



**Community Philosophy Circle
Topic Presentations and Discussion Summaries**

**January – November 2025
Oil City, Pennsylvania**

*A Space for Ideas!
Question & Inspire!*

MISSION

*The Community Philosophy Circle seeks to spark community conversations
on the human experience in Northwestern Pennsylvania and beyond,
fostering connection and the exchange of ideas.*

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Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #1

**Envisioning Society: Philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, and
the Challenge Before Us**

January 15, 2025

Topic Question: "How Would You Reshape Society If You Were Building from Scratch?"

Presentation Summary

Philosophy is part of daily life, often unnoticed, shaping how people make moral choices, navigate dilemmas, and reflect on society. The central question—*How would you reshape society if you were building from scratch?*—was framed within the broader philosophical tradition, referencing Plato's *Republic* and Socrates' thought experiment of envisioning a just city, which explores the roles of leadership, education, and justice in society. These questions remain relevant today, as modern societies and communities continue to grapple with governance, social structures, and the pursuit of fairness, stability, and progress.

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Plato's *Republic*:** Socrates' vision of justice emphasizes creating a society that seeks the happiness of all rather than favoring any one group.
2. **What Is Philosophy?:** Philosophy, meaning "the love of wisdom," is the study of fundamental questions about life, knowledge, and existence, shaping both individual and societal understanding.
3. **Who Were Socrates and Plato?:** An introduction to these foundational philosophers, their historical context, and how their ideas continue to influence modern thought.
4. **Plato's *Republic*: Envisioning Society and the Just City:** A look at Socrates' thought experiment in *The Republic*, exploring justice, leadership, and social structure as a means to understand the role of philosophy in governance.
5. **The Question Passed Down and The Challenge Before Us:** Exploring the connection between philosophical tradition and our discussion, its influence on contemporary communities, and the ongoing challenge of reimagining, improving, and actively shaping the world around us.

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Plato's Republic

Our aim in founding the State was not the disproportionate happiness of any one class, but the greatest happiness of the whole.”

— Plato, *Republic* (Book IV)

2. What is Philosophy?

Philosophy, meaning "the love of wisdom," is the study of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, morality, human life, and much more. It seeks to explore life's hardest questions critically and thoughtfully, challenging assumptions to better understand ourselves and the world. Philosophy encourages us to explore even our silliest fancies, but it also does not shy away from the weightiest and most significant matters that confront humanity.

Philosophy as we know it began in ancient Greece around 600 BCE. Thinkers called the Pre-Socratics, like Pythagoras and Thales, among others, sought to understand reality and the universe. While many cultures have pondered these questions, it was in ancient Greece and the surrounding Mediterranean that a remarkable flourishing of thought and innovation emerged. This shift sparked debates about existence and knowledge, influencing how humans approach understanding the world. What started as questions about life grew into systematic thinking, laying the foundation for virtually all modern intellectual traditions.

As an academic field, philosophy is often divided into several main areas: logic (how we reason and construct arguments), ethics (how we should live and relate to others), metaphysics (the nature of reality and existence), epistemology (how we know what we know), and aesthetics (how we perceive and value experiences, such as what is considered beautiful).

Yet, philosophy is not just an academic pursuit. It is woven into the very act of living.

Philosophy is something you do every day, often without realizing it—whether making choices as simple as deciding which flavor of ice cream is better, vanilla or chocolate, or grappling with far more serious matters, such as whether there can ever be such a thing as a just war that causes the death of thousands. But these are only a few examples of the countless questions philosophy sets itself to explore, and there are endless more.

3. Who Were Socrates and Plato?

Socrates and Plato were Greek Athenian philosophers from the 5th century BCE. Socrates (469–399 BCE), often called the father of Western philosophy, challenged people to examine their lives, think critically, and question assumptions.

Known as the “gadfly of Athens,” Socrates saw his mission as awakening the state and its people to self-reflection and virtue, pulling them away from stagnation or apathy. He employed a method of questioning now known as the Socratic Method, which involved asking probing questions to expose contradictions in people's beliefs in the pursuit of truth.

Socrates openly questioned many, including powerful individuals and institutions, earning both admiration and contempt. His style of challenging authority led to his trial and execution for allegedly corrupting the youth by introducing new gods and undermining the city's traditions. Despite this, Socrates was highly respected by many Athenians and gained numerous devoted students, including Plato.

Plato (427–347 BCE), one of Socrates' students, carried forward his ideas by using Socrates as a character in his philosophical dialogues. Plato founded the Academy, one of the first institutions of higher learning and an archetype for all such institutions that followed. However, it was likely not comparable to what higher education has become today.

Socrates and Plato lived in ancient Athens during a tumultuous period in its history. The city, known for pioneering democracy, was recovering from the Peloponnesian War, a devastating conflict that left Athens weakened and divided. Civil unrest and a brief oligarchic coup destabilized the city, creating an atmosphere of political tension and uncertainty. This shifting political landscape certainly influenced them, just as political circumstances influence us today.

4. Plato's Republic: Envisioning Society and the Just City

Our discussion question—*How would you reshape society if you were to build it from scratch?*—finds its forerunner in one of the most influential works in history: Plato's *Republic*.

In *The Republic*, written around 380 BCE, Plato records a dialogue led by his teacher Socrates. In it, Socrates envisions the construction of a "just city" (*kallipolis*) as a means to understand justice within the individual. This thought experiment is often considered to have two layers: as a literal proposal for an ideal society and as a metaphor for achieving inner harmony and order within the individual.

By scaling the concept of justice from the individual to a societal level, Socrates examines how roles, education, and governance might work together to create fairness and harmony. This exploration raises questions about the nature of justice, the responsibilities of leadership, and the balance between individual freedoms and collective well-being.

When we consider how to reshape society, we are, in a sense, continuing Socrates' experiment. By questioning what is fair, what roles people should play, and how resources and responsibilities should be distributed, we engage in the same philosophical exercise that has sparked discussions for over two millennia and forever changed the landscape of political thought and systems of government in the Western world.

5. The Question Passed Down and The Challenge Before Us

The Community Philosophy Circle discussion group is a space where ideas can grow, perspectives can shift, and assumptions can be questioned. We may never reach tidy conclusions, but we can work to ask better questions, offer good reasons, and engage in meaningful dialogue. But is this truly possible? That is up to all of us.

What we can say, though, is that it is much harder if we never try. If we do try, all of us here could be part of a community that not only thinks together but also puts thought into action. But we need to start somewhere. So, ask questions, inspire perspectives, and create conversations that make a difference.

Conversations where you can ask, "How would this idea work if we tried it in our town? What might happen?" and receive thoughtful consideration—even if that idea leads nowhere. A conversation where at least a new possibility is given thought, and some may even come to life in our community as we grapple with the great mystery of the human experience. Plato may have

raised his questions, offered his answers, and passed them down to us, but no matter what we think or do, Plato cannot think or act for us. But can we expect any one person to?

So, let's get to the question—one that has been asked for centuries, perhaps since the very beginning of human society: What should a society or community be like? But as we think about that, it brings us closer to something even more personal: How do you envision your own community? If you could design it from scratch, what would it look like? Once you start imagining, another thought may follow: If nothing were holding you back, would you build it exactly as it is—or would you create something entirely different?

These questions, taken as a whole, form our discussion tonight: *How would you reshape society if you were to build it from scratch?*

This question is just a starting point. It challenges us to think not just about the world at large but about the world we shape around us—the community we live in and the people we share it with. It draws us into broader conversations while also bringing us back to reflect on our community and ourselves.

But this is not just a question that has been passed down to us—it is a challenge that is ours to meet. So, the challenge remains, as it has for generations: How should we shape our society, our community? And even more: What will we do about it? But first—what do you think?

And so, I pass the question to us all: *How would you reshape society if you were to build it from scratch?*

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #1

Discussion

January 15, 2025

Topic Question: "How Would You Reshape Society If You Were Building from Scratch?"

Discussion Summary

The discussion was based on a thought experiment: *How would you reshape society if you were building from scratch?* Topics included whether a society could exist apart from current systems or must rely on existing infrastructure and technology. Participants discussed the influence of individual growth versus systemic change, and how societies balance individual autonomy with shared responsibility. Other points addressed included the role of competition and cooperation, whether the desire to improve is innate or shaped, how scarcity affects social organization, and different views on whether a perfect society is possible.

Discussion Points

1. **Living Within or Separation from Existing Society:** The tension between self-sufficiency and reliance on modern systems.
2. **The Role of the Individual in Society:** The impact of personal development versus systemic change on societal progress.
3. **Individualism and Collectivism:** How societies balance personal autonomy with shared responsibility.
4. **Competition vs. Cooperation in Society:** The role of competition in progress and its effects on social cohesion.
5. **Is the Desire to Improve Innate?:** Whether self-improvement is a fundamental human drive or shaped by society.
6. **Moving Beyond Scarcity:** Strategies for reducing scarcity and increasing collective well-being.
7. **Is a Perfect Society Possible?:** The pursuit of perfection versus the value of continuous improvement.
8. **Closing Quote:** Quote on the philosophical journey of questioning and understanding by T.S. Eliot.

1. Living Within or Separate from Existing Society

A discussion point was whether a society could be made entirely anew or built within the existing world. The feasibility of full separation from modern systems was questioned, given the value of technology, infrastructure, and medicine. The idea of a self-sustaining community free from outside pressures was explored, but reliance on broader resources was acknowledged. The discussion considered whether society should isolate itself or selectively adopt useful elements while rejecting harmful ones, with a recurring theme of balancing independence and interconnectedness.

2. The Role of the Individual in Society

The discussion examined whether society is shaped by individuals or if systemic change is necessary to address inequalities. The idea that personal growth leads to societal improvement was explored, with debate on whether focusing inward could drive broader progress. Limitations of individual change in addressing issues was brought up.

3. Individualism and Collectivism

Another major theme was the balance between individual autonomy and collective responsibility. The idea of a decentralized society, composed of smaller, self-governing communities, was considered. Within this model, people would have the freedom to align themselves with groups that share their values while still participating in a larger interconnected system.

There was an exploration of whether a society should be structured around shared goals and principles or whether it should accommodate a wide range of perspectives. Additionally, it was noted that historically, societies have often formed around family structures and one's set of abilities, raising questions about how society might navigate those dynamics.

4. Competition vs. Cooperation in Society

The nature of competition and its impact on society was widely discussed. The idea that competition drives progress was examined alongside concerns that it can create division. There

was a reflection on whether competition is an innate human trait and if it should be embraced or managed differently in a society.

The distinction between competition for self-improvement versus competition against others was considered. A question was raised: should society encourage competition that pushes individuals to grow, or should it instead focus on cooperation that ensures collective well-being?

5. Is the Desire to Improve Innate?

A discussion was posed about whether people naturally seek self-improvement or if they need to be taught to do so. The observation that children demonstrate an innate curiosity was considered, alongside the idea that societal pressures sometimes dampen this instinct over time. The effects of trauma on limiting personal growth were discussed, as well as the argument that education should focus on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and critical thinking rather than what is commonly considered academic achievement.

6. Moving Beyond Scarcity

One challenge in constructing an ideal society is dealing with scarcity. The idea that societies should be structured to reduce scarcity and increase overall abundance was explored, with reflections on how technological and social innovations can contribute to this goal. Historical progress was referenced as evidence that living conditions have improved over time, but it was also noted that such progress is often not evenly distributed.

7. Is a Perfect Society Possible?

The idea of perfection was questioned, with acknowledgment that perfection was mostly considered subjective. Also, it was brought up that perfection aligns more with the proper use of something than with an ideal. Rather than striving for a utopia, the discussion leaned toward the importance of continual progress and adaptation. A question was posed: would immortality remove the drive to improve, or would it create new challenges?

8. Closing Quote

A final thought from *Little Gidding*, the fourth and final poem in *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot, published in 1942:

*We shall not cease from exploration, and at the end of all our exploring,
we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #2

Society's Purpose: Aristotle, Telos, and Eudaimonia

February 19, 2025

Topic Question: "How Would You Reshape Society If You Were Building from Scratch?"
(Continued Conversation)

Presentation Summary

Building upon the first meeting, this discussion revisited the thought experiment of envisioning society from scratch, with an added focus: what is its purpose? Aristotle's philosophy was introduced as a contrast to Plato's vision in *The Republic* from the last meeting, where he envisioned a just city designed to impose order and harmony. Aristotle, in contrast, saw society as something that grows naturally, beginning with families and expanding into communities and city-states (*polis*). He argued that a society's purpose is not merely stability or power but to cultivate *eudaimonia*—human flourishing through virtue—one that evolves toward an ultimate purpose (*telos*). It was proposed that Aristotle challenges us not just to ask how society should be structured but for what purpose it should exist.

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Aristotle's:** A passage from *Politics* introducing Aristotle's view that society is a natural development, originating for survival but ultimately existing for the good life.
2. **The Question for Society: What Is It For?:** Civilization, the structures societies create, and the question of their purpose.
3. **Plato, Aristotle, and the Good:** Comparing Plato's ideal just city ruled by philosopher-kings with Aristotle's vision rooted in human relationships.
4. **Aristotle's Life and Legacy:** Aristotle's background, his time at Plato's Academy, his contributions to philosophy, and how his ideas shaped intellectual history.
5. **From Families to the Polis: How Communities Form:** A look at Aristotle's view that society develops naturally, beginning with families, growing into villages, and ultimately forming city-states (*polis*).
6. **Telos: The Purpose of Society:** A brief outline of Aristotle's Argument that everything, including society, has a purpose (*telos*), with its ultimate goal being to cultivate human flourishing.
7. **Our Community: To What End?:** Bringing Aristotle's ideas into the present, questioning whether society serves a purpose and what this means for us today.

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Aristotle's Politics

*When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, **the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, but continuing in existence for the sake of a good life.** And therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best. Hence, it is evident that the state is a creation of nature and that man is by nature a political animal.*

— Aristotle, *Politics* (Book I, Part 2), trans. Benjamin Jowett

2. The Question for Society: What Is It For?

Throughout history, civilizations have risen and fallen, each shaped by their own understanding, so be it, of justice, governance, and the purpose of human life. Some societies have sought rigid order, while others have strived for freedom. Some have placed power in the hands of the few, others in the hands of the many, and some never even had a choice. Yet beneath this, a question lingers: Why any of this at all? But that may raise another question as we test our answers: What is it for?

When we last gathered, we explored Plato's thought experiment from his work *The Republic*—his attempt to imagine an ideal city and understand the just individual. However, while Plato envisioned society as something to be designed from above, so to speak, his student Aristotle saw it as something that grows toward some end. If we are to talk of building a society from scratch, Aristotle challenges us to ask not just what society should look like, but what it is for and to what end.

3. Plato, Aristotle, and the Good

Both Plato and Aristotle agree that a just state must be rooted in the pursuit of the good. But what is the good, and how do we achieve it?

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that justice is the harmony of a well-ordered society, where each person fulfills the role best suited to them. He envisions a structured state ruled by philosopher-kings, with auxiliaries protecting the city and producers sustaining it. Plato's work suggests he thought that most people live in ignorance, seeing only shadows of reality, while true philosophers must seek knowledge of the Forms—pure, ideal truths beyond the material world.

Aristotle mostly rejected Plato's idea of the Good as a separate, ideal Form. Instead, he sees the good as something realized through human relationships within the *polis*. Ethical and political life shape the conditions for human flourishing, which develops through virtue, practical wisdom, and a well-structured society.

4. Aristotle's Life and Legacy

Born in 384 BCE in Stagira, Northern Greece, Aristotle was the son of a physician to the Macedonian royal court, exposing him to the study of medicine. At 17 years old, he traveled to Athens, where he joined Plato's Academy, studying under the philosopher for nearly two decades.

While Aristotle revered his teacher, he eventually departed from Plato's thought—though we can question how far he actually strayed. After Plato's death, he left Athens, later becoming the tutor to Alexander the Great. Eventually, he returned to Athens and founded a school we now call the Lyceum. The Lyceum was a Greek gymnasium and common space used for athletic training, military preparation, and intellectual pursuits. Unlike Plato's Academy, which was a more secluded institution, the Lyceum remained a more public space where Aristotle taught as he walked the grounds with his students.

In 323 BCE, after Alexander the Great's death, anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens grew, forcing Aristotle to flee to Chalcis, a town on the island of Euboea, just off the eastern coast of mainland Greece. He died there in 322 BCE, likely from a digestive illness or natural causes, though the exact details remain uncertain.

Unlike Plato, who emphasized abstract ideals, Aristotle took, what we could call, a more scientific approach, observing, categorizing, and analyzing the world. While he still valued

reason, his method emphasized studying reality as it appears to us. His contributions spanned nearly every intellectual field. Yet, much of Aristotle's work, in hindsight, stands in stark contrast to the standards we claim to hold today.

Through the Islamic Golden Age, thinkers like Averroes and Avicenna (during the 12th century) preserved and expanded Aristotle's work. In medieval Europe, his ideas shaped Scholasticism, one of the most significant intellectual traditions of the Catholic Church, especially through Thomas Aquinas. To this day, Aristotle is regarded as one of the greatest minds in human history—a philosopher whose ideas still underpin our understanding of science, ethics, governance, theology, and the nature of reality.

5. From Families to the Polis: How Communities Form

Aristotle held that society develops organically, starting from the most basic unit of human association—the family. In the *Politics*, he describes a hierarchical structure in which individuals first come together as families, then form villages, and ultimately organize into city-states (*polis*), which he considered the highest form of human association. He saw the *polis* not just as a settlement but as a political partnership (*koinōnia*) built around shared values and the pursuit of the good life.

For Aristotle, the *polis* exists by nature because humans are fundamentally political animals (*zōon politikon*). He argued that only a beast or a god could live entirely outside of it, as humans need political life to fulfill their nature. Civic participation and virtue were central to his philosophy—he believed that a just society arises when citizens actively engage in governance, shaping laws and institutions to cultivate the common good.

6. Telos: The Purpose of Society

For Aristotle, everything in nature has a *telos*, a final purpose toward which it strives. A seed's *telos* is to become a tree. Likewise, a society's *telos* is to cultivate human flourishing, what he calls *eudaimonia*.

This marks a shift from Plato's approach. While Plato seeks the ideal Form of a just society, Aristotle focuses on what enables individuals and societies to achieve their ultimate end (*telos*).

He argues that the best society is one that cultivates people's ability to develop virtue, engage in meaningful action, and reach their highest potential.

Aristotle does not see society as merely a tool for economic means. Its purpose is ethical—to cultivate virtue in its citizens. This means that the best society is not necessarily the most powerful, the most efficient, the wealthiest, or even the fairest, but rather the one where people can live virtuous lives.

7. Our Community: To What End?

But now, back to us. Aristotle challenges us to think about how society came to be and to what ends. He argues that a well-functioning state requires different people to play their roles, just as a healthy body relies on different organs working together to fulfill their purpose. In this, he agrees with Plato—but unlike Plato, Aristotle rejects rigid utopian models, seeing society as structured through practical governance, customs, and relationships. Plato challenges us to imagine the ideal society. Aristotle challenges us to ask: Does society serve its purpose, and to what end?

History has seen societies rise and fall, many losing sight of their purpose and the structures that sustain them. Rome collapsed under its own excesses, Athens fell to internal strife, and no modern society is immune to the same fate. And so, this conversation remains open to us.

Last time, we asked, “How would you build society from scratch?” But perhaps we should also ask: What is it for?

Does our observation and experience naturally lead us to believe that society has a fixed purpose? Some argue no—there is much to question, and rightly so. Others, like Aristotle, see society as a means to an end, a tool to cultivate virtue and structure human life. But if the answer is not clear, then the question still lingers—why any of this at all?

At this point, have we gained anything from our discussion, and does it serve a purpose? And what does this mean for our guiding question? What we can say—where many remain uncertain—is that we have begun, and we continue. That may be all the certainty we need at the moment.

So now the question turns to us, and as we pose it again, perhaps in a new light: *How would you reshape society if you were to build it from scratch?*

And again: What do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #2

Discussion

February 19, 2025

Discussion Topic: "How Would You Reshape Society If You Were Building from Scratch?"

Discussion Summary

Building upon the first meeting, this discussion revisited the thought experiment of envisioning society from scratch, with an added focus: what is its purpose? The group's conversation expanded into questions about the ideal size of a society, the relationship between governance and efficiency, and whether modern societies have lost sight of their fundamental purpose. Participants explored how societies sustain themselves, how they balance centralization and decentralization, and whether the scale of a society influences its stability and effectiveness.

Discussion Points

1. **Structured Planning and Organic Development of Societies:** The discussion examined societies built through centralized planning versus those emerging naturally.
2. **The Impact of Scale on Society:** The conversation explored how size affects governance, efficiency, and cohesion, comparing small, adaptable communities to large, bureaucratic societies.
3. **Governance, Bureaucracy, and Decision-Making:** The focus was on whether larger governments become disconnected and overregulated, while localized decision-making preserves effectiveness.
4. **Growth, Sustainability, and the Limits of Societies:** The discussion considered whether expanding societies become unsustainable and if localism offers resilience.
5. **Localism and National Governance:** The conversation addressed tensions between national structures and local communities.
6. **The Role of Shared Purpose:** The role of common identity and interdependence in maintaining stability was explored.
7. **Economic Structures and Resource Distribution:** The discussion covered competition, cooperation, and prioritizing efficiency, wealth, or collective well-being in economies.
8. **Fundamental Needs and Priorities:** The conversation explored whether securing basic needs should precede higher pursuits in a society.
9. **Closing Quote:** The value of philosophy, as Bertrand Russell expressed, lies in fostering uncertainty and questioning, freeing individuals from prejudices.

1. Structured Planning and Organic Development of Societies

The discussion explored whether societies function best when designed from the top down or when they emerge naturally from the ground up. Plato's vision of a carefully structured society was contrasted with Aristotle's view that societies develop in response to practical needs rather than abstract principles.

A key question emerged: Has any society in history ever truly been designed from scratch? Even large-scale attempts at top-down societal engineering have always emerged from preexisting cultures. The modern challenge of climate change was introduced as an example of a global issue requiring global coordination. However, some participants questioned whether a top-down solution could ever work, given the deep entrenchment of local and national self-interest. The debate remained unresolved: Should societies be built with strong centralized structures, or should they prioritize decentralized, organic growth?

2. The Impact of Scale on Society

A major theme that arose was the relationship between the size of a society and its ability to function effectively. Smaller communities often foster stronger relationships and shared values, while larger societies require more formal governance structures. Participants considered historical examples such as Aristotle's polis, the city-states of the Renaissance, and modern nation-states.

A statistic was introduced: Since World War II, the U.S. Congress has written an average of 2.5 million words of legislation per year, more than twice the length of the entire Harry Potter series annually. This led to reflections on whether governance becomes inherently less efficient as a society expands. Some participants argued that societies need a limit to their scale to remain functional, while others noted that economic and military pressures often drive expansion beyond what could be ideal.

3. Governance, Bureaucracy, and Decision-Making

The discussion turned to whether larger governing bodies inherently become inefficient. A comparison was drawn between small communities, where rules are often unwritten but understood, and large governments, which produce vast amounts of legislation that few can fully comprehend. Some participants suggested that governance should function as an interconnected system, where issues are resolved at the most appropriate level rather than relying on a distant central authority.

The pharmaceutical industry was used as an example: Large-scale operations require strict Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure consistency and prevent catastrophic mistakes. However, within a family, no such formal regulations are needed. The contrast raised a question: Should societies operate with rigid systems like a global business, or with more fluid, adaptable rules like a family?

4. Growth, Sustainability, and the Limits of Societies

A recurring idea was that societies often expand until they reach a point of unsustainability. Historical parallels were drawn to the Roman Empire, which relied on external resources and mercenary armies before collapsing. The conversation also touched on modern examples, such as outsourcing manufacturing and food production, and whether societies that lose self-sufficiency may become more vulnerable to decline—or whether interdependence can instead foster resilience and economic strength.

One participant introduced *Breakdown of Nations* by Leopold Kohr, which argues that societal problems stem from excessive scale rather than poor structure. This idea resonated with discussions of localism, where smaller, self-sufficient communities might be better equipped to sustain themselves than sprawling nation-states.

5. Localism and National Governance

The conversation highlighted a growing divide between national governance and local self-sufficiency. Some argued that smaller communities are more adaptable and responsive, while large nations struggle with efficiency and representation.

The Amish were discussed as a model of sustainable localism: Instead of growing indefinitely, they break into new communities when a settlement reaches a certain size. This decentralized approach was contrasted with centralized government structures, which may struggle with inefficiency at scale.

6. The Role of Shared Purpose

A question emerged: Can a society function if its members do not believe in it? Some argued that societies must maintain a shared sense of purpose to remain stable. Others suggested that belief in a system is easier to sustain at smaller scales, where people know their leaders personally and feel that their contributions matter. However, this raised another question: Does a society require a common identity, or can a network of interdependent communities provide sufficient stability?

7. Economic Structures and Resource Distribution

The conversation examined how societies distribute resources. Some participants emphasized that industrialized economies prioritize efficiency and competition, while others pointed to Indigenous models where resources are shared to ensure communal stability. The discussion explored whether balancing competition and cooperation is key to a functional society.

Participants also noted that economic interdependence shapes how societies function. The discussion highlighted that while local economies provide resilience, larger economic structures facilitate broader opportunities. This raised the question: Should societies emphasize decentralized self-sufficiency or integrate into larger economic systems?

8. Fundamental Needs and Priorities

Citing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the discussion questioned whether societies can function effectively if their foundational needs are not secured. Participants explored how societies prioritize different levels of human need—from basic survival to higher aspirations.

A key point was that as societies grow and delegate responsibility for fundamental needs to larger governing structures, they risk losing awareness of those needs entirely. Industrialized societies, despite their wealth, may be out of touch with the immediate concerns of survival that shaped earlier social structures. The conversation questioned whether modern governance has become inefficient by focusing too much on distant, overarching goals while overlooking the immediate needs of local communities and their long-term stability.

9. Closing Quote

The final thought was a quote from British philosopher Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912):

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #3

**The Conversation Across Lives: Generations and
Responsibility—Who Decides?**

March 19, 2025

Topic Question:

“Are generations a reality that shapes identity and responsibility in society, useful categories for understanding people, or just stereotypes that divide?”

Presentation Summary

This presentation explored generations in relation to community and responsibility, questioning whether generational differences are real or simply narratives we create. Society was framed not as a single moment but as an ongoing conversation between the past, present, and future. Oil City served as a case study of how communities can inherit the legacies of industry, economic shifts, major environmental changes, and collective memory. The presentation examined whether generational labels clarify social change or create unnecessary divisions. The Nonidentity Problem raised questions about intergenerational responsibility, asking if present choices should account for the well-being of future generations. It also considered whether people have an obligation to preserve traditions and institutions or if progress requires challenging and moving beyond the past. The role of technology was explored in shaping how generational divides are perceived. In the end, this raised the overall question, who gets to decide?

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quotes From Homer's *Iliad* and Socrates:** Reflections on generational change and youth that we have continued to pass down.
2. **Generations and the Stories of Community: What We Carry:** Oil City was used as a case study, examining how communities inherit the legacies of the past and preserve collective memory.
3. **Generations: Labels, Differences, and the Power They Have:** Exploring whether generational categories explain social change or create divisions, and how they may shape identity and responsibility.
4. **Plato, Aristotle, and the Conversation Between Many Lives:** Considering whether society exists in a single moment or as an ongoing dialogue between past, present, and future generations.
5. **The Nonidentity Problem and Responsibility: What Do We Owe the Future?:** Introducing Derek Parfit's Nonidentity Problem and whether present generations have ethical obligations to those not yet born.

6. **Inheriting or Rejecting the Past: What do we owe it?:** Questioning whether traditions, institutions, and structures should be preserved or challenged to move forward from the past.
 7. **Technology Divide, Embracing the Future, and the Stories We Tell:** Considering whether technology widens generational divides, whether adaptation is an obligation, and how it shapes perceptions of social change.
 8. **Our Community's Narrative Across Lives: Who Decides?:** Examining how communities construct history, how memory shapes, and whether generational perspectives guide or limit us—and who ultimately decides if any of it matters.
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1. Opening Reflection: Quotes From Homer's *Iliad* and Socrates

Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. The wind scatters one year's leaves on the ground, but the live timber bursts with buds and blooms again. And so with men: as one generation comes to life, another dies away.

— Homer, *The Iliad* (Book 6, Lines 146–149)

The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their food, and tyrannize their teachers.

— Commonly attributed to Socrates.

Note: This quote is likely a later paraphrase meant to reflect ancient Greek attitudes toward the youth—we don't know if Socrates actually said it, or if Plato ever wrote it down. But just the same, we can't say for certain that a single person named Homer wrote the *Iliad*. Still, it is considered correct to call it Homer's *Iliad*. In both cases, what we have are likely just old stories that have been passed down to us.

2. Generations and the Stories of Community: What We Carry

Oil City's history is still here—you can see it on the hills and in the valleys, spotted with tank batters, pipelines, and pumping jacks, some for recent years but most left over from the past. You can see its history in the homes and buildings that stand now. You can hear it in the stories people

tell—stories like how, before Quaker State left, there were 20,000 people, and now there are only 10,000.

Is this a story of decline and a warning passed along to younger generations? Or is it a shared experience, a lingering trauma from a community's past, that bonds us through time—even if it no longer reflects the present and conflicts with other public narratives? Or is it something else entirely? Is it a story to be told or one to be forgotten?

This is only one story among many. Yet the town was shaped by industry, by cycles of boom and bust, and by the people who lived through it all and some who still remember days past, often seeing them as better. Though, were they? This is nothing new. Every culture passes down stories.

But for us now, what have we inherited from them? Much more than stories. It is the communities we live in, the roads we drive, the jobs we work, and the resources we rely on—all shaped by those who came before us. Even biologically, we carry a portion of our ancestors' genetic makeup with us. But what do we owe those who came before us, those who will come after, and those in front of us now?

3. Generations: Labels, Differences, and the Power They Have

The topic of generations comes up a lot. We talk about Boomers and Millennials, Gen X and Gen Z, as if they are distinctly separate groups. But what do those labels really mean? Are they just a way of making sense of change, or do they create unnecessary divisions?

A 20-year-old in a small town might have more in common with a 50-year-old neighbor than with another 20-year-old in a distant city. A factory worker and a business owner in the same town might be considered from the same generation, but their lives are so different that they barely seem to share the same world. So, what really defines a generation? Shared experiences? Cultural shifts? Or just the year on a birth certificate?

Yet, there do seem to be tangible differences that make one age group different from another. It can be a hard thing to deny, whether the differences were caused by shared environmental factors or something else. Generational narratives are talked about as real-time tensions influencing

everything from economies, workplaces, and education to technology, rural communities struggling to retain young people, workplace attitudes toward change, and social movements defined by generational divides in values.

Still, whether these divisions are real or not, they seem to have a significant influence on how we think about people and society. And if we could get an answer, does it change the responsibilities, if any, we have to the people who came before us and those who will come next? But why does any of this matter to us? And how does this connect to our discussion group and the conversations we are having?

4. Plato, Aristotle, and the Conversation Between Many Lives

Plato and Aristotle did not talk about “generations” the way we do, but they seem to have wrestled with the same questions we are looking at today. In our first two discussions, we looked at Plato’s vision of an ideal city and Aristotle’s idea that societies grow toward a goal. But as we debated, we also questioned whether any society could truly start from scratch. Even if we could wipe the slate clean, we would still bring with us traditions, ideas, and assumptions from the past. But neither Plato nor Aristotle seems to face the topic of generations as we do, though we might be able to form some interpretation.

So now, instead of just imagining society or defining its purpose, we are dealing with something else: not society existing in a single, unchanging moment but as a conversation between past, present, and future transforming across time. One life spans one life, but many lives span many lives, forming an unbroken chain, constantly renewing as each person's actions shape the future of those to come.

5. The Nonidentity Problem and Responsibility: What Do We Owe the Future?

But if future people do not exist yet, do we have any responsibility to them? Do we owe them a livable planet? A functioning economy? A stable society? Or is each generation only responsible for itself?

This brings us to the **Nonidentity Problem**, a concept in population ethics coined by Derek Parfit in his work *Reasons and Persons* (1984). The problem suggests that since future people will be different depending on our choices today, we can not say we are harming any particular individual by making bad choices—or any choice for that matter—we are just creating a different set of people. The argument is that we can not “harm” future people because they would not exist if we had made different choices. For example, if we pollute the environment, those who are born into a world with climate change would not exist in a world where we had prevented it.

Intergenerational responsibility to the future counters the Nonidentity Problem by arguing that our ethical responsibilities extend to any future people, regardless of who they are. Predictable harm—such as environmental degradation—matters because we cannot justify harmful decisions by saying different individuals would have existed otherwise. Ethical responsibility requires ensuring livable conditions for all future people, as suffering and disadvantage remain real, no matter who specifically comes into existence.

6. Inheriting or Rejecting the Past: What do we owe it?

Then there is the other side of it: How much should the past dictate how we live today? Do younger generations owe it to the past to preserve its traditions, its institutions, and its beliefs? Or does every generation get to start fresh, deciding for itself what to keep and what to leave behind?

a. Argument for Inheriting the Past

One view holds that the past is not something we can simply step away from, and laws, economies, and social structures do not reset with each generation—they actively benefit us in ways we often take for granted. The knowledge we use today, from medicine to engineering, is built on centuries of accumulated learning. No single generation discovers everything on its own. It relies on what came before. For example, modern science exists because past thinkers laid the groundwork and rejecting the past entirely would mean losing that foundation. The same applies to social structures: government, legal systems, and education are inherited institutions that shape

our lives. The argument is that we must inherit their legacy because starting over from scratch is not only unwise since many of these structures benefit us but, in practice, impossible.

Yet, must we accept what the past gives us as it is? We may not be able to throw off centuries of tradition, but can one claim that what we inherit remains unchanged? That kind of continuity seems just as impossible.

b. Argument for Rejecting the Past

On the other hand, another position is that the past should not dictate what people do today. Moral responsibility is more personal—someone should not be held accountable for or have to sustain something they never agreed to or had anything to do with, especially if it is not beneficial to do so. Societies progress by challenging outdated norms rather than being trapped by them. Just as past generations in the U.S. moved beyond child labor being a standard practice, today's world should focus on the present and move forward from old norms and ways of thinking that create current barriers and may be outdated or even arbitrary, like defaulting to someone as an authority just because they are older.

This argument, like the previous one, should also raise questions. For example, child labor was once widespread in the U.S., and many profited from it, whether through direct sales or by consuming products made by children. Some likely still benefit from fortunes that were made, and many modern industries were built on the practice. Should those who gained—and still gain in some way—bear responsibility or provide compensation? The same applies to slavery in the U.S. Those who were enslaved and their descendants did not benefit or receive reparations, while many others profited greatly—though, of course, not those who were enslaved or their descendants. Yet neither slavery nor child labor is entirely in the past. Many still profit from these practices, and we may as well, through the products we buy in stores and online. Does that change our responsibility? And if we are unaware, are we still accountable?

After considering all of these arguments, can we say we have picked a side and chosen the right answer? Perhaps, but fully accepting or rejecting an argument is not always straightforward. Life is rarely so rigid. And this is only a small part of a much larger debate. Like many things, there is often more to it, but we have taken the first step.

7. Technology Divide, Embracing the Future, and the Stories We Tell

But now, what about current generations embracing what the future brings? Technology makes this question even sharper. The world is changing faster than ever—or at least, that is the commonly accepted story.

It is often characterized like this: Older generations sometimes struggle to adapt because they are resistant to change or because change itself is accelerating in ways no generation before has had to deal with. On the other hand, younger generations are characterized as growing up in a world shaped by technology. So they are better prepared for a world that most believe will be dominated by technology. Meanwhile, older generations are being left behind, but they see younger people as being more disconnected from social interaction and unable to have real conversations.

Does each generation have an obligation to keep up, or should society slow down to maintain something more equal for those who can not? One of the most active age groups on Facebook is 55 and older, with a significant portion 65+. But does being on social media mean you are good at technology? Or is all of this a story we tell? If it is just a story and not as true as we might think, why do we tell these stories?

Maybe it is because communities are not just single, isolated moments made up of only the people who live in them now. Maybe, they are built on the memory of the past, which we connect to the world around us, as well as our expectations for the future and what we believe our responsibilities to it should be. The choices we make today shape the world others will inherit—just as we are shaped by the choices of those who came before us. But how do we decide what is worth preserving and what needs to change?

When do we listen to the wisdom of the past, and when do we challenge it—especially when it seems to be less than wise? This is a question that philosophy itself has been put to through the ages, one it has had to answer and at times, failed. Most no longer believe, as Aristotle did, that the Earth is at the center of our galaxy.

8. Our Community's Narrative Across Lives: Who Decides?

The Community Philosophy Circle is about discussing ideas, but it can also be seen as continuing a conversation that has been going on for thousands of years. The intellectual tradition, which finds its origins in the works of Plato and Aristotle, among others, is often viewed as still grappling with many of the same fundamental questions.

In a way, we can see ourselves as continuing their conversation today, guided by people of the past who are long gone—people whose ideas we may never fully know with the same intimacy or immediacy. So I wonder: how much will our conversation resemble what they would have thought? Perhaps it will. Perhaps it will not. I do not know if I can give an answer.

Yet now, we are no longer just imagining an ideal society, nor asking what it is for. Instead, we are confronting the notion that a society—our own community—does not exist as a singular, static, unchanging moment. The notion that it exists, shaped by those who came before us, those who will come after, and those in front of us now. And that it is shaped by how we relate to each other and the experiences we bring—some of which are often said to be part of our generation.

Now, at the end, can we say with certainty that a person's views are simply because that is how their generation sees it, and be done with it? How satisfying it would be to have such certainty. Or is there more to it?

So we continue our conversation: *Are generations a reality that shapes identity and responsibility in society, useful categories for understanding people, or just stereotypes that divide?*

And maybe as important: Who gets to decide? Those of the past, the future, or us—here, in the present, now?

Before I turn it over to us, if you will allow me one more question: What do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #3

Discussion

March 19, 2025

Topic Question:

“Are generations a reality that shapes identity and responsibility in society, useful categories for understanding people, or just stereotypes that divide?”

Discussion Summary

This discussion explored how generations shape and respond to change, from historical cycles and defining events to the values they carry and leave behind. It began with the idea of historical cycles, and the group also questioned how generations are defined. Concerns emerged around how to prepare the next generation. This led to a reflection on how values are passed down, what should be preserved or let go, and the role of well-being and responsibility in shaping communities. The importance of mobility and rootedness came up, raising questions about how connection and community evolve or erode. From this, a tension took shape: What do we keep, and what do we go beyond? And who or what determines it overall? It was reflected that larger forces often shape what communities can preserve, regardless of what's done at the local level—yet connection remains possible, if we value it.

Discussion Points

1. **Generational Cycles and Historical Patterns:** Discussed whether generations follow cyclical phases, raising questions about predictability, repetition, and the limits of historical foresight.
2. **Defining Generations: Events and Experience:** Considered how generations are defined and how shared experiences or historical events shape them.
3. **Preparing the Next Generation and Future Uncertainty:** Reflected on the challenge of raising children in a rapidly changing world where past guidance may not apply to the future.
4. **Work, Responsibility, and Well-being:** Discussed the tension between individual well-being and communal responsibility, and how values are passed between generations.
5. **Built for a Time, What We Lose and Choose to Carry:** Explored how generations relate to the time they live in, what is lost, and what people intentionally choose to preserve or leave behind.
6. **Mobility, Community Change, and What Holds Us Together:** Discussed the changing nature of place and relationships, social disconnection, and the tension between personal freedom and community cohesion.

7. **Closing Quote:** Cicero, *De Senectute*, "He who plants trees labors for the benefit of future generations."
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1. Generational Cycles and Historical Patterns

A participant introduced the idea from *The Fourth Turning*, a book by William Strauss and Neil Howe (published in 1997) that outlines a repeating generational cycle. According to the model, society moves through four phases—High, Awakening, Unraveling, and Crisis—roughly every 20 to 22 years. The authors charted this pattern across five centuries of Western history and argued that each generation plays a part in an unfolding rhythm of rise, tension, and renewal.

The group considered whether such cycles can truly be observed in lived experience. Some participants felt that after having gone through two or three generational phases themselves, a pattern seemed recognizable, especially in the sense that society now feels caught in a period of disruption or confrontation. Several noted that the present moment carries the kind of uncertainty that often marks a turning point.

Still, there was hesitation around how much weight to give to the idea of historical cycles. Some asked whether identifying patterns like this helps us better understand where we are, or if it risks oversimplifying complex changes. If these shifts really do repeat, does that suggest history is moving in a fixed loop? Others noted that while patterns may appear in hindsight, the course of events still feels unpredictable when lived in real time.

The discussion left open the question of whether society follows a cycle, or whether the idea of cycles simply gives us a way to make sense of change after it happens. Also, some wondered: if these cycles repeat, does that mean history is predictable or even predetermined? One participant noted that while patterns may exist, human response still matters. Just because a pattern is visible doesn't mean the outcome is inevitable.

2. Defining Generations: Events and Experience

The conversation turned to how generations are defined. While people are often grouped by birth year, several participants questioned whether that approach captures the full picture. It was suggested that major world events—those that leave a cultural or emotional mark—may play a more important role in shaping a generation's identity.

Examples like the September 11 attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic were brought up as turning points. Some noted that events like these are experienced very differently depending on a person's age and stage of life. A younger person might remember disruptions to school or daily life, while someone older may recall the threat to health or national security. The idea emerged that what defines a generation may not be when people are born, but how they experience and respond to shared moments in history.

Some in the group shared that they've never quite felt aligned with their assigned generational label. This led to a broader reflection: if generations are shaped by circumstances rather than marked by a strict timeline, then how do we distinguish one from another? Another question emerged, considering shared experience: If people of different ages are shaped by the same events, and no clear line separates one group from another, what does it really mean to belong to a generation?

The COVID-19 example returned. Even though people of all ages experienced the same global event, their experiences varied widely. Some were isolated from school and friends, while others feared for their health or livelihoods. It was suggested that these differences in experience, interpretation, and emotional impact may play a larger role in shaping generational identity. Still, it remained an open question—how much can shared events bridge generational divides, and where do those divides actually begin and end?

3. Preparing the Next Generation and Future Uncertainty

The conversation turned to how rapidly the world is changing. While the Industrial Revolution marked a turning point in the speed of societal shifts, many in the group felt we are now living

through a different kind of revolution—one driven by technology, norms, and expectations that shift faster than people can fully adjust.

This raised concerns among parents about preparing their children for a future that feels increasingly uncertain. Several noted that previous generations could often picture what their children's lives might look like. Today, that sense of predictability is harder to hold onto. What once seemed like solid guidance may no longer apply a decade later.

The group reflected on the idea that each generation may be well-suited to the world they grow up in, but not always to the pace of change that follows. As society accelerates, it becomes harder to pass on values and wisdom that will still be relevant in the near future.

It was noted that these shifts aren't just technological—they affect how we relate to others, how we understand tradition, and how stable life feels. A point of debate in the discussion was: In a world that keeps changing faster, how do we prepare the next generation without knowing what lies ahead?

4. Work, Responsibility, and Well-being

The conversation turned to how people across generations approach work and responsibility. While some observations were made about older generations staying late to finish the job and younger ones protecting time for life outside of work, the discussion moved toward the question: how do we teach balance between individual well-being and communal contribution?

Participants reflected on how values are passed down, whether through parenting, mentorship, or lived example. It was noted that freely giving time to others can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose, but that boundary-setting also reflects self-respect and an awareness of burnout. The group acknowledged that both are important, but can sometimes feel in tension with one another.

This led to a broader reflection: What does it mean to contribute to a community, and how do we raise children to value themselves, and the needs of others? The conversation centered less on who works how, and more on what kind of responsibility we want to carry and encourage.

5. Built for a Time, What We Lose and Choose to Carry

A comparison was made between generations and vehicles—each one designed to operate well in its own era, but not always built to handle the changes that come after. Someone recalled an older mentor who often commented that the world seemed to be unraveling—a view that tends to reappear across generations as each struggles to keep pace with change. The group noted that these concerns may not signal decline so much as the difficulty of adapting when familiar ways no longer seem to apply.

The idea emerged that people are shaped by the times they grow up in, and while those experiences build resilience and insight, they may not always prepare someone for what comes next. This led to a reflection on what we inherit—both as individuals and communities—and how we choose what to carry forward. When someone dies, they take with them a kind of lived knowledge that often goes undocumented, quietly disappearing unless it is passed down intentionally.

At the same time, it was noted that not everything from the past needs to be preserved. The group discussed how certain habits, traditions, or relationships may no longer contribute to well-being or growth. Some shared the view that letting go is not always a loss—it can be a part of moving forward.

6. Mobility, Community Change, and What Holds Us Together

The discussion turned toward the changing nature of place and belonging. It was brought up that technology has changed how people relate to both location and one another. While digital tools allow people to stay connected across distance, some felt they may also weaken in-person relationships and local community ties. Further, a participant noted that, in their lifetime, they had seen rural communities lose both population and a sense of cohesion—some no longer existing in any recognizable way. Even when events are offered locally, interest and participation often seem to decline.

In contrast, it was mentioned that in earlier times, particularly in parts of Europe, people were often legally bound to the towns where they lived. Movement was restricted, and relocating often

required specific circumstances, such as being part of a trade guild or receiving official permission. It was also noted that under the Articles of Confederation, individuals were expected to have a recognized home, and movement without one or a reason for traveling could be considered unlawful. This restriction was deliberately left out of the U.S. Constitution, signaling a shift toward broader personal mobility, like leaving your hometown or traveling anywhere at all for any reason.

This led to a reflection on the value the U.S. system places on freedom of movement, even if that freedom may contribute—intentionally or not—to the long-term decline of community stability. A question emerged: do we have any obligation to the places we live, or to the people in them? It was agreed that movement can offer new opportunities, but some questioned what holds a community together when fewer people remain in one place or regularly interact with one another.

The conversation circled back to a central question: What do we keep, and what do we go beyond? This led to further reflection on who or what determines it? While some stated that maintaining social connection requires time, effort, and shared commitment, others noted that economic, social, and cultural forces often shape communities, regardless of what is done at the local level. Still, it was expressed that connection is possible, if it is something we value enough to maintain.

7. Closing Quote

The final thought was a quote from the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, written in *De Senectute* (*On Old Age*, 44 BCE):

He who plants trees labors for the benefit of future generations.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #4

The Walk: Time Spent Crossing Bridges

April 23, 2025

Topic Question: “What is place and how do we experience it?”

Presentation Summary

This work is a reflective meditation on the experience of place, structured through a solitary walk across a familiar town. Beginning at the threshold between private home and public street, it explores how boundaries, both physical and unseen, shape how we inhabit and understand space. It questions how places are encountered not only through the senses, but also through memory, habit, imagination, and human decision. Observations of town raise questions about how beauty, decay, and value are judged, and how such judgments reflect personal and cultural expectations. The work reflects on how memory and absence continue to structure perception, suggesting that what is no longer present can remain part of lived experience. It considers how natural forces and human choices together shape towns, and how meaning is carried, altered, and sometimes lost over time. Rather than offering conclusions or final answers, it seeks to embody the question itself: *“What is place, and how do we experience it?”*

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard:** For Bachelard, truly inhabited spaces take on the *essence* of home—not just sheltering the body, but holding imagination, memory, and inner life.
2. **Thresholds and Boundaries:** Crossing from home into town, the narrator explores visible and invisible lines that define space, belonging, and the habits of daily life.
3. **Seeing the Town: Beyond Surface:** Walking familiar streets, the narrator finds layered meaning in buildings and scenes—asking whether we perceive places as they are or project ourselves onto them.
4. **Geography and Awareness:** Natural features shape the town’s appearance and layout, and even something from a river to a plastic bag can evoke experiences that seem to resist explanation.
5. **Decisions and Judgments:** The town reveals choices made and forgotten. Empty lots, fading signs, and judgments show how place reflects values, assumptions, and meanings.
6. **The Whole and the Beyond:** Looking outward and upward, the narrator imagines the town as a whole—and what lies beyond it—reflecting on their place within it, and how even buildings can express people’s beliefs.
7. **Return and Reflection:** Walking back, the narrator questions what people desire from a place—progress, preservation, beauty—and whether community can exist even in solitude.
8. **Home Again, and the Question:** The return home framed the town as an unfolding and left open the central question: what is place and how do we experience it?

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard.

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), p. 5.

2. I went downtown yesterday with no one else, to see it as it is.

Standing at the threshold of my home, I stepped out the door. Cool air hit me, carrying smells I couldn't quite name. Someone cooking onions? Damp concrete? Something metallic? I knew it was there, but I didn't know what it was. The porch creaked under my feet. The chair I never sat in held a few dry leaves. I heard the sound of distant traffic and industry, a subtle constant. The door closed behind me. I stood there a moment, staring out at other homes, the town, the hills that surround it all, and I looked back down to the street below.

Then I took the steps down.

The sidewalk met me like it always does, cracked and familiar. These are things I sense, but there's more than just what can be sensed. I'm at a threshold that marks a border between the private and the public, between what's mine and what's shared, between the inside of my home and the outside it shelters me from. Home is shelter, but also a legal boundary. A space where I can say who comes in and who stays out. But what is this really? A feeling? A right? A structure? A habit? Why do we build homes like this, structured by rooms, divided by walls, secured by doors? Some boundaries are physical. But others are invisible, and not just legal boundaries, yet we believe in them as if they were tangible. What do we make of all this, I wonder?

3. I walk down the hill to town on the same streets I've walked for years.

And yet, from the start, it wasn't just a walk. I was trying to see it—the town. Not as just background, not as mere name on a map, but as form. As shape. As question. What is this place, and how do I experience it? What does it mean to live in a place like this, to walk it, to shape it, and be shaped by it? Both the seen and unseen.

Ahead, I see a house with plastic on the windows, a small garden unplanted in an old tire, paint peeling. I see another home—elaborate, stonework, ornate trim, a governor's drive, a porch that seems almost ceremonial. I could catalog the textures. I could name the architectural styles. But that doesn't explain what I feel—that pull of being surrounded by the known and still not understanding it, not like the ones who dwell in those homes, and I'm not meant to.

I passed a building I've passed a hundred times.

Some would call it an eyesore. Others, history. I have a history with it, like others do. I looked up at the cracked windows, rust running like tears down the side, and felt something. Was it sadness? Respect? Reverence? Loss? Even a kind of rough beauty? Maybe it was what could be called an aesthetic experience: when something appears not just as a thing, but as a form that matters. But how can a phrase like that—"aesthetic experience"—explain or hold any claim over the immediacy of what I feel now? I'm feeling the way that I'm feeling myself.

Still—why do these things make me feel this way? Is it the lines? The light? Or is it something else entirely? A failed promise? A memory I never had? When we see ruin in a building, are we seeing the structure, or the breakdown of someone's intention? And what do we see when we see its opposite—a building intact, clean, that shows future possibility and prosperity? Is it a sign of something more?

What makes a place beautiful? What makes it ugly? And what are we really judging when we say so? We'll stop to take photos of an old forest—roots exposed, bark flaking, branches soft with rot—because nature's decay is often seen as natural, even beautiful. Many would not call that an eyesore. We call it part of the cycle. But here, in town, rot is called ruin. A building has been empty for years. That gets called blight. But why? Is it because the building once had a purpose, and now does not? Or is it something more about how we judge ourselves and others? So decay in nature could be called sublime? And decay in towns could be called decline? But both are subject to the same unrelenting force, both suggest life and its passing. So what are we really responding to? The merely physical?

What makes a place feel whole? Or disjointed? Or bleak? Is it a matter of design? Of memory? Of neglect? Of having a use, a purpose? Or not having it? Maybe it's not the place, but the way

that I'm feeling myself. I look at a storefront where the glass is smudged and empty. I try to see it without judgment, but I can't. Something in me says: this is failure. But what has failed? The window? The business? The promise?

4. I reach the bridge.

Below, the river moves—indifferent to me, to everyone. It carved this town into two before the town was here or the land had a name. Geology gave birth to the town's economy. It gave people a reason to come here who hadn't been here before. The geography was a determining part of how the streets were shaped, the locations of schools, mills, businesses, and homes.

I look down at the river catching the light. I see a single plastic bag snagged in the weeds on the bank. Ugly? Maybe. But also—a mark. A trace. An interruption. I thought again of earlier, passing the houses and buildings. What do we experience in a moment like these? Not use. Not pleasure. Something like awareness?

There are different names for it: from disinterested judgment to embodied perception, if I'm using those terms correctly. But maybe it's simpler. Sometimes we look at something, and it looks back. Not literally. But we feel seen by it. Located. Measured. Still, after everything, it's only me who is looking. Maybe it's still simpler: connection. But merely to a plastic bag snagged in the weeds? And then, no words capture it.

5. I cross the bridge.

And yet, not everything is passive like the geography. There are decisions here. Someone chose the angles of these buildings. Someone zoned this town. Someone decided where the trucks would idle and where the trees wouldn't be replanted. A building condemned or brought back. It's not just what we see that manifests what is seen—like a chain of decisions, some economic, some thoughtful, some hasty, some no longer remembered.

I passed the old hotel. It's gone now—torn down—but I stopped at the empty lot where it once stood. I will remember, and one day, others will not. I passed another lot where a school once stood. I don't remember it, but the outline of the space it filled remains.

Down another block, I noticed ivy climbing an old wall, a sun-faded sign barely legible on a door. Some people would throw it away. Some find something in it, maybe, like I have. And I guess others will let it fade in the sun for years. What does this reflect? Does it reveal what we value? What we mourn? What we hope for? Maybe not clearly. But even in the almost inconsequential sun-faded sign, we can make unlimited judgments—whether judged rightly or not. Does that faded sign tell us more than the words we can no longer read on it? If we see a home in poor condition, we might relate it to poverty. If one is in good condition, we might relate it to care or pride or wealth.

But this is too convenient. It's often not so clear-cut. One is not simply poor, one not. One ugly, one beautiful. One good, one bad. Even though we often speak in such terms and try to fit it all into one word or the other.

What is our measurement? What would be our perfect form—the one we weigh all others against? Perhaps what we imagine is not just beauty, but a place that gives us what we think we need, and to be recognized by it. That it's what we wanted it to be. But again, how do we measure it? And if it does not meet standards, what do we say? Does resentment fester and grow?

When someone says this town is ugly, what they might mean is, "It failed to be what I wanted it to be." Or maybe it's even more personal?

But maybe that's too easy. Maybe the judgment isn't completely theirs. Maybe they were taught what it should look like: symmetry, clean lines, fresh paint. Or maybe something completely different. What if that's just a habit, a cultural training, a learned dismissal of anything that doesn't sell or benefit them? But who decides that? Maybe that's too easy as well.

6. Still walking, I look up.

I see the church on the hill, its steeple cutting into the sky with geometric precision. The kind of structure built to draw the eye upward, to something beyond. Even its layout and attraction have roots in ancient theories of harmony: geometry based on music, proportion drawn from notions

of the divine. There's something about a building high on a hill that makes it seem as if something distant is above us, and we are small beneath it.

Above the steeples reaching up, the town is seen together as a whole—roads winding through hills, houses gathered like lines, buildings punctuating the land. Among the hills and valleys carved by rivers and creeks, the lives of others unfold. And above it all, the blue sky. Beyond the blue sky, darkness. And out there in the darkness—the unknown.

Looking back through the dark, you see the hills and valleys, the roads and rooftops, the people who live there, the whole organic shape. And then, finally, you see me, here in it all. Yet I'm one among many. Does that make me small—insignificant—compared to it all? Maybe there is no comparison to be made, and it is only me.

I notice the sun is setting. I look out and see a cell tower in the distance, high on a hill. The light atop it blinked once, then again. Blink...darkness...blink...darkness...

7. I turned back.

Back past the church. Back past the ivy. Back over the bridge and across the divide of the river that pays us no mind. It hasn't changed. But the light has. The hills are catching the last of the sun. I feel the air shifting, like breathing, a familiar chill of spring. But how can it be? Familiar. I haven't lived this moment before.

I stop at the library steps to rest and think.

When I was young, I thought a town was just there. Like the sky. Like the hill. Now I see it's made. By use. By refusal. By silence. By compromise. By division. By abandonment. By return. And more than I can ever say. I see—but can I ever fully know something that unfolds endlessly?

The appearance of a community in some way holds a record of what people were willing to live with. And sometimes what they weren't. What counts as improvement? What will this place become? Some people see a mural and call it hope. Others call it a waste. Some call a cleaned-up blank wall progress. Others call it a missed opportunity. Some say we need growth, but what is growth? Others say we need to preserve what we have. What are we really preserving when we

preserve a place? Its use? Its story? Or the feeling it gave us and, at times, to make others feel the same way we do? When we try to preserve a place, it doesn't seem to be about preserving only physical structures.

Still, some want more trees. Others want more parking. People seem to always desire something. To return. To go. To stay the same, or even not to be a part of it at all, and have little to say. But what will we do? And how much is really in anyone's power to do? Is it more or less than what we've come to live with?

A child bikes past me, weaving. I step aside. The moment passes. But in it is a whole way of moving through space, and of awareness. Who notices? Who makes room? Some say experience is shaped by the senses. Others say it's shaped by memory, expectation, imagination. Many theories try to explain it. No matter. None of this happens in isolation. What is place without people?

There are people here—not just myself. I am not just in some isolated void of nothingness. If no one were here, could we still call it a place? But I see them here. I only walked alone because I asked no one to come along and no one asked me. Maybe what I'm really asking is: can we still have community if we walk alone, feeling the way that we're feeling ourselves?

But others are here with me. But what do they see? What are we drawn to? To purpose? To care? What do we mean when we say this place is beautiful? That it pleases us? That it stands for something?

8. My rest over, and I walk back home.

I turn the corner. The porch is in sight again. Up the cracked sidewalk. Up the steps. The porch was still the way it was. The chair still empty. I pass back through the threshold where the private meets the public, where my life is held in and let out again. Why do we feel more at home in some places than others? What are we really responding to when we say a town feels alive or dead? What makes one place worth saving and another forgettable? How do we talk about it?

But at the end—still—what is place?

I'm not sure, not in any way that would satisfy. Even now, I don't think I have a final answer to "What is place, and how do we experience it?" Not an answer everyone would accept or agree on, if it's even possible. And I don't know what your answer should be.

But I think I can say this: I've come to think it's more than appearance. It's more than use. It's, certainly, more than a point on a map.

But now I'm here back at the discussion circle with you, not walking the street, looking at it through my eyes, experiencing the world around me. But I know I missed things. I know I may have seen things differently than others might. I didn't say all that I could about this. There's much more and not about buildings and homes and streets and hills and valleys. I'm sure someone could tell me what I didn't notice, seen or unseen.

I gave it a start, a try. And so we'll start and try together. It may be a small step, but the topic we are taking on is not at all a narrow one, and perhaps it's a bit ambitious. But now this question is yours:

What is place, and how do we experience it?

And that question is the front porch where we'll begin.

Now—what do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #4

Discussion

April 23, 2025

Topic Question: “What is place and how do we experience it?”

Discussion Summary

The discussion explored how people understand, experience, and describe the places they live. It moved through early memories of home, the role of care and neglect, and how space becomes meaningful, habit, and shared use. Topics included differing views on aesthetics, architecture, digital connection, and the challenges of maintaining community in changing times. The conversation also considered how perception, memory, language, and attention shape our sense of place. The final section centered on a dilemma: if words can shape how places are viewed, but words do not seem to fully capture how a place is—how can we speak truthfully about it? Especially when a place is experienced so differently by the people who call it home.

Discussion Points

1. **Memory, Home, and Familiarity:** People shared memories of feeling at home, exploring how space is shaped by routine, imagination, and design expectations.
2. **Care, Neglect, and the Appearance of Value:** Discussed how visible upkeep affects perception, and whether care must always be seen to be real.
3. **Place, Presence, and Belonging:** The conversation explored what gives place meaning—people, presence, or memory—and who feels like they belong.
4. **Gathering, Community, and the Use of Space:** Reflected on how public spaces matter not just for being there, but for how they are used and shared.
5. **Virtual Life, Physical Presence, and Connection:** Considered how digital spaces create connection, while raising concerns about what may be lost offline.
6. **Phones, Attention, and What We Notice:** The discussion explored how constant connection shapes how we notice, feel, and experience the places we're in.
7. **The Challenge of Speaking Honestly About Place:** The discussion raised a dilemma: How do we speak honestly without defining it by them, especially when people experience the same place in conflicting ways.
8. **Closing Question:** From Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), a reflection on how the world is not made by us, but is the ground of our thought and perception.

1. Memory, Home, and Familiarity

The discussion opened with reflections on the earliest memories of feeling at home. For some, this meant childhood houses—spaces filled with comfort, repetition, and routine. One person said it was the place where friends gathered, a home that was not fancy but felt welcoming. Another mentioned dreams, retreating inward, where even imagined places could feel more grounding. A person with a background in architecture said that in design education, personal experience of space was rarely considered. Designers were taught to focus on how things looked or functioned, not how they might feel to someone living there.

That same speaker described how what counts as "good" design changes with time, mentioning a personal admiration for brutalism—a style now often considered cold or unwelcoming. It raised the point that judgments of place often follow trends more than any fixed standard. We tend to value places based on what we expect them to be, not just how they are.

Others shared how difficult it can be to preserve a sense of home across time. One person described renovating their childhood house, trying to improve it without erasing it. It was asked: At what point does a house stop being the one you grew up in? Another mentioned how reading—a private, quiet activity—requires not just time, but a space that feels right. A certain corner. The right light. These small comforts, they said, do not always look like much to others, but they matter deeply.

2. Care, Neglect, and the Appearance of Value

The group turned to how care—or the lack of it—shapes how we perceive a community and what it says about the people who live there. One person described the unease they feel when walking past homes that appear neglected. It is not just visual decay, they said—it creates a sense of unease, an impression that no one cares, and that the space is not welcoming. Another recalled Pittsburgh in the 1980s, when economic decline left entire neighborhoods hollowed out. The appearance of abandonment was not just cosmetic—it affected how people felt about themselves and their worth.

This raised deeper questions. Does a neglected space always mean no one values it? One speaker countered that view, describing young families in their small town struggling to maintain their homes—not from apathy, but exhaustion. They remembered raising children themselves while working full time, with no time for paint or landscaping. The love was still there. The care had not disappeared—it had just been redirected to other efforts like raising kids.

Another echoed the point: a chipped porch might not mean neglect; it might point to different priorities. Choosing to invest energy in children instead of flowerbeds does not suggest people do not care. It suggests they care about something else. It was suggested that value is not always visible on the surface.

Yet, one noted a study suggesting a walk through clean, well-lit streets feels shorter and more pleasant than the same walk through dim, seemingly neglected spaces. The aesthetic of a space—its light, its upkeep—can shape how long something feels, how safe we feel moving through it, and whether we want to return.

On one hand, people urged caution in judging communities by appearance alone. On the other, others acknowledged that appearances shape real emotional and social experiences. It was noted the importance of looking beyond appearances, while others acknowledged how strongly visual cues shape how a place feels. Yet what we see may not reflect the full reality. A place that looks uncared for might still hold meaning, effort, and attachment. Whether or not those qualities can—or should—be separated from appearance was left unresolved.

3. Place, Presence, and Belonging

The discussion turned to place and the question: Is place just a physical structure, or something else? One person said they had moved too often to feel rooted anywhere. For them, place was defined by people, wherever they felt safe and known. Another recalled the feeling of home in their mother's office. It was not about the room itself but the relationship.

That raised another question: Can place exist without people? Some thought yes—certain structures seem to carry meaning even in absence. A church on a hill might still evoke reverence, even if empty. But others thought that a place only comes to be a place when someone inhabits it.

The old thought experiment came up: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? One person reframed the issue: if no one is there, who does it matter to? Another question followed: Does meaning require someone to witness it, or can a place hold significance on its own?

The group then explored what it means to be "in" a place but still not feel part of it. One person described living overseas for years, building a life and family, and still feeling marked as a foreigner. They shared cultural terms used to name those who are physically present but never fully accepted. This resonated with others who have, at times, felt like outsiders in their own hometowns.

The contrast between personal and public space came up. At home, people can shape their surroundings. In community, everything is contested—what to preserve, what to change, who gets to decide. One person talked about how seemingly small decisions, whether to build a park or a parking lot, tear down or restore—become debates about identity and not always just functional choices. They can be expressions of what kind of place a community believes itself to be or an individual believes it should be.

4. Gathering, Community, and the Use of Space

Many remembered growing up in communities where people gathered regularly—at churches, schools, festivals. Now, they said, those shared spaces feel like exceptions rather than norms. A community event does not feel routine—it feels rare, and when it happens, people take notice.

It was mentioned the pandemic accelerated the drift away from it. One person who works in human services described how years of effort building trust with families vanished almost overnight when home visits had to stop. Now, they said, those doors are still harder to open. Others talked about the lasting effect of avoiding restaurants or skipping public events. Even though things have reopened, the habit of keeping distance has stuck.

It was pointed out that gathering places remain. A local café came up as a place where people still choose to be together or at least see others. One person said they sometimes stop in even when they do not want coffee, just to feel around others. It was considered that these places

matter not for what they sell, but because they give people a reason to stay, linger, and see each other.

The group also considered how gathering is not just about having buildings—it is about what those places are for and how they are used. One person pointed out that we often associate spaces with specific actions: parks for play, kitchens for cooking, libraries for quiet. If we want a space to serve community, we have to think beyond aesthetics and ask: What do people believe they are allowed to do there? Another added that it is not just about having the space—it is about showing people how to use it. A place only becomes communal when people feel they can enter, stay, and take part. A question came up: do we need new places, or do we need new habits to bring people back together?

5. Virtual Life, Physical Presence, and Connection

The discussion moved into digital space. People with teenagers described how their kids "hang out" online—in Fortnite, Minecraft, or social chats. These are not pretend spaces—they are real to the people in them. Friends gather every night, even if physically apart.

But others were not sure that is enough. One said studies show young people who spend the most time online report the highest levels of depression and loneliness. Even if digital space feels real, it may still be missing something essential. One brought up a point as an example of something missing: If I am sitting across from someone, I can tell if they are lying, but online, you may not be able to pick up on the same visual cues. Others noted the lack of physical touch, which cannot be replicated virtually.

It was reflected on how quickly digital life has changed expectations. Some recalled the movie *Ready Player One*, where people escape into a virtual world while the real one crumbles. One person said their child has two phones but often leaves one behind—not all kids are addicted, they said, though the culture still has not settled on norms for what is healthy. Another compared smartphones to knives—powerful tools that can help or harm, depending on how we are taught to use them.

6. Phones, Attention, and What We Notice

Some said they have tried putting away their phones for a day. Doing so, they said, changes how space feels. One person described walking through town without their phone and feeling more present, more grounded. Without instant access to every answer, they were left to wonder longer, and that wonder made them notice more.

Others discussed the anxiety that comes from not having a phone. Not because of emergencies, but because all contact, all direction, all planning now lives in that device. One said their kids, even with multiple devices, often do not worry about it the same way older generations do. The relationship to constant connection may be changing.

The discussion kept returning to the idea that attention shapes experience. If our phones pull us away from where we are, then they are not just tools—they are shaping what kind of place a place becomes. A town full of people walking with heads down, so to speak, is different from one full of people waving hello.

7. The Challenge of Speaking Honestly About Place

The group talked about how people describe the towns they live in—and how this could shape experience. Several agreed that it is common to hear, “There is nothing here,” even said directly to visitors. One person shared that they had recently met someone new in town, and one of the first things locals told them was exactly that. It raised a question: how much do our own words define what others come to think about a place?

Another speaker described the difficulty of being honest about place. They spoke about the tension between naming real challenges—declining population, aging infrastructure, lack of resources—and still trying to make the community inviting. If those problems are all people hear, it can push them away. One person responded with a phrase they had heard before: “Love does not pay rent.” Caring about a place does not replace the material support it needs.

There were different views about what makes a place worth preserving. One person described their attachment to old or abandoned spaces—prisons, monasteries, bunkers—not because they

were usable or safe, but because they carried a kind of presence. Another emphasized the need for functional, well-maintained spaces, especially when thinking about the future of a town.

A dilemma emerged from this discussion: How do we speak honestly about the places we live—naming what is broken without reducing them to only what is wrong?

If the words we use shape what we and others come to think, yet no words can fully hold all that a place is—its history, its hardship, its potential—how can we speak truthfully about it?

Especially when the experience of that place is often not agreed upon. What one sees as decline, another might see as beauty, or even home.

Note: I wonder, can any words ever fully and truly capture it? And when words fail us, what do we say? Even then, it still seems we are here.

8. Closing Quote

A quote from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, written in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #5

**Circles of Belonging: Drawing What Doesn't (Yet)
Exist**

June 18, 2025

Topic Question: “What is belonging?”

Presentation Summary

This presentation is an inquiry into belonging—what it offers, what it demands, and how it shapes individuals and communities. It questions whether belonging is a feeling, a social fact, or a structure people construct or resist. Through metaphor, memory, and historical reflection, the presentation examines the visible and invisible boundaries that define inclusion and exclusion. It also considers the costs people bear to belong, and what it might mean to belong universally or not at all. Rather than offering a single conclusion, the work opens a space for reflection on whether community must always draw lines, and whether we can imagine belonging differently.

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Epictetus’ *Discourses*:** Epictetus believed humanity was a single moral community, part of the Stoic conception of Nature.
2. **What We Call Belonging:** This section explores the concept of belonging by asking what it truly means. Is it emotional, social, or structural? The discussion reflects on why people seek it and what they hope to find—recognition, safety, identity—and how belonging can both nurture and constrain.
3. **Circles of Belonging:** Belonging is pictured as a circle with edges—inside and outside. The section explores how those edges are drawn in towns like Oil City and elsewhere. It asks who decides the boundaries, and whether they are even that clear.
4. **Exclusion, New Community, and the Cost of Belonging:** This section reflects on how exclusion can be both explicit and subtle. It explores how new communities often emerge in response to exclusion, and examines the personal costs people accept in order to belong. It also asks whether we should be cautious about seeing belonging as “natural.”
5. **Universal Belonging:** Can we belong without boundaries? This section explores ideas from Diogenes and the Stoics about being a citizen of the world, questioning whether universal belonging is possible or even meaningful. Can we draw new circles as we like, or does it take others to recognize them?

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from *Discourses of Epictetus*

If indeed what the philosophers say is true, that the whole world is a single community, and that a human being is a citizen of that community, it follows that neither any human being nor any action can be outside that community.

— Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.26–27 (trans. Hard)

2. What We Call Belonging

I've been thinking about what it means to begin something. Not just to start a conversation or a project, but to step into a space in which nothing yet exists, and maybe cannot exist until people gather around it.

We use the word belonging often, as though its meaning is obvious. People say, “Something belongs to them,” or “I belong here,” or “I never felt like I belonged.” But what are we really naming? Is belonging a feeling? A permission? A role? A contract? An illusion? Is it something universal? Or something that shifts across time, place, and peoples? And there are many other words that we use besides belonging to gesture at this.

Many do seem to seek what we call belonging. But why seek it? Maybe because belonging offers recognition, safety, connection, identity. It allows people to participate, to be seen, to share in something larger than themselves. Aristotle called humans political animals, social creatures. Without belonging, he argued, we cannot fully thrive—that being cut off was a kind of diminishing, that we cannot live as humans in isolation.

At its best, would we think that belonging helps build trust and meaning in people—be it through family, friendship, work, culture, common cause—nurturing resilience and allowing people to come together toward some goal. Yet belonging is not always that clear. Belonging can carry expectations: ways to speak, to act, to conform. People sometimes bend or mute parts of themselves to belong. Sometimes this seems to happen without notice. Sometimes it comes with deep struggle.

And yet, even knowing this, many still seek it. Why? Because the alternative can be harder: we may perceive the alternative as isolation, invisibility, disconnection from others and resources, and a lack of being valued.

3. Circles of Belonging

Now let's picture belonging as a circle, a circle of belonging. There is a center. There is a circumference. There is an inside and an outside. But who draws the circle? Who benefits from it? What holds it in place: memory, authority, resource, habit, fear, love? And is there really something at the center? Are there forms of belonging: formal, informal, open, closed?

In a town like Oil City, these lines are often clear—certain names, certain histories, what part of town you are from, families, known contributors, newcomers. In small towns, the boundaries can be visible. But it seems many are not always so simple or seen. One may belong in one space but not in another. One may belong today but not tomorrow. How would we know?

What decides, and how? Do those on the inside even know they are or how the line works? Or do they believe no line exists? The same can be said of those outside. But someone must recognize in some way—perhaps in how they are embraced or not—or else how does it exist, if "exist" is the word to use here? Whether it is easy to point to or not, it does seem to happen. Things are not always as clear as our metaphor of a circle suggests. What is the rule? What is the criteria? Is it how one looks? Or things not visible, or both?

4. Exclusion, New Community, and the Cost of Belonging

But on the other hand, sometimes inclusion and exclusion is obviously overt, if not written in law—like segregation was, immigration restrictions now, and the denial of legal personhood that was once denied to women, the enslaved, Indigenous people in the U.S. But like our previous examples, it seems the overt is also connected to something more subtle that often lingers on—in who is seen, who is ignored.

But belonging is not only about exclusion. There seem to be two sides of it. It also seems about acceptance. New circles seem to form all the time—countercultures, subcultures, movements of resistance and renewal. One example: how LGBTQ communities have historically built

communities in most larger metropolitan areas in response to exclusion. Though, this is not limited to large metropolitan areas. Many other groups have done the same. When doors close, new spaces are often made.

Again: what is it we are seeking when we seek belonging? Why do people build these circles at all? Sometimes it is for resources, safety, opportunity, survival. Sometimes it is for the chance to be seen, to take part in a story.

Digital life complicates this. One can “join” a group with a click. But is this belonging, or an illusion of it? Does it satisfy the need, or deepen it?

And yet, is this seeking itself natural? We often hear: “Wanting to belong is human nature.” But is it? And even if it is, what kind of nature? If seeking belonging is natural, does that make exclusion natural too? Or is this a slippery slope to be very cautious of? Where does such a line of thought lead? Must we accept it as a fact of human nature?

Consider also: people often sacrifice their own well-being to belong. They mute parts of themselves, adapt, or contort because the cost of being excluded may be seen as greater. What drives this? Is it only fear, or a want to be part of something? Is it always a bad thing, so to speak?

Still, some may choose not to belong, or not in the ways expected. They reject certain circles or live between them. We can think of the image of the wanderer—and it has often been claimed there is freedom here—but also loneliness, and possibly being cut off from things considered valuable by a group.

Yet if a group holds something considered valuable—some authority, recognition, resources—is exclusion inevitable? Does every circle require edges? Sometimes scarcity is real, but sometimes the need is created to justify the boundary. Maybe the center of belonging we seek turns out hollow and void.

5. Universal Belonging

And now, what of the idea of universal belonging, a circle that includes all. Is this possible? Or does it erase what belonging means? Can a circle without edges still give meaning? Or must belonging, by nature, define who is in and who is not?

Diogenes, the ancient Cynic, called himself a citizen of the world. He rejected wealth, status, and the comfort of society to live in the streets. But was this belonging, or a refusal of it? A freedom, or an illusion? The Stoics carried forward this idea of cosmopolitanism, seeing all humans as part of one moral community. But can such an ideal truly live in practice? Can we belong to the whole world, or does belonging always require some form of boundary?

Can we simply declare ourselves outside or inside, or even a citizen of the world, and have it be so? A circle that is me alone or the whole cosmos when I think it. Who would stop me—but who else would recognize it? But if others do recognize my fantasies, my line or lack of it, do they no longer remain fantasies, but become something beyond me? But couldn't we all do this?

Perhaps this question circles to: if belonging is something we can create, can it also be something we uncreate? Can we draw new circles, or none at all? And if we could, what would we lose? What might we gain? Do you think it is up to us? Can we step into a space in which nothing exists yet—and gather around it? What are we doing now?

I've heard it said: community is defined by who is in and who is out. But is it? What about our community?

For us, *what is belonging?*

As always, what do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #5

Discussion

June 18, 2025

Topic Question: “What is Belonging?”

Discussion Summary

The group explored the nature of belonging, beginning with the question of whether people truly seek belonging or something more personal, such as meaningful connection. Many described belonging as conditional, tied to social performance, approval, or exclusion rather than something freely chosen. Cultural identity and assimilation added further complexity, as people shared how heritage and cultural background can be erased, misunderstood, or reshaped across generations. Labor, class, and authority shaped feelings of inclusion or imposture, especially within exploitative systems. Digital communities were debated; some saw real bonds, while others questioned the depth of online belonging. Technology and generational change raised concerns about access, recognition, and the future of human connection. Throughout, belonging was seen not as a fixed state but a fragile, evolving negotiation—felt in its presence, absence, or loss. The discussion closed on the idea, if anything, still holds people together in a time of fragmentation and uncertainty. It also raised a question: have the fundamental structures of society, like work, education, and communication, actually changed, or are people still facing the same challenges, simply reshaped by new circumstances?

Discussion Points

1. **Connection and Questioning Belonging:** Some questioned whether people truly seek belonging at all, suggesting that meaningful connection—especially in moments of loneliness or change—may matter more than group inclusion.
2. **Conditional Belonging and Social Performance:** Belonging was described as often requiring approval, adaptation, or emotional performance. Stories of instability and survival revealed how inclusion can feel conditional rather than freely chosen.
3. **Gossip and Communication Stereotypes:** Gossip was reframed as a social tool—sometimes protective, sometimes harmful—and often shaped by cultural norms and stereotypes around communication.
4. **Imposter Syndrome, Labor, and Authority:** Experiences of self-doubt were linked to professional settings and systemic inequality. Discussions covered imposter syndrome, economic pressure, and the emotional toll of navigating limited agency.

5. **Cultural Identity, Disconnection, and the American Label:** Conversations around culture and adoption explored how identity can feel fractured—shaped more by others’ assumptions than by lived experience or personal connection to heritage.
6. **Assimilation and Fitting In:** Reflections on assimilation revealed how language, memory, and identity are lost or hidden. Belonging was seen as fragile—negotiated across generations and often challenged from within and without.
7. **Division, Recognition, and the Uncertainty of Belonging:** Polarization and performance were explored as forces shaping identity. People reflected on how questioning group labels or avoiding extremes can lead to isolation or exclusion.
8. **Belonging in Digital Spaces:** Opinions diverged on whether digital spaces create real connection. Online communities were seen as both supportive and exclusionary, with unspoken rules and social hierarchies.
9. **Memory, Technology, and the Future of Belonging:** Technology’s role in shaping access and exclusion raised concerns. Instant information, automation, and unequal digital participation were discussed as new forces redefining who belongs.
10. **Continuity and Disconnection in an Age of Change:** Despite rapid change, many of the same problems seem to persist. The group explored generational perspectives, communication breakdowns, and shifting workplace identities, considering which norms are eroding and which circles of belonging may be lost.
11. **Closing Quote:** A line attributed to Groucho Marx from a resignation letter.

1. Connection and Questioning Belonging

The discussion opened with a challenge to the concept of belonging itself. One person distinguished between belonging and connection, saying they did not crave belonging but sought meaningful connection—a shared understanding with even one other person. To them, belonging felt like something larger and more abstract, while connection was intimate and concrete. Others reflected on how the need for belonging may shift with age: teenagers often feel pressure to belong in peer groups, but this diminishes in adulthood as people navigate work, family, and personal priorities.

One person described the comfort of being known in a space where they had contributed meaningfully over time. In that setting, they felt belonging not because of who was there, but because the space itself held a kind of memory to them. In this view, belonging emerges through purpose and continuity, not necessarily through people.

The conversation often circled back to the feelings tied to belonging. Some linked it directly to loneliness, suggesting that the desire to belong is often a desire to feel less alone. One person, referencing the television series *Alone*, noted that even the most rugged, self-sufficient individuals often reach a breaking point—not from lack of survival skills, but from isolation. Another noted that contestants who were parents seemed to struggle more with separation, suggesting that belonging is often tied not to place, but to people, especially family.

Others described belonging as something most clearly felt in its absence. You only recognize its importance when it is missing. One person suggested that even if someone can meet ninety percent of their physical and emotional needs alone, the remaining ten percent—that ache for social presence—becomes overpowering over time. Despite high stakes like a five-hundred-thousand-dollar prize, many *Alone* participants walk away, choosing connection over reward. The point, one person said, is that something essential in us chooses belonging.

2. Conditional Belonging and Social Performance

One person noted the double-edged quality of the word “belonging.” The phrase “You do not belong here” marks exclusion, an external judgment. “I belong here” is a personal affirmation of presence and comfort. The group reflected on this tension between internal experience and external validation, noting that belonging often requires invitation, access, or approval, and it is not always self-determined. Belonging, then, can feel like something given or withheld, while connection might be more mutual and voluntary.

Another person shared their personal story, describing a childhood spent being adopted informally by many different families. They had grown up across varied communities—church groups, bikers, urban neighborhoods. They noted that this did not create a stable or lasting sense of belonging. Belonging, in this case, was replaced by adaptability and the ability to form shallow but necessary connections for survival. Another person added to this with a friend’s

experience in the foster care system. Their friend had described those early connections as fleeting and emotionally unstable. The lesson, they said, was learning to accept that some relationships run their course. They might not be permanent, but that does not make them meaningless.

Others expanded on this idea, agreeing that not all connections are meant to last, but that does not diminish their significance at the moment. The illusion that only lasting relationships matter was challenged, and instead, people proposed a more fluid view: relationships can be short-lived and still be meaningful. Sometimes, the pain comes not from the loss, but from our expectations of permanence.

Someone said this kind of life is like a series of auditions. One person's friend, who grew up bouncing between homes, felt like he constantly had to perform—always be likable, adaptable, "on," or risk being removed. That survival strategy made him incredibly skilled in social spaces, but it was forged in the insecurity of being disposable. Another person shared their own early experience of defiance and disconnection. Raised in a deeply religious home, they spoke about growing apart from certain religious teachings during childhood. Although their mother was supportive, they felt distant from their extended family and church community. That early distance led them to question expectations and build a sense of belonging outside of those groups.

Other people reflected on this dynamic and the difference between spaces where you are told you belong versus those where you carve out connection yourself. Belonging can feel conditional or inherited, while connection often feels earned. Some viewed this as a matter of resilience and authenticity: when you have had to work for your place in the world, the connections you make are deeper, more intentional. You may value them more precisely because they were not handed to you. One person even suggested that people who have always been given a place may never fully understand the depth of connection formed through hardship.

The conversation also explored how emotion and mutual recognition shape connection. Some argued that belonging often relies on institutional or cultural gatekeeping and is about whether others decide you are in or out. Connection, by contrast, is personal and relational. It comes from a shared emotional investment. Yet even here, there is fragility. People often neglect the

connections they have simply because they do not feel the same energy or importance in return. It is not about what others do for you—it is about how emotionally real the bond feels.

The group circled back to the theme of control and responsibility. Some warned against the danger of trying to be responsible for another person's emotional state, especially in close relationships. Trying to make someone else happy is not only impossible, it places an unbearable burden on both people. The belief that we can manage another's emotional life undermines the honesty and mutual effort needed for genuine connection. It creates imbalance and, ultimately, collapse.

3. Gossip and Communication Stereotypes

The conversation turned to gossip. It was introduced as an example of how people navigate social situations. Although gossip is often viewed negatively, one person described it as a form of social behavior that can signal trust, build group identity, and offer protection. In some cases, it was seen as a kind of ritual—an exchange of insider knowledge that marks inclusion or exclusion.

They explained that gossip can be a way to test the waters with another person. Sharing a story about someone else may feel safer than expressing personal emotions directly. It can serve as a subtle way to reach out and determine whether someone is open to deeper connection, without risking direct emotional exposure. In that sense, gossip is not only about others; it can function as a coded expression of one's own needs.

The group also acknowledged gossip's harmful potential. It can be manipulative, judgmental, or even cruel, especially when used to isolate, diminish, or control others. One person shared an experience in which gossip may have saved their life: a warning about a dangerous coworker was passed along informally, prompting caution that ultimately helped prevent a fatal workplace accident. Was that still gossip, or something else entirely?

Intent and context seemed to matter. Is the purpose to help, to make sense of something, or to exclude and harm? Gossip shared without care can cause damage, but when used thoughtfully, it may serve as a way to reflect, support, or protect. It often fills the space between formal

communication and emotional need, offering an improvised language for trust, caution, or concern.

Some reflected on how gossip has been culturally coded as feminine and dismissed as frivolous, while male communication is often portrayed as more direct or physical. These patterns, many noted, are taught, reinforced, and shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Behaviors aren't just personal choices—they're embedded in culture, passed down, reinforced by stereotypes, and shaped by what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable in different communities. One person pointed out that calling gossip "female behavior" often reflects a failure to understand women's communication—framing it as trivial rather than valid. Others added that everyone learns to use what tools they have, whether reputation or force, depending on what's considered acceptable.

4. Imposter Syndrome, Labor, and Authority

The conversation moved into personal experiences of not belonging, particularly in unfamiliar environments or roles. One person shared a story from their first week working in finance, where formal dress and professional client interactions triggered imposter syndrome. Despite being trained and competent, they questioned whether they truly belonged in that space.

Others connected this to broader issues of leadership and authority. They suggested that imposter syndrome is not limited to new roles. It also affects how people relate to those in power. Many would rather follow than lead, not because they lack ideas, but because they do not want the burden of responsibility. This raised questions about how leaders are chosen, why people defer authority, and how internal doubt shapes who steps forward—or does not.

One person described training new restaurant servers who often wanted to "fix" their workplace but were not in a position to make real changes or did not want to take on that work fully. The person challenged this mindset, pointing out that these servers were hired to do a specific job—not to solve systemic problems while being underpaid. Their advice was simple: do your job with integrity, make what money you can, and do not burn yourself out trying to change an institution that never asked for your input. This sparked reflection on the limits of influence within exploitative systems and the emotional toll of investing energy in environments that offer little compensation or power in return.

The group also examined the history and culture of tipping in the United States. One person traced the practice of tipped wages back to post-slavery labor structures, noting how tipping became a way to avoid paying wages to newly freed Black workers. Others added that tipping norms vary widely across countries, with European diners often confused by American expectations. Cultural assumptions about labor, fairness, and compensation not only differ across borders—they also travel between them, reshaping everyday practices in the process.

This part of the discussion revealed that the feeling of not belonging often intersects with larger historical forces. Whether navigating a new profession, confronting economic exploitation, or questioning one's place within a hierarchy, the experience is not just emotional. It reflects deeper systems of value, inequality, and social identity.

5. Cultural Identity, Disconnection, and the American Label

The conversation next focused on cultural and racial belonging. One person shared their experience as an adoptee from China, raised in Western Pennsylvania. Although racially identified as Chinese, they grew up outside any Chinese cultural context, do not speak the language, and have no lived connection to that heritage. This produced a tension—they were seen as part of a group they felt no internal connection to. They described feeling suspended between two categories, belonging partially to both but fully to neither. This raised a broader point: many forms of belonging are complicated by layers of perception, expectation, and upbringing.

Other people expressed similar experiences. One person recalled being told as a child that they were simply “American,” with no mention of their ethnic background. Though perhaps intended to promote unity, this erasure also cut them off from family history, culture, and community. The loss of heritage—whether intentional or not—left some people feeling unanchored in both the past and the present.

Several reflected that this experience is more common than it might seem. Many said their supposed cultural background felt more like a historical note than a lived identity. Unlike communities with strong customs or languages, they lacked rituals or shared stories that foster a sense of belonging.

This led to a discussion about national identity and the meaning of the label “American.” Some described the term as ambiguous, especially in the present moment. People asked whether the identity still holds meaning, or if it has become too politically and socially contested to unify anyone. For some, calling themselves American still offers a sense of grounding. For others, it leads to discomfort or a desire to reshape what that label means.

One person brought up a local story from Oil City’s past, when the town’s historically Polish neighborhood was referred to by the slur “Polack Hill.” However, this is not just in the past, as it is still often referred to by this name. The group reflected on how even within predominantly white communities, longstanding divisions and exclusions have shaped the boundaries of belonging. In this light, American identity has never been singular or neutral. It has often been defined through the lines it draws—who is included, who is excluded, and which histories are preserved or ignored.

6. Assimilation and Fitting In

Two people who grew up in St. Louis noted differences in how belonging was experienced in Western Pennsylvania. They described historic communities—Polish, Italian, and others—that were once strong but later discouraged from maintaining their heritage. Many immigrant families were urged to speak without accents, raise children in English, and distance themselves from ancestral customs. Some people reflected on how that process of assimilation erased language and culture within a generation, often leaving younger family members with little sense of where they came from or what it meant.

One person shared that their older relatives spoke fluent Gaelic but hid it, since English was considered more respectable. Others recalled family members who never acknowledged their heritage at all, responding simply “American” when asked where they were from. These accounts raised a tension: how heritage and identity are shaped by pressures to fit in, and what gets left behind in the process.

Another person brought up a story about someone they knew who claimed to be Irish on St. Patrick’s Day and was physically attacked by someone from Ireland for saying it. That led to a wider exchange on what it means to belong to a culture—whether ancestry, language,

recognition, or lived experience carries more weight. The group explored how cultural belonging is not only a personal feeling but also something that can be challenged or denied by others.

They also examined how in-group and out-group dynamics once defined social and economic life in towns like Oil City. Whether through ethnic networks, religious identity, or neighborhood ties, having a place in the group could determine access to jobs, safety, or support.

When asked about growing up in Titusville as a Chinese adoptee, one person reflected that people were often curious but not cruel. Many assumptions came from unfamiliarity rather than hostility. A gay person who had come out in the 1980s described a similar experience: being treated as a source of questions, sometimes strange or intrusive, but rarely intentionally harmful. Both said they had developed patience over time, learning to respond without defensiveness, understanding that not every question comes from malice.

The person who was adopted from China shared a story about a child once asking them, “What do you eat?” Their reply—“hot dogs and hamburgers”—helped diffuse the awkwardness, but the moment revealed how early and casually people begin attaching assumptions to those who appear different.

Several key points emerged from this part of the conversation: how personal and family background can be erased or forgotten; how group boundaries shift across time, language, or culture; and how identity claims may be either welcomed or dismissed depending on the context. Belonging, in this sense, seemed to be neither fixed nor fully personal. People noted that it is something negotiated between self, others, and history, though it is not always clear where that negotiation begins or ends. Belonging is not always chosen, peaceful, or safe. Sometimes, it is earned through ritual. Sometimes, it is enforced through fear. Other times, it is invented and adopted out of necessity. And sometimes, we only realize we belonged once we leave and feel the absence.

7. Division, Recognition, and the Uncertainty of Belonging

This part of the discussion explored how belonging is not simply felt—it is assumed, negotiated, or withheld, often without being directly acknowledged. One person pointed out that we rarely

know what others are thinking about us in group settings. Do we actually belong, or are we just being tolerated? Since belonging often plays out in perception rather than certainty, it becomes as much an internal struggle as a social one.

This idea of oppositional belonging came up through examples like sports rivalries, such as the Bengals and the Steelers. Rivalry, even if adversarial, suggests some relationship. The group asked: does having an enemy imply shared ground? And what happens when others label relationships we did not choose? Who decides the nature of a connection—us, or those observing from the outside?

One person noted that moderates often become targets from both sides. Extremes offer moral certainty and identity, allowing people to feel righteous as part of a group while rejecting the other side entirely. What happens to those who do not pick a side? Is there any room to belong without pledging allegiance?

Others added that extreme ideologies often function less as belief systems and more as teams. It becomes less about values and more about loyalty, symbols, and repetition. In such environments, asking “why” can feel dangerous. Questioning gets pushed out. Belonging can then replace thinking, with inclusion prioritized over understanding.

They reflected on whether lines of belonging are softening today or just being redrawn with new intensity. Some believed people have more autonomy in defining identity and community. Others pointed out that many forces are still working to enforce exclusion. Are we living in a time of growing inclusivity, or are new divisions being carved out? Some said division is sometimes tactic—fractured communities are easier to manage and less capable of pushing back.

The group then discussed how quickly people and ideas are categorized. One question emerged: do we divide people because it is natural, or because we are trained to? Some traced this back to Aristotle and the Western tradition of classification. Others distinguished between categorization and recognition. Recognizing a face or sound as a baby is different from sorting people into pre-made boxes. So where does recognition stop and labeling begin?

One person brought up the staged footage of lemmings being pushed off a cliff in a Disney documentary, a false image that shaped public perception for decades. The story raised a larger

question: how much of what we believe about group behavior is built on misrepresentation? Often, we follow habits passed down without ever choosing them. And in the end, how much of who we are is shaped by systems we never consciously agreed to or understand?

8. Belonging in Digital Spaces

The conversation then turned toward the nature of belonging in online spaces. One person raised a question: Can you feel like you belong in a digital community with the click of a button? Some were skeptical. They argued that online spaces tend to be surface-level unless real, sustained one-on-one connections are formed. Others disagreed, offering personal experiences that challenged that view. One example came from a long-standing friendship between two people who had never met in person, but who had communicated daily for years through online gaming. This pushed back against the idea that digital connection is always less meaningful than face-to-face interaction.

Still, the group observed that digital communities often develop their own rules, hierarchies, and expectations. These spaces can mirror the exclusivity of physical groups, complete with gatekeeping, social rituals, and unspoken codes that determine who is accepted. In some settings, especially in competitive gaming environments, the tone can become harsh. Verbal attacks and aggressive language are common, and staying in such communities may require developing a thick skin. Some questioned why this kind of hostility is tolerated—why it has become normalized in so many corners of the internet. And in spaces that are decentralized by design, who decides what kind of behavior is acceptable?

One person stated that no one else should have the authority to tell them where they belong. Others responded by noting that belonging is not always up to the individual alone. Groups, too, play a role in recognizing membership. A question emerged: Is it enough to claim belonging for oneself, or does the group ultimately get to decide whether someone is truly part of it?

9. Technology and the Future of Belonging

The discussion shifted toward values, memory, and the forces shaping how people live today. A few individuals reflected on how they were raised. One person gave an example, noting that

while many people are taught kindness and empathy growing up, others may not be. This opened a broader conversation about generational differences. Different families, places, and time periods pass down different norms, and those lessons continue to shape people well into adulthood.

From there, the conversation turned to the role of technology. One person noted that the internet has weakened some traditional forms of community but also created entirely new ones. For some, this has meant a loss—a disconnection from local places and people. For others, it has offered new forms of belonging that they never found in person. This led to disagreement. Is this shift a decline, or simply a transformation? Some believed that each generation tends to see the next as lost, and that panic about moral change is nothing new. Others felt the current moment is different—an era of unprecedented transformation, not just another repetition of the past.

The arrival of AI, the internet, and other rapid technological changes sparked discussion about access to knowledge and power. Older systems like libraries provided vetted information, though often with a delay or incompleteness. Today's tools offer instant results, but not always with depth. The group discussed the tension between rapid change and understanding—between using technology as a tool for exploration versus using it to shortcut thinking. There was concern that tools like ChatGPT are already reshaping how people learn, replacing traditional methods with instant answers that may hollow out deeper forms of knowledge.

The group then looked to the future: Will college still matter? Will most jobs disappear? Will even thought itself be outsourced if technologies like Neuralink become widespread? One concern was about control. Who will determine who gets access to knowledge, tools, and opportunity? Some worried that new barriers may emerge—not based on race, wealth, or geography, but on access to learning. If only a portion of society can navigate advanced systems, others may be locked out and not just from data, but from healthcare, education, participation, and full membership in society. These exclusions may be less visible than before, but more difficult to overcome.

The topic of automation followed. Machines are no longer just replacing physical labor; they are entering professions like medicine and law. One person mentioned “lights-out manufacturing”—factories that run without any human workers. They also talked about the idea

of the knowledge economy, where value is generated not through manual labor, but through knowledge. What becomes valuable in such a world? Is it still information? Interpretation? Creativity?

The group considered whether machines could replace human judgment. In some cases, AI has outperformed judges in legal decisions. But even if machines can be more accurate, can they understand context, emotion, or moral nuance?

Someone referenced Aristotle's distinction between different types of knowledge, suggesting that today's systems prioritize abstract knowledge over embodied or practical understanding. This led to a conversation about class and access. If the economy increasingly rewards those with formal education or the ability to work with AI, what happens to those in trades or in communities that lack access to these tools?

10. Continuity and Disconnection in an Age of Change

One person questioned the idea of rapid change in the modern world, especially when it comes to the deeper challenges we face, particularly in education. They reflected on the work of John Dewey, written more than a century ago, which remains surprisingly relevant. Dewey critiqued the divide between vocational and academic learning. Despite major shifts in society and technology, many of the core dilemmas he identified, and the systems he challenged, still exist. Education may appear to be evolving, but its deeper structure has changed far less than we assume.

The group debated whether education itself has truly changed or if it's simply repeating unresolved questions in new forms. This led to reflections on whether educational systems are built more for job preparation or something else, touching on Socratic themes—whether we are still, in some sense, just circling back to discovering how little we actually know.

Someone raised the idea that technology has weakened human interaction. Even as tools for communication have expanded, people often feel more isolated. They described generational differences in how people connect—texting and email are now the norm, while direct conversation is often avoided. Yet face-to-face communication remains more effective. A story

was shared about someone walking into an office and quickly resolving an issue that had been delayed for months through digital outreach.

Others added examples of how in-person presence has been devalued. Couples sit in silence at restaurants, lost in their phones. Friends grow distant, even when physically nearby. Some believed this disconnection began before smartphones, rooted in the fast pace and individualism of modern life. In places like New York, daily interactions become automatic. Empathy is replaced with routine.

Participants linked this to the growing practice of ghosting. Silence itself becomes a response. Texting allows people to manage contact on their own terms, shielding themselves from vulnerability. Emotional safety is prioritized over resolution. In both personal and professional life, distance replaces dialogue.

A former project manager described how earlier workplace culture operated with a different logic. Results came first. Feelings were secondary. Another person pointed out that for many people, work is not just a paycheck—it is identity, survival, and community.

Others saw that outlook as fading. As mental health and personal boundaries are considered more of a priority, many no longer accept or embody the hard-edged workplace norms of the past. Some in the group viewed this as progress. Others worried that something essential—like commitment or shared accountability—was being lost. There was a reflection on the broader American industrial identity—companies like U.S. Steel and Heinz are now foreign-owned—symbolizing not just economic change, but the erosion of past norms and the unraveling of a framework that once held the older working-class culture together.

11. Closing Quote

A quote attributed to comedian Groucho Marx, reportedly written in a resignation letter to the Friars Club:

I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as a member.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #6

**The Love of Wisdom on Trial: Education Unsettled,
A Challenge to Think**

July 23, 2025

Topic Question: “What does it mean to educate?”

Presentation Summary

This presentation explored the question “*What does it mean to educate?*”, using Plato’s *Apology* as a starting point. It questioned whether education is about passing on knowledge, shaping values and behavior, prompting reflection, or something else entirely. Through the trial of Socrates, it explored how education is often connected to power, authority, public life, and the danger of asking questions. The presentation raised issues still relevant today, such as: Who should educate, and what should be learned? Is it about getting a job, bettering yourself, or improving society? Is education a system, a habit, or something necessary and formally required? And does any of this hold in theory or in practice?

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Plato’s *The Republic*:** Plato described Socrates as saying that education is the turning of the soul toward truth, not the mere transfer of knowledge. True learning awakens what is already within.
2. **Education and the Unanswered Questions:** Outlines questions about what education is and why the definition still remains unsettled.
3. **Plato, The Apology, and the Trial of Socrates:** Introduces Socrates’ trial and the background of Plato’s *Apology* as a foundational educational text.
4. **Who Improves Youth?:** Summarizes the exchange between Socrates and Meletus on who shapes the youth of Athens.
5. **What Are We Really Asking About Education?:** Explores broader questions of influence, purpose, and authority in how and why we educate.

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Plato's *Republic*

Education is not what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes. The power is already in the soul; the instrument with which each learns must be turned around from what is coming into being until it is able to endure the contemplation of what is and the brightest part of what is, which we call the Good.

—Plato, *The Republic* 518c–d (trans. Shorey)

2. Education and the Unanswered Questions

What is education? Who is an educator? Can anyone educate, and should they? These are old questions, but they are far from settled. People talk about education as something we give, receive, or formally require. We send children to school, debate what students should learn, and decide what counts as success. But what does it actually mean to educate?

Is it about passing on knowledge? Shaping behavior? Prompting reflection? Is it about getting a job, bettering yourself, or improving society? Who decides what should be learned and who counts as a teacher or qualifies a person to be one? Should we be paid to educate? Is all teaching educational? Is education necessary or just a given?

These are not at all new concerns. Even though there is no direct line from ancient Athens to today's classrooms, much of what we now call education, at least in theory, traces its roots back to early philosophical thought, especially Plato. *The Apology*, written over 2,400 years ago, remains one of the most widely read texts in philosophy and a fitting place to begin this topic. It presents a challenge to what it means to educate, to learn, and to think in public, if not, an example of a part of one of the earliest written theories of education.

3. Plato, *The Apology*, and the Trial of Socrates

The Apology is Plato's account of the trial of Socrates in 399 BCE. Accused of impiety and corrupting the youth, Socrates appears before an Athenian jury not to plead for mercy, but to explain and defend how he has lived. The word “apology” here comes from the Greek

apologia—meaning a defense speech, not an expression of regret, but an argument in support of his “love of wisdom,” philosophy.

Socrates (469–399 BCE) was a former stonemason who became known for his public dialogues and questioning of people. He left no writings of his own. What we know comes largely from his student Plato (427–347 BCE), who made Socrates the central figure in many of his philosophical works. Plato may have been a student of Socrates, but Socrates did not run a school or write books. He walked the streets of Athens asking questions of politicians, poets, craftsmen, and anyone at all, testing their ideas not out of malice but because he believed true wisdom began with knowing what you do not know.

Socrates’ approach, now known as the Socratic Method, involved asking probing questions that revealed contradictions and exposed false beliefs. He questioned public figures not to provoke for its own sake, but to help uncover assumptions they had not examined. He claimed little wisdom or knowledge of his own. Still, people followed him. He became a well-known figure in Athens. Many were young and imitated his way of questioning others. A number of these young people grew up to be critics of the Athenian government, and in a few cases, aligning with enemy city-states.

4. Who Improves Youth?

In *The Apology*, Socrates is charged with corrupting the youth, but what did he actually do? He denies being a teacher in the usual sense. He never charged fees, never claimed to pass on knowledge, and said he knew little or nothing, except that he knew he knew nothing, and others did not even know that about themselves. He questioned everything, especially what others claimed to know. He was praised by many but unsettled others.

One important moment in the trial comes when Socrates asks: who improves the youth? His accuser, Meletus, says everyone improves them—everyone except Socrates. Socrates responds with an analogy: when it comes to horses, only a few people are skilled enough to train them. Most may do harm. Why would we assume the opposite for young people?

Then Socrates asks: why would anyone corrupt others deliberately, knowing they would be harmed in return? If it were unintentional, should he not be corrected rather than punished?

Socrates insisted his role was necessary. He called himself a gadfly, sent to sting the city awake. He believed Athens needed someone who refused to let it fall asleep in its own certainty.

5. What Are We Really Asking About Education?

So when we ask, “*What does it mean to educate?*” are we just asking about classrooms or credentials? Are we asking what it means to shape the way someone thinks? Is it about giving people what we think they need to know, or helping them ask what they truly value? Should education promote agreement or challenge it? Can education be seen as a threat? Is using AI a form of education, or can it be an educator?

Socrates was executed not because he held power in the way we may usually think, but because he asked questions that disrupted people. He challenged Athens to think about what it taught, how it taught, and why. That was considered dangerous. Is it still considered dangerous today?

What we can say either way is that these are challenges we still face.

So we start here, with a question: *What does it mean to educate?*

I wonder, may other questions follow from this one, like: What counts as education? Can anyone do it? Should they? Is it a system to manage or a habit of mind? And who do we trust to guide it? Is it for something? What is that, especially in our community?

What answers have already been given over thousands of years? Do they hold in theory or practice? There are certainly many more questions, even if we could answer all of the questions here. This will not be the last time we take up any of these questions. But this is one place to begin.

Now, as always, what do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #6

Discussion

July 23, 2025

Topic Question: “What does it mean to educate?”

Discussion Summary

The discussion traced the nature, purpose, and structure of education from Plato's philosophy to modern classrooms, weaving historical influences, personal experiences, and critical questions about who education serves. It explored formal and informal learning, the role of community, and the skills schools prioritize or neglect. Participants considered responsibility, autonomy, and whether education aligns with its stated ideals or serves other ends. The conversation concluded with a view on education as a social structure shaped by sacrifice, cultural values, and systemic priorities.

Discussion Points

1. **Plato's Thought, the Philosopher King, and Who Teaches:** Considered Plato's view of educators, debating whether Plato thought teaching requires social standing, innate ability, or practical testing, and parallels between ancient and modern qualifications.
2. **The Myth of the Metals, the Allegory of the Cave, and the Ends of Education:** Examined Plato's metaphors of hierarchy and enlightenment, questioning whether education's aim is truth itself or guiding people through complexity.
3. **Roots of Modern Education and the Question of Responsibility:** Traced influences from antiquity, the Reformation, Enlightenment, and industrialization, focusing on responsibility for education and how the state shapes priorities.
4. **Lifelong Learning and the Limits of Autonomy:** Discussed tensions between self-directed and guided learning, and whether lifelong education can be encouraged without reducing it to state-controlled training.
5. **Formal vs. Informal Education, Indoctrination, and a Transfer of Knowledge or Priorities:** Explored structured versus unstructured learning, potential for indoctrination, and whether formal education imparts more than knowledge to students.
6. **Hands-On and Community Learning, and Limits of the Classroom:** Reflected on work-based skills, community teaching (i.e., "it takes a village"), classroom constraints, and the lack of focus on skills in formal schooling.

7. **Social Skills, Good Education, Quality, and Individual–Society in Education:** Considered shifts in skill teaching, preparation for life, the role of social skills, and whether education serves individual goals or societal needs.
 8. **Consent, Purpose, Systemic Limits, and Education as Sacrifice:** Questioned students' ability to choose education, examined reform challenges, and applied Bataille's economic theory to see education as a social sacrifice of surplus time, public funding, and personal effort, given cultural meaning and reinforced by social systems as valuable.
 9. **Closing Question:** John Dewey wrote that education is not merely preparation for life, but life itself—an ongoing process inseparable from living.
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1. Plato's Thought, the Philosopher King, and Who Teaches

The discussion opened with a focus on Plato's thought, particularly in *The Republic* and *The Apology*, and on his view of the relationship between education and social roles. The first question raised was whether, in Plato's view, educators needed to come from a certain social standing to be qualified to teach. This led to consideration of the “philosopher king,” Plato's model of an ideal leader attuned to truth and reason, guiding others through a deeper understanding of justice and the good.

One person noted that *The Republic* also assigns distinct functions to different members of society: warriors defend, producers create, and rulers govern. Among rulers, the highest role is the philosopher king. For Plato, such a ruler might be the ideal educator—not necessarily for training in pedagogy, but for alignment with truth and reason. Still, the text leaves open whether Plato meant this as a literal political structure or a metaphor for the governance of the soul. It was suggested that, if taken literally, the philosopher king would bear responsibility for instructing others. Also, Plato's work seems to suggest that in a well-ordered society aligned with the *logos*, education would emerge naturally from the order itself. The quality of the society would foster the quality of its citizens, and learning would be a byproduct of good order, if not, one of its main purposes.

It was noted that Plato does outline something like a system of education, but never gives a complete direct answer. Further, he wrote dialogues rather than treatises, leaving more room for debate about his meaning. One person pointed out classic Socratic examples of the cobbler and the horse trainer. For example, if you wanted your shoes repaired in ancient Athens, you would not trust the task to just anyone—you would take them to a cobbler. Their point is that education, like shoemaking or horse training, should be entrusted to someone known to do the work well, a specialist in the craft.

The conversation then turned to whether modern educators should possess natural aptitude, develop their skills over time, hold a certain social standing, or have formal qualifications. Some argued that Plato valued innate ability. Others emphasized lived experience, noting that Plato also stressed testing oneself in the real world. In his view, a person might learn philosophy in a classroom, but courage, wisdom, and loyalty would be proven in the field—whether in war, governance, or other forms of enterprise. This “testing of one’s metal” suggests that Plato saw education as incomplete without practical engagement. One also brought up that he does not seem to address trade skills directly, perhaps assuming they developed naturally through roles and apprenticeships, as were in Athens, where a cobbler learned from another cobbler, not by attending a formal school. Or that a warrior is a warrior because of an innate capacity for courage and combat, according to Plato.

2. The Myth of the Metals, the Allegory of the Cave, and the Ends of Education

This led to discussion of the “myth of the metals,” Plato’s metaphor for social hierarchy in which individuals are born into a class of gold, silver, or bronze. Some in the group said it seemed like a kind of “social alchemy,” so to speak. Concerns arose over whether this implied an elitist system that would limit roles for most people. Others noted that Plato’s categories were not meant to be absolute, and that someone born “bronze” could, through development, rise to the level of a philosopher. It was a kind of meritocracy. They added that even in modern times, merit-based systems, intentional or not, are often shaped by a person’s social standing, making Plato’s idea not far removed from what society practices today.

One participant argued that in Plato's framework, education's purpose was precisely to seek the true nature of things. Others countered that this was only one possible framework among many. Modern systems, they noted, rarely frame education as the pursuit of eternal forms. Instead, they mix practical training with abstract knowledge, often leaning heavily toward societal utility.

From here the allegory of the cave emerged as another lens for Plato's educational philosophy. In the story, human beings are chained in a cave, facing a wall, seeing only shadows cast by objects passing before a fire behind them. The true forms—the ideal “chairness” or “horseness”—exist outside the cave, but most people cannot bear or comprehend such reality. Only philosophers, Plato suggests, can turn toward the light, endure the vision of truth, and return to help others. For some, it illustrated how most people live in ignorance, seeing only shadows, while true educators are those who ascend to the “light” and return to guide those still in darkness. Others resisted this interpretation in today's world, suggesting the metaphor felt outdated in an age when vast amounts of information are instantly accessible. For the group, this raised the question of whether education's aim is the pursuit of revealing truth for truth itself, or if its role is better understood as helping people navigate complexity without claiming to have the final answer.

3. Roots of Modern Education, and the Question of Responsibility

Attention shifted from Plato's thought more to modern education systems. Some suggested that ancient ideas, like those of Plato, still influence education today and helped lay the foundations of the modern system. Others argued there is no direct line from Plato's Athens to today's classrooms, only echoes remain, with contexts too different for simple comparisons. Still, some noted that the persistent divide in modern education between technical and academic tracks may reflect historical interpretations of Aristotle's and Plato's thought. This divide, one participant argued, has roots not only in ancient philosophy but also in early American schooling, shaped on one hand by Enlightenment ideals and on the other by industrial labor needs.

Several historical influences were discussed. The Protestant Reformation and the start of the push for universal literacy so people could read scripture for themselves. The Enlightenment emphasis on reason and science. American figures like Benjamin Franklin, who saw education as

a practical tool for self-betterment, civic improvement, and state commitment to public schooling.

This led to the question: before asking who should educate, who bears responsibility for ensuring education happens? Is it the state, the family, the individual, or “the village” in the proverbial sense? It was noted that in today’s world, public funding makes the state a central player, but that funding also shapes what is taught, often steering education toward producing citizens who meet economic and political needs. In Plato’s time, by contrast, the “responsibility” question was embedded in the structure of the polis, with the ruling class guiding education for their ends.

Historical parallels came up again. In the medieval period, the Church’s education system largely trained clergy. Literacy in Latin, the language of scripture and scholarship, was confined to the aristocracy and clerical class. The Protestant Reformation and the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages were raised as a step toward democratizing education and expanding the state’s role in it. Enlightenment-era America also tied literacy to democratic participation, with examples such as tax exemptions for newspapers and protections for the press to encourage public debate.

The Industrial Revolution was raised as a counterpoint. Often the concern was less with serving democratic participation and more with serving economic ends. State-supported schooling was designed to produce workers with basic literacy and numeracy. The group noted that this model persists—not necessarily to make everyone a philosopher or even a good citizen, but to ensure functional competencies deemed necessary.

4. Lifelong Learning and the Limits of Autonomy

Some argued that while the state can provide schooling, lifelong learning is ultimately the responsibility of the individual. Others countered that democracy depends on an educated public, making education a shared responsibility of state, family, and community. This raised the challenge of how to guarantee access without reducing education to state-managed training.

It was noted that while education is absent from the U.S. Constitution, many state constitutions, including Pennsylvania’s, include provisions for it. This reflects a widely held view that the state

should bear at least part of the responsibility, since leaving education solely to the individual could result in inconsistency, shortfalls, and a lack of standardization. But even in societies with public schooling, one participant argued, the ultimate responsibility still lies with the individual. Formal education covers only a small part of life, and the rest must come from self-directed learning.

Many agreed that the idea of lifelong education is rarely emphasized, but it is unclear what it means in practice or how formal education could support it. Further, most people are taught to see learning as ending with the completion of formal schooling. One person, raised by “ex-hippies,” recalled being taught to question media and authority and to keep learning beyond the classroom. Yet, in their view, dismissing education—whether publicly funded or otherwise—has consequences and that we are experiencing that now.

One person who agreed compared this to a story they heard of a parent who lets a five-year-old make all their own decisions. In the example, the child chose to stay up until three in the morning, and the parent would also stay awake. However, it was pointed out by some, while this might appear to be an independent choice, it required an adult to remain awake and supervise, meaning the decision was never truly free of external support. Others also pointed out that even when the adult doesn’t directly choose for the child, their acceptance and facilitation shape the outcome.

The discussion explored how such a situation blurs the line between autonomy and guided action. If the adult’s role in enabling or restricting choices fundamentally alters the decision, then education—whether formal or informal—may likewise be less about isolated self-direction and more about structured influence. The group considered whether education is best understood as a transfer of knowledge, or as a process of developing judgment and habits within a framework of protection and oversight. The example raised the point that even in seemingly self-directed learning, there is often an unseen outline that shapes the learner’s path—just as the five-year-old’s decision was supported and contained by the adult’s presence.

5. Formal vs. Informal Education, Indoctrination, and the Transfer of Knowledge or Priorities

The discussion moved to the view, one person suggested, that education is the imparting of knowledge from one person to another, often from adults to children, but that the choice to accept learning ultimately rests with the individual. Learning should be actively sought out, though it was noted that many high school students are not pursuing it for its own sake, instead attending because it is mandatory.

It was then asked whether there is a meaningful difference between learning and educating. One analogy compared a puppy imitating an older dog lifting its leg without fully understanding the action—seen as learning-by-imitation rather than education. Others argued the distinction is unnecessary, with both terms describing the acquisition of knowledge, though education may be more structured.

A philosophical tension emerged around whether education is inherently good. It was noted that falsehoods can be taught, and Nazi Germany was cited as an example where extensive education served as indoctrination. This raised questions about whether every educational framework contains indoctrination and whether moral judgment depends on relative or absolute standards of good and evil.

The conversation returned to the role of Plato’s influence, acknowledging that while later systems borrowed from him, the distinction worth exploring might be between formal and informal education. Informal learning can come from community life—the “it takes a village” idea—where people, especially parents, allow children to gain their own experiences rather than shaping them entirely, while still setting boundaries to prevent harm (“don’t eat Tide Pods”). It can also occur by simply observing others, such as watching interactions on a park bench.

Formal education, by contrast, involves an organized system with a schedule and systematic presentation. One proposed distinction was that if people other than the learner invest resources—such as money, time, teachers, or curriculum—it becomes formal, whereas self-directed study without outside investment remains informal. This introduced an underlying question: if formal education always reflects the priorities of those funding and organizing it, does it inevitably shape the learner toward those priorities rather than toward their own?

6. Hands-On and Community Learning, and Limits of the Classroom

From here, the conversation began to connect these ideas to local and personal experience, including perspectives shaped by life in industrial communities such as Youngstown's steel industry. Friends who worked in union jobs, such as machinists, received specific, hands-on training. In steel mills, learning to operate machines required access to the machines themselves. Skills like compounding coal into a coke oven for steel production could not be picked up in a classroom alone; they had to be learned on the job.

The "it takes a village" idea returned in the context of modern schooling. In the current system, young children are often placed in classrooms for long hours, expected to focus on material they may have little interest in. Those who show enthusiasm for certain subjects, like math or language, can thrive, but others may be labeled as inattentive and given medication for not sitting still. Some argued that studies suggest children learn better if they can first expend their energy before instruction—an idea that challenges the standard school structure of sitting for long stretches.

Examples were given from personal experience, such as teaching a child to recognize words during car rides by pointing out signs and asking "what's that word?" or identifying objects in the environment, from maple trees to store signs. It was added that this hands-on, shared responsibility across a community can give children more individualized attention than a single teacher.

Music education was raised as a special case. In most arts programs, there is no separation of special education students unless a disability prevents them from functioning in a regular class. All students take basic art or music, but specialization occurs in activities like chorus, band, or advanced art classes. This raised the question of why music and art are treated differently from other subjects when it comes to separating students by ability, and whether that difference reflects an educational theory or something inherent in the art form.

It was noted that while the system prioritizes certain academic skills, many practical skills—such as managing finances or planning for the future—receive little to no attention in formal education, even though they are essential in adult life. This fed into a larger theme running through the discussion: whether the education system is actually aligned with the skills most people will need beyond school.

7. Social Skills, Good Education, Quality, and Individual–Society in Education

Experiences with education varied widely. Some remembered learning practical life skills in school that have since disappeared. Others questioned whether schools still teach students how to research and learn independently, pointing to changes in culture, technology, and expectations. Declining national scores and reports of lowered standards in teacher preparation programs raised concerns about whether the quality of instruction has kept pace with societal needs.

Several people described personal experiences with homeschooling, traditional schooling, or both. These stories highlighted differences in preparation for life, the impact of starting work young, and a sense that compulsory education changes the relationship between student and system. Some thought, historical comparisons suggested that earlier models, which emphasized core literacy and numeracy, may have served some students better.

The softer side of education—the social skills and habits learned in a classroom—was also discussed. These included learning how to share, listen, adapt to different personalities, and treat others respectfully, often without formal lessons. This raised the question of whether these elements are still being taught or reinforced in today’s schools, and whether education without them is truly complete.

From there, two principles were proposed as central to good education: teaching students how to learn and fostering a love of learning. Many felt the current system fails at both, often draining curiosity out of students by their mid-teens. This tied into broader concerns about whether the system rewards curiosity at all, and whether its structure matches the natural way humans learn.

An example of a news story involved a college sophomore who could not read and relied entirely on AI tools to complete assignments. One person thought, this should be seen as a profound failure of the education system. The example became a point for questions: is this the system’s failure, the individual’s, or both?

One person played devil’s advocate, asking what if the student wanted it that way. This led to a larger debate over whether education is shaped by the desires of the individual or the goals of the

society that funds it. If society funds education, it was argued, then its purpose should align with societal objectives, even if those differ from what students want. Others emphasized personal motivation and choice, noting that individuals often pursue learning simply because they enjoy it.

8. Consent, Purpose, Systemic Limits, and Education as Sacrifice

A question was posed: if children had the choice to attend school, would they choose it, and would they even be capable of making that decision? It was argued that many most likely would not, since they lack the knowledge and perspective needed to understand such a choice. The group noted how often people complain, “I was never taught X,” no matter the subject, and questioned whether children could meaningfully decide what they should learn. It was posed that given that their knowledge and experience are still developing, and that the human brain’s frontal cortex does not fully mature until the late twenties, what does that mean for how much responsibility young people can realistically take for their own education?

This led to a comparison with earlier periods in history, when people often took on significant responsibilities at a younger age. One person suggested that now, for many, substantial responsibilities are delayed until their mid-twenties, nearly doubling the time before adulthood. Those who attend college may face debt but often avoid major responsibilities until years later. The group debated whether this extension of adolescence is necessary or productive. It was also suggested that this perspective may be more about how some adults view young people than about the reality for all youth.

One person reflected on how they view history as a kind of story and noted the intertwined development of mathematics, history, and cultural exchange. They pointed out that if not for adopting Arabic numerals, with algebra itself being an Arabic word, mathematics in the West might have evolved very differently. This brief aside led to the question of what happens when education itself ends: what are the consequences for society if learning is no longer valued or maintained? One person framed education as “what remains after you forget what you were taught.”

The discussion touched on AI's impact on assessment, the risk of mediocrity, and whether education systems truly aim to educate in the ideal sense. A metaphor emerged in a story about trying to secure a duck enclosure from persistent raccoons. Each attempt to reinforce the barriers was met with a new problem, reflecting the ongoing challenges in reforming education. The conversation returned to skepticism about whether what we call education, or a particular system of education, always aligns with the ideal of what we think education should be, or even functions in that way. It was suggested that its purposes may at times be something entirely different and serve other ends, whether intentionally or not.

Toward the end, one participant reframed Georges Bataille's ideas as a lens on education. In Bataille's *general economy*, societies inevitably produce a surplus—of resources, time, and human energy—that must be expended in ways given cultural meaning. Sacrifice, in this view, can involve not only material goods but also years of life, effort, and other valued resources. What is given up must be seen as valuable, yet the act asserts something else is worth more. Education, they suggested, channels surplus time, significant public funding, and personal effort into an exchange for perceived knowledge, credentials, or social standing. Whether or not these outcomes truly exceed the loss for each individual, the broader social and economic order, not just the formal education system, actively produces and reinforces the belief that they do. It produces this belief by shaping the standards for what counts as valuable gain, and reinforces it as those who have made the sacrifice have a stake in affirming it, helping preserve the value-structure that makes the sacrifice appear worthwhile.

9. Closing Question

The final thought was a quote from American philosopher John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916):

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #7

On The Ship of Theseus

August 13, 2025

Topic: “The Ship of Theseus”

Presentation Summary

This presentation looks at the problem of the Ship of Theseus and what it says about identity and change. From Greek myth to Plutarch's account and Hobbes' later twist, the story asks whether something is the same after all its parts are replaced. The problem has shaped thought across philosophy, logic, and questions of personal identity. Instead of resolving it, the presentation invites reflection on what we mean by sameness, continuity, and identity itself.

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*:** Plutarch tells how the Athenians preserved Theseus' ship by replacing planks as they decayed.
2. **Background on the Ship of Theseus:** Background on the myth of the Ship of Theseus, its preservation, and its use as a philosophical problem, from Theseus' return and Plutarch's account to Hobbes' version, raising questions about change, continuity, and identity.

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius of Phalerum, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

—Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 23 (trans. Dryden)

2. Background on the Ship of Theseus

Theseus is a hero of Greek mythology, celebrated as the legendary king of Athens. He is best known for traveling to Crete to slay the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster kept in the Labyrinth, and for freeing young Athenians who were being sent there as a tribute. According to the story, he sailed back to Athens with the rescued youths on a ship that became a symbol of the city's pride.

The Athenians valued the ship as a historical monument. To preserve it, we are told, they replaced its wooden planks one by one whenever they decayed. This maintenance continued for centuries, even into the time of the philosopher and statesman Demetrius of Phalerum (around 300 BCE).

Plutarch, writing in the first century CE, recorded this account in his *Life of Theseus*. He noted that philosophers used the ship as an example to ask a puzzling question: if all the original parts have been replaced over time, is it still the same ship? The paradox became a classic problem in philosophy about the nature of identity and change.

Later, in the 1600s, Thomas Hobbes added a twist: what if someone kept all the discarded original planks, restored them, and built another ship? Which one would be the “real” Ship of Theseus—the one with continuous use and history, or the one made from the original material?

This simple story, for some reason, has raised many questions, sparked much debate, and intrigued people for thousands of years. It has been seen as touching on everything from personal identity to logic and mathematics. It has led people to ask questions like: How much can change before something stops being itself? What counts as “the same”? Are there different kinds of identity? Is identity a relation to others, to oneself, or does it tell us nothing at all? And so on. Many answers have been given, yet I’m not sure any are final.

But the question I’m concerned with is: what do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #7

Discussion

August 13, 2025

Topic: “The Ship of Theseus”

Discussion Summary

The discussion focused on the classical thought experiment, the Ship of Theseus, using it to consider identity, continuity, and meaning across material, psychological, and communal perspectives. Participants began with the puzzle of replacement and restoration, questioning whether a ship rebuilt plank by plank remains the same vessel or becomes something new. The discussion moved to human life and memory, comparing the ship's change to the body's renewal and the continuity of self over time. The group spoke about the connection between physical substance, psychological coherence, and shared perception, asking whether identity depends more on recognition than on material fact. Local examples such as the ship *Niagara*, restored churches, and Oil City's evolving character were used to think about how names, stories, and purposes carry through transformation. As the discussion drew to a close, it moved between these ideas, asking how meaning endures through ritual, language, and memory even as people change, and how what fades or is lost in the physical can still live on.

Discussion Points

1. **The Problem of Sameness:** Considered the Ship of Theseus and Hobbes's version, asking whether something rebuilt remains the same and whether identity depends on material continuity, use, or recognition.
2. **Human Change, Time, and Measuring Continuity:** Linked the ship's renewal to the body's regeneration, viewing continuity as a living process rather than permanence, and questioning whether sameness can exist apart from time and context.
3. **From Ship to Self: The Continuity of Identity:** Explored how physical and psychological continuity combine to form personal identity, even as both body and mind evolve over time.
4. **Community and Identity: Collective Recognition and Others' Perception:** Considered how communal recognition and naming could establish meaning, suggesting that shared belief can sustain identity.
5. **Community and Identity: The Vessel, the City, and the Words We Use:** Applied the notion sameness to Oil City, connecting local change to the endurance of names, language, and shared meaning in preserving civic identity.

6. **Agendas and Preservation: Motive, Classification, and Philosophical Reflection:**
Compared monuments and symbols to the Ship of Theseus, discussing how motives alter meaning and how abstraction allows difficult reflection.
7. **Function vs. Form, Public vs. Private:** Debated whether identity arises from purpose or structure, extending the question to examples repurposed buildings, sacred spaces, and public recognition.
8. **Church to Bar: When Purpose Fades, Does Identity?:** Explored how changing function transforms meaning, some argued that purpose, not appearance, defines what something is to us
9. **I Am Who I Say I Am: Continuity of a Self and the Psychology of Identity:**
Discussed personal identity as self-definition, balancing autonomy against social perception and psychological coherence.
10. **Essence, Action, and the Influence of Environment:** Questioned whether there is an essential “Me-ness” or “shipness,” considering how environment and circumstance may shape identity.
11. **After What Was and What Might Have Been: The Stories That Outlast the Ship:**
Reflected on legend, memory, and adaptation - from community storytelling and local history to myth and ritual - as the means by which identity survives loss and change.
12. **Closing Question:** G. W. F. Hegel wrote in *The Science of Logic*:
“Identity is the identity of identity and non-identity.

1. The Problem of Sameness

The discussion began with one participant giving a more in-depth description of the Ship of Theseus and explained that over time each plank of the ship was replaced until none of the original material remained. The ship was still brought out for events but eventually dry docked and possibly discarded, leaving uncertainty about whether it was ever the “real” ship. Further they thought, the central question was whether the ship, after complete replacement, remained the same. Someone added on Hobbes’s version, where the old planks are reassembled into another ship, raising the question of which one should count as the original, if either.

A few joined in, saying they did not see this as a major problem, describing it instead as a set of legitimate questions about the meaning of sameness. They said the issue depends on how the word “same” is used, comparing it to human identity over time. One person used themselves as an example, describing changes over fifteen years—loss of hair, aging, and the likelihood of death in another fifteen years—while noting that others would still recognize them as the same person, even after death.

Another participant said that people often seem to maintain the idea that something is the same and they dislike change because it implies things were not as good as they thought or that mistakes were made. They mentioned examples of a few people they have known, describing individuals who regretted drinking too much when younger and now wished to change the past but could not. They said one can only change the present and future, not what already happened.

The group then returned to Hobbes’s example. Someone asked whether Hobbes said anything about using the same nails or the same workers to rebuild the ship. They pointed out that those who built it originally had been dead for hundreds of years and that even the tools and wooden pegs were no longer available. They concluded that a ship built again from the old planks would not truly be the Ship of Theseus but a reconstruction.

The discussion as a whole raised questions about the definition of sameness, whether identity depends on material continuity, use, or recognition, and how such questions apply both to objects and to people.

2. Human Change, Time, and Measuring Continuity

It was remarked that people often connect the Ship of Theseus to the identity of people. One noted how, on a scientific level, humans regenerate their cells, comparing this to new boards being added to the ship. They linked Hobbes’s version to cloning, suggesting that rebuilding a ship from old planks would be like creating a human clone, reusing original parts to form something new. They drew a distinction between physical materials, such as the ship’s planks or the body’s cells, and intangible things like thoughts or behaviors, which seem to change but in nonphysical ways. The idea was that while the body renews itself materially, people also transform in ways that cannot be measured easily or the same way.

Another member expanded on the idea of change by saying that even if the ship's material stayed constant for a moment, time itself changes it. They described people walking on it, the surroundings shifting, and each moment being unique. They said that because each moment differs from the last, the ship is never the same twice, not even from one second to the next. Someone else compared it to the saying that you cannot step into the same river twice because it is always flowing and changing.

A different participant tested this further using temperature of water as an example. They said that if the temperature of Lake Erie is listed as 73 degrees on one day and 73 again the next, it does seem to suggest there is something that is not changing. Even allowing for a margin of error and local variations, both days could have reached exactly 73 degrees at some point—not necessarily at the same place or time, but simply that there were multiple instances when the same temperature occurred. They referred to the idea of absolute zero and suggested that temperature might serve as an example of a constant that does not change. Someone else countered, it might appear the same numerically but would not be identical in reality, since wind, clouds, and air composition all differ. Another person brought up absolute zero as a point where there is no molecular motion, saying this could be seen as a fixed state, though it exists only as a theoretical condition. And also responded that even when readings match, the environment changes, so sameness cannot be separated from context.

3. From Ship to Self: The Continuity of Identity

The group then moved toward applying the question to people rather than objects. One person supported the earlier analogy that a person's cells are replaced over time, comparing it to the replacement of the ship's planks. Even though the physical body changes, they said we still regard it as the same person. The harder question, they added, is whether it is the same body, but the more relevant one is what makes it the same person.

They used the example of comparing themselves as an adult with themselves as a two-year-old. The body at those ages is very different, yet it would be incorrect to think that the older me appeared out of nowhere. They said I developed gradually over time, and that continuity—rather than material sameness—explains why I'm still the same person. They said that thinking about identity requires looking at how parts and experiences are connected in a continuous series.

Attention then shifted to the mind. Most agreed it was physical in some sense but others still thought it was not reducible to only particles in the brain. Its development was said to be a continuous process involving memory, emotional growth, and personality. The idea emerged that who a person is depends on these psychological traits as much as on the body. The point was made that without continuity, identity questions cannot be solved, but with both physical and psychological continuity, a rational case can be made that a person at different ages remains the same. Bodily continuity connects the material side, and psychological continuity connects the mental side. Someone else said this connected to their earlier thought that impermanence and change are not really the main issue when considering what the ship itself is.

4. Community and Identity: Collective Recognition and Others' Perception

The discussion shifted toward how identity might come from shared understanding rather than material structure. One speaker argued that the Ship of Theseus exists through community recognition, the stories and traditions that surround it. Meaning, they said, depends on what people agree it is. They gave an example: if they convinced everyone their father's pontoon boat was the Ship of Theseus, then belief itself would make it so and everyone would say it was the Ship of Theseus.

Someone else brought this idea into the realm of personal identity again, asking how it applies to people. If other people's descriptions define who someone is, how would that compare to a person's own sense of self? The first speaker replied that they only know others through experience and observation, and that their picture of someone changes when they learn more about them. They said this perception of others does not define that person to themselves, only how they appear to the observer. They compared it to naming, saying identity can be like calling someone "Michelle," even though that name may carry different meanings for everyone who uses it.

Someone else tied this to generational shifts, noting that each era redefines the meaning of things. They pointed to the Pittsburgh Steelers, whose players and coaches constantly change, yet the team remains the same because the community continues to give it identity. As the group

discussed, the theme turned toward relationship: how seeing a stranger on a bus immediately leads to forming impressions based on setting or expression. Identity, they said, arises through these exchanges. The ship, too, exists through its link to the community that names and preserves it, just as Athenians once maintained Theseus's ship for civic ritual.

5. Community and Identity: The Vessel, the City, and the Words We Use

As the discussion turned more local, someone said the question of identity could apply to places as well as objects. They compared Oil City to the Ship of Theseus, saying that while its people, industries, and appearance have changed, its story and memory still connect to what came before. The point, they said, was not to judge the change but to ask how much transformation a place can undergo while remaining itself.

Others joined in, noting that efforts to preserve or improve something can also erase what once defined it. They mentioned paintings ruined by over-restoration and an actress whose surgery altered how people recognized her. Another spoke of an actor who adapted to change and succeeded, saying that what we call "the same" depends on which traits are carried forward and why. The group reflected on how deciding what to keep or replace shapes the way identity endures, whether in a person, a work of art, or a city.

The conversation shifted to whether identity depends on shared agreement or on independent fact. Some argued that truth exists apart from what people choose to call something. One person gave an example: a horned, grass-eating animal remains a goat even if someone insists it is a pig. The same, they said, applies to the Ship of Theseus. Its structure and materials exist regardless of opinion. Others countered that without shared definitions, even facts lose clarity. They pointed to dictionaries as an attempt to hold language steady so that people can understand one another. A few said that truth may stand apart in theory, but in practice, meaning depends on recognition and use.

The discussion turned back to the Athenian festival ship. Naming the restored vessel "the Ship of Theseus," someone said, kept its identity alive through repetition and custom. Another wondered whether replacing planks in secret would cross into deception, since belief in continuity would rest on not knowing what changed. The conversation returned to Hobbes's version with two

ships: both could exist, but neither would be identical. There was some agreement that most disputes like this fade as interest wanes, though similar confusion still appears in everyday life, like when people argue over official terms or certifications where names, politics, and authority become tangled together.

6. Agendas and Preservation: Motive, Classification, and Philosophical Reflection

The discussion compared the debate over Confederate monuments to the Ship of Theseus, noting that both raise questions about what is being preserved, simple memorials or propaganda. One speaker described how some people portray the monuments as simple memorials or symbols of heritage, while others argue they were created later for ideological reasons, turning history into propaganda. The group reflected that once a symbol carries motive, its meaning changes, and becomes inseparable from the purpose behind it.

Philosophy, someone noted, makes it possible to examine ideas that would otherwise provoke conflict. The Ship of Theseus offers that distance—it allows questions about identity, continuity, and meaning to be discussed without naming politically or emotionally charged examples. The group compared this to *Planet of the Apes*, where fiction serves as a veil for moral and social reflection, giving audiences room to think without direct confrontation. They observed that in both cases, abstraction creates space for understanding; stepping back from real controversies lets people look more clearly at how meaning and motive shape what things come to represent.

Attention moved toward why these topics like The Ship of Theseus endure. It was noted by someone, The ship, though imaginary, was said to reveal something real about human continuity. Watching others grow and change shows how sameness and difference coexist. Identity was described as meaningful only when linked to lived experience.

Some said philosophers ask about meaning, while scientists focus on classifying materials and structure. Others questioned the limits of the analogy, pointing out that a ship cannot define itself, whereas people can. It was noted that objects existed before language, and that humans later imposed identity through naming and description. The conversation moved toward how people classify change. The group discussed how definitions depend on which features are

considered—such as material, structure, or purpose—and how each method can yield a different result. Some said that depending on what traits are emphasized, several interpretations could all seem reasonable. One person introduced a thought experiment about the tree that became the ship, wondering what it would “think” about its own transformation. Another said this raised the issue of consciousness and we could continuously add to this classification.

7. Function vs. Form, Public vs. Private

Discussion turned to the idea that the ship’s identity may depend on its use. A vessel honored for centuries as sacred or royal might draw its meaning from purpose rather than material. Someone gave an example: If later sold to haul livestock, it would no longer be the Ship of Theseus but a cattle barge. Others said its history would still set it apart, giving it a different but related identity.

Examples followed from some of the group: Airplanes converted into restaurants, churches turned into bars, and firehouses made into other businesses all showed how form and name persist even as function changes. Even when sanctity is removed, many still call the building “the old church.” In towns, places are still known by family names generations after those families are gone. Someone noted that the persistence of naming shows how memory keeps identity alive even after things have changed.

The group then discussed the ship *Niagara* in Erie, built from original blueprints but known simply as “the ship Niagara.” Few people, one said, use the technical term “faithful recreation.” Other examples included a nightclub called Church Brew Works in Pittsburgh, where pews and the altar remain part of a restaurant. The several agreed that people often hold to old names even as meanings evolve.

Focus shifted toward recognition. Something exists as what it is only when acknowledged publicly. Philosophy, too, was described as requiring declaration and response. Socrates’ wisdom mattered because he spoke it aloud and faced questioning. Others disagreed, saying philosophy can occur in private reflection, as with Wittgenstein writing in isolation. His work, they argued, remained philosophy even before anyone read it. Others compared this to J.D. Salinger, who wrote privately for decades; only discovery later would bring his work into discourse.

A comparison was made to a tree falling in a forest with no one to hear it. Some said it still makes a sound because sound is vibration; others said sound requires perception. The idea was extended to philosophy: private thought is like the falling tree, while public exchange is the hearing of it. Thinking alone can be philosophy, yet when shared it becomes part of collective understanding. Reflection can exist privately, but once expressed it enters public identity, much like the Ship of Theseus existing differently depending on how and where it is recognized.

8. Church to Bar: When Purpose Fades, Does Identity?

The conversation returned to the example of churches and how function shapes meaning. A church was described as a building created for worship, defined not by appearance but by purpose. If it stops being used for worship and becomes a bar, it was said to no longer be a church in any practical sense, even if the cross, altar, and pews remain. The group then discussed how language reflects this connection between use and meaning. In one Unitarian Universalist (UU) community, for instance, some avoid the word “church” because they associate it with traditional Christianity, while others continue to use it, viewing the name as tied to the building’s shared purpose as a place for gathering and reflection.

It was noted that when a church is de-sanctified and used for another purpose, it loses its religious role and becomes subject to taxation. The discussion turned to buildings that regain their use as a church, such as one in Pittsburgh’s Strip District that had been a club and later became a church again. This was taken as evidence that identity can return when function changes back.

The group compared this to the Ship of Theseus. Like the church, one said, a ship is defined by its purpose. As long as it sails, it remains a ship even if every part is replaced. But if its planks are used to build a house, it ceases to be one because its purpose no longer matches. Across every version of Theseus’s ship—the original, the repaired, and the rebuilt—they said all could still be called ships because they fulfill the same role.

The idea was raised that the ship might lose its identity if the annual festival stopped. Others argued that it would still exist but only as a symbol. The group imagined building a new ship from different materials and beginning a new festival, saying the story could continue through

recognition and purpose even without any part of the original remaining. Some questioned whether that continuity of meaning would be enough, or if something essential would still be lost, or at least, without a physical connection, it could be considered a weaker symbol. Others added that even if the current ship were hypothetically the original, it could still face the same fate if its meaning were forgotten.

9. I Am Who I Say I Am: Continuity of a Self and the Psychology of Identity.

The discussion shifted again toward psychology and the way personal identity mirrors the Ship of Theseus. It was said that while bodies and peoples' thinking constantly change, most people seem to experience themselves as the same person each day or perceive themselves as the same in some way. One person suggested that waking up every morning as a new individual would be impossible to live with. Without some sense of continuity, life would feel disconnected, like having multiple personalities or being told each day that one is someone else. They said such a psychological state would likely be destructive for that person.

A passage from a book on codependency was quoted: "I am who I think I am," "I am who you say I am," and "I am what I think you think I am." The group discussed how people who live by the third idea—defining themselves by others' opinions—lose independence. The goal, they said, is to reach the point of self-definition: "I am who I say I am."

Conversation turned to people who change depending on their surroundings. It was said that most eventually settle on one version of themselves that combines earlier ones. The point was made that everyone plays roles such as parent, worker, or musician, but those are not the same as the self behind them. One person mentioned organizing events, saying it is something they do, not who they are. They explained that activities or roles, such as planning an event or leading some group, are things people take on, but they don't necessarily define a self. The point led others to question what, if anything, remains constant when roles change, and whether identity can exist apart from the things a person does. Then it was on how psychological continuity might be what holds an identity together, even if that sense of stability is partly imagined, though others

did not take it to be only imagined but something that gives a person the psychological coherence needed to live.

The belief in sameness was described by one as a healthy construct rather than an imagined falsehood. Without it, experiences would have no connection and would not belong to a single self. Continuity, even if partly imagined, gives coherence to life and allows people to act with purpose.

10. Essence, Action, and the Influence of Environment.

The conversation moved to personality and its complexity. Someone talked about how, in group therapy, they use short exercises that ask participants whether they are a square, circle, or squiggly line. The exercise was said to reveal patterns, though some resist being categorized. The point was that people are multi-faceted, each domain adding to the whole. Some, however, define themselves entirely through how others see them and often lose a stable sense of self.

Plato's ideas were recalled, with the suggestion that there might be something like "Me-ness," an essential form defining a person just as "shipness" defines the Ship of Theseus. The group considered whether identity might already exist in full, only revealed through living. Others disagreed, saying there may be no fixed essence. Listing traits such as having a beard or liking vanilla ice cream, they argued that none of those aspects are unique by themselves; individuality comes from their particular combination. Attention shifted to whether identity depends on action. If a person loses a defining role, such as athlete or musician, does part of them vanish? Some said this happens often when circumstances change. Like early, others said that what people do is not who they are. Existence itself, not activity, forms identity.

Discussion turned to continuity in biology. One person described DNA as systematic, unfolding predictably through growth, while psychological development was said to be irregular, shaped by trauma and experience. A comment was made about the role of environment—how even DNA can express differently depending on external conditions. Examples were given of frogs that change based on temperature, suggesting that if this relates to what is called identity, it may shift not only from within but also through what surrounds it.

11. After What Was and what might have been: the Stories That Outlasts the Ship

The conversation opened up to a discussion of how war, stress, and external conditions can alter a person's hormone levels. It was said that identity cannot come only from DNA because environment and experience constantly reshape who we are. Attention turned to the mind-body problem, with comments about whether identity originates in physical processes or in thought. Chemical and environmental changes, one said, influence both body and mind and thought showed how the two are connected. Genetics came up as a topic when one person described hearing that a farm pig released into the wild grows hair and tusks and becomes a boar. Others corrected the claim, explaining that DNA itself stays the same, but gene expression changes in response to the environment, and conditions activate different traits rather than creating new ones.

The discussion went back to the football team example. The Pittsburgh Steelers were used as an example of continuity through change, a team that stays recognizable even as players and coaches come and go. The shared colors, history, and fan culture were said to preserve the sense of the Steelers. Talk turned to when the Cleveland Browns moved to Baltimore and became the Ravens. It was explained that the team's ownership and players relocated, but the Browns' name, colors, and history stayed in Cleveland under an agreement with the NFL. Baltimore's team was treated as a new franchise, while Cleveland later reestablished the Browns with a new roster. The point was used to show how something can change completely in form yet still be considered the same in identity because of shared memory and recognition. However, many fans still feel that their team was taken from them.

Someone else mentioned how the Los Angeles Lakers kept their name from Minnesota, where the team originated and the name referred to the Great Lakes ships called "lakers," though many assume it comes from Minnesota's nickname, "Land of 10,000 Lakes." They said the name shows how meaning can drift from its origin, as most people no longer know or question why the team is called the Lakers. The identity continues in name alone, even though its original connection is lost on most.

The Grove Hill Cemetery tours were brought up by one participant, describing how actors portray historical figures from Oil City's past. One of the featured men, celebrated in the 1800s, was described as beloved by the community, honored with a parade and large procession at his death. Though his grave still stands, his name has faded from memory, and visitors must look it up in the tour booklet. The story, it was said, keeps his legacy alive even without anyone remembering who he was. The group noted how this mirrored the Ship of Theseus: the man's physical self is gone, but the story preserves something of the notion of him.

Questions followed about how often the tours occur. Others said they are usually held in September, often with performances by the Community Playhouse. Actors dress in period clothing and speak as the people they represent. There was curiosity about whether they imitate real voices, and it was answered that they probably do not but still convey the spirit of the person. Several pointed out that through these portrayals, the community in a way maintains its own version of the Ship of Theseus, where memory stands in place of the original.

Another mentioned that visitors still come asking to see John D. Rockefeller's office in their building in Oil City, though no one is certain which room it was or whether he ever actually worked there. People tend to assume the office was upstairs, but it was most likely on the lower floor. The point they raised was how stories can outlast facts, with legend often replacing what can be verified, yet still remaining something people gather around and seek out—much like the Ship of Theseus.

Conversation came back to biology and war again. The group discussed reports that more boys are born than girls during and after wars, compared to peace times. The question arose whether famine has the opposite effect. Another person's answer was yes, that female births increase during scarcity, possibly because daughters require fewer resources to survive. This was said to occur in both humans and animals as an adaptive pattern. Some in the group wondered whether such patterns were coincidence or part of biology's balancing process and if it could be a predictor of war and famine now.

Others questioned how much of this could be verified and said it was more like folk science than established fact, a pattern that might hold cultural weight even if not fully scientifically confirmed. The discussion turned to how such beliefs reflect deeper ways societies try to make

sense of trauma. One person compared it to Athens' legend of Theseus slaying the Minotaur and saving their youth from being sacrificed to it—suggesting that such myths may have preserved the memory of a real historical tragedy. Myths and legends like that of Theseus may serve a similar role, connecting communities through a shared belief in something that shaped them long ago, even when the original event—real or imagined—has been forgotten.

Athens eventually stopped sailing the ship, and some questioned what that meant. Did they outgrow the trauma that first gave the ritual meaning, or simply lose the memory that sustained it? It may suggest that perhaps what is lost in the legend's disappearance mirrors what societies may lose when they forget what once bound them together. However, the end of the practice may have merely reflected a broader societal decline in ritual continuity across the Greek world, as civic religion weakened and memory of the ship's purpose faded. This may have been why an actual Ship of Theseus was ultimately lost. Yet, still, it is remembered today in philosophy whether real or imagined.

12. Closing Question

The final thought was a quote from German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's *The Science of Logic* (1812–1813):

Identity is the identity of identity and non-identity.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #8

The Trolley Problem: Tricked to choice, or not?

September 17, 2025

Topic: “The Trolley Problem”

Presentation Summary

This presentation connected ordinary community problems with one of the most recognizable thought experiments, the trolley problem. Beginning with Philippa Foot's 1967 tram case and the Doctrine of Double Effect, and Judith Jarvis Thomson's work, it discussed the many variations and raised questions about principles and consequences, means and side effects, and responsibility and luck. In the end, like the trolley problem and its variants, the quotations they raise can seem endless, with no good answer. Likewise, some claim philosophy offers only problems and no real solutions or way out, but it was asked: is philosophy more than a mere study, and is there a way out of the fly-bottle?

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Philippa Foot's *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect* (1967):** The original passage from which the trolley problem comes, contrasting a rioter's demand for a scapegoat with a runaway tram threatening five workers.
2. **Choices and What's at Stake:** Everyday examples of trade-offs, from schools and roads to food pantries and shopping carts, outline thinking of choices that carry costs and dilemmas.
3. **The Trolley Problem and Its Variations:** Presents the trolley problem and its background, from Philippa Foot's 1967 tram case and the Doctrine of Double Effect to Judith Jarvis Thomson, who coined it, and explored variations.
4. **The Fly in the Bottle: What Do We Do With This?:** Raises broader questions about moral responsibility, principles versus consequences, and philosophy's role: are we trapped in these quotations, or is there a way out?

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Philippa Foot's *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect*

*Suppose that a judge or magistrate is faced with rioters demanding that a culprit be found for a certain crime and threatening otherwise to take their own bloody revenge on a particular section of the community. The real culprit being unknown, the judge sees himself as able to prevent the bloodshed only by framing some innocent person and having him executed. Beside this example is placed another in which a pilot whose airplane is about to crash is deciding whether to steer from a more to a less inhabited area. **To make the parallel as close as possible, it may rather be supposed that he is the driver of a runaway tram, which he can only steer from one narrow track on to another; five men are working on one track and one man on the other; anyone on the track he enters is bound to be killed.** In the case of the riots, the mob have five hostages, so that in both examples, the exchange is supposed to be one man's life for the lives of five.*

— Philippa Foot, *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect*, Oxford Review No. 5 (1967)

2. Choices and What's at Stake?

In towns like ours, choices are often made under limits. A school may ask: should scarce funds go to keeping the music program, or redoing an old outdated football field? A township might face a choice: do we fix the main street everyone uses, or the back road only a few families depend on that has become nearly impassable? A food pantry may wonder: do we prepare full meals for a few families, or spread smaller amounts across many? Of course, we could scale these questions up, from local to national, to global, and even to the personal choices of a single individual.

No matter, other solutions sometimes appear, and these choices may not be as stark as they first seem. Maybe they are too simplified. Yet they capture a way of thinking: what do we do when every option carries a cost, and we have to choose between them? But what exactly is that cost? What is really at stake? Sometimes the issue is immediate and serious, like lives on the line now. Sometimes it is ordinary, like whether you return the shopping cart to the cart return or leave it in the lot. What do we do? Does it matter?

3. The Trolley Problem and Its Variations

In 1967, philosopher Philippa Foot presented what became one of the most famous dilemmas in contemporary philosophy: the trolley problem. In the paper it was a runaway tram case, presented alongside other examples. She introduced it in a paper on abortion in connection with the Doctrine of Double Effect, a principle dating back to Aquinas that asks whether it can ever be permissible to cause harm as a side effect of doing good. Foot used the cases to test the difference between killing and letting die, raising doubts about whether the distinction between harm as a means and harm as a side effect can guide us.

The development into what we now call the trolley problem also owes much to Judith Jarvis Thomson and her 1985 paper *The Trolley Problem*, where she expanded it with new variations and drew out the trolley example. Since then, the trolley problem has become one of the most recognizable thought experiments, giving rise to countless variations and, in recent years, even showing up in movies, TV, and memes.

Here is one common paraphrased version:

A runaway trolley is speeding down a track. Ahead of it are five people who will be killed if nothing is done. You are standing by a lever. If you do nothing, the trolley continues and kills the five. If you pull the lever, the trolley diverts onto another track, but there is one person standing there who will be killed instead. Do you pull the lever or not?

Some say the problem is five lives against one. Surveys of this problem point to most people at least saying they would pull the lever. But the moment we ask why, things may become less clear. Is it right to act if acting means directly causing harm? One of Thomson's added adaptations was the "fat man" variation, where the only way to stop the trolley is to push a large man off a bridge. The numbers are the same, but doesn't it seem different? Why? Does it matter whether harm is a side effect or the very means to the end?

There are now thousands of variations of the problem, maybe more. Foot herself, along with many others, introduced variations. One is the "side-track worker": diverting the trolley would

kill one person, but that person knowingly accepted the risk by working on the tracks. Another is the “transplant surgeon”: five dying patients could be saved only if one healthy person is killed for their organs. More recently, the “self-driving car” version asks: if a crash is unavoidable, should the car be programmed to save the most lives, even if that means sacrificing its passenger? But if there are so many variations and possibly endless ways to reshape it, what does that say about the problem? Are they even the same problem, or is there something they share in common? Is it that there is something at stake, is it the choice itself, or something completely different, if at all?

4. The Fly in the Bottle: What Do We Do With This?

But with these, the choices in life rarely seem so neat. Are they problems people actually face? Do they miss the point, wherever that may be?

So what do we do with this? Do we decide by principles that hold no matter what? Do we measure consequences, trying to save the most? Is it worse to cause harm than to allow it? Do we value outcomes and consequences or principles more? Is there a universal answer, or are such dilemmas always situational? Can we ever know enough to make an informed decision? If we cannot, are we ever truly justified in what we do, and can we be held responsible at all? Or are we simply lucky or unlucky in how things turn out? Is it worse to cause harm than to allow it? What if loved ones are involved? Is there any justification beyond our own interests, and would others see it the same way? Is our choice really our choice, or is it determined somehow? Can rules or law cover every case, or might they be the cause of them?

Like the trolley problem and all its variants, so too the quotations can seem endless, as if we could keep coming up with them without end, with no useful answer.

And likewise, it is often said that philosophy raises problems only to trap us in them, offering no real solutions, just endless questions with no final answers. Some have claimed its value lies only in the attempt, with no effect on the world beyond those who study it. Do we think otherwise, and is that view too narrow? Is philosophy more than a mere study?

Still, even Socrates, our ancient lover of wisdom, was often criticized for that very thing, leading people into questions and tricking them with arguments they could not escape, forcing them to admit they did not know what they once thought they knew. But are we trapped here? There does sometimes seem to be a way for the fly to get out of the fly bottle, so to speak. But what is this bottle, and is the way out really just pulling the lever or not? Is it a trick, or is it something more, or even less?

Just a few more questions without giving any answer: would you put the cart away?

And, as always, what do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #8
Discussion

September 17, 2025

Topic: “The Trolley Problem”

Discussion Summary

The conversation explored how the trolley problem is framed, how people interpret moral responsibility, and how real life rarely presents clean choices. Participants examined the structure of the scenario, the role of action and inaction, and the weight of uncertainty. They compared the thought experiment to history, local infrastructure, resource limits, work dilemmas, cultural beliefs about destiny, rules and liability, and the influence of long term systems. The group reflected on how people learn to make choices, how habits and stories shape judgment, and how earlier decisions set the conditions for later moral problems.

Discussion Points

1. **The Structure of the Trolley Problem:** Explored how framing and design shape the trolley scenario and whether strict or flexible interpretations make it a real moral question.
2. **Action, Inaction, and Moral Responsibility:** Considered how refusing to act still counts as a choice and how responsibility shifts once someone intervenes.
3. **Uncertainty, History, and Justification:** Examined decisions made under limited knowledge and how later judgments rely on information unavailable at the time.
4. **Responsibility, Knowledge, and the Waterfall:** Used a waterfall analogy to show how responsibility begins with awareness and how earlier actions alter later risks.
5. **From Natural Forces to Human Systems:** Looked at natural versus human created dangers and how long standing design choices shape present moral situations.
6. **Trains, Trucks, and Pipelines:** Compared transportation risks, noted tradeoffs between safety and convenience, and highlighted how trust and politics shape judgments.
7. **Everyday Trolley Problems and Practical Dilemmas:** Connected staff shortages and service decisions to hidden systems of allocation and how small actions redistribute outcomes.
8. **Free Will, Destiny, and the Question of Meaning:** Debated determinism, destiny, and free will, asking how beliefs about fate influence responsibility and intervention.
9. **Individual and Collective Decisions:** Considered how committees, rules, and institutional biases distribute harm and limit discretion in real community decisions.

10. **The Circle:** A visitor's answer prompted reflection on utilitarian reasoning and on the purpose of creating a shared space for inquiry.
 11. **Returning to Systems and Long Term Consequences:** Shifted focus to long standing structural decisions that create today's risks, reframing the lever moment as a surface symptom.
 12. **Habit, Stories, and How People Learn to Choose:** Linked childhood stories, curiosity, trust, and early experiences to the formation of judgment and habits of decision making.
 13. **Closing Question:** William James wrote in *The Dilemma of Determinism* (1884), "Genuine freedom involves chance; for where there is no chance, there is no real choice."
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1. The Structure of the Trolley Problem

The discussion opened with a question about how the trolley problem is constructed and how strictly it should be interpreted. One participant, drawing on a background in architectural design, said that the problem depends on how conditions are arranged. Change the physical layout and you change the problem itself. They suggested that the trolley problem could work the same way. The classic picture of two tracks and a lever is one particular design, and small changes in that design might produce a very different moral situation. This raised the question of whether the problem should be treated as a fixed scenario that must be accepted as given, or as an open framework that can be reinterpreted and modified. Some people take it at face value (i.e., pull the lever or not) while others interpret it on a different level. An issue was raised because most people have seen humorous or exaggerated versions of the trolley problem online, and it was not obvious how strictly the group should hold to the original form.

Another participant asked what makes the trolley problem meaningful as a moral question. If the scenario is defined so rigidly that no alternative possibilities are allowed, it may become more of a trick question rather than a real ethical problem. If, on the other hand, the constraints are loosened even a little, the situation begins to change. They wondered how often real life presents anything that resembles a trolley case. The problem depends on specific conditions: two sets of tracks, a working lever, a runaway trolley, people who cannot move, and no time to do anything

else. They said that without these elements, the dilemma would not exist in the same way. This led to a broader discussion on how philosophical problems depend on their framing and whether moral reasoning can ever be separated from the systems, technologies, and environments in which we live.

2. Action, Inaction, and Moral Responsibility

From there, the group moved to first consider the typical form of the problem: one person at the switch, five people on one track, and one on the other. A participant thought that starting here, with the simplest form, anchors the discussion: do you pull the lever and save five lives at the cost of one?

Several people shared their initial reactions. One person said they would pull the lever, because if there really were no other options, saving the five seemed like the only responsible choice. Walking away would feel like allowing five deaths that could have been prevented. Someone else replied that walking away is not neutral. It is still a decision, and the refusal to act can be a form of acting. The absence of a decision then becomes the decision itself. Others agreed that many people, when confronted with sudden danger, might freeze rather than intervene.

The group considered how responsibility changes at the moment a person acts. One person noted that pulling the lever does not only change the outcome, it changes the sense of ownership. The person who acts must live with the knowledge that they directly caused the death of one specific individual, even if doing so saved five others. This raised the question of whether there is a difference between killing and letting die, and whether refusing to choose can be considered a choice in its own right.

3. Uncertainty, History, and Justification

The conversation moved from the thought experiment to historical examples. One participant compared the trolley problem to President Truman's decision to authorize the use of the atomic bomb. In this view, one devastating act might have prevented a larger catastrophe. Others in the room challenged the comparison. They asked whether anyone can truly know what would have happened had the bomb not been used. It was mentioned that Truman himself did not fully

understand the weapon's power before it was dropped. It was brought up that it often seems a person acts in a situation shaped by limited knowledge, yet later justifications often rely on information that was not available at the time.

It was considered whether believing one did the best possible thing under uncertainty is enough if outcomes cannot be fully known in advance. A few thought that the trolley scenario simplifies this tension by turning unknowns into known quantities: five on one track, one on the other, no time to gather more information. Real decisions rarely offer that clarity.

4. Responsibility, Knowledge, and the Waterfall

At this point an analogy was given. One participant described a river that splits and leads toward a waterfall. If someone is heading toward the waterfall and another person does not even know the danger exists, there is little that can be asked of them. However, once a person learns about the waterfall, the question changes. If they know about the danger and choose not to warn anyone, is there a moral problem, even if their silence is never discovered?

This led to a series of questions. If someone almost goes over the waterfall, manages to escape, and then walks back up the hill, do they have an obligation to warn the next person coming down the river? If they place a sign, have they fulfilled their responsibility? If another person later removes that sign, how responsible are they for any future harm? This was to explore how responsibility may begin with knowledge and how actions that affect the conditions of choice can be important, even if they are far removed from the final moment of crisis.

5. From Natural Forces to Human Systems

The waterfall example opened conversation about situations created by nature versus those created by human decisions. Someone asked who builds the tracks in the trolley problem. People often find themselves in danger because of choices made long before they arrived on the scene. Others pointed out that many real problems involve limited resources, such as deciding whether to direct help to people in one's own community or to those in another country. A participant mentioned Peter Singer and Effective Altruism, describing his view that individuals may have

significant obligations to strangers they will never meet. The group did not attempt to settle Singer's argument but used it to highlight different approaches.

The discussion then turned to physical infrastructure. People recalled a local case in which someone was struck and killed by a train near downtown. This prompted the question of why tracks run through populated areas at all. Someone explained that rail lines originally carried passengers and therefore went through towns. Today many of those lines carry freight instead, but the routes remain. Although the person who died in the local incident had fallen onto the tracks while intoxicated, the event raised questions about whether this arrangement still makes sense. This was seen as an example of how earlier design decisions can continue to shape risk for later people.

6. Trains, Trucks, and Pipelines

From there, the discussion compared railroads and tractor trailers. One participant noted that trucks replaced many rail services because they were more flexible and did not require building new tracks. Another added that trains derail often enough, but they rarely kill people, while trucks are involved in a very high number of accidents. Removing some truck traffic might save many lives, yet society continues to rely on them. They were suggesting that we often accept the loss of life for economic benefits and convenience.

This led into a conversation about pipelines. Some thought that pipelines could reduce truck traffic and possibly lower the number of accidents, but many people oppose them. Concerns include long term maintenance, environmental damage, land use, and the difficulty of monitoring safety. One person mentioned that some states, such as New York, refuse pipeline construction even if this means higher energy prices now and fuel arriving by ship or truck instead. Some thought that these examples show how questions about the greater good cannot be separated from trust, politics, and history.

Someone then mentioned a former Secretary of Agriculture whose policy preferences helped shape the monocrop system in the United States. Focusing on crops like corn and wheat set patterns that still affect agriculture today. Many said that they had seen situations where a single decision, made decades ago, continued to influence the lives of people who had no say in it at the

time. They compared these long term effects to versions of a trolley lever: a choice is made once, and many others live inside the tracks it creates.

7. Everyday Trolley Problems and Practical Dilemmas

The discussion then moved toward everyday situations that resemble trolley problems in quieter and more complicated ways. One person who had worked in human services described the challenge of staff shortages. When several workers are absent, administrators must decide which clients receive services and which do not. In practice, the person whose support is cut is often the one with the fewest hours, the most flexible schedule, or no family member to advocate for them. This creates a structure that consistently favors those who are more visible or more vocal. The group recognized this as similar to the trolley problem, where vulnerability and protection are shaped by the design of the system.

Another person offered examples from restaurant work. Staff can quickly identify demanding customers who expect special treatment. Sometimes, instead of catering to them, servers quietly choose to highlight someone else who did not ask for attention, improving that person's experience without their knowing. This became another case of redistribution. The group reflected on the figure of the "squeaky wheel," or in other words someone who raises their voice about things instead of simply expecting them, and asked whether becoming that person is strategic, manipulative, necessary, or all three at once. Someone said that in some situations, such as dealing with a utility company that should have already fixed a problem, being the squeaky wheel seems required just to be treated fairly.

The group then asked how all of this relates to the lone person on the track in the trolley problem. Could that person be imagined as someone who is entitled or highly privileged. Would that change how people feel about pulling the lever. If the one is widely disliked and the five are not, does that affect what seems like the right choice, even if the classic problem tells us that numbers alone should matter. Many thought that if choices like this are made in the real world, the choice is influenced by who the people on the tracks are, and depending on who they are, outcomes will differ.

8. Free Will, Destiny, and the Question of Meaning

The conversation shifted into questions of free will and determinism. Someone raised a spiritual version of the trolley problem by asking whether the one person on the track might be at a particular point in their spiritual journey. If a person believes that certain events are meant to happen, does that belief change whether they feel they should intervene. How could anyone know whether a particular death or survival is meant to occur.

This led to discussion of cultural images of destiny, including the film series *Final Destination*, where characters briefly avoid death but cannot escape it entirely. In that story, changing the details of a situation does not alter the fact that death returns. The group used this to ask whether people truly have free will or whether they act within a larger causal structure that is already set.

One person then outlined three broad philosophical positions. Libertarian views of free will hold that individuals genuinely choose their actions. Determinist views hold that every event results from prior causes stretching back to the beginning of the universe. Compatibilist views suggest that the world may be causally determined while people still possess meaningful decision making capacity within it. Some in the group distinguished material determinism, which sees all events as governed by physical laws, from moral and psychological determinism, which emphasize habits, character, and social conditioning.

Others noted that many people are inclined to believe in free will, especially in societies shaped by strong individualist traditions or religious ideas that stress personal choice. Others pointed out that not all cultures share these assumptions. Ancient Greek myths, for example, include the Fates cutting the thread of a person's life, suggesting a predetermined span independent of human intention.

One person objected strongly to the phrase "meant to be," especially when used to explain tragedies. They rejected the idea that the death of a child or a disaster is part of a divine plan. Instead, they argued that events occur because of natural forces, circumstances, or human actions. The group did not settle the argument but recognized that different views on destiny and meaning influence how people interpret responsibility in a case like the trolley problem.

This raised another question: if determinism is true, does pulling or not pulling the lever matter at all. Would the outcome unfold in exactly the same way regardless of what a person decides, because their decision was itself determined. Even within determinism, people are still held accountable by others for what they do, and there is no way to preserve responsibility inside a determined world if it is.

9. Individual and Collective Decisions

The discussion then turned to individual and collective choices. One person pointed to earlier conversations in other meetings about taxes and libraries that had already shown that many important decisions are made by groups rather than single people. In a literal trolley case, only one person can pull the lever, but in real communities decisions about risk and safety often play out through committees, city councils, and institutions.

Someone observed that communities sometimes know in advance that harm is coming to someone, even if they do not know exactly who. Some thought that at least on a governmental level, in those cases the conversation becomes a kind of risk analysis. Which outcome harms fewer people. Which group carries the loss. Even if this is not admitted openly, lives may be weighed against one another, and not necessarily for the greater good. The group also talked about how bias enters these calculations. A community that is already shaped by racism or other prejudices does not suddenly become neutral when facing a hard decision. People pressure and persuade to protect their own interests.

The role of rules and procedures resurfaced with a story about a crash video. One person described that in the video an officer was dealing with several injured people in a vehicle. A civilian offered to help, but the officer repeatedly sent them away, choosing to follow department procedure rather than accept outside assistance. Many acknowledged that rules limiting civilian involvement are often written to protect responders and institutions from liability, but they also remove space for judgment. This example brought the group back to the question of how a community “pulls the lever” in advance by writing laws and protocols that determine who may act and how. In those moments, rules can function like moral principles but often are protocols to protect some, follow the process, avoid culpability.

10. The Circle

In the discussions, a new visitor entered and was introduced to the basic trolley scenario. After hearing the setup, they said they would pull the lever to save the five, sacrificing the one. Some identified this as a response that fits a broadly utilitarian pattern, even if the person answering does not think of it as a theory. The scenario then served as an opportunity to sketch the outlines of utilitarian, consequentialist, and duty centered approaches to ethics.

During this, the visitor asked what the Community Philosophy Circle itself was for. This led to a brief reflection on the purpose of the gatherings. People explained that the circle exists as a space for questions that rarely appear in ordinary conversation. It grew out of an idea of trying something new in the community. Some said they appreciated having a place where disagreement did not immediately turn into conflict and where different perspectives could be heard. Some described the circle as a kind of third place, neither home nor work nor social media, where people could think together in real time.

11. Returning to Systems and Long Term Consequences

In the final part of the discussion, the group came back to the structure of the trolley problem and the larger systems it could be similar to. One person argued that the most important question is not whether to pull the lever, but how people ended up in danger in the first place. The tracks through towns, the reliance on trucks, the design of pipelines, and the shape of the food system were all examples of past decisions that created present risks.

The group discussed the East Palestine derailment as a rare but highly visible event that forced attention onto a system that usually remains unnoticed. The earlier example came up again. They contrasted the relatively small number of deaths from train collisions with the much larger number linked to tractor trailer accidents. The difficulty of changing national infrastructure and the influence of cost and convenience were cited as reasons why major shifts are hard to enact, even when risks are known. Someone then returned to the example of monocrop agriculture and pointed out how a single administrative preference in the mid twentieth century helped set the course for entire industries. In general, decisions years ago made with limited information still shaped what is possible today.

There were questions about how people make decisions in such conditions. Do individuals always believe they are right when they act, or do they often decide under uncertainty, habit, boredom, or pressure. One participant suggested that many choices are made without full knowledge or clarity. The idea arose from some that human decision making is often incomplete, that moral problems rarely appear in isolation, and that the true work of thinking about the trolley problem may lie as much in examining the systems that produce crises as in judging the final moment when a lever is pulled or left untouched. In a way, some considered the lever decision as not the real moral problem, since they thought there may not be any right answer in any strict sense in the common version of the trolley problem. The real moral problem that something may actually be done about is everything that happens long before the lever exists.

12. Habit, Stories, and How People Learn to Choose

The conversation returned to the question of why people act the way they do when facing decisions. One person brought up a study in which people were placed in a room with a single button. Left alone long enough, many of them pressed the button even when it delivered an electric shock. The group used this as an example of how curiosity, boredom, and discomfort with inaction can drive people to make choices without fully understanding the consequences.

One saw this idea connected to childhood sayings like “curiosity killed the cat.” Historically, such warnings may have served to keep children away from danger, but they can also discourage questioning. From there, people shared stories about learning that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or similar figures were not real. Some remembered feeling misled, especially if parents had promised not to lie. Others said they did not feel betrayed and understood those stories as attempts to bring joy into hard lives. These memories led to reflections on trust, authority, and how early experiences shape later judgments about fairness and honesty.

The group noted that many views about taxes, education, and public services may emerge from these earlier experiences and the stories people grow up with. Someone gave the example of people who oppose certain forms of public spending while relying heavily on programs like Social Security or public schooling. Another mentioned the common phrase “Keep your hands off my Social Security” as an illustration of how people can forget that they themselves benefit from collective systems and past choices made by others.

13. Closing Question

The final thought was a quote from William James in *The Dilemma of Determinism* (1884), published in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*:

Genuine freedom involves chance; for where there is no chance, there is no real choice.

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #9

Confronting the Specter: Fear

October 15, 2025

Topic: “Fear”

Presentation Summary

This presentation looks at a story recorded by Pliny the Younger (61–113 AD) in a letter to Licinius Sura around 100 CE. It recounts the experience of Athenodorus Cananites, a Stoic philosopher who rents a house in Athens said to be haunted by a ghost in chains. The account is among the earliest written ghost stories of its kind and reflects ideas on fear, perception, and reason. The presentation provides context for the letter, its philosophical background, and how it raises questions about the nature of fear.

Presentation Sections

1. **The Ghost and The Philosopher** Provides background on Pliny the Younger's letter and introduces the story of Athenodorus Cananites and the haunted house in Athens.
2. **Reading: Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Sura*:** Presents the letter in which Pliny recounts Athenodorus's experience in the house and the discovery that follows.
3. **What Haunts Us Still:** Raises questions about the nature of fear and perception, using the story to reflect on how fear is imagined, experienced, and represented.

1. The Ghost and The Philosopher

This month's discussion on fear will begin with a short reading from a letter by Pliny the Younger (61–113 AD), the Roman lawyer and man of letters writing around the year 100 CE. In it, Pliny addresses Licinius Sura, a senator of distinction and close confidant, and recounts the tale of Athenodorus Cananites (c. 74 BC – 7 AD), a Stoic philosopher of great repute. Athenodorus, upon his arrival in Athens, rents a house that all others shun, a dwelling whispered to be haunted by a restless specter in clanking chains.

It is a fitting and spectral prelude to our theme, not merely a ghost story for the season, but one that invites thought. Beneath its eerie surface, the ancient tale raises questions about fear: does it arise from what we see, from what we believe, or from what the imagination conjures when the light grows dim and how we respond to it? This is likely no accident. The tale may have originated as an allegorical teaching tool used by Stoic philosophers to explore reason, perception, and the nature of fear. The creation of allegories and logical word problems was common within the Stoic school as a means of expressing their teachings.

As one of the earliest ghost stories of its kind in writing, it foreshadows elements later seen in the modern haunted-house genre, including the haunted house with a troubled past, the determined outsider who investigates, and the restless spirit seeking burial or release after meeting its mortal fate through a violent end. Yet beyond this and its antiquity, the story is thought-provoking for another reason: showing how fear is used in storytelling, and raising questions about why, in modern genres like horror for example, we often find fascination—even entertainment and delight—in what frightens us. So now, prepare yourself for a ghost story.

2. Reading: Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Sura*

The present recess from business affords you leisure to give, and me to receive, instruction. I am extremely desirous therefore to know your sentiments concerning spectres, whether you believe they actually exist and have their own proper shapes and a measure of divinity, or are only the false impressions of a terrified imagination?...

To this story, let me add another as remarkable as the former, but attended with circumstances of greater horror; which I will give you exactly as it was related to me. There was at Athens a large and spacious, but illreputed and pestilential house. In the dead of the night a noise, resembling the clashing of iron, was frequently heard, which, if you listened more attentively, sounded like the rattling of fetters; at first it seemed at a distance, but approached nearer by degrees; immediately afterward a phantom appeared in the form of an old man, extremely meagre and squalid, with a long beard and bristling hair; rattling the gyves on his feet and hands. The poor inhabitants consequently passed sleepless nights under the most dismal terrors imaginable. This, as it broke their rest, threw them into distempers, which, as their horrors of mind increased, proved in the end fatal to their lives. For even in the day time, though the spectre did not appear, yet the remembrance of it made such a strong impression on their imaginations that it still seemed before their eyes, and their terror remained when the cause of it was gone. By this means the house was at last deserted, as being judged by everybody to be absolutely uninhabitable; so that it was now entirely abandoned to the ghost. However, in hopes that some tenant might be found who was ignorant of this great calamity which attended it, a bill was put up, giving notice that it was either to be let or sold. It happened that Athenodorus the philosopher came to Athens at this time, and reading the bill ascertained the price. The extraordinary cheapness raised his suspicion; nevertheless, when he heard the whole story, he was so far from being discouraged, that he was more strongly inclined to hire it, and, in short, actually did so. When it grew towards evening, he ordered a couch to be prepared for him in the forepart of the house, and after calling for a light, together with his pen and tablets, he directed all his people to retire within. But that his mind might not, for want of employment, be open to the vain terrors of imaginary noises and apparitions, he applied himself to writing with all his faculties.

The first part of the night passed with usual silence, then began the clanking of iron fetters; however, he neither lifted up his eyes, nor laid down his pen, but closed his ears by concentrating his attention. The noise increased and advanced nearer, till it seemed at the door, and at last in the chamber. He looked round and saw the apparition exactly as it had been described to him: it stood before him, beckoning with the finger. Athenodorus made a sign with his hand that it should wait a little, and bent again to his writing, but the ghost rattling its chains over his head as he wrote, he looked round and saw it beckoning as before. Upon this he immediately took up

his lamp and followed it. The ghost slowly stalked along, as if encumbered with its chains; and having turned into the courtyard of the house, suddenly vanished. Athenodorus being thus deserted, marked the spot with a handful of grass and leaves. The next day he went to the magistrates, and advised them to order that spot to be dug up. There they found bones commingled and intertwined with chains; for the body had mouldered away by long lying in the ground, leaving them bare, and corroded by the fetters. The bones were collected, and buried at the public expense; and after the ghost was thus duly laid the house was haunted no more.

— Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, “To Sura” (Letter LXXXIII), *The Harvard Classics*, Vol. 9 (1909–14)

3. What Haunts Us Still

But are we still haunted by a ghost or, at the very least, by a few lingering questions? What, indeed, is this story truly about—the specter within the house, or something unseen within ourselves, waiting beneath the surface until it rises, immediate and inescapable before us: fear. Yet what is fear? What do we mean by this word—a state, a drive, an instinct, a compulsion that moves us to act, so be it, born of the real or the imagined? Is it always fear of something, or fear itself, that casts its shadow? Can we ever point to anything here with certainty and swear that nothing else hides in the darkened corners beyond our sight?

Many strange and still-unknown questions linger there, waiting just around the turn of thought, ready to spring upon us when we least expect them. But do not be afraid. I have but one final question for you.

Like a stalking phantom beckoning through the night toward a resting place seldom illumined by the lamplight of reason’s revelation, yearning for release from the dark, I ask once more: What do you think?

Community Philosophy Circle – Meeting #9
Discussion

October 15, 2025

Topic: “Fear”

Discussion Summary

The conversation began asking what fear is, how it arises in the body, and whether it begins with instinct, judgment, or something else. The discussion then turned to uncertainty and the unknown, focusing on how imagination, belief, and lack of information are connected to fear. Stories of haunted houses, ghosts, intuition, and personal testimony were used to explore how fear is experienced differently, and how experiences can feel real and authoritative even without shared proof. The group also discussed fear in entertainment, courage, risk, and moral behavior, including whether fear plays a role in virtue. Attention then turned to death, grief, and the afterlife, examining how fear relates to personal experience and conviction. The discussion also addressed fear in relation to culture, upbringing, gender, power, and place, considering fear not only as an internal response but as something shaped through families, communities, stories, and shared spaces.

Discussion Points

1. **What Fear Is and Where It Comes From:** Fear was examined as a mix of perception, bodily response, and motivation, raising questions about whether it begins in biology, judgment, or both.
2. **The Unknown, and the Stoic in the Haunted House:** Fear was linked to the unknown, with contrasting responses of investigation versus flight illustrated through the Stoic story of Athenodorus.
3. **How Belief and Perception Shape Fear:** The group questioned whether fear resides in external conditions or in the beliefs and interpretations of the perceiver.
4. **Ghosts, Evidence, and Personal Testimony:** Personal experiences were shared and debated as forms of evidence that may not prove claims universally but still carry weight for those involved.
5. **Intuition and Danger:** Fear was discussed as a gut-level warning system that can signal physical or moral danger before conscious reasoning.
6. **Entertainment, Horror, and the Attraction of Fear:** Participants explored why people seek fear in safe settings and whether horror functions as rehearsal, thrill, or spectacle.
7. **Virtue, Courage, and the Absence of Fear:** The discussion asked whether courage and virtue require fear to exist and what happens when fear is blunted or missing.
8. **Risk, Rules, and Moving Toward Fear:** Fear surrounding rules, forbidden spaces, and judgment was contrasted with deliberately facing fear as a path to growth.

9. **Fear of Death and Beyond It:** Beliefs about death and afterlife were examined for how they intensify, reduce, or reshape fear.
 10. **Parents, Culture, and How Fear Is Learned:** Fear was discussed as shaped by upbringing, culture, and generation, while allowing for wide individual variation.
 11. **Imaginary Friends and Different Minds:** Differences in imagination, perception, and cognition raised questions about how shared our experiences of fear really are.
 12. **Local Hauntings and Community Stories:** Fear was tied to place through local ghost stories, rituals, and shared community narratives.
 13. **Gender and the Fear of Powerful Women:** The group examined how fear operates around authority and gender, especially in responses to women who hold power.
 14. **Closing Quote:** From Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) Fuller was a Transcendentalist and is regarded as an early feminist thinker.
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1. What Fear Is and Where It Comes From?

The conversation opened with someone asking, What do we mean by fear? Someone else suggested that before the group went further, it needed a starting point and a working sense of what was being discussed. One person, drawing from readings in the philosophy of emotion, offered a common picture. Fear, they said, is usually understood as an emotion that involves seeing something as dangerous or threatening, feeling that perception in the body through tense muscles, facial expression, posture, or heart rate, and then being moved to get away or protect oneself.

Someone wondered about cases where the body reacts before thought, such as flinching at a sudden noise. Another person asked about fears that show up without any obvious physical signs. Someone else pointed out that fear does not always push us to run and sometimes freezes us in place.

Another participant suggested that if fear includes judgment, then it seems tied to how we think, yet if it is biological, it might arise before we consciously think at all. If fear pushes us to act,

how do we explain those moments of paralysis? From this, fear began to look like a meeting point between what we perceive, how our bodies respond, and what we feel compelled to do.

From there, the group moved to the origins of fear in human life. Developmental psychology entered the discussion when someone recalled classic experiments with babies crawling toward a glass cliff. Before a certain point, infants show no fear at all. Once depth perception develops, they hesitate and refuse to cross, even though the glass is safe. This raised the question of what is built in and what is learned. Some thought there seems to be a biological fear system that comes online early, but one that still depends on perception and awareness.

Others contrasted this with clearly learned fears. One person remembered staying at a friend's house for the first time as a child. The adults repeatedly asked, Will everything be okay? Will there be a call home? That suggestion alone lodged in the child's mind. Nothing threatening happened. The situation itself was ordinary. Yet the expectation that something might go wrong became the very thing that made the experience anxious.

2. The Unknown, and the Stoic in the Haunted House

The discussion moved to what fear is about. One person suggested that almost all human action might be motivated by fear of the unknown. In that view, philosophy itself, Descartes asking what he can really know, or anyone who keeps asking what is this, is driven by discomfort with not knowing. When something strange appears, like the story's specter, some people rush toward it to understand it, and others slam the door and run. A question was raised: why do some of us move toward the unknown and others away from it?

Someone pointed out how much fear grows when senses are taken away. Reading a ghost story in the light is one thing. Reading it in the dark changes the entire experience. Remove vision, and the mind fills the void with possibilities. Fear becomes the shape of our own imagination. For one person, learning and philosophy are attempts to turn on the light, to reduce fear by replacing vague unknowns with specific, named things.

The group then connected this to the Stoic story of Athenodorus and the haunted house from the topic introduction. One participant loved it because he fights drama. In their mind, fear and

drama are close cousins. Athenodorus hears the ghost tale, rents the cheap house, and instead of panicking, he sits down to work with a lamp in hand. When the specter appears, he treats it almost like a problem to be solved. He follows it, finds the chains and bones, and has them buried, ending the haunting. For this person, the lamplight symbolized reason, and the story became a model: when people around you stir up fear or mystery, you can respond with patience and investigation rather than emotional chaos.

Others wondered, what if the story had ended differently? What if the specter killed him? Stoic confidence assumes that reason can master fear and false impressions, but maybe that is wishful. Somebody noted that the Stoics were materialists. They did not believe in supernatural spirits, yet the story seems to treat the ghost as real knowledge, a cataleptic impression in Stoic terms. That raised a question: if even a Stoic story imagines a real specter, do we take that at face value, or treat it as a dramatized lesson about facing fear?

3. How Belief and Perception Shape Fear

From there, attention moved away from Athenodorus to the people who came before him in the story. One person pointed out that for the earlier inhabitants, the ghost was not a puzzle. It was terrifying. They could not sleep, they worried themselves into illness, and even died of fright. For them, the haunting was no less real than the philosopher's later rational explanation. Their perception, snake in the bed or snake in the mind, shaped their reality.

Someone reflected on the story: does burying the bones actually change the house, or just change the belief of the person who buries them? If a later tenant never hears about the bones being removed and hears only that the house is haunted, might they still see something? Is the haunting in the space or in the perceiver? Someone suggested that burying the bones might act like a placebo for one person's fear while leaving the deeper history untouched.

Religious beliefs and spirits were brought up. One participant explained how they personally approach a feeling that could seem like evil spirits. They do not go ghost hunting for darkness. If something feels malevolent, they use words from their own faith tradition to tell it to leave, and they feel the fear lift. For them, belief and courage are entangled. What they think is true about the world directly shapes what they can face. Another person noted that Athenodorus's courage

is also rooted in belief. He trusted that the specter could be investigated and laid to rest, while the previous tenants believed only that it would destroy them.

At the same time, it was joked that the story functions as propaganda for philosophy: philosophers get discounted rent by being rational. They also noted that, in the story, Athenodorus wants the haunted house more when he hears about the ghost because it is cheap and intellectually interesting. What looks like terror to one person can be an opportunity for another.

4. Ghosts, Evidence, and Personal Testimony

Someone asked, how seriously should we take ghost stories at all? One person warned against saying it is true for you as if every belief were equally correct. Either ghosts exist or they do not, or we just do not know yet. At the same time, they argued that we need experiences, testimony, and some attempt at investigation.

That led to a few people's personal stories. One woman described life after the death of her young son. Years later, their daughter was upset one night because her brother had been in her room and said he had to leave to go help Grandma. When the mother went upstairs, she thought she saw a small shadow at the edge of her vision, the right size and shape to be her son. She comforted her daughter, assuming grief and imagination might explain it.

The next day, she casually asked the boy's grandmother what she had been doing around that time. Without being told anything, the grandmother said she had been struggling with a puzzle her grandson used to love and, half joking and half serious, had asked him aloud to help her. For her, the two stories matched. At the same time the grandmother called on her grandson, the daughter said he had to leave to go help Grandma.

For the mother, this was not just comforting symbolism. She had already tried to doubt herself, and she knew grief could distort perception. But this independent corroboration from the grandmother gave her something she called a knowing. It was not proof for everyone, but evidence strong enough that she could say, I know his soul still exists. That conviction changed her relationship to death. Before her son died, she had no firm belief about any afterlife.

Afterward, she no longer feared her own death in the same way. She still doubted her own mind at times, but she could no longer dismiss the possibility of a continued soul.

Others responded carefully. A self-described skeptical agnostic said stories like hers did not make them suddenly believe in ghosts, but they made it harder to confidently say there are none. At minimum, they thought such experiences deserve to be taken seriously as evidence, even if they do not settle the question.

5. Intuition and Danger

One person argued that even if we knew spirits existed, that would not remove fear. Just as some humans mean harm and others do not, some spirits, if real, might be benevolent while others might be dangerous. Knowledge that ghosts exist would still leave us fearing intentions, if not more so.

Someone told of a seemingly normal dinner with a salesman. They had never before felt sheer evil from a person, but in this man's presence they sensed something deeply wrong. As the evening went on, his stories confirmed their impression. He was more than merely rude. There was something morally corrupted under the surface. For them, this was an example of a fear-like response that felt very real and tangible, rooted in the person's character rather than any obvious threat.

Another participant connected this to a gut sense about danger. They argued there is something in us, whether shaped by personal experience, genetic inheritance, or species history, that lets us know when something is off. Even before we consciously articulate danger, we recoil from sharp teeth, snake-like shapes, or an off feeling in someone's presence. They thought our brains are wired to keep us alive, and fear is one of the tools.

This led to a question: if fear helps us avoid danger, why do we sometimes ignore or rationalize those signals? At the same time, why do we also seek out fear in safe ways, horror films, thrill rides, and frightening stories, if our bodies are built to avoid it?

6. Entertainment, Horror, and the Attraction of Fear

The group turned to fear in entertainment. One person asked, if fear evolved to keep us safe, why do people spend so much time chasing it in movies, haunted houses, and ghost tours? Does living in a relatively safe society make us hungry for artificial dangers? Do people in less safe countries seek out horror at the same rate?

Several participants confessed they hate horror movies because they highlight the shortness and fragility of human life. Others, though, were drawn to literary horror. One person who does horror story readings said people constantly request *The Tell-Tale Heart*, a story of premeditated murder and madness. They were struck by how many people say they love this story, which is basically about stalking and killing an old man because his eye is unnerving, hiding the body under the floorboards, and then going insane from guilt.

It was asked why people like it. Some suggested that the appeal lies in justice: the murderer is undone by his own conscience. Others thought many listeners simply do not think deeply about the moral content, and they respond to the rhythm and drama.

Someone connected this to how people pick wedding songs without listening closely to the lyrics, choosing sad or bitter songs because they superficially sound romantic. We can be drawn to stories that, on the surface, celebrate love or intensity while underneath they are about fear, loss, or obsession. In that sense, entertainment can smuggle fear and danger under the cover of a distracting surface aesthetic.

The group wondered whether safe fear in stories desensitizes us, or whether it offers a controlled rehearsal: a way to feel terror without actual danger, to practice navigating fear from the safety of a couch or theater seat. People were split. Some felt braver after surviving a scary movie, and others felt more aware of vulnerability. Fear, some thought, is not just a survival reflex. It can also be a spectacle, a thrill, a ritual, and like a mirror we willingly walk toward.

7. Virtue, Courage, and the Absence of Fear

At this point it came up: does fear have a purpose beyond survival? Could fear exist so that courage and virtue can exist at all? If there were no danger, no possibility of harm, could we

meaningfully talk about bravery, integrity, or moral strength? Courage only makes sense if there is something to fear and we act anyway.

That led to a discussion of how people do not seem to feel fear in the same way. One person said psychopaths and certain high-powered leaders were mentioned as examples. They also said some studies show that people with psychopathic traits have blunted physiological responses to fear stimuli: their heart rate does not spike, and their palms do not sweat in situations that shake others.

Several striking stories followed. In one, a CEO repeatedly broke rules and landed in court. The judge tried to frighten him straight by sending him to jail, assuming the experience would deter him. Instead, he adapted, leaned into the prison's violent culture, and came out worse. Fear of punishment did not work on him the way it does on most people.

Another story involved a serial killer who chose a random delivery driver to kill, not in a heat of passion or revenge, but because he seemingly wanted to. Raised in severe abuse, the killer seemed to lack ordinary emotional responses. Facing trial and punishment, he felt no fear and little remorse. These stories raised questions: if fear is dulled or missing, what anchors behavior?

From there, the question was asked: why is it that the majority of us do not commit such acts? Is it fear of breaking the law? Fear of divine punishment? Fear of what others will think of us? Or is it more fundamentally about empathy and identification with others? One person separated those motives. Some people obey rules because that is the rule, whether secular or religious. Others act from a more humanistic place: I do not harm you because I would not want to be harmed. Fear shows up even here, not just fear of jail or hell, but fear of being a bad person, fear of being discovered, and fear of becoming the kind of person we ourselves would despise.

8. Risk, Rules, and Moving Toward Fear

Next, the group talked about how individual differences in risk tolerance may shape our fears. Some people said they are not afraid of public speaking or breaking small rules, and others find those things terrifying.

Going into the teacher's lounge or the wrong bathroom became symbols of forbidden spaces. As children, some were convinced crossing those thresholds would bring disaster, though logically nothing that terrible could happen. The rule itself, plus the fear of being caught, was enough to keep them out.

Someone brought up the movie *The Sandlot*. The kids are terrified of a huge dog behind a fence and refuse to retrieve a prized baseball hit into the yard. The unknown dog becomes almost mythic. But when the danger of disappointing a parent, who values that Babe Ruth ball, becomes too great, one boy finally climbs the fence. Knowledge of what is actually in the yard reduces the fear. But the decision to face it was driven by a different reaction.

One person talked about their professor's advice in college: move toward the fear. The idea was that the place you are afraid to go is often exactly where your growth is. For years, their adult life has felt like walking into situations that frighten them, not extreme physical risks, but risks of judgment, failure, or being seen. They contrasted this with thrill-seeking. They are not jumping off bridges. They are accepting speaking roles, sharing vulnerable stories, and taking on responsibilities that scare them.

9. Fear of Death and Beyond It

At one point, it was said that someone did not fear death. That startled others, who asked what that meant. Did they expect an afterlife, heaven, or a particular religious picture?

One person clarified that they have no detailed expectation, but they do believe there is something, a continued reality beyond this life. Experiences throughout their life, including encounters they interpret as contact with the dead, have convinced them of this. Because of that, they are not terrified of personal nonexistence. What they do fear is leaving their children suddenly, and knowing from their own experience of losing a parent how shattering that can be.

Others reflected on loved ones who are convinced they will go to heaven, yet still live in terror of hell. Some thought religious frameworks often seem to increase fear of death rather than ease it. In contrast, the woman who told the story of her son said that her experience gave her

confidence, not that everything will be pleasant, but that her son's soul continues. That knowledge, for her, lessened fear.

Alcohol and recovery were brought up. One person described walking outside drunk one night, looking up at the Milky Way, and suddenly having a moment of clarity, what they called a revelation about what this is between heaven and earth and us. It did not translate into a neat doctrine, but it stayed with them as proof there is more than we usually see. Later, they became sober and could still recall that moment in vivid detail. However, they still thought it was mostly a result of drinking too much.

Others in the room were agnostic or skeptical. Some said they had never seen anything they would count as credible evidence of ghosts or an afterlife, but they would not dismiss those who had. On this subject, there were those who felt they knew there was something beyond death, those who suspected it but were not sure, and those who leaned toward doubt but were open.

10. Parents, Culture, and How Fear Is Learned

The conversation turned to how much of our fear is inherited from parents versus absorbed from the wider world. One person suggested we tend to go one of two ways: we either adopt our parents' beliefs or react against them as the black sheep. Another pushed back, saying we often overemphasize parents and underestimate siblings' different personalities, community influences, and individual variance. Children in the same household can grow into very different fears and values, even if raised the same.

Someone mentioned knowing people whose parents believed in psychic gifts or spirits while the children did not, and vice versa. The environment is not a simple imprint. Our brains are different. Our experiences diverge, and our perceptions do not match.

Some wondered, in a broader cultural lens, if life in a relatively wealthy country shapes what we consider dangerous. One participant contrasted third world contexts, where fear centers on getting food, water, and medicine, with the comparatively abstract fears of those who can just go buy something. Survival anxiety and existential anxiety are not the same.

Generational differences came up again. Some older participants remembered parents or grandparents who seemed almost Stoic: feelings did not matter, and you just got on with things. In contrast, they said, many younger people are raised with safety nets: if you feel uncomfortable, call me and I will come get you immediately. One person wondered if this shift, while compassionate, can also create new fears or lower tolerance for discomfort.

At the same time, the earlier discussion about snakes and inherited fear came up again. People described instinctively jumping at cords, branches, or belts that resemble snakes, even when they look like snakes. Somewhere between biology and culture, fear signals are trained and retrained. Sometimes this helps us survive, and sometimes it keeps us from things we might actually want or need to face.

11. Imaginary Friends and Different Minds

From there, the group began questioning how shared our experiences of the world really are. This brought up the topic of imaginary friends.

One participant described seeing people regularly walk through the front door as a young child, assuming they were just normal visitors, only to realize later that no such people had actually entered. The experiences were so ordinary to them that they did not even think to mention them at the time. Another vivid memory involved seeing a cat seem to transform and have two heads, with one head tar-black and hollow-eyed, somehow fusing with the animal. As an adult, they wondered how to understand those experiences. The experiences faded in adolescence, but never vanished from memory.

Others connected these experiences to the common phenomenon of imaginary friends. Several people shared memories of having them themselves, or of children describing imaginary friends. In some cases, these figures were given detailed traits or backstories rather than appearing as vague or fleeting presences. This raised questions about how such companions should be understood: as psychological phenomena, imaginative mechanisms, developmental tools, or something that does not fit neatly into any single category. The group did not settle the question.

This led into a discussion of how differently brains work. One person described having a friend who cannot form mental images. Another knew someone with no internal monologue, whose thoughts do not show up as words. Someone else said they see many more shades of red than their partner does. It was considered that we often assume that we all see the same thing and have similar experiences.

A design on the wall was pointed out as an example. To most, it was green. Some argued parts of it could be read as blue, gray, or white, depending on how you slice the spectrum. Some thought that what we call green is as much a shared language as a shared perception. Fear, it was brought up, might be similar: we think we are talking about the same thing, but we may not be.

12. Local Hauntings and Community Stories

Ghosts returned, this time tied to local places and community lore. Several people described specific buildings in their region that were said to be haunted.

In the transit building in Oil City, workers and visitors sometimes smell cigar smoke when no one is smoking. One person remembered a drum circle at the building where they jokingly invited John D. Rockefeller to join them, then watched an electromagnetic field detector, a ghost meter, start flashing in time with the rhythm. John D. Rockefeller was said to have once had an office in the building. When they stopped drumming, it stopped. They thought the device was not proof of anything, but it felt like a response. Another said the transit building has at least three different specters, spread across floors and rooms. Another spoke about local ghost tours. On one tour, they refused to cross a threshold into a particular corner of a building, feeling an overwhelming sense of evil. Someone else related experiences with a gentle specter that people have named Mary.

Another story came up about a local university chapel. At some time in the past, the story goes, a theater student named William had been booed off stage during a performance and later died by suicide in the balcony. Every year around Halloween, the history department would host an event in the chapel. They would put a flashlight onstage and invite William to perform. Sometimes, in front of hundreds of people, the light would flicker to life. At the end, they would tell his story and invite everyone there to give him the ovation he never received. For the storyteller, this ritual

was not about proving anything scientific. It was about healing, and a way for a community to remember a young man's pain and dignity.

A few considered that our stories about haunted buildings, benevolent spirits, and tragic students give shape to how we live in certain places. Some of those stories keep people away, and others invite them in. Further, fear here is not just private emotion. It is part of a shared landscape made of buildings, rituals, rumors, and stories of the dead.

13. Gender and the Fear of Powerful Women

Next, the conversation turned to gender, authority, and what people are afraid of in each other. One woman described herself as almost constitutionally defiant. If someone says, you cannot do that, her instinct is, watch me. Asked whether this defiance might be rooted in a fear of being seen as less than others, she firmly said no. She traced it instead to a childhood where her parents never told her she could not do something because she was a girl. At home she heard that you can be what you want. In the wider culture, she heard the opposite: women are limited, women are secondary, and women should stay within certain roles. Her defiance, then she thought, was a refusal to let the outside world override the possibility she had been given inside her family.

Several people shared experiences of working in offices in the 1980s and 1990s. For women, harassment was routine: grabbing, comments, pressure to flirt, or pressure to stay after work. Dress codes were rigid and gendered. One participant recounted being called into the boss's office in the mid-90s because she came to work without pantyhose. Men, meanwhile, were required to wear suits and ties and were forbidden to have beards in some companies. It was thought that clothing was used to enforce a particular image of professionalism that rested on strict gender expectations.

Someone mentioned an old internal guide from Disney that supposedly decoded office descriptions of women: go-getter meant bitch, and so on. The group connected this to broader patterns: men in leadership are often praised for traits like decisiveness, assertiveness, and toughness, while women with the same traits are punished for them. A participant gave Hillary Clinton as an example. She displayed the standard attributes of a male political leader, yet many

rejected her for precisely those qualities, not in spite of them. The question arose from the group: do we, as a society, fear powerful women? The answer given by the room was yes.

14. Closing Quote

From Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Fuller was a Transcendentalist and is regarded as an early feminist thinker. This quote is often misattributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared with what lies within us."

Community Philosophy Circle – Topic Presentation #10

The One Who Watches Rivers

November 19, 2025

Topic: "Responsibility"

Presentation Summary

The One Who Watches Rivers begins with a story about a single person who finds themselves alone in a silent world. As others appear, a village slowly forms through shared work, accidents, and everyday conflicts, and people begin asking who is responsible. A role is created to watch a dangerous river, a river-watcher, and the person is chosen to hold it. When a storm causes flooding, homes are lost and the village divides over how to understand what happened and who should answer for it. Years later, similar situations arise again, and explanations and judgments return often. The story ends with a younger villager being offered the river-watcher role and facing the question of what it would mean to take it on.

Presentation Sections

1. **Opening Reflection: Quote from Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1844):** The opening declaration of Stirner's philosophical egoism, asserting the primacy of the unique individual over all moral, religious, and social ideals.
2. **To Oneself, Alone in a World:** A human appears alone in a silent world, experiences their body, hunger, pain, and the environment, and notices patterns in themselves that they did not seem to choose and a world that is indifferent to them.
3. **Others and a Village:** Another person appears, misunderstandings happen, more people arrive, and a village forms. People begin asking who caused things to happen and who should answer for them.
4. **The River and the Watcher:** The village builds near a river, creates the role of the river watcher, and chooses one person for it, the watcher. A storm causes flooding, and the village debates blame, fault, and what should change.
5. **Time Passing and a New Question:** The watcher grows older, hears the same kinds of disputes repeated, reflects on responsibility, and is asked by a younger villager whether to take the river-watcher role.

1. Opening Reflection: Quote from Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*

My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is mine, and it is not a general one, but is—unique, as I myself am unique.

Nothing is more to me than myself!

— Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (1844)

2. How do we imagine the beginning? Alone, even Ignorant of solitude?

A person opened their eyes to a world silent on all matters, and indifferent. Nothing beyond themselves in this moment. Unaware of any source, did they choose to be here?

They stood on an empty plain under a white sky. A being untethered. No name, no past, no promises or concept of the future. When they lifted their arm, it moved. When they stepped, the ground answered with sound. They could act, but there was no one else for it to matter to. No praise. No blame. No expectations

Then the world began to push back.

The sun burned if they walked too long in the open. Rocks blistered their feet and bruised them if they fell. Hunger arrived without any permission. They learned, slowly, that not everything obeyed them like their body seemed to. Some things yielded, some things refused, some things punished back. They could still choose, but choice now lived inside a frame they hadn't designed.

They noticed patterns in themselves that felt older than any decision they made: the breathing in and out that happened on its own, the instinct to flinch or blink, a pull toward water, the need to eat, the way hair and nails grew and so much more. Did these move them before they could think? Were those impulses “theirs,” or just part of whatever had thrown them into the world?

3. Then, one morning, there were other footprints.

The second person appeared by the river, staring back with the same startled look. For the first time, a gesture had a face to land on. A raised hand could comfort or threaten. The moment's

silence could soothe or accuse. They moved differently around each other. Neither spoke, but something in them adjusted. Though neither seemed to understand how or why. Was it another's presence that changed them?

Sometimes they collided by accident: a stone tossed carelessly, a task done one way when the other expected another, a moment meant as play taken as an insult. "I didn't mean it," one would say. "You should have known," the other would answer. In this, intention and outcome drifted apart, yet often one wanted the other to answer for what happened.

More people arrived.

A camp became a village: paths, rules, shared tools, the rhythm of work and rest. Some things went well, harvests came in, water walls dug, projects finished, and some things didn't: tools broke, fires spread, food spoiled, plans fell apart. After each turn, good or bad, the same questions floated up.

"Who made this happen?"

"Who was supposed to handle it?"

"Who's going to take care of it now?"

They discovered different ways of using the same word for this. That is, responsible and its kinds.

Sometimes it meant: Are you even the kind of person we can answer to?

Sometimes: Who did this, and what do they deserve now, blame, punishment, forgiveness?

Sometimes: Whose job was this in the first place?

And sometimes: What sort of person are you becoming, the kind who can be trusted or the kind who steps away?

4. The villagers eventually built houses near a river that sometimes rose too fast.

But the ground seemed good for building and many took the risk. To ease their worry, they made a role: The One Who Watches Rivers.

The first person, older now, trusted, careful with small things, was chosen.

“You’ll watch the river,” they told them. “If it swells, you warn us.”

It became more than a task; it became part of who they were in the eyes of others. People pointed from a distance: “That’s the one who watches the river.” Strangers treated them as if the whole village slept safely because of them. Some admired the role. Some resented the authority and the way the watcher began doing things no one had asked for, expecting it to be accepted even though no one had agreed.

Even so, people began expecting more and more from them, and still expected them to answer for whatever the river did. Little by little, most of the village let their own vigilance fade, placing their fear onto this one person’s shoulders. In time, many forgot how to watch the river themselves, and some didn’t even know what the watcher actually did. A few said they wanted a new watcher, but others went out of their way to stop anyone from stepping in, even though they didn’t know how to watch the river themselves. They simply liked things as they were.

One night a storm rolled in early, faster than usual. The watcher had been up late helping settle an argument in the village. They slept too long. By the time they reached the bank, the water was already flooding the low houses. People scrambled up the hill carrying what they could. One child slipped; the watcher pulled them out, but homes were lost.

In the days after, the village met about what had happened.

Some said, “It was a storm that no one could have predicted or stopped.”

Others said, “We all chose to live this close to the river. We knew.”

More said to the Watcher, “Yes, but you are the One Who Watches the River. You accepted that. You failed.”

The watcher wanted to say: *I didn't choose to exist. I didn't choose my habits, or the way sleep finally caught me. I didn't choose the storm's timing. I didn't choose where you built homes. I didn't choose all the things you expected, often assumed and never said.*

Instead, the Watcher said, "I should have woken earlier."

Some villagers thought punishment would be just. Some wanted a new watcher. Some thought there was no need and that the Watcher was still the best watcher in the village. Some wanted new rules: a second watcher, a bell system, houses moved higher.

Out of one event came blame, guilt, reforms, and a re-drawing of roles. It changed some things, and others it did not at all.

5. Years passed.

The watcher became an elder. Now others stood before them, answering for things that had gone wrong: a broken tool that hurt someone, a promise not kept, a risk taken that harmed nobody—this time.

As the elder Watcher listened, they heard the same words they themselves had spoken years ago, on the night the river rose and the village flooded. Villagers said things like:

"I didn't mean it."

"I didn't see it coming."

"I thought someone else was watching."

"Nothing bad happened—why are you angry?" And no and on.

Slowly, the elder Watcher noticed something. People weren't only arguing about each event itself; they were revealing what they expected from one another. The village wasn't just asking who caused what. Each judgment carried more than blame or excuse; it showed the kind of life they believed the village should live together. Every decision made smuggled in a kind of imposed answer to deeper questions:

What do we expect from a human life here?
How much risk do we ask each other to carry?
Who do we need you to be? And so on and so forth.

It was deciding what kind of lives they wanted to live together.

One sleepless night, the elder tried to return in memory to that empty plain under a white sky when there was no one else with no name, no past, no promises or concept of the future, to the feeling of being untouched by any demand and held only to one's own way, I myself. But now that idea seemed like fantasy, a story told, not something that could have ever truly been. Even if the world had been empty, they saw that they had never really been alone: they carried with them impulses, needs, ways of thinking they hadn't chosen, and the shadow of a future unknown to them. But were these obligations now any less a fantasy, or did something make them more real and immediate?

Maybe there was never a sharp line where "my responsibility" begins and everything else ends, only a moving boundary between what shaped them, what they chose, what others decided their choices meant, and what future those choices may make. But whose choices, if they could be called that? Was there really a choice? Could any truly be pointed to?

In the morning, a younger villager came to them with a question: "They want me to take the river watcher post next season. Should I say yes? What if something happens?"

The elder thought of storms, laws, blame, accidents, politics, common virtues you often hold to, whether you hold them truly or not. They thought of how the village needed someone in that role, and how anyone who took it would stand at the crossing point of luck, choice, and expectation in a world grasping for surety, where there seemed only flux.

They didn't give an answer. Instead, they said, "If you take it, some things will be your fault that never fully were. If you refuse, some things will still be your doing, just in a different way. Either way, some will think they need you, and whatever you do will matter to them. And at other times it will not."

The younger person was quiet for a long moment.

“What should I be responsible for?” they finally asked.

The elder almost said, that’s the question we’ve all been answering with our lives, whether we meant to or not.

Instead, the just replied:

“That’s exactly what you’re deciding. Now, what do you think?”

**END NOTE: THIS DOCUMENT IS IN THE PROCESS OF BEING
UPDATED TO INCLUDE 2026 MEETINGS.**