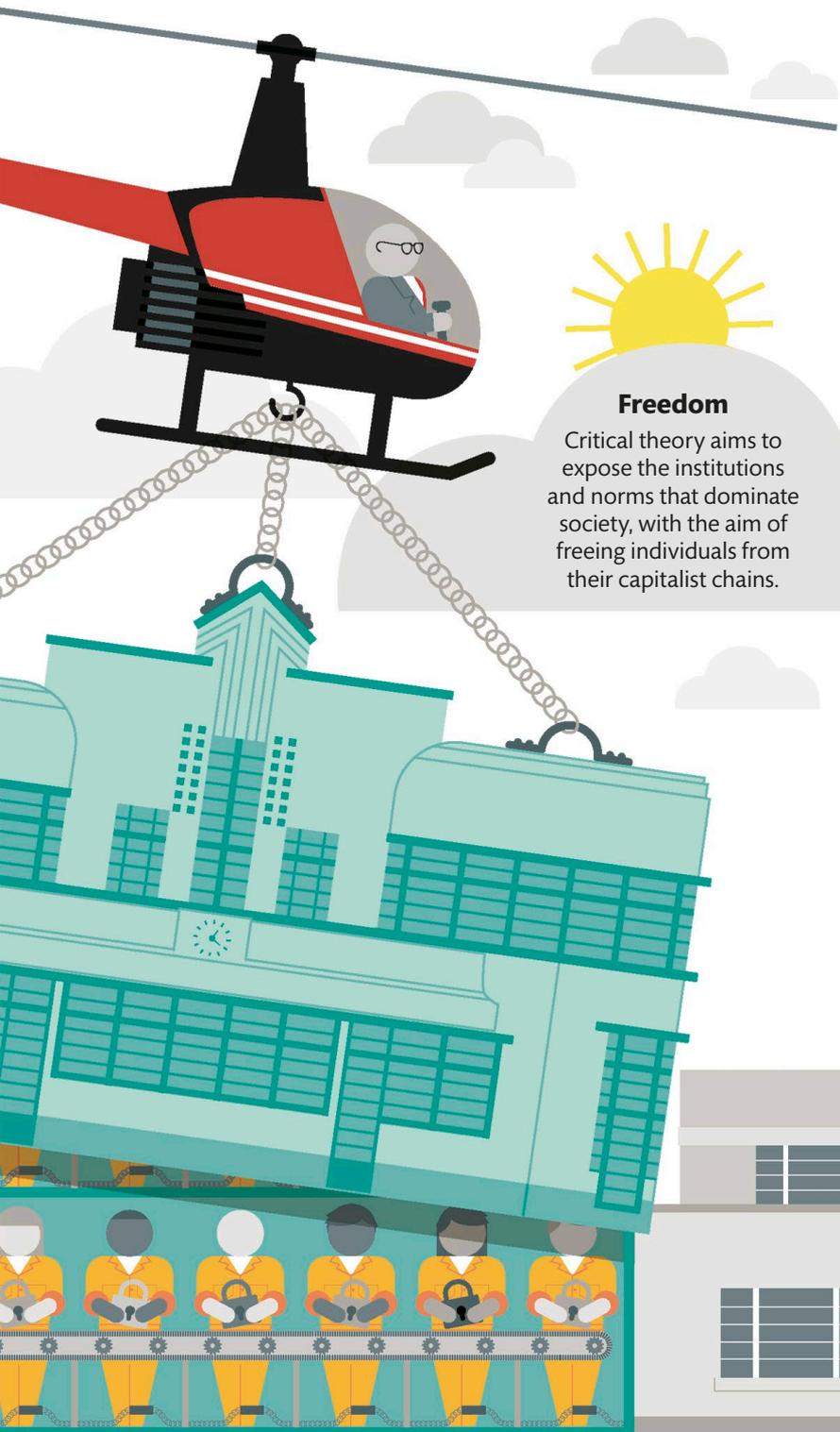
“The limited freedom of the bourgeois individual puts on the illusory form of perfect freedom.”

Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (1972)

Liberation from liberalism

Critical theorists argued that liberal rationality no longer sets us free, but has instead turned into a new form of enslavement. They seek to overturn various forms of social, economic, and political control over individuals.





Freedom

Critical theory aims to expose the institutions and norms that dominate society, with the aim of freeing individuals from their capitalist chains.

THE RISE OF CRITICAL THEORY

The first critical theorists were influenced by Karl Marx's critique of society and the economy (see pp.218-219). The critical theory movement centers on the Frankfurt School, whose members include Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse.

Technological advances in the early 20th century allowed ideas to be quickly reproduced and circulated to huge numbers of people. This, critical theorists argue, enabled certain ideologies and cultural forces to dominate and suppressed individuals' desires to seek answers for themselves.

Critical theory has, since its foundation, extended in numerous directions, including feminism, postcolonial and race theories, and gender theory.



Power plays

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was a prominent social theorist, historian of ideas, and philosopher associated with postmodernism (see pp.138–139). His work challenged traditional ideas about power.

Disciplinary power

Foucault's philosophy challenged both traditional philosophers and important thinkers of his own time, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (see pp. 126–127). He was influenced to some extent by existentialism and phenomenology, as well as the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (see pp.78–79).

Foucault regarded power and knowledge as being intimately interconnected and being used to control and dominate individuals. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he considered new forms of control and punishment at work in the modern prison. He identified what he calls “disciplinary power,” which is exerted not only in prison, but also in other institutions such as schools, hospitals, and industry. This is a mode of control that pervades all levels of society.

The tactics and techniques of modern disciplinary power are designed to sustain power structures throughout society by imposing self-regulation on the populace. Foucault thought that

this modern “disciplinary power” replaces the “sovereign power” (of, for example, kings or judges) found in feudal social structures.

Conforming individuals

Disciplinary power achieves control over individuals by making them conform voluntarily to the norms and standards of society. It brings about the “normalization” of individuals (especially “deviant” persons) by requiring them to fit into existing systems such as education. The process is also intended to produce efficient workers.

At the same time, the infrastructure for the monitoring and observation of individuals—such as the surveillance camera—effectively controls individuals by identifying deviant behavior for punishment. Foucault also applies his theories on the relationship between power and identity to sexuality, a theme developed by Judith Butler in her work on gender, sex, and sexuality (see pp.140–141).

Normalization

Foucault calls the crucial technique for exerting disciplinary power over individuals “normalization.” Individuals who are observed, examined, and judged as having failed to comply with required norms and regulations (such as those in industry) or to meet certain standards (of good, “normal” behavior, for example) are considered “deviant” or “abnormal.” The behavior of such individuals is deemed to require correction—potentially through coercive tactics and procedures. Techniques of disciplinary control thereby turn individuals into the objects of scientific (or pseudoscientific) knowledge and domination.

Punishment

Close surveillance is a more efficient and less severe form of control than previous systems based on physical punishment.



Diverse workforce

The capitalist economy requires vast numbers of individuals from a variety of backgrounds to work in industry.



Entering education

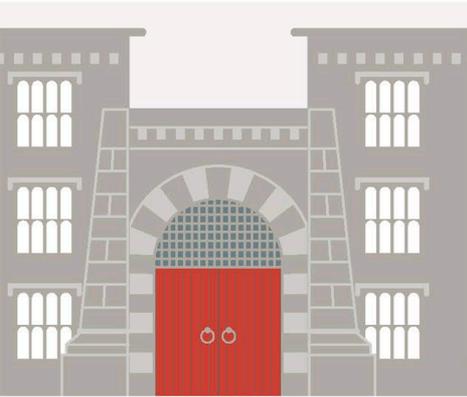
Education appears to open up new opportunities for students with a wide range of potential skills and abilities.





“Disciplinary power [...] is exercised through its invisibility.”

Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish (1975)



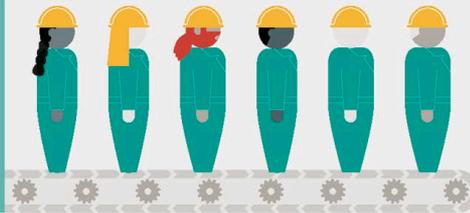
Normalization in prisons

Observation and strict surveillance achieves normalization: inmates behave as though they are constantly being observed.



Normalization in industry

Monitoring and surveillance turns individuals into efficient and useful workers who are judged by their contribution to the economy.



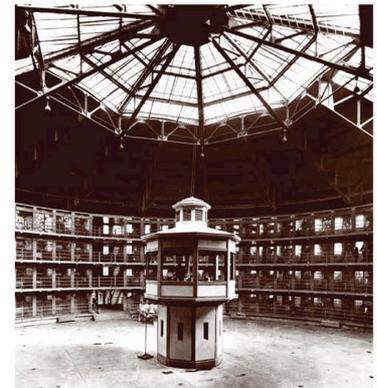
Normalization in education

Education aligned with norms and standards controls students, rendering them employable and therefore useful to society.



THE PANOPTICON

Foucault used the example of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison, which Bentham designed in the late 18th century, to illustrate his idea of modern disciplinary power. The architectural model of the prison includes individual cells encircling a central observation tower, from which each of the inmates could be watched. The idea was that because the inmates could be observed at any time, they would behave as though they were constantly under inspection. Foucault considered this technique to be a prototypical example of using disciplinary power to exert control over the individual.



The Panopticon was never built, but this 1928 prison in Crest Hill, Illinois, followed Bentham's original design.



Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida was an influential postmodern thinker whose thesis of “deconstruction” laid down a detailed linguistic challenge to both the prevailing views of the day and accepted philosophical tradition.

Dismantling philosophies

The idea of “Deconstruction” proposed by Derrida (1930–2004) owed much to Martin Heidegger’s earlier notion of “*Destruktion*,” which itself challenged the Western metaphysical tradition—the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality and our perception of it. Derrida continued Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and, in particular, its “logocentrism”—the idea that truth exists as a separate entity to the language (“*logos*”) used to describe it. Derrida famously declared “There is no outside-text,” meaning we cannot grasp what is beyond the language used to discuss philosophical concepts.

Derrida argued that the meaning of a word is not a representation of some “truth” that exists “out there.” Instead, words draw their meaning from their links and oppositions to other terms. In traditional metaphysical thinking, binary oppositions such as essence/appearance, speech/writing, mind/body, being/nothingness, and male/female have gained acceptance. Derrida points out that these oppositions involve a biased prioritization of one term over the other in a hierarchical relationship decided arbitrarily.

Not only is this theoretically inadequate, but it can be ethically or politically dangerous, potentially resulting in violence or injustice against the things represented by the “inferior” item in each pair.

As a philosophical approach, deconstruction investigates these binary oppositions and exposes the biases that underlie them. It does not seek to reconcile the terms of opposition, but aims to destabilize and rethink the differences between traditional opposites.

Différance

Derrida further explored the meaning of words with his idea of “*différance*,” a play on words that implies both difference and a deferral of meaning. He argued that meaning comes from differences between words, but that arriving at meaning is deferred because of the way we use language—terms are qualified, explained, and contextualized by the other words surrounding them. For Derrida, *différance* means that when we examine “truths,” theories, and ideas, we must deconstruct the words used to refer to them, remaining alert to the fact that meaning is never as straightforward or explicit as it may seem.

POSTMODERNISM

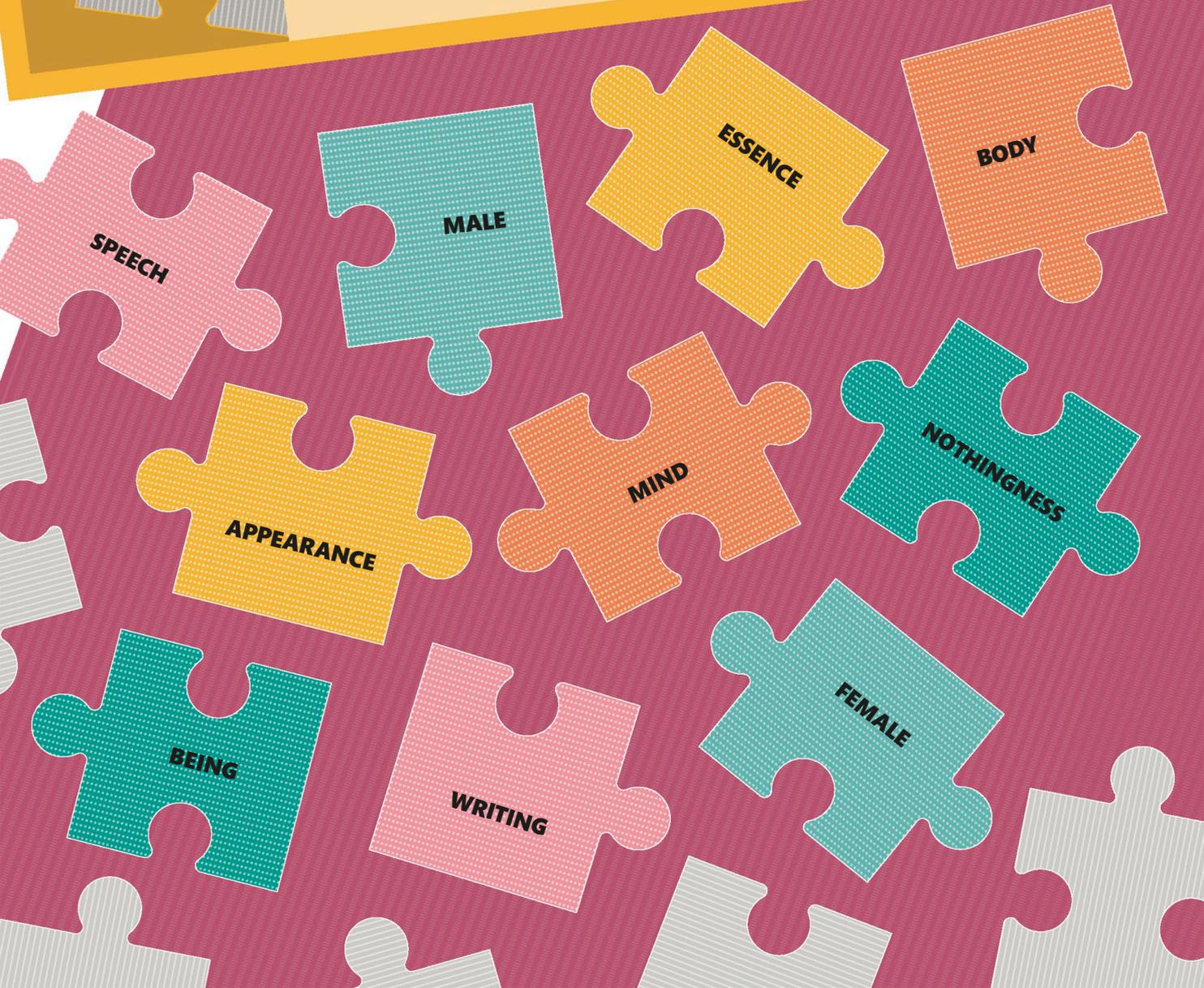
Postmodernists argue that the world as we know it is “discursively constructed”—that there is no fixed or stable relationship between individuals and the world, and that difference is at the heart of all things. Postmodernists endorse multiple viewpoints and emphasize the “contingency”—reliance on other factors—of scientific and other rational attempts to make sense of things. They challenge the authority of reason and objectivity and argue that choosing one theory over another is a result of individual decisions rather than of rational, objective justification.

Questioning meaning

Meaning is created by the “play” of differences between words, which can be limitless and indefinite. Rather than perceiving concepts as existing in paired opposites, Derrida encourages us to question the basis of our understanding, actively deconstructing the meaning of a text by challenging implicit hierarchies, breaking traditional binary pairings, and looking for gaps—which Derrida termed “*aporias*” (Ancient Greek for “puzzles” or “contradictions”)—in meaning.



TRADITIONAL DISCOURSE



SPEECH

MALE

ESSENCE

BODY

APPEARANCE

MIND

NOTHINGNESS

BEING

WRITING

FEMALE



Feminist postmodernism

Third-wave feminists, influenced by postmodernism (see pp.138–139), question the idea that sex and gender are biologically determined. They aim to overturn dominant “feminine” and “masculine” ideals.

Gender as a performance

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender is a sort of performance. Acted out repeatedly, gendered performances have solidified in time and created the illusion that gender has an essential nature, which is either male or female.

Such performances, Butler claims, reinforce dominant norms and ideals relating to the traditional gender binary (feminine and masculine) and (hetero)sexuality, and marginalize and oppress those who do not conform, such as gay or transgender people.

Butler argues that these norms are socially constructed and rooted in language as “regulative discourses.” Such discourses shape which forms of sex, gender, and sexuality are “socially acceptable,”

and enable dominant groups to exercise power over others. Butler argues that we must contest these norms in order to destabilize the view of a gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality.

Against essentialism

Essentialism, simply defined, is the view that all women across cultures and time share essential features or experiences. An essentialist might, for example, say that sex is defined

Sex and gender are both socially constructed

Third-wave feminists, including Butler, argue not only that gender is socially constructed, but that sex (having a “male” or “female” body) is, too, through language. They question the biological foundations of gender.



Redefining gender

Many contemporary feminists believe that universal claims about women, gender, and sex are wrong. Such claims, they say, obscure the diversity of women’s situations and strengthen male-female power hierarchies. Butler argues that not only gender but also sex is socially constructed and reinforced.





by essential biological attributes we are born with (a view called “biological foundationalism”).

Butler argues that essentialism is a political fiction that serves existing oppressive patriarchal regimes. In her critique of the category “woman,” she rejects the view that the word refers to a unified gender identity and proposes a new understanding of the complexities of gender identity that intersects with other aspects of a woman’s identity, such as race.

THE THREE WAVES OF FEMINISM

The traditional (pre-1960) view of gender and sex was that they are both the product of biology—that is, that sex determined gendered behavior and roles. Second-wave feminists (1960s–early 1980s) believed that sex is biological, but that gender is a social and cultural creation. Third-wave feminists (1990s–) argue that “sex” and “the body” are not simply biological categories: differences between male and female bodies are, in part at least, socially constructed.



THIRD-WAVE FEMINISTS question the idea of essential female characteristics.



One size does not fit all

Butler argues that an idealized view of women is a dangerous illusion that has an oppressive power and damaging effects.

“Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.”

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990)



Gender roles

Butler seems to liken us to actors in a puppet show, performing gendered scripts, and asks how we can disrupt these norms to promote justice for both women and men.