On June 11, 1963, 73-year-old Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, sat in a busy downtown intersection of Saigon and set himself on fire. He burned to death in seconds. It was the ultimate protest by Buddhists against the political oppression and persecution they felt in Vietnam under the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem.
UNIT EXPECTATIONS

By the end of this unit, you will be able to

• summarize the main questions, philosophers, and schools of philosophy of social and political philosophy

• evaluate responses to the main questions and theories of social and political philosophy expressed by some major philosophers and schools of philosophy

• demonstrate the relevance of questions and theories of social and political philosophy to everyday life, to other areas of philosophy, and to other subject areas

• apply philosophical reasoning skills to develop and express your own ideas about issues in social and political philosophy

When do citizens have a responsibility to obey the law, and when are they justified in protesting against their government?

Although disturbing, the practice of suicide as a means of protest forces us to consider the importance of rights and freedoms, and the lengths to which people are willing to go to secure their rights and freedoms. How do you feel about suicide as a form of political protest? Is it effective, or is it excessive? How do you think a government should respond to political protests?

Is it a human power or a divine power that invests a government with authority? By what right does a government retain control over the people, justifying its power? Who should control the economy: the government or the market? Should society ensure that wealth is distributed equally? If so, how should this be done? These are some of the questions you will explore in this unit, through the writings of political philosophers and activists working for either social conservation or social change.

YOUR UNIT CHALLENGE

Your challenge for this unit is to develop a question about social and political philosophy that you would like to have answered. Write an answer to your question, based on your knowledge at this point in the course. When you have completed Unit 6: Social and Political Philosophy, answer your question again, based on what you have learned in the unit. Then compare your new answer with your original answer. How has your answer changed?
CHAPTER EXPECTATIONS

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- demonstrate an understanding of the main questions of social and political philosophy
- summarize the positions of the major philosophers and schools of philosophy in social and political philosophy

**Key Terms**

- anarchism
- authoritarianism
- capitalism
- communism
- conservatism
- democracy
- egalitarianism
- fascism
- liberalism
- natural law
- political philosophy
- religious universalism
- social philosophy
- socialism
- social contract
- totalitarianism
- utopianism

**Figure 16-2**

A protest against the G-20 Summit in Toronto, during the summer of 2010, turned violent as masked demonstrators stomped on a police vehicle. What are the limits to freedom of expression?
CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Social philosophy and political philosophy do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by the historical, cultural, and religious forces of a nation. These forces shape the ideologies, policies, and structure of the nation’s social and political institutions. To live together in peace, humans must follow a system of rules that is intended to provide security, equality, and justice.

Although social philosophy and political philosophy are often examined as one, there is a key difference between them. Social philosophy explores the relationships between people and political institutions. It addresses government regulations that affect society, such as social welfare, labour policies, and equal opportunity laws. Political philosophy explores the ideal type of government and looks at where power resides (for example, the church or the state, the monarch or the legislature). It explores the concepts of justice, rights, and regulations. It often focuses on what ought to be the case, instead of chronicling what is the case: What is the ideal government? Should all people be treated equally regardless of race, creed, or gender? How much freedom should an individual enjoy without government interference or limitation? What rights and responsibilities should citizens have in a well-governed state? Political philosophy also focuses on meaning: What do justice and freedom mean? Do the meanings of justice and freedom allow everyone to enjoy them equally? In this chapter, you will explore the answers to these questions as you examine how political philosophy is woven into the fabric of our lives.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
—Martin Luther King Jr.
THE IDEAL STATE: WHAT PHILOSOPHERS HAVE SAID

Philosophers have long questioned the nature of political power and explored the concept of the ideal state. Why do states exist, and what limits should be placed on their power? How should a society be structured, and who should rule? What is the purpose of a political community, and how can we attain justice and happiness? In this section, you will look at how various philosophers over the last 2000 years have tried to answer these questions.

Ancient Greek Philosophers

In the Republic, Plato (427–347 BCE) presented his idea of a just state: one that is organized into levels. As shown in Figure 16-3, each level corresponds to a type of metal, with gold at the top. This hierarchy reflects Plato’s belief that if the people in each class worked to fulfill their natural skills and talents, order would be achieved in society. Justice would also be achieved, in the sense that everyone would be working to their full potential for the common good. Maintaining order, at the head of Plato’s ideal state, is the philosopher-king, a wise person who rules with reason, courage, and moderation. He or she is responsible for reigning in the animal passions or greed that threaten to undermine social order. In Plato’s Republic, Socrates describes the ideal state as an analogy. Justice in the Republic, he argues, is a suitable model for justice in the soul because both require balance between rational and animal elements. Human justice involves wisdom, courage, and moderation, which includes knowing one’s proper place in society.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was concerned with which type of government—monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—would best serve the common good. He believed that each type of government has its advantages, but there is not one supreme system that suits every society. Although he believed that democracy—rule by the people—would work under certain circumstances, he cautioned that this type of governance could lead to chaos if the majority of citizens were unreasonable or ignorant. Aristotle’s collection of ideas, published as lecture notes in Politics, emphasizes that those who are in power need to consider the interests of everyone—except women, slaves, and children, who have no role in politics. According to Aristotle, the political community revolves around the polis, or city-state. Men can gather in the polis to exchange their logos (reasoned speech) and engage in praxis (cooperative action) for the advancement of ideas and, ultimately, the improvement of society.
**Persian Philosophers**

Aristotle’s ideas on government were far-reaching. The Persian philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi, (870–950) was a voracious reader of Aristotle’s work. As one of the early political philosophers of Islam, he promoted the idea of a “virtuous city” in his book *The Virtuous City*. In a virtuous city, the goal of all citizens, including the king, would be to cooperate with one another and cultivate each other’s virtues, as well as maintain these virtues in proportion to the *golden mean*: not too courageous so as to risk needless defeat in foreign wars, nor too afraid to defend the state against invaders. Al-Farabi believed that people have their own unique skills and talents, which they should develop to the highest ability in order to achieve happiness. Al-Farabi’s qualities of the ideal king—a virtuous and intellectual philosopher—resemble those of Plato’s philosopher-king.

Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Sinā, also known as Avicenna, (981–1037) was another Persian philosopher who was influenced by Aristotle’s ideas regarding the state. In *The Book of Healing*, he focused on the community, more specifically the city-state, for ensuring order. He described the idea of the “just city,” which would provide the material necessities of survival for its citizens, resulting in social harmony. Avicenna departed from Plato’s idea of the philosopher-king as the ideal ruler. In his opinion, the state would best be served by a leader who possessed more practical traits, such as common sense and effective political control. In *Realism and Idealism in Avicenna’s Political Philosophy*, Miriam Galston describes Avicenna’s ideal ruler as follows: “The determining factor here is superiority of practical judgment and excellence in political management...”

**Medieval Philosophers**

After Avicenna’s ideas were translated into Latin, he gained prominence among some medieval European philosophers. During the Middle Ages, the relationship between the church and the state was a central concern of social and political philosophers in Europe. At this time, the ideas of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), an influential Dominican Italian priest and theologian, were prominent. Aquinas focused on the idea of one ruler, whose supreme authority was a God-given right. He justified the Church’s role as the higher political authority because of natural law: the concept of a universal, eternal, and natural force. According to Aquinas, God reflects natural law and His word forms the basis of people’s morality. A ruler who followed the natural hierarchy of order would legitimately rule, provided that he cared for the “common good” and was not a tyrant who put his own interests before those of the people. Aquinas describes this type of ruler in his work *On Princely Government*: “When government is unjustly exercised...”
by one man who seeks personal profit from his position instead of the good of the community subject to him, such a ruler is called a tyrant.”

Englishman Thomas More (1478–1535) was a lawyer by training but worked as a Lord Chancellor for King Henry VIII. He proposed an ideal society based on mutual cooperation, communally-held property, and abundant leisure time for people to enrich their lives. In his work *Utopia*, published in 1516, More detailed his vision for a shift in governance from a system based on greed and self-interest to one based on sharing and mutual interest. His concept of the ideal political state is known as *utopianism* (from the Greek *ou*, meaning “no,” and *topos*, meaning “place”). More’s contributions to social and political philosophy were short-lived, however. King Henry VIII chopped off More’s head when he did not recognize the King’s divorce and new title as head of the Church of England. At his execution, More joked that his beard did not deliver harm and should be spared from being part of the chopping. More was later made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

In contrast to Aquinas’s and More’s Christian ideas of an ideal society, which emphasized the common good and mutual interest, Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) focused on self-interest and the cultivation of a person’s *virtù*—personality traits required to achieve and maintain power—as guiding principles. Machiavelli was a well-known philosopher who was very active behind the scenes in the politics of the Florentine republic. His short but influential work, *The Prince* (1513), defined a successful ruler as one who puts his morality aside in favour of achieving political gain. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli explains that a successful ruler must do whatever it takes to hold on to power and govern effectively, even if this means breaking moral codes: “…he must be mentally prepared to act as circumstances and changes in fortune require. …he should do what is right if he can; but he must be prepared to do wrong if necessary.”

1. Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies of the ideal state reflect the time period in which they lived.
   a) What assumptions about gender, human rights, and intellectual capabilities did they make? How did their assumptions influence their ideas?

   b) Do their ideas continue to exist in various parts of the world? If so, explain where and how.

2. In your opinion, does the church have a higher authority than the state, or should society keep the church and the state separate? Explain your answer.
INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND STATE INTERFERENCE

Philosophers at different points in history, and in various parts of the world, have reflected on the relationship between the individual and the state. Who is more important: the individual or the community? How much freedom should the individual give up for the benefit of living in a peaceful society? What limits, if any, should be placed on the state’s power? Two 17th century English philosophers, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704), had very different views on the authority of the state. Hobbes did not believe in limiting the state’s power if this meant maintaining social order. Locke believed that if the state interfered with people’s natural rights, people had the right to rebel against the state.

The Social Contract

In 17th century England, the civil war between parliament and the monarchy helped to shape the political ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both supported the idea of a social contract between the people and the state, but for different reasons. A social contract involves the individual giving up some of his or her freedoms to the state in order to attain and preserve social harmony.

Thomas Hobbes argued that a social contract is necessary because of the evil nature of humans. He advocated the need for a ruler because human beings are naturally selfish and animalistic in their instinct for self-preservation. Hobbes believed that if people had complete freedom, without rules or a ruler to establish order, they would harm anyone who threatened their well-being. This would result in total chaos. In his book Leviathan, Hobbes explains that without a ruler, people’s lives would remain “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” The supreme ruler, or “the great Leviathan,” as coined by Hobbes, would reflect the “plurality of voices, unto one will,” subjecting the people’s “judgement to [the ruler’s] judgement” for the ruler to maintain peace and order effectively. According to Hobbes, if the community transfers its rights to the ruler, the Leviathan can hold absolute and supreme control over the people.

John Locke countered Hobbes’s view of the Leviathan and the absolute authority of the state. He believed that people hold natural rights of life, liberty, and property. (The Constitution of the United States rephrases “property” more generally as “the pursuit of happiness.”) According to Locke, the state can justify its authority only if it protects these rights. In The Second Treatise of Civil Government (1690), Locke’s premise of the social contract focuses on the mutual obligation between the government and its subjects: the government protects the rights of its
subjects, and the subjects reciprocate by obeying the government’s laws. The government’s rule remains firm as long as the government upholds the protection of the rights and laws that were made in accordance with the people’s consent; if the government violates these rights and laws, the people can form a new government. The exception to this contract is non-landowners, who cannot enjoy this protection. How does Locke’s restriction to landowners resemble Plato’s division of social classes?

Another philosopher who supported the social contract theory was the Swiss-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whose book *The Social Contract* opens as follows: “L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers” or “Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains.” Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau believed that evil and misery come from society, not from people, whose nature is essentially good. In the same book, Rousseau explains that it is in everyone’s interest to enter into a social contract—to compromise some of his or her rights in order to enjoy the benefits of the state: “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.” Rousseau argued that the existence of the state is justified because it represents what is best for the community—a concept that he called the general will. The state understands and respects the general will and applies it for the benefit of everyone. The actions of those who defy the general will are not tolerated because they are harmful to the social contract and to themselves.

**Conservatism and Liberalism**

Social and political philosophies often develop as a response to their historical context: the political, social, cultural, and economic setting during which they emerge. In 1814, a new political philosophy, called *conservatism*, emerged as a reaction to the radical political upheaval of the French Revolution (1789–1799). Conservatism promotes the idea that political change should take place gradually through reasoned analysis, as opposed to violence. It emphasizes the preservation of traditional values and institutions. Edmund Burke (1729–1797), an Irish-born philosopher, criticized the forceful and violent protests that characterized the French Revolution. In 1790, he published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a work that emphasized reasoned dialogue between the state and “those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.” Burke believed that society is built on the traditions and customs handed down by previous generations and that established institutions, such as the monarchy and the Church, are what hold society together. He emphasized the rights of the community over those of the individual.
Countering conservatism is the philosophy of liberalism, which emphasizes the freedom of the individual, with minimal government constraints. The British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) championed liberalism in his work On Liberty (1859). Mill did not believe in government interference, except to protect citizens from physical or moral harm. For example, if a parent were unable to provide food or education for his or her child, the state would have a moral obligation to step in and provide for the child.

Aside from the state’s moral obligation, Mill presses for the individual’s full freedom of expression, thought, feeling, and pursuit in order to gain knowledge and truth. Being able to exchange ideas without state interference or coercion means that people can seek truth, which ultimately leads to the progress of humankind.

“...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race...If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth, if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

Unlike Aristotle and Locke, Mill believed that women have rights. He circulated a petition defending the equal rights of women.

**Extremes of State Authority**

When there are few or no limits to state authority, people are more vulnerable to government interference and reduced protection of their rights. Moreover, complete authority by the state often leads to abuse of power and the loss of individual freedom. In Canada, protection against absolute, unchecked government authority is entrenched in the constitution. For example, Article 9 of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms restricts police authority and its powers of arbitrary arrest or detention. However, people in other parts of the world are not protected by the checks and balances of a democratic political system and are ruled by governments who represent extremes of political philosophy.

**Totalitarianism** is a form of government that is led by a dictator. A dictator is a leader who demands complete obedience from the people, negating their individual rights in the process. Central to the totalitarian philosophy is a state that regulates all resources and all political and social matters. The dictator exercises complete control over all the people and uses military force to subdue any challenges to state authority and to reinforce his or her power. Freedom of expression is not tolerated, as censorship is the norm. Can you think of any examples of totalitarianism in the world today?
Similar to totalitarianism, **authoritarianism** is a form of government in which the ruler possesses absolute control and exercises arbitrary rule over the people. Citizens must completely submit to the ruler, for fear of meeting their fate at the hands of a brutal military regime. Individual freedoms and rights are severely restricted under the heavy hand of authoritarianism. **Fascism**, a reflection of authoritarianism, is characterized by extreme nationalism led by an exalted ruler, complete censorship of the press, and a strong military that would use violence to achieve its ends. A fascist state is founded on a rigid class society, based on a hierarchical model: labourers, farmers, professionals, and the military. Do you know of any examples of authoritarianism or fascism in the world today or in the past?

**Anarchism** is the opposite extreme of complete state authority. Derived from the Greek word *anarchos*, meaning “without rulers,” anarchism is a political ideology that supports true freedom, arising from the abolishment of the state and social institutions. Although anarchism has come to be associated with violence and chaos, the original philosophy emphasized non-violence. French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), for whom "property is a form of theft," conceived *anarchy* to mean a society without a government—a society that would undergo a non-violent transformation based on a peaceful reconciliation between citizens and state. Since then, however, some anarchists around the world have tried to achieve change through violent means.

**Challenging State Authority**

On June 5, 1989, a solitary man stood defencelessly, yet defiantly, in front of a line of military tanks in China’s Tiananmen Square. The photograph shown in Figure 16-11 captured the tense climax of the pro-democracy student protest against the Chinese government. For several weeks, students and workers had come to Beijing from throughout China to press for freedom of speech and expression, for less corruption in all levels of government, and for more governmental reforms. The night before this photograph was taken, Tiananmen Square had been the site of a bloody massacre. Approximately 2000 protesters had lost their lives in a hail of bullets and a procession of tanks. The image of the Tank Man continues to be banned in China on the Internet and in other media. Although more than 20 years have passed since this tumultuous event, the Tiananmen protest is considered a defining moment in the history of Communist China—a state that does not tolerate challenges to its authority.
The Tiananmen protest underscores issues of governance, citizen expression, and state authority. Activities or ideas that challenge the Chinese state are quickly suppressed or prohibited. There is a long conservative tradition of showing humility before the emperor, supported in part by Confucian thinking from the 6th century BCE and Mohism from the 4th century BCE. Because the Tiananmen protest inspired so many people to demonstrate publically against China’s Communist government, its members feared that the student movement would eventually remove them from power. Although suppressed by the police state, this threat remains today. In 2009, Liu Xiaobo was charged by the state for “inciting subversion of state power.” He was sentenced to 11 years in prison for publishing Charter 08, a petition expressing the need for political change to improve human rights and to end one-party rule in China. In 2010, Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his tireless efforts to secure greater civil liberties for the Chinese people. By awarding the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Committee was criticizing the Chinese Communist Party’s suppression of individual rights, such as freedom of speech.

**PROFILE**

Mozi
470–391 BCE

- Chinese philosopher born in Tengzhou, Shangdong Province
- After his death, his disciples formed Mohism, a school of thought based on his ideas about politics and society

According to Mohists, to eliminate opportunities for disagreement and chaos in society, an authoritarian ruler needs to establish and enforce a unified moral code that will be delivered by educating the masses.

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Figure 16-11
This image is known as the Tank Man. Why is it so powerful?
After the presidential victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on June 12, 2009, in Iran, a domestic and worldwide protest erupted, disputing the fairness of the electoral process. The defiant outpouring of support for the opposition candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, whose campaign colour was green, demonstrated the people’s desire for political change. Beginning with Mr. Mousavi’s presidential bid, the campaign for political reform, called *mowj-e-sabz* or the Green Revolution, reflected the growing need to restore the civil liberties of the Iranian people, eliminate corruption in the government, and implement economic reforms.

On June 16, 2009, an estimated 7 million Iranians from all walks of life—students and workers, men and women—marched in silence. One particular Iranian protester, whose death symbolized the voice of freedom, was 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan. Silenced by a single bullet from a sniper’s rifle, Agha-Soltan’s death challenges state authority, brutality, and oppression. Can the legitimacy of the Iranian government still be upheld, despite the overwhelming protest against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election?

1. Hobbes and Rousseau provide different perspectives on human nature.
   a) Whose philosophy do you agree with, and why?
   b) How do Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s assumptions about human nature dictate their political philosophy?

2. What is the difference between conservatism and liberalism? How would each of these schools of thought respond to the Tiananmen protest?

3. The G-20 protest in Toronto, in the summer of 2010, turned into a violent demonstration (see Figure 16-2). Which philosophical theory or theories would the Canadian government use to justify its authority, namely the use of the police force, in response to the protesters?

4. Fascism is marked by the force of one ruler who has absolute and arbitrary power. If the fascist leader provides peace and economic security for the people, is the abuse of power justifiable? If so, to what extent?
**RIGHTS**

Do all people have the right to be treated equally? This is one of the most important issues in social and political philosophy. Many thinkers have imagined a society that is based on equality for all. But is this really possible? If it is, what guidelines should a society follow to ensure equality for all? If it isn’t, how should the government approach and address this issue? These are just some of the questions debated by *egalitarian* political philosophers, who believe that it is the state’s responsibility to correct inequalities in society. What do you think? As you read this section, try to formulate your own ideas on the concept of equality for all.

**The Equal Distribution of Wealth**

Many of those who promote the idea that it is the state’s responsibility to correct inequalities in society believe that the government should play a role in redistributing wealth to avoid extreme differences in the income of its citizens. The government has the power to do this, by demanding more taxes from people with higher incomes and less taxes from those with lower incomes, and then using the tax money to benefit the poor. Critics of this approach think it is unfair and describe it as “stealing from the rich to give to the poor.” Do you agree with these critics?

**The Struggle among Classes**

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

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight—a fight that each time ended neither in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

—opening lines of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

By the end of the 19th century, Europe was enjoying the fruits of the Industrial Age. During this time, however, economic inequalities undermined the idea that everyone would share the success. In reality, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population held the majority of the riches. Witnessing the economic and social disparity between the
wealthy and the working class, German philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) envisioned a society of equality for everyone, where all class systems would be eliminated, all private property would become public, and all forms of governance would be centralized in the hands of the working class. The Communist Party was supposed to be “the vanguard of the proletariat,” or the workers’ protector against exploitation. In their work, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels focused on motivating the working class to revolt against the government and industrial elite. They developed three key ideas: socialism, communism, and egalitarianism.

**Socialism** involves managing the economy through specific government policies and through collective ownership and control of industries, such as agriculture, banking, and transportation. Modern socialism tries to level social inequalities through government interventions, such as providing unemployment insurance to the unemployed and welfare to the poor. **Communism** takes this further with collective ownership of all property and centralized control over the production and distribution of goods. Called a *command economy*, a communist system transfers the ownership of property from the hands of a privileged few into the hands of the state. Class distinction is erased, and everyone shares in the benefits of each other’s labour. Critics refer to this as a “cradle to grave welfare state” because it provides education, health care, and employment for life, but it lacks incentives for people to work harder in order to succeed. Everyone gets the same paycheque at the end of the day. In 1980, both China and Vietnam added incentives into their forms of communism to promote a stronger work ethic.

The goal of Marxist theory is to unleash human potential by reaching **egalitarianism**, which is characterized by the elimination of social inequalities through equal access to education, work, and health care. In Canada, egalitarianism is reflected in our universal health care system, which, in theory, provides everyone with the opportunity for equal access to medical services.

In contrast to socialism and communism, **capitalism** is an economic system in which the production and distribution of goods is controlled by individuals or private companies, such as McDonald’s, Nike, Rogers Communications Incorporated, and Sony. In a capitalist system, state interference is minimal, and the goal of private companies is to make as much profit as possible. Company profits are dictated by a free market, as determined by consumers.

Marx thought there was an inherent flaw in this kind of capitalist system, in which the production and distribution of goods is controlled by individual risk-takers (entrepreneurs). Private companies and corporations make as much profit as possible by increasing sales and reducing costs.
One way to reduce costs is to maintain low wages that exploit workers. The industrialist is not motivated to protect children in the interests of society. Instead, the industrialist benefits from using child labour to cut costs.

Figure 16-14
Children often worked 10-hour days in English factories during the 19th century. Karl Marx noted the plight of these young workers in his *Communist Manifesto.*

**Philosophical Liberalism**

Like Marxist philosophers, contemporary liberal thinkers seek to answer the same questions about the fair distribution of goods. However, they endorse gradual and legislative change instead of revolution. American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) is well known for his ideas on the principles of personal liberty and social equality. In one of his most noted books, *A Theory of Justice,* Rawls promotes the idea that an individual has dignity and worth that social structures should not be permitted to violate. In this book, Rawls introduces the concept of the “original position,” the starting point of a hypothetical situation in which people of somewhat equal ability decide to agree on principles of justice. To create a fair society, these people have to be placed behind what Rawls called a “veil of ignorance,” where they are unaware of their class, race, or gender. What they would be aware of is their need of “primary goods,” which include liberties, opportunities, wealth, income, and power. If people did not know where they would be placed in society, they would be better able to balance everyone's interests. Rawls believed that if society were developed in this way, fairness would be the guiding principle. His concept of the “veil of ignorance” is presented in the Thought Experiment that follows.
The Veil of Ignorance

You have been chosen to be a contestant in CBTV’s ultimate reality show: Veil of Ignorance! When you arrive at the television station, the producer greets you at the door. As you walk through the studio, she tells you about the concept of the show: “We’re going to fly you to a remote tropical island with 10,000 inhabitants, and we’re going to make you the supreme architect of the government and social system of the island. It’s going to be entirely up to you to devise a blueprint of basic rules and principles that will determine how resources on the island, such as education, health care, welfare, job opportunities, and natural materials, will be distributed among the inhabitants. You’ll be able to design anything you want, and we’ll be filming you every step of the way. We’ll make sure that everything you design gets built, implemented, or realized.”

Weird, you think. You’ve never heard of a reality show quite as realistic as this. But being all-powerful could be fun. The producer continues, “However, there’s a catch to the show. We think viewers will love the catch. You are going to have to live in the society that you design. And there’s also a twist. When you are coming up with your designs, you won’t know where you will end up in your society. You are completely in the dark. Hence the title of the show: Veil of Ignorance. Until your society is built, you won’t know if you’ll be rich or poor. You won’t know if you’ll be popular, ignored, or shunned. You won’t know if you’ll be talented at sports, music, or writing—or at nothing at all. You won’t know what your psychological makeup will be like—high strung, easy going, or introspective. You won’t know what sorts of values you’ll hold. You won’t even know if you’ll end up being male or female. You have to be prepared to end up being anyone. You don’t like this catch? It’s too risky. What if you end up on the street, homeless? Or what if you end up sick and unable to afford medical care? And, all the while, the cameras will be following you. How embarrassing.

The next day, you are on the island. You’d love to walk on those beautiful beaches and swim in the crystal blue sea. Instead, however, you are stuck in a big office behind a desk. The producer shouts “Lights, camera, action!” and the cameras start to roll. It’s not easy. You squirm in your chair. You scratch your head. You ask yourself, “How do I design an entire society from the ground up? Where do I start? What rules and principles do I create?”

After a few false starts that had the producer really interested—a despotic kingdom, a dictatorship, a slave-owning society—you realize that it’s best to play it safe. You design the fairest rules and principles you can. Why? Because you don’t want to gamble with your own future and possibly end up being homeless, oppressed, or owned by someone. So, you try to take into account the interests of everyone on the island equally, and to ensure a minimal degree of fairness for everyone. You try to design a society
that will have as few unfortunate people—including your future self—in as few unfortunate situations as possible. This involves a lot of cost-benefit analyses, in which you weigh the expected benefits of an action (the probability that it will occur, plus the benefits that it will yield) against the expected costs (the probability that it will not occur, plus the costs of it not occurring).

How did you learn those fancy cost-benefit analysis techniques? Easy, really. You remembered how your parents had to deal with all the fights you used to have with your brother and sister. If there was just one chocolate bar and your brother or sister wanted it as much as you did, your parents would prevent a fight by allowing one of you to cut it in half and the other to have first choice of the resulting pieces. This would ensure that the chocolate bar would be cut and distributed fairly. Your parents called it the “maximin principle,” and you never really understood what they meant until now.

The producer of the reality show is not very happy with the results. “Hey, I wanted some drama and suffering, highs and lows, tears of joy and sorrow. I wanted people in the audience to be on the edge of their seats, waiting to see if you were going to end up a rich CEO or a beggar on the street. I didn’t want this! Fairness doesn’t grab anyone’s attention unless they’re forced to walk in someone else’s shoes. It just doesn’t sell a television show.”

1. Could our society benefit from operating under a “veil of ignorance”? Explain your answer by providing specific examples.

2. How is Rawls’ concept of “original position” related to the question in the section introduction: Do all people have the right to be treated equally?

**Equal Treatment**

Many of the ideas about an inclusive society that were proposed by the ancient philosophers were not inclusive at all. Their understanding of the public did not include anyone who was non-European or female. In ancient times, slavery was permitted and widely practised. Enslaved individuals had no rights and were often considered the property of their owners. This created a hierarchy of people in which some were considered inferior to others.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, European states began establishing colonies in other parts of the world. The practice of conquering a foreign land to gain political and economic control of its territory is called colonialism. The Europeans felt justified in enslaving the non-European peoples they conquered because they believed themselves to be superior. Here we revisit one of the central questions of social and political philosophy: Should all people be treated equally regardless of race, creed, or gender?
During the Age of Discovery (the period between the early 15th and 17th centuries), European governments drafted laws to divide their newfound lands. Although these laws recognized the natural right of indigenous peoples to the land they inhabited, it allowed the Europeans to acquire the land by consent and sometimes by force. The use of armed force was considered unjust, unless the indigenous peoples refused to enter into trade, refused to admit Christian missionaries, or inflicted gratuitous violence upon the government or its citizens. Unfortunately, the history of clearing the land and forcing resettlement on reservations demonstrates the legacy of colonialism in justifying the use of force to acquire the indigenous peoples’ property.

**Post-Colonial Movements: The Struggle for Rights and Independence**

By World War II, many nations under colonial rule sought to take back their power and land from the Europeans. Oppressed peoples in colonized lands refused to allow themselves to be treated as inferiors and sought to free themselves, not only physically but intellectually. From these rebellions rose powerful intellectuals who developed philosophical movements that sought to achieve equality for all peoples.
Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was a political and spiritual leader who is considered the “father” of India. Gandhi’s movement was a response to England’s colonization of India, which began in the 1600s and ended in 1947. He was the leader of the Indian Nationalist Movement, which opposed British rule and promoted political and social progress for all Indians. While working in South Africa in the fight against discrimination, Gandhi created satyagraha, a concept meaning “devotion to truth.” It was based on the doctrine of non-violent protest to achieve justice and equality for all. Gandhi spent his life working diligently to overthrow British rule and to better the lives of India’s impoverished. Gandhi was a true believer of ahimsa: a doctrine of non-violence toward living things. Canadian philosopher James Tully explains as follows:

“Ahimsa or non-violence is a whole way of life for Gandhi. He says that western civilization—imperialism, capitalism, inequality, centralization, modernization, militarism—is founded on ‘might makes right’—on the premise that order has to be imposed coercively on basically asocial, aggressively competitive and distrusting humans, as in Hobbes, Kant, Marx, Mill, Freud, Rawls, Habermas, etc. …Non-violence is the opposite way of life, that relationships of love and mutual aid are deeper and more fundamental than relationships of force and competition. If this were not true, the human race would have destroyed itself long ago, yet modern histories and theories overlook non-violent trustful relationships of mutual aid that underlie the foreground wars and competitions.”

—James Tully, Gandhi, Lecture Four

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) was another Indian philosopher who was born out of the British colonization of India. He was largely influenced by Gandhi and other Indian thinkers. Radhakrishnan believed that the answer to unifying India was to turn to religious teachings. Agreeing with Gandhi, Radhakrishnan believed in the moral foundation of politics, proclaiming that religion and politics were not two separate entities but must work together. He encouraged his listeners to reject violence and negative thinking, and turn to theological thinking, which would develop religious universalism. He believed that the movement toward universalism would transcend all boundaries—historical and cultural. In his book Eastern Religion Western Thought, Radhakrishnan proposes a new world order founded on a mutual respect between religious traditions.

—I am prepared to die, but there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill.

—Mohandas Gandhi
Frantz Fanon and Nelson Mandela

In their lifelong struggle to achieve equality for their people, revolutionary writer Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) and legendary activist Nelson Mandela (1918–) both grappled with the following philosophical questions: Do all people have the right to equal treatment? What actions by an individual are justified if his or her rights are not recognized? Both Fanon and Mandela were directly affected by the impact of colonial rule, but they differed in their approach to eliminating oppression and attaining freedom and equality for all.

Fanon was born on the island of Martinique. He was a descendant of African slaves who had been brought to the Caribbean by French colonizers to work on sugar plantations. His book Black Skin White Masks was a major influence on civil rights, anti-colonial thought, and the Black consciousness movement around the world. Fanon was considered a revolutionary social theorist, and he applied many of Marx's perspectives to his writings. Fanon believed in Marx's ideas, but his point of view was Afro-centric, so he spoke not only to class conflict but also to race conflict. Fanon was the voice of colonized Black people, whom he referred to as “the wretched of the Earth.” This was the title of his last book.

Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the preface to The Wretched of the Earth and was a great influence on Fanon. In this book, Fanon urges Black people to liberate themselves from the degradation of colonialism. He suggests that liberation is only possible through violence against the European oppressors.

And it is clear that in colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonisation and decolonisation is simply a question of relative strength.

Contrary to Fanon, who saw violence as a way to liberate Black people from political oppression, Nelson Mandela was committed to non-violence and forgiveness, although this was not always the case. Nelson Mandela (1918–) is a widely recognized political figure who was instrumental in liberating South African Blacks from the oppressive, yet legal, racist system of apartheid (a Dutch word, meaning “Separation”). Mandela was a great believer in Gandhi and was committed to non-violence until he reached a point at which passive resistance no longer seemed an option. Condemned for his activism, Mandela defended himself at his trial, where he was charged with sabotage. The excerpt below is from a speech he made on June 12, 1964, at his trial.

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the idea of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Apartheid was abolished in 1989, and, after serving approximately 27 years in prison, Mandela was freed in 1990. As the first Black President of South Africa (1994–1999), Mandela used Gandhi's policies of non-violence, as well as the virtues of human kindness and forgiveness, to encourage the Black majority to pardon the actions of the White minority and make peace.
Justice and Gender: Issues of Social Equality

Earlier in this chapter, you learned that Plato advocated for a political system headed by the elite—the scholars of society. Did you know, however, that Plato challenged established ideas about women as inferior beings? In the *Republic*, he argued that it is unjust for a society to deny its young women educational opportunities that were offered to young men. Plato thought that men and women were equal in their ability to reason and were equally capable of becoming leaders in society. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought that men had superior reasoning abilities and should, therefore, naturally rule over women. Aristotle’s views became entrenched in Western thought, allowing many influential philosophers to accept the belief of female inferiority.

Followers of feminism have argued that patriarchal, sexist assumptions are engrained in traditional Western philosophy. Although the status of women has improved in recent years, and women are increasingly represented in government and other forums, women’s rights are still evolving in their struggle to achieve equality.
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), a British philosopher and activist for women’s rights, called for reforms that would allow men and women to be educated alike and together. Wollstonecraft supported equal citizenship for both sexes, giving everyone “a direct share in deliberations of government.” She struggled to educate herself and published *Thoughts on the Education of Girls* in 1786. In this book, she argued against primarily teaching women embroidery, sewing, and needlepoint, because it did not focus on making girls independent thinkers. For women to achieve the benefits of full citizenship, she believed that they must engage in rational and reasoned thought, which could only be acquired through education.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft suggested that women be granted civil and political rights, and also have elected representatives of their own. She argued that, in order to understand society, women should be allowed to learn what men learn.

“...the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding—yet virtue can be built on no other foundation.”

1. After years of colonial rule, do you believe that newly liberated nations are capable of self-government? How would egalitarian philosophers respond to this question?

2. Why might Gandhi’s political doctrine of *satyagraha* appeal to people with strong religious beliefs?

3. What are your thoughts about religion as a unifier of nations? Do you feel that religion has the power to unite people, or is the opposite true? Does religion divide people?

4. a) What philosophical questions do you feel are important to feminists?

b) What is Mary Wollstonecraft’s philosophy on equal treatment and how women can achieve this?
RESPONSIBILITIES

Most societies impose duties or responsibilities on their citizens, which we might see as an exchange for protecting their citizens’ safety and well-being. When taxes are collected, it is presumed that these taxes are going into the country’s financial reserves for the common good, such as defending the country against invasion or maintaining positive relations with neighbouring countries. Some countries, such as Germany, Greece, and Brazil, have mandatory military service. Do you consider it a duty to serve your country this way? Even if you do not, perhaps for religious reasons, you probably consider treason (disloyalty to your country) to be an unacceptable crime.

Voting is often thought to be a public duty, since voter disinterest threatens the workings of democracy by potentially allowing weak candidates or dictators to sweep to victory. When you vote, you are entering into a public debate by voicing your opinion on a candidate or an issue. Your political opinions represent part of the general will. By voting, you are contributing to the expression of the general will at the time. If you do not vote, you are not exercising your right to participate in your government.

According to Plato’s image of social harmony, the people in a republic have a duty to use moderation to fulfill their highest purpose and not overstep their station in life. Similarly, Aristotle believed that people have a duty to pursue virtues such as courage, honesty, and generosity, and to imitate exemplary people in society in order to fulfill their natural purpose. Italian philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas returned to Aristotle through Christianity, claiming that the ruler and the citizens have a duty to fulfill their natural purpose by upholding the higher, divine right of God. In Summa Theologiae, Aquinas explains that the citizen must be guided by God’s eternal, divine law.

“...the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light. It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than a rational creature’s participation of the eternal law.”

In a religious state, and especially in a theocracy like the Vatican (the smallest state on Earth), the Church and its leadership (the Pope in the Vatican) are in a position above the government. Their role is to help lawmakers interpret the eternal law, in order to stay on a path that follows the Church’s teachings, when drafting human laws. In an Islamic state, it is the scholars who perform this role.
Wanting to protect democracy is a rather conservative sentiment, associated with a longing for traditions. For conservative thinkers, citizens have a responsibility to the past and future that entails preserving what is good and not succumbing to whims or popular reforms when making policy. In his work *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke proposes that the constitutional government

"is to be looked on with reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."

Citizens are also obligated to follow the laws of the state. Laws are designed by the lawmakers of a society to maintain order and protect its citizens from harm. There are usually consequences or punishments associated with breaking the laws. In Canada, you must be 18 years old to vote. In Ontario, you are not allowed to drive a car until the age of 16, and you are not allowed to drink alcohol before the age of 19. There are also laws against stealing other people’s property and causing them bodily harm. Likewise, professionals and members of organizations, such as unions, are governed by codes and bylaws. Teachers in Ontario are governed by three sets of rules, creating triple jeopardy if they step out of line: the Ontario legislature’s Education Act, the ethical code of conduct of the Ontario College of Teachers, and the bylaws and policies of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, you were introduced to questions that are central to social and political philosophy. You were also introduced to the theories, schools of thought, and philosophers who have attempted to answer these questions. You have gained an understanding of ancient philosophies on state leadership and have learned how these philosophies have evolved over time to represent the will of the people. As you have discovered, there is a close connection between social and political philosophy and the human condition. In the quest to create an ideal state, where there is a good balance between individual freedom and state authority and where all citizens are treated fairly, philosophers and political leaders have attempted to represent the voice of the people who are often removed from control of political power. The field of political philosophy is ever changing, as it seeks to address the needs of different communities.

1. What do you think should be the duties or responsibilities of citizens? List five, and share them with your classmates. Was there common ground, or general agreement, in your class?

2. How might your list from question 1 have been different if you had lived in the past or in another country? How universal or trans-cultural is your list?

3. Although it is natural to dream about having no laws to govern us, would you really want to live in a state of lawlessness? Imagine what would happen if people stopped obeying traffic laws or paying taxes. Make a table that lists the advantages and disadvantages of living in a state without laws. Then use your ideas to write a paragraph about why a lawless state would be a good or bad alternative to our society.

4. Is getting inoculated a civic duty, since it may stop the spread of a virus such as influenza, perhaps preventing a pandemic? Do we have a right to decline inoculation, based on religious beliefs or even a personal dislike of needles?
Knowledge and Understanding/Thinking

1. Create an organizer like the one below. List the key philosophers of social and political philosophy and their concepts, and analyze their strengths and weaknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Philosopher</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

2. What is the difference between capitalism and the command economy of a communist state? Which type of economic system do you think is better? Why?

Thinking/Communication

3. Consider the following quote by Mary Wollstonecraft: “Among unequals there can be no society.” Write a debate statement that expresses your position on this quote. Defend your statement using your philosophical reasoning skills and the terminology of social and political philosophy.

4. Develop a question that is relevant to political philosophy and addresses the concerns of gender equality and race in Canada.

5. Create an activity about social and political philosophy for your classmates. In one column, list five central questions about social and political philosophy, as well as an idea that relates to each question from one of the philosophers you studied in this chapter. In the other column, list the five philosophers to which these ideas belong, but mix up the order. (To make your activity more challenging, you could provide more than five names.) Have one of your classmates connect each idea to the appropriate philosopher. (To make your activity more creative, you could place each philosopher’s idea in a thought bubble in the first column and draw a caricature of each philosopher in the second column with his or her name. Each thought bubble could then be connected to the appropriate caricature.)

6. Form a values line in your class, arranging people according to their views on laws: those who find comfort in having strict laws and those who would prefer few, if any, laws. Then divide your class accordingly to debate the following resolution: *Be it resolved that our society will abolish punishment for breaking laws.*
Communication/Application

7. Apply Gandhi’s philosophy of *satyagraha* to a contemporary issue.

8. Burke proposed that the way to social change is through reasoned analysis not violence. In contrast, Marx believed that an uprising is a legitimate form of effecting change, in order to transform a social or political system. Consider a current conflict, and explain which approach you would apply.

9. Role-play a town hall meeting in which you debate the different perspectives of colonial thinkers and revolutionaries against colonial rule. On the one side, you will need to develop philosophical questions that would have been debated by colonial thinkers and would have informed their reasoning for colonization. On the other side, you will need to develop philosophical questions that would have been debated by revolutionaries who were seeking to be free from colonial rule. It does not matter which side you are on; challenge yourself to think in character.

10. Imagine that you are a modern-day feminist, or a supporter of the movement (male or female), who has been mysteriously transported into the 1700s alongside Mary Wollstonecraft. You have modern-day knowledge of feminism and are aware of the struggles of the past that resulted in the present state of affairs for women. Create a speech that you must deliver to political leaders of the 1700s. Your speech must address how the concerns of women need to be at the forefront of political decision making. To do this, draw upon the ideas of philosophers and political thinkers in this chapter, and address some of the key questions of political philosophy.