

Arbitrariness Objection

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"In space, no one can hear you think."

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1 Arbitrariness Objection

1.1 Introduction to the Arbitrariness Objection

The Arbitrariness Objection stands as one of philosophy’s most versatile and powerful critical tools, capable of exposing weaknesses in arguments across virtually every domain of human thought. At its core, this objection challenges the justification for distinctions, boundaries, or choices that appear to lack sufficient reason—asking why a line is drawn in one place rather than another, why certain entities are included while others are excluded, or why a particular principle applies in some cases but not others. This seemingly simple question resonates with profound implications, striking at the heart of how we justify our beliefs, values, and social arrangements.

To understand the Arbitrariness Objection, we must first clarify what precisely is meant by “arbitrariness” in philosophical discourse. Arbitrariness refers not merely to randomness or unpredictability, but more specifically to the absence of adequate justification for a choice, distinction, or principle. When philosophers accuse a position of being arbitrary, they are suggesting that it lacks a principled basis—that there is no good reason why things are arranged one way rather than another, or why a boundary is drawn at a particular point. This differs from randomness, which implies outcomes determined by chance processes, and from capriciousness, which suggests decisions made impulsively or whimsically. Rather, arbitrariness in the philosophical sense points to a fundamental gap in justification—a failure to provide sufficient reason for why a particular position, distinction, or principle should be accepted over alternatives.

The philosophical problem posed by arbitrariness stems from its tension with our basic demand for justification. In both everyday reasoning and formal philosophical systems, we naturally expect that important distinctions and principles should be grounded in good reasons. When faced with a choice between drawing a boundary at point A or point B, we want to know what justifies selecting one over the other. If no compelling reason can be offered, the choice appears arbitrary, and thus unjustified. This demand for non-arbitrary justification reflects a deeper philosophical commitment to the principle that rational distinctions should be based on relevant differences rather than mere convention or preference.

Consider, for instance, the seemingly straightforward question of when a developing organism counts as a person. If we draw the line at birth, we might be asked: why birth rather than one day before or one week after? If we instead point to conception as the crucial moment, we face the same challenge: what principled reason justifies conception rather than a moment before or after? This pattern of questioning reveals the structure of arbitrariness objections—they highlight the difficulty of justifying precise boundaries in continuous processes or phenomena where no clear discontinuities exist.

The logical structure of arbitrariness objections typically takes the form of a “Why here rather than there?” challenge. When a philosophical position draws a distinction, establishes a boundary, or makes a choice that could reasonably have been made differently, the arbitrariness objection asks what justifies this particular selection over alternatives. If no non-arbitrary reason can be provided, the objection suggests that the position lacks adequate justification. This structure makes the arbitrariness objection particularly effective in philosophical debates, as it often reveals hidden assumptions or unacknowledged limitations in a theory.

Arbitrariness objections function as critical tools by exposing the need for justification in areas where it might otherwise be overlooked. They force philosophers to articulate and defend the reasons behind their distinctions and principles, thereby strengthening the overall argumentative structure of philosophical positions. However, not all instances of arbitrariness are equally problematic. In some contexts, arbitrary elements may be unavoidable or even acceptable. For example, linguistic conventions are arbitrary in the sense that there is no inherent reason why the sequence of sounds “dog” should refer to canines rather than some other concept. Yet this arbitrariness does not undermine the functionality of language, as long as the conventions are shared and consistent within a linguistic community. The key philosophical question becomes when arbitrariness is genuinely problematic versus when it is benign or even necessary.

The significance of arbitrariness objections in philosophy extends far beyond their utility as critical tools. These objections reveal deep tensions within philosophical systems, particularly regarding the relationship between justification and the drawing of boundaries. Many philosophical theories rely on distinctions that, upon closer examination, appear difficult to justify non-arbitrarily. For instance, moral theories must determine which entities deserve moral consideration and how much, political theories must justify the boundaries of political communities and the distribution of rights and resources, and epistemological theories must establish criteria for knowledge and justified belief. In each case, arbitrariness objections challenge the theorist to provide non-arbitrary justifications for these crucial distinctions.

The challenge of drawing boundaries and making non-arbitrary distinctions connects to broader philosophical concerns about vagueness, classification, and the nature of justification itself. The sorites paradox—famously illustrated by the question of how many grains of sand constitute a heap—exemplifies this challenge. As we add or remove individual grains, there appears to be no precise point at which a non-heap becomes a heap or vice versa. This paradox highlights the difficulty of drawing boundaries in continuous phenomena and raises questions about whether seemingly precise distinctions are ultimately arbitrary.

The scope of arbitrariness objections extends across virtually every domain of philosophical inquiry, revealing their versatility as critical tools. In moral philosophy, these objections challenge theories to justify moral boundaries and hierarchies. Political philosophy grapples with arbitrariness in justifying political authority, distributions of resources, and rights. Epistemology confronts questions about the foundations of knowledge and the boundaries of justification. The philosophy of language examines the relationship between arbitrary signs and their meanings, while aesthetics explores questions about artistic classification and value. Even metaphysics and ontology, which deal with the fundamental categories of being, must address objections that these categories themselves may be arbitrarily drawn.

Examining arbitrariness across these diverse contexts requires a methodological approach that recognizes both common patterns and domain-specific variations. While the logical structure of arbitrariness objections remains relatively consistent, their implications and potential responses vary significantly depending on the philosophical domain. For instance, addressing arbitrariness in linguistic conventions may involve appeals to shared practices and functional utility, whereas responding to arbitrariness in moral boundaries might require deeper metaphysical or normative justifications. This article will explore these variations while highlighting the underlying unity of arbitrariness objections as a philosophical phenomenon.

As we embark on this exploration of the Arbitrariness Objection, we will trace its historical development from ancient philosophy to contemporary debates, examining its manifestations across different philosophical domains and analyzing various responses to the challenges it poses. The journey will reveal not only the critical power of arbitrariness objections but also the ingenuity of philosophical attempts to address them. By understanding the nature and implications of arbitrariness in philosophical reasoning, we gain insight into the fundamental project of philosophy itself—the search for justified distinctions, principles, and systems of thought that can withstand the challenge of the “Why here rather than there?” question.

The historical origins of arbitrariness objections reveal a fascinating evolution of philosophical thought, as ancient thinkers first began to question the justification for distinctions and principles that had previously been taken for granted. By examining these historical developments, we can better appreciate both the enduring nature of arbitrariness objections and the changing contexts in which they have been deployed.

1.2 Historical Origins and Development

The historical evolution of arbitrariness objections reveals a fascinating intellectual journey, as philosophers across centuries grappled with the fundamental challenge of justifying distinctions, boundaries, and principles. This lineage of thought begins in the ancient world, where thinkers first systematically questioned the foundations of human classifications and norms, setting the stage for millennia of philosophical development. Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the works of Plato and Aristotle, contains some of the earliest explicit confrontations with problems of arbitrariness. In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, the famous dilemma posed by Socrates—whether the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, or whether it is pious because the gods love it—strikes at the heart of divine command theories of morality. If the gods arbitrarily determine what is pious, then morality becomes a matter of whim rather than principle. This challenge to theological voluntarism demonstrates how ancient thinkers recognized that grounding distinctions in mere will or convention, without further justification, renders them philosophically unstable. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, further developed this line of thought through his distinction between natural justice and conventional justice. Natural justice, he argued, possesses universal validity everywhere, while conventional justice varies according to circumstance. By acknowledging that some aspects of justice are indeed conventional—established by agreement rather than inherent in nature—Aristotle implicitly recognized the problem of arbitrariness in social and moral arrangements. His subsequent attempt to identify natural standards of justice reflects an early philosophical effort to establish non-arbitrary foundations for ethical distinctions. The skeptical traditions of ancient philosophy, particularly Pyrrhonism, elevated concerns about arbitrariness to a central methodological principle. Sextus Empiricus and other skeptical thinkers argued that for every argument, an equally compelling counterargument could be constructed, leading them to suspend judgment about non-evident matters. This skeptical approach directly challenged the possibility of establishing non-arbitrary distinctions in areas ranging from ethics to epistemology, suggesting that human classifications might ultimately rest on convention rather than reason.

Moving into the medieval period, arbitrariness objections took on new dimensions as philosophers grappled with reconciling classical thought with religious doctrine. Scholastic debates frequently centered on the re-

relationship between divine will and natural law, raising profound questions about whether morality depended on God's arbitrary commands or on reasons that even God must respect. thinkers like Thomas Aquinas sought to avoid the specter of divine arbitrariness by arguing that God's will operates in accordance with His rational nature, making moral laws reflections of eternal reason rather than mere fiat. However, this position faced challenges from those who emphasized God's absolute sovereignty, suggesting that divine commands could not be constrained by external standards. This tension reached its most acute expression in the fourteenth century with thinkers like William of Ockham, whose voluntarist theology emphasized God's absolute freedom to command anything whatsoever, even actions we might intuitively consider immoral. Ockham's position, though not explicitly framed as addressing arbitrariness, highlighted the philosophical problems that arise when moral distinctions are grounded in unconstrained will rather than non-arbitrary principles. The early modern period saw arbitrariness objections resurface with renewed vigor in the context of debates about political authority and social order. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), advanced a radical conventionalism that recognized the fundamentally arbitrary nature of political distinctions in the state of nature. Hobbes argued that without a sovereign power to enforce agreements, concepts like justice and injustice have no existence—there being “no law, no injustice.” His social contract theory acknowledged that political authority and moral distinctions arise from human convention rather than natural necessity, though Hobbes believed that the rational self-interest underlying the contract provided a non-arbitrary justification for establishing political order. This sophisticated attempt to address arbitrariness through rational self-interest represented a significant development in philosophical responses to the problem. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, writing in the late seventeenth century, directly confronted arbitrariness through his principle of sufficient reason, which he formulated as the dictum that “nothing happens without a reason why it is so and not otherwise.” This principle, articulated in works like the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) and *Theodicy* (1710), represented perhaps the most systematic philosophical attempt to eliminate arbitrariness from metaphysics and epistemology. Leibniz argued that God, in creating the best of all possible worlds, had sufficient reasons for every aspect of creation, and that human understanding should aspire to discover these reasons rather than accepting apparent brute facts. His commitment to the principle of sufficient reason stemmed from a deep philosophical conviction that arbitrariness represented a fundamental flaw in any system of thought or reality.

The Enlightenment period witnessed arbitrariness objections becoming central to fundamental debates in moral philosophy, epistemology, and political theory. David Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and later *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), advanced what would become one of the most influential arbitrariness objections in the history of philosophy through his is-ought gap. Hume observed that in moral reasoning, authors often move from statements about what *is* the case to conclusions about what *ought* to be the case without explaining this transition. He famously noted that this “ought” expresses a new relation that seems to require explanation, as it is not contained in the premises. This observation constitutes a powerful arbitrariness objection to moral systems that attempt to derive normative conclusions purely from descriptive facts. If moral principles cannot be grounded in non-moral facts without an arbitrary leap, then the foundations of morality appear troublingly unjustified. Hume's sentimentalism offered one response to this problem, suggesting that moral distinctions arise from human feelings rather than

reason, though this solution itself faced challenges of potential arbitrariness in varying emotional responses. Immanuel Kant, deeply influenced by Hume's challenge, sought to establish non-arbitrary foundations for morality through his deontological ethics. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant argued that the moral law must be grounded in pure practical reason rather than contingent facts about human nature or society. His categorical imperative—act only according to maxims that you could will to become universal laws—represented an attempt to establish moral principles through a procedure that eliminates arbitrary elements by testing universalizability. Kant believed that by grounding morality in the very structure of rational agency, he could avoid the arbitrariness that plagued other ethical systems. However, his project faced its own arbitrariness objections, particularly regarding the apparent plurality of possible formulations of the categorical imperative and questions about how to resolve conflicts between duties. Utilitarian philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill approached the problem of arbitrariness from a different direction, seeking to minimize arbitrary distinctions by focusing on consequences. Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) famously declared that “each to count for one, and none for more than one,” attempting to establish a non-arbitrary principle for moral consideration based on the capacity to suffer and experience pleasure. This quantitative approach to ethics aimed to eliminate arbitrary distinctions between different individuals or groups by focusing solely on the aggregate consequences of actions. However, utilitarianism faced its own arbitrariness objections, particularly regarding how to measure and compare utilities across different individuals, and whether the exclusive focus on consequences might arbitrarily ignore other moral considerations.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw arbitrariness objections become increasingly sophisticated, as philosophers developed new methodological tools for exposing and addressing arbitrary foundations in philosophical systems. Friedrich Nietzsche, in works like *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), employed what he called the genealogical method to expose the arbitrary historical origins of moral concepts that were typically presented as universal and necessary. Nietzsche argued that concepts like “good” and “evil” had contingent historical roots in power relations rather than in objective moral truths. By revealing these origins, he sought to demonstrate the arbitrariness of prevailing moral systems and encourage a reevaluation of values. His perspectivism further challenged the possibility of non-arbitrary foundations for knowledge, suggesting that all truth claims are grounded in particular perspectives rather than objective reality. Nietzsche's radical approach to arbitrariness influenced later philosophical movements and represented a significant escalation in the challenge to traditional philosophical foundations. The logical positivist movement of the early twentieth century, associated with philosophers like Rudolf Carnap and A.J. Ayer, developed a systematic approach to eliminating arbitrary metaphysical distinctions through their verification principle. In works like Carnap's *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928) and Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), the positivists argued that meaningful statements must be either empirically verifiable or analytically true. This criterion was designed to eliminate what they saw as arbitrary metaphysical speculations that could not be empirically tested. While the verification principle itself faced significant challenges—including the problem that it could not meet its own criterion—it represented a bold attempt to establish non-arbitrary boundaries for meaningful discourse. Early analytic philosophers, including G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, focused on developing precise, non-arbitrary classifications through careful logical analysis. Moore's

Principia Ethica (1903) famously identified the “naturalistic fallacy”—the mistake of defining moral properties in terms of natural properties—which he saw as an arbitrary leap from descriptive to evaluative language. Russell’s work on logical atomism sought to establish a non-arbitrary foundation for knowledge by reducing complex propositions to simple atomic facts. These analytical approaches reflected a growing concern with eliminating arbitrary elements from philosophical reasoning through greater logical rigor and precision.

As we trace this historical development, we can see how arbitrariness objections evolved from relatively simple challenges to divine commands and social conventions into sophisticated methodological tools for examining philosophical foundations across multiple domains. Each era contributed distinctive approaches to identifying and addressing arbitrariness, from Aristotle’s distinction between natural and conventional justice to the logical positivists’ verification principle. These historical developments not only shaped contemporary understanding of arbitrariness objections but also revealed their enduring power as critical tools in philosophical inquiry. The increasing sophistication of these objections paralleled the growing complexity of philosophical systems they were designed to challenge, creating a dialectical relationship that continues to drive philosophical innovation. Having examined the historical origins and development of arbitrariness objections, we can now turn to their specific manifestations in moral philosophy, where they have played a particularly crucial role in challenging theories about moral boundaries, principles, and the scope of moral consideration. The historical evolution of arbitrariness objections reveals a fascinating intellectual journey, as philosophers across centuries grappled with the fundamental challenge of justifying distinctions, boundaries, and principles. This lineage of thought begins in the ancient world, where thinkers first systematically questioned the foundations of human classifications and norms, setting the stage for millennia of philosophical development. Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the works of Plato and Aristotle, contains some of the earliest explicit confrontations with problems of arbitrariness. In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, the famous dilemma posed by Socrates—whether the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, or whether it is pious because the gods love it—strikes at the heart of divine command theories of morality. If the gods arbitrarily determine what is pious, then morality becomes a matter of whim rather than principle. This challenge to theological voluntarism demonstrates how ancient thinkers recognized that grounding distinctions in mere will or convention, without further justification, renders them philosophically unstable. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, further developed this line of thought through his distinction between natural justice and conventional justice. Natural justice, he argued, possesses universal validity everywhere, while conventional justice varies according to circumstance. By acknowledging that some aspects of justice are indeed conventional—established by agreement rather than inherent in nature—Aristotle implicitly recognized the problem of arbitrariness in social and moral arrangements. His subsequent attempt to identify natural standards of justice reflects an early philosophical effort to establish non-arbitrary foundations for ethical distinctions. The skeptical traditions of ancient philosophy, particularly Pyrrhonism, elevated concerns about arbitrariness to a central methodological principle. Sextus Empiricus and other skeptical thinkers argued that for every argument, an equally compelling counterargument could be constructed, leading them to suspend judgment about non-evident matters. This skeptical approach directly challenged the possibility of establishing non-arbitrary distinctions in areas ranging from ethics to epistemology, suggesting that human classifications might ultimately rest on convention rather than reason.

Moving into the medieval period, arbitrariness objections took on new dimensions as philosophers grappled with reconciling classical thought with religious doctrine. Scholastic debates frequently centered on the relationship between divine will and natural law, raising profound questions about whether morality depended on God's arbitrary commands or on reasons that even God must respect. thinkers like Thomas Aquinas sought to avoid the specter of divine arbitrariness by arguing that God's will operates in accordance with His rational nature, making moral laws reflections of eternal reason rather than mere fiat. However, this position faced challenges from those who emphasized God's absolute sovereignty, suggesting that divine commands could not be constrained by external standards. This tension reached its most acute expression in the fourteenth century with thinkers like William of Ockham, whose voluntarist theology emphasized God's absolute freedom to command anything whatsoever, even actions we might intuitively consider immoral. Ockham's position, though not explicitly framed as addressing arbitrariness, highlighted the philosophical problems that arise when moral distinctions are grounded in unconstrained will rather than non-arbitrary principles. The early modern period saw arbitrariness objections resurface with renewed vigor in the context of debates about political authority and social order. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), advanced a radical conventionalism that recognized the fundamentally arbitrary nature of political distinctions in the state of nature. Hobbes argued that without a sovereign power to enforce agreements, concepts like justice and injustice have no existence—there being “no law, no injustice.” His social contract theory acknowledged that political authority and moral distinctions arise from human convention rather than natural necessity, though Hobbes believed that the rational self-interest underlying the contract provided a non-arbitrary justification for establishing political order. This sophisticated attempt to address arbitrariness through rational self-interest represented a significant development in philosophical responses to the problem. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, writing in the late seventeenth century, directly confronted arbitrariness through his principle of sufficient reason, which he formulated as the dictum that “nothing happens without a reason why it is so and not otherwise.” This principle, articulated in works like the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) and *Theodicy* (1710), represented perhaps the most systematic philosophical attempt to eliminate arbitrariness from metaphysics and epistemology. Leibniz argued that God, in creating the best of all possible worlds, had sufficient reasons for every aspect of creation, and that human understanding should aspire to discover these reasons rather than accepting apparent brute facts. His commitment to the principle of sufficient reason stemmed from a deep philosophical conviction that arbitrariness represented a fundamental flaw in any system of thought or reality.

The Enlightenment period witnessed arbitrariness objections becoming central to fundamental debates in moral philosophy, epistemology, and political theory. David Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and later *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), advanced what would become one of the most influential arbitrariness objections in the history of philosophy through his is-ought gap. Hume observed that in moral reasoning, authors often move from statements about what *is* the case to conclusions about what *ought* to be the case without explaining this transition. He famously noted that this “ought” expresses a new relation that seems to require explanation, as it is not contained in the premises. This observation constitutes a powerful arbitrariness objection to moral systems that attempt to derive normative conclusions purely from descriptive facts. If moral principles cannot be grounded in non-moral facts without

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1.3 The Arbitrariness Objection in Moral Philosophy

The transition from historical developments to contemporary applications of arbitrariness objections finds its most profound expression in moral philosophy, where questions about justification, boundaries, and principles strike at the heart of how we understand right and wrong. As we saw in the previous section, Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Kant grappled with the foundations of morality, each attempting to establish non-arbitrary bases for ethical judgments. Yet these historical debates merely set the stage for the sophisticated arbitrariness objections that would come to dominate moral philosophy in the modern era. The moral domain presents a particularly rich terrain for arbitrariness objections because moral theories must draw numerous distinctions—between right and wrong, permissible and impermissible, persons and non-persons, obligations and mere options—each of which demands justification. When such distinctions appear to lack sufficient reason, they become vulnerable to the charge of arbitrariness, potentially undermining the entire moral framework. This section examines how arbitrariness objections function across major moral theories, revealing both the power of these objections and the ingenuity of philosophical responses to them.

The problem of moral boundaries and thresholds represents one of the most fertile grounds for arbitrariness objections in ethics. Moral phenomena often exist on continuums rather than in discrete categories, forcing us to draw lines where no natural discontinuities exist. Consider the debate over personhood and its moral implications—a classic example of the sorites paradox in moral contexts. When does a developing human organism acquire the moral status of a person? If we point to conception as the decisive moment, we must answer why that exact moment rather than a nanosecond before or after. If we instead identify viability outside the womb, birth, or the development of certain cognitive capacities, each of these proposed thresholds faces similar challenges. The arbitrariness objection here is not merely theoretical but has profound practical implications for abortion law, stem cell research, and end-of-life decisions. Philosophers like Mary Anne Warren have attempted to address this by proposing clusters of criteria for personhood (consciousness, reasoning, self-motivated activity, capacity to communicate, and self-awareness), but even this approach faces questions about why these particular criteria and why this specific combination. The problem becomes even more acute in end-of-life ethics, where conditions like dementia create a gradual decline in cognitive capacities, forcing us to ask at what point a person ceases to be the moral entity they once were. These cases illustrate how the arbitrariness objection can paralyze moral decision-making when clear boundaries are unavailable.

Moral responsibility presents another domain where boundary problems generate arbitrariness objections. Consider the continuum from intentional action through recklessness and negligence to mere accident. At what point does behavior become sufficiently blameworthy to warrant moral condemnation? If we blame someone for driving recklessly and causing harm, must we not also blame someone who was merely negligent? If negligence is blameworthy, what about carelessness that falls just short of negligence? The challenge

of drawing non-arbitrary lines in such cases has led some philosophers to argue that moral responsibility itself may be an all-or-nothing concept that cannot be applied to degrees, while others have developed scalar accounts of responsibility that attempt to avoid arbitrary thresholds. The influence of luck on moral outcomes further complicates these boundaries, as famously explored by Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams. If two drivers behave identically but one causes harm due to a child unexpectedly running into the street, why does the unlucky driver deserve greater blame? The arbitrariness objection here suggests that moral distinctions based on luck rather than choice lack justification, challenging our intuitive practices of moral assessment.

Vague moral concepts provide yet another arena for arbitrariness objections. Concepts like “human dignity,” “autonomy,” and “integrity” play central roles in many moral theories, yet their boundaries remain notoriously fuzzy. When does medical treatment violate human dignity? What level of cognitive impairment undermines autonomy? How do we distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable constraints on integrity? The vagueness of these concepts allows for arbitrary application in particular cases, undermining their justificatory power in moral reasoning. Philosophers have responded in various ways—some by attempting to provide precise definitions, others by embracing the vagueness as inevitable but manageable through contextual judgment, and still others by abandoning such concepts altogether in favor of more determinate alternatives. Each approach faces its own arbitrariness challenges, revealing the persistent difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for moral discourse.

Deontological moral theories, with their emphasis on rules, duties, and rights, face distinctive arbitrariness objections that challenge their very structure. Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt to establish non-arbitrary moral principles through pure reason, yet even Kant’s system has been accused of containing arbitrary elements. Consider the formulation of the categorical imperative that commands us to act only on maxims that we could will to be universal laws. Kant provides examples of lying promises, suicide, and neglecting one’s talents as maxims that fail this test, but philosophers have questioned why these particular maxims should be considered the proper objects of moral evaluation. Why focus on the maxim of an action rather than its consequences, the agent’s character, or the action’s relationship to social conventions? Kant’s answer—that maxims capture the principle of volition that makes an action morally evaluable—may seem circular to critics, who argue that the selection of maxims as the relevant moral category itself appears arbitrary. The multiplicity of formulations of the categorical imperative (universal law, humanity as an end, kingdom of ends, autonomy) raises further questions about their equivalence and why these particular formulations should capture the essence of morality.

The problem of moral exceptions and conflicting duties presents another fertile ground for arbitrariness objections within deontological frameworks. Kant’s strict prohibition on lying, even to save a life, has been widely criticized as morally rigid, but attempts to introduce exceptions face their own arbitrariness challenges. If we allow lying to prevent serious harm, must we not also allow it to prevent moderate harm? Where do we draw the line, and what non-arbitrary principle can justify this boundary? W.D. Ross’s theory of *prima facie* duties attempted to address this problem by recognizing multiple basic duties (fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence) that may conflict in particular situations, requiring judgment about which takes precedence. Yet Ross provides no clear method for re-

solving these conflicts beyond “the mature moral agent’s intuitive judgment,” which critics argue introduces an unacceptable element of arbitrariness. Why these particular duties rather than others? Why not include duties to the environment or to future generations? And when duties conflict, what justifies prioritizing one over another? Ross’s appeal to intuition may seem like an admission that the boundaries between duties cannot be drawn non-arbitrarily, undermining the deontological aspiration for objective moral principles.

The scope and boundaries of moral obligations within deontological theories also generate arbitrariness objections. Consider the question of special obligations—do we have stronger duties to family, friends, and compatriots than to strangers? If so, what non-arbitrary principle justifies this partiality? Kantian universalism suggests that moral obligations should apply equally to all rational beings, yet this seems to conflict with common moral intuitions about special relationships. Attempts to ground special obligations in voluntary commitments (promises, contracts) or natural relationships (parent-child) face questions about why these particular relationships generate obligations while others do not. The problem becomes even more complex when we consider obligations to future generations or to distant strangers. What non-arbitrary principle can explain why our obligations extend to some beings but not others, or to some times but not others? These challenges reveal how deontological theories, despite their emphasis on principle, struggle to draw non-arbitrary boundaries around the scope of moral concern.

Consequentialist moral theories, particularly utilitarianism, face their own distinctive arbitrariness objections that challenge their approach to moral evaluation. Utilitarianism, in its classical form as articulated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness or pleasure, wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness. This seemingly simple principle generates complex questions about whose happiness matters and how we measure and compare happiness across individuals. The utilitarian commitment to impartiality—“each to count for one, and none for more than one”—aims to avoid arbitrary distinctions between different individuals, but this commitment itself faces challenges. Why should we be impartial in our moral assessment? What non-arbitrary principle justifies giving equal weight to all affected parties, regardless of their relationship to us or their particular characteristics? Critics like Bernard Williams have argued that this impartial demand conflicts with deeply held personal commitments, suggesting that utilitarianism requires an alienating standpoint that ignores the morally relevant differences between our own projects and those of strangers.

The problem of aggregation and distribution of utility within consequentialist frameworks generates further arbitrariness objections. Utilitarianism requires summing happiness across individuals, but this raises questions about interpersonal comparisons of utility. How can we non-arbitrarily compare the intensity of pleasure or pain experienced by different people? What principle justifies adding my mild headache to your severe pain and concluding that the sum of suffering justifies imposing a burden on a third party? These difficulties become even more acute in population ethics, where we must compare the total utility of populations with different numbers and levels of well-being. Derek Parfit’s “repugnant conclusion”—that a world with enormous population at a barely positive level of well-being might be judged better than a smaller population with very high well-being—highlights how utilitarian aggregation can lead to counterintuitive results. Attempts to avoid this conclusion by modifying the utilitarian calculus face arbitrariness objections about why particular modifications (average utility, critical levels, etc.) should be preferred. The challenge

of drawing non-arbitrary boundaries around which consequences matter and how they should be aggregated remains one of the most persistent problems for consequentialist theories.

Questions about the boundaries of moral communities present another area where consequentialist frameworks face arbitrariness objections. Classical utilitarianism extends moral consideration to all beings capable of suffering, but this extension itself raises questions about where to draw the line. What non-arbitrary principle justifies including sentient animals but excluding plants or inanimate objects? Peter Singer's argument for expanding our moral circle to include all sentient beings faces challenges from those who question why sentience should be the relevant criterion rather than, say, rationality, autonomy, or species membership. The problem becomes even more complex when we consider future generations or possible beings. Do we have obligations to people who do not yet exist? If so, how do we compare their interests to those of existing people? The non-identity problem, explored by Parfit, reveals how choices that affect who comes into existence can make it difficult to say that those choices harm or benefit particular individuals, since different choices result in different people existing. These cases challenge the consequentialist to provide non-arbitrary principles for determining whose interests count in moral evaluation and how they should be weighed against each other.

Perhaps the most fundamental arbitrariness objection in moral philosophy concerns the determination of moral status itself—what entities deserve moral consideration and why. This question lies at the heart of debates about animal rights, environmental ethics, abortion, and artificial intelligence, yet it resists non-arbitrary resolution. The traditional view that only human beings possess full moral status has been challenged by philosophers like Singer and Tom Regan, who argue that species membership alone cannot justify moral distinctions. If being human is morally relevant, they ask, what non-arbitrary principle explains this relevance? The capacity for rationality, sentience, or autonomy might be offered as alternatives, but each of these criteria faces boundary problems similar to those encountered in the personhood debate. If rationality grounds moral status, what about humans with severe cognitive impairments or highly intelligent animals? If sentience is the criterion, how do we determine which beings are sentient, and what about beings with marginal sentience?

Speciesism—the assumption of human superiority based solely on species membership—has been compared to racism and sexism by critics who see it as an arbitrary form of discrimination. Yet defenders of human exceptionalism argue that there are morally relevant differences between humans and other animals that justify differential treatment. The challenge for both sides is to identify non-arbitrary principles that can explain why some entities count morally while others do not. This problem extends beyond animals to include ecosystems, species, and even artificial entities. Does a river have moral standing? What about a corporation, a robot, or a work of art? The arbitrariness objection here suggests that without clear, principled distinctions, our allocations of moral status may reflect mere prejudice or convention rather than justified moral judgment.

The problem of justifying hierarchies of moral value compounds these difficulties. Even if we agree that multiple entities deserve moral consideration, we may disagree about how much consideration each deserves. Do humans have greater moral status than animals? If so, by how much? Do future generations matter

as much as present ones? What about the difference between causing harm and failing to prevent harm? These questions require us to make comparative moral judgments that appear vulnerable to arbitrariness objections. Attempts to ground these hierarchies in natural properties (rationality, sentience, autonomy) face questions about why these particular properties should have the moral weight assigned to them, and why one property should take precedence over another when they conflict. The challenge becomes even more complex when we consider that different moral theories may prioritize different properties, leading to conflicting assessments of moral status that themselves appear difficult to justify non-arbitrarily.

The arbitrariness objections in moral philosophy reveal a profound tension at the heart of ethical theory. On one hand, we demand that moral distinctions be grounded in non-arbitrary principles that can withstand rational scrutiny. On the other hand, the phenomena we seek to evaluate—actions, agents, consequences, and values—often resist neat categorization, existing instead on continuums with blurred boundaries and overlapping criteria. This tension has led some philosophers to embrace a form of moral particularism, rejecting general moral principles in favor of contextual judgment, while others have doubled down on the quest for non-arbitrary foundations through increasingly sophisticated theoretical developments. The persistence of arbitrariness objections across all major moral theories suggests that they point to something fundamental about the nature of moral judgment itself—perhaps that our moral concepts are inherently vague, that moral reality lacks the precision we desire, or that the demand for non-arbitrary justification can never be fully satisfied in the moral domain.

As we have seen, arbitrariness objections function as powerful critical tools in moral philosophy, challenging theories to justify their distinctions, boundaries, and principles. These objections have shaped the development of ethical thought, driving innovations in deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethical frameworks. Yet they also reveal the limits of moral theory, highlighting the difficulty of establishing fully non-arbitrary foundations for moral judgment. The ongoing dialogue between arbitrariness objections and philosophical responses demonstrates the dynamic nature of ethical inquiry, where challenges drive theoretical refinement and new theories generate new objections. This dialectical process continues to enrich our understanding of morality, even as it reminds us of the provisional nature of all moral systems.

The challenges of arbitrariness in moral philosophy naturally extend to the political realm, where questions about justice, rights, and political authority demand similar justifications. As we turn to examine the arbitrariness objection in political philosophy, we will discover how these moral considerations translate into questions about the legitimacy of social arrangements, the distribution of resources, and the boundaries of political communities. The problems of drawing lines and justifying distinctions that we have encountered in ethics take on new dimensions when applied to the collective structures of political life, revealing both continuities and discontinuities between moral and political arbitrariness objections.

1.4 The Arbitrariness Objection in Political Philosophy

The transition from moral to political philosophy represents a natural extension of arbitrariness objections, as the collective structures of political life raise similar questions about justification, boundaries, and principles,

but with additional complexity due to their public and coercive nature. While moral philosophy concerns individual judgments and actions, political philosophy addresses the institutions and arrangements that govern collective life—arrangements that claim authority over diverse populations and enforce compliance through legitimate power. The arbitrariness objection in political philosophy thus takes on added significance, as it challenges not merely theoretical distinctions but the very foundations of political order and the distributions of benefits and burdens that shape human lives. In this domain, the question “Why here rather than there?” becomes “Why this political arrangement rather than another?” and “Why these boundaries of inclusion and exclusion rather than others?”—questions with profound implications for justice, legitimacy, and human flourishing.

The legitimacy of political authority presents the most fundamental arena for arbitrariness objections in political thought. Every political system draws boundaries—between citizens and non-citizens, between rulers and ruled, between legitimate and illegitimate exercise of power—yet these boundaries often appear contingent rather than necessary, reflecting historical accidents rather than principled justification. This problem has haunted political philosophy since its inception, challenging thinkers to explain why individuals should obey political authority and how that authority can be justified without appealing to mere convention or power. The social contract tradition, from Hobbes to Rawls, represents one major attempt to address this challenge by grounding political legitimacy in the hypothetical consent of rational individuals. Yet even this sophisticated approach faces arbitrariness objections. Consider the question of political boundaries themselves: why do I owe allegiance to the state in which I happened to be born rather than to some other political community? The “birthday lottery” of citizenship appears morally arbitrary, yet it determines fundamental rights, obligations, and life chances. This challenge, famously articulated by David Hume in his critique of tacit consent theories, suggests that most people never explicitly consent to their political arrangements and would face unreasonable costs if they attempted to exit them. If political obligation depends on consent, and consent is absent or coerced, then the authority of the state appears unjustified—an arbitrary imposition rather than a legitimate arrangement.

Robert Nozick, in his influential work “Anarchy, State, and Utopia,” offered a different approach to political legitimacy through his entitlement theory and minimal state conception. Nozick argued that political authority could be justified only if it arose through voluntary transactions without violating individual rights, leading him to advocate for a minimal “night-watchman” state limited to protection against force, theft, and fraud. Yet even this carefully circumscribed conception of state power faces arbitrariness objections. Why should protection rights be prioritized over other rights or needs? What non-arbitrary principle justifies enforcing these particular protections through coercive taxation while prohibiting redistribution for other purposes? Nozick’s response—that any more extensive state would necessarily violate individual rights—begs the question of why these particular rights should be inviolable while others are not recognized. The boundaries of Nozick’s minimal state themselves appear difficult to justify non-arbitrarily, as critics like G.A. Cohen have pointed out. The problem becomes even more acute when we consider how actual political boundaries are drawn. The arbitrary nature of many international borders—determined by historical accidents, wars, or colonial imposition rather than principled division—challenges the legitimacy of state authority itself. If the very boundaries that define political communities lack justification, how can the au-

thority exercised within those boundaries be legitimate? This question becomes particularly pressing in cases of secession, annexation, or decolonization, where the arbitrariness of existing borders is explicitly contested.

The problem of arbitrary historical accidents in political arrangements extends beyond borders to include the very establishment of political institutions. Most contemporary political systems evolved through contingent historical processes involving conquest, revolution, or compromise rather than deliberate rational design. The United States Constitution, for instance, emerged from a series of specific historical circumstances and compromises—including the notorious Three-Fifths Compromise regarding enslaved persons—that reflected the power dynamics of the time rather than abstract principles of justice. While defenders might argue that subsequent amendments and interpretations have addressed these historical contingencies, critics contend that the fundamental structure remains shaped by arbitrary historical factors rather than principled justification. This challenge appears even more acute in societies with deeply unjust histories, such as those built on slavery, colonialism, or ethnic cleansing. If current political arrangements trace their legitimacy to institutions established through fundamentally unjust processes, how can they claim non-arbitrary justification today? This question lies at the heart of debates about transitional justice, reparations, and constitutional reform, revealing how historical arbitrariness continues to shadow contemporary political legitimacy.

Questions of justice and distribution represent a second major domain where arbitrariness objections operate with particular force in political philosophy. The distribution of resources, opportunities, and power in any society raises fundamental questions about fairness, yet the principles guiding this distribution often appear vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness. John Rawls, in his seminal work “A Theory of Justice,” developed one of the most sophisticated responses to this problem through his concept of the original position and the veil of ignorance. Rawls argued that principles of justice would be chosen fairly if they were selected by rational individuals behind a “veil of ignorance” that concealed their particular social position, natural talents, and conception of the good. This thought experiment aimed to eliminate arbitrary influences on the choice of principles, ensuring that no one would be able to tailor principles to their own advantage. The principles Rawls believed would emerge from this procedure—equal basic liberties and the difference principle (which permits inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged)—were intended to address the arbitrariness of natural and social contingencies. Rawls famously argued that natural talents and their distribution are “arbitrary from a moral point of view”—no one deserves their genetic endowment or the social circumstances into which they are born. Since these arbitrary factors heavily influence life outcomes, justice requires mitigating their effects through institutional arrangements.

Rawls’s approach represented a powerful attempt to address arbitrariness in distributive justice, yet it faced significant objections on precisely these grounds. Robert Nozick, in “Anarchy, State, and Utopia,” challenged Rawls’s characterization of natural talents as arbitrary, arguing that individuals are entitled to the fruits of their talents even if they don’t deserve those talents themselves. Nozick proposed an alternative “entitlement theory” of justice, focusing on historical processes of acquisition and transfer rather than patterned distributions. According to Nozick, a distribution is just if everyone is entitled to their holdings through legitimate acquisition or voluntary transfer, regardless of the resulting pattern. This approach aimed to avoid the arbitrariness of redistributive schemes by respecting individual rights and voluntary transac-

tions. Yet Nozick's theory faces its own arbitrariness objections. Why should historical entitlements take priority over current needs or equal opportunity? What non-arbitrary principle justifies the initial acquisition of property that forms the basis for all subsequent entitlements? The "proviso" that Nozick added to his acquisition principle—that acquisition must not make others worse off than they would have been in a state of nature—raises further questions about how to determine baseline conditions and what counts as making someone worse off. These difficulties suggest that both patterned and historical principles of distribution face challenges from arbitrariness objections, though in different ways.

The debate between Rawls and Nozick illuminates a deeper tension in theories of distributive justice regarding how to respond to natural and social arbitrariness. Rawlsians argue that justice requires correcting for the arbitrary influence of factors beyond individual control, while libertarians contend that attempts to correct for these factors necessarily violate individual rights. This tension manifests in contemporary debates about luck egalitarianism—the view that inequalities are justified only if they arise from voluntary choices rather than brute luck. Luck egalitarians like Ronald Dworkin and G.A. Cohen have developed sophisticated accounts of how to distinguish between choice and luck in distributive contexts, yet these accounts face their own arbitrariness objections. How do we draw the line between voluntary choices and circumstances beyond individual control? What about the influence of social context on what appears to be voluntary choice? The problem becomes particularly acute in cases of "option luck" versus "brute luck"—is a gambling loss a result of choice or bad luck? Is a career choice influenced by social expectations truly voluntary? These boundary problems suggest that even attempts to correct for arbitrariness may introduce new forms of arbitrariness in their classification of cases.

The moral significance of natural and social arbitrariness extends beyond individual distribution to questions about group-based disadvantage and historical injustice. If race, gender, and class are socially constructed categories with no inherent moral significance, yet they systematically influence life chances, how should principles of justice respond to this arbitrariness? Affirmative action policies, for instance, aim to correct for historical and ongoing discrimination, yet they face objections that they arbitrarily disadvantage individuals based on group membership rather than individual merit. This objection raises questions about whether group-based remedies for arbitrary disadvantage are themselves arbitrary, and whether individual or group characteristics should be the primary focus of distributive justice. Similar questions arise in debates about reparations for historical injustices like slavery or colonialism. If current generations did not perpetrate these injustices and may not have benefited directly from them, what non-arbitrary principle justifies holding them responsible for rectification? Conversely, if historical injustices continue to shape current distributions of advantage and disadvantage, what non-arbitrary principle justifies ignoring them in contemporary assessments of justice? These questions reveal the complex interplay between historical arbitrariness and contemporary justice, challenging political philosophers to develop principles that can address past wrongs without creating new forms of arbitrariness.

Rights and their boundaries constitute a third domain where arbitrariness objections play a crucial role in political philosophy. Political systems typically recognize certain rights as fundamental—protecting individuals against interference and guaranteeing important benefits—yet the determination of which rights exist, their scope, and their relative priority appears vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness. The problem begins with

the very identification of rights. What non-arbitrary principle explains why some interests are protected as rights while others are not? Why, for instance, do most political systems recognize rights to life, liberty, and property but not to meaningful work, adequate healthcare, or vacation time? The distinction between negative rights (protections against interference) and positive rights (entitlements to goods or services) exemplifies this problem. Negative rights like freedom of speech or protection against arbitrary arrest are widely recognized in liberal democracies, while positive rights like education or healthcare remain more controversial. Yet the distinction between negative and positive rights itself appears somewhat arbitrary, as both require resources for their realization. Protecting negative rights typically requires police, courts, and other institutions funded through taxation, just as positive rights require public provision of services. The question then becomes what non-arbitrary principle justifies prioritizing some rights over others, or recognizing some as fundamental while rejecting others.

The scope and boundaries of recognized rights present further challenges from arbitrariness objections. Even for widely accepted rights like freedom of speech, questions arise about where to draw the line between protected and unprotected expression. Does freedom of speech include hate speech, false advertising, or incitement to violence? Different societies draw these boundaries differently, yet the differences often reflect cultural values or power dynamics rather than principled justification. Similarly, the right to privacy raises questions about what constitutes a reasonable expectation of privacy in different contexts—does it include protection against surveillance, data collection, or publication of personal information? The boundaries of property rights present analogous problems—what non-arbitrary principle explains why some resources can be privately owned while others (like air or oceans) cannot? Intellectual property rights face even greater arbitrariness objections, as they involve creating artificial scarcity of non-rivalrous goods through legal fiat. The duration of patents and copyrights, for instance, varies across jurisdictions and historical periods, yet these variations appear to reflect political compromises rather than principled distinctions. If intellectual property rights are justified by their incentive effects on innovation, what non-arbitrary principle determines the optimal duration or scope of these rights?

Conflicts between rights highlight another dimension of arbitrariness objections in political philosophy. When rights conflict—as they frequently do—political systems must determine which takes precedence, yet these prioritization decisions often appear arbitrary. Consider the conflict between freedom of speech and the right to privacy, or between religious freedom and anti-discrimination protections. Different societies resolve these conflicts differently, yet the differences rarely reflect clear principled distinctions. The U.S. Supreme Court’s approach to free speech, for instance, has created various categories of unprotected or less-protected expression (obscenity, fighting words, commercial speech) that critics argue lack coherent justification. Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights has developed a “margin of appreciation” doctrine that allows member states considerable discretion in balancing rights, but this approach raises questions about whether such balancing can be done non-arbitrarily. The problem becomes even more complex when we consider that rights themselves may be conceived hierarchically, with some rights considered more fundamental than others. What non-arbitrary principle explains why rights to life or bodily integrity should take precedence over property rights, or why political rights might be prioritized over economic rights? These questions reveal the difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary hierarchies of rights, particularly in diverse so-

cieties with conflicting values and conceptions of the good.

Rights-based theories of political philosophy face additional arbitrariness objections regarding their foundations. Theorists like Ronald Dworkin have argued that rights are fundamental to political morality, providing essential protections for individual dignity and equality. Yet critics question what non-arbitrary principle justifies these particular rights rather than others, or why rights should be considered fundamental at all. Utilitarian critics, for instance, argue that rights are merely instrumental to maximizing welfare, with no inherent moral status. From this perspective, the boundaries and scope of rights should be determined by their consequences rather than abstract principles—a view that rights theorists find arbitrary and potentially dangerous. Conversely, deontological approaches to rights may justify them through appeals to human dignity or autonomy, yet these concepts themselves face arbitrariness objections regarding their definition and application. The challenge of providing non-arbitrary foundations for rights has led some philosophers to embrace political constructivism, which attempts to ground rights in public reason and overlapping consensus rather than metaphysical truths.

Political constructivism represents a sophisticated attempt to address arbitrariness objections by grounding political principles in the practical reasoning of free and equal citizens rather than controversial metaphysical or moral claims. Rawls, in his later work “Political Liberalism,” developed this approach in response to criticisms that “A Theory of Justice” relied on a controversial comprehensive doctrine incompatible with reasonable pluralism. Political constructivism aims to establish freestanding political principles that can be endorsed by individuals with diverse comprehensive views through overlapping consensus. The original position is reconceived not as a metaphysical truth about justice but as a device of representation that helps us work out the most appropriate principles for a democratic society. By focusing on public reason—the reason of free and equal citizens—constructivism attempts to avoid the arbitrariness of appealing to contested moral or metaphysical foundations. Instead, political principles are justified by their ability to gain the reasoned acceptance of citizens who recognize each other as free and equal, despite their deeper disagreements.

The role of overlapping consensus in constructivist approaches addresses the problem of arbitrary foundations by seeking principles that can be supported from within different comprehensive doctrines. Rather than requiring citizens to accept a single controversial foundation for political principles, constructivism invites them to find convergent justifications based on their own diverse perspectives. This approach aims to avoid the arbitrariness of imposing a particular comprehensive view on citizens who reasonably reject it, while still establishing stable and legitimate political arrangements. For instance, Rawls’s two principles of justice might be supported by a religious believer as reflecting divine command, by a Kantian as expressing respect for autonomy, and by a utilitarian as approximating optimal welfare outcomes. Despite these different justifications, the principles themselves gain legitimacy through their ability to command overlapping consensus. This approach represents a nuanced response to arbitrariness objections, acknowledging the difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations while still seeking to justify political principles through public reasoning.

Despite its sophistication, political constructivism faces significant challenges from arbitrariness objections. The very idea of public reason raises questions about what counts as reasonable and what forms of argument

should be excluded from public political discourse. Rawls

1.5 The Arbitrariness Objection in Epistemology

The challenges facing political constructivism regarding public reason and the boundaries of reasonable discourse naturally lead us to parallel concerns in epistemology, where the arbitrariness objection operates at a fundamental level. Just as political philosophers grapple with justifying principles without appealing to controversial metaphysical foundations, epistemologists confront the problem of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for knowledge and rational belief. The theory of knowledge, with its focus on justification, evidence, and rational standards, provides fertile ground for arbitrariness objections that strike at the heart of how we distinguish knowledge from mere opinion, justified belief from arbitrary conviction. In epistemology, the question “Why here rather than there?” transforms into inquiries like “Why this basic belief rather than that?” or “Why these standards of rationality rather than others?”—questions that reveal the precariousness of our attempts to ground knowledge in non-arbitrary principles.

Foundationalist theories of knowledge represent one of the most explicit attempts to address the problem of arbitrariness in epistemology by proposing that knowledge rests upon basic beliefs that are justified independently of other beliefs. René Descartes, in his “Meditations on First Philosophy,” famously sought indubitable foundations for knowledge through radical doubt, arriving at the cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) as a basic belief immune to skeptical challenge. From this foundation, Descartes attempted to build a system of knowledge by deriving further beliefs about the external world, God, and mathematics. However, the arbitrariness objection quickly surfaces in the transition from the cogito to these other beliefs. What non-arbitrary principle justifies Descartes’s move from his own existence as a thinking thing to the existence of a non-deceiving God? And how does the existence of such a God guarantee the reliability of clear and distinct ideas about the external world? Critics have argued that Descartes’s foundational project contains arbitrary elements, particularly in his appeal to God as a guarantor of truth—a move that appears to rely on the very clear and distinct ideas it is supposed to validate, creating a circular justification that undermines the foundationalist aspiration for non-arbitrary starting points.

The problem of the given, as articulated by Wilfrid Sellars in his seminal essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” presents a more systematic arbitrariness objection to foundationalist theories that rely on sense experience as a source of basic beliefs. Sellars challenged the idea that there could be non-conceptual “given” experiences that provide justification for beliefs without themselves requiring justification. The core of his critique is that any purportedly given experience must already be conceptualized to play a justificatory role, and this conceptualization introduces the possibility of error and the need for further justification. For instance, if I claim that my experience of a red cube provides basic justification for believing there is a red cube before me, Sellars would argue that this experience must already be categorized under the concept “red cube” to justify that belief, and this categorization itself depends on linguistic and conceptual training that might be mistaken. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that foundationalists cannot identify a set of basic beliefs that are both truly foundational (justified without relying on other beliefs) and capable of supporting the edifice of knowledge without arbitrary assumptions about the reliability of sense experience.

or the correctness of conceptual classifications.

C.I. Lewis, in his work “Mind and the World Order,” attempted to address this challenge by developing a sophisticated foundationalism that acknowledged the role of conceptual interpretation in experience while still maintaining that sense experience provides a constraint on belief. Lewis distinguished between the “given” in experience and the conceptual interpretation through which we understand it, arguing that while concepts are chosen by us, the given is not. However, this approach faces its own arbitrariness objections regarding how we determine which conceptual interpretations are adequate to the given. If multiple conceptual schemes can account for the same experiential data, what non-arbitrary principle justifies selecting one over others? Lewis’s pragmatic criterion—choosing concepts that serve our interests—risks making the foundation of knowledge relative to human purposes rather than grounded in non-arbitrary features of reality. The difficulty of identifying non-arbitrary basic beliefs has led many epistemologists to abandon foundationalism altogether, seeking alternative approaches to justification that might avoid the problem of arbitrary starting points.

Coherentist theories of justification represent a major alternative to foundationalism, addressing the arbitrariness objection by rejecting the idea that knowledge requires basic beliefs justified independently of other beliefs. Instead, coherentists argue that justification is holistic, with beliefs being justified by their coherence with other beliefs in a system. W.V.O. Quine, in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” famously advocated this view with his metaphor of the web of belief, where statements at the periphery (concerning experience) are revisable in light of recalcitrant experience, but so are statements closer to the center (logic and mathematics), though with greater resistance. This holistic approach aims to avoid the arbitrariness of selecting basic beliefs by treating justification as a matter of mutual support among beliefs within an entire system. However, coherentism faces its own distinctive arbitrariness objections, most notably the challenge of alternative coherent systems. If justification depends solely on internal coherence, what non-arbitrary principle justifies preferring one coherent system over another? This problem becomes acute when we consider that multiple mutually incompatible systems might be equally coherent internally.

The isolation objection highlights this concern by pointing out that a coherent system of beliefs might be entirely disconnected from reality, yet still perfectly coherent. Consider a paranoid delusional system that incorporates all apparent contradictions into an elaborate conspiracy theory—such a system might be internally coherent yet fundamentally disconnected from the actual world. Coherentists must explain why we should prefer systems that are connected to experience, but this appeal to experience seems to reintroduce a foundational element that coherentism was designed to avoid. Quine’s naturalized epistemology attempts to address this by treating science as our best guide to reality, but this approach faces questions about why scientific methods should be privileged over other ways of forming coherent beliefs. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that without some external constraint, coherentism cannot justify the selection of one system over another, making knowledge relative to whatever coherent system one happens to accept.

Circular reasoning presents another dimension of the arbitrariness objection to coherentism. While coherentists embrace a form of circularity (beliefs are justified by their coherence with other beliefs, which are in turn justified by their coherence with the original beliefs), critics argue that this circularity is vicious rather than

virtuous. The problem is particularly evident in attempts to justify fundamental standards of reasoning, such as the laws of logic, within a coherentist framework. If the justification for modus ponens (if P then Q , P , therefore Q) is its coherence with other beliefs, but those other beliefs themselves depend on modus ponens, the justification appears circular and arbitrary. Ernest Sosa has responded by distinguishing between “epistemic circularity” (using a faculty to justify itself) and “conceptual circularity” (using a concept to define itself), arguing that epistemic circularity need not be vicious if the faculty is reliable. However, this response requires some way of establishing reliability without circularity, which brings us back to foundationalist concerns. The challenge for coherentism is to explain how circular justification can avoid arbitrariness without appealing to external standards that would undermine its holistic approach.

Epistemic boundaries and vagueness constitute a third domain where arbitrariness objections operate powerfully in epistemology. Many epistemic concepts—knowledge, justification, evidence, rationality—appear to have vague boundaries, raising questions about where to draw lines between knowing and not knowing, justified and unjustified belief, sufficient and insufficient evidence. The sorites paradox, which we encountered in moral and political contexts, applies equally well to epistemic concepts. Consider the question of when a collection of justified beliefs constitutes knowledge. If we have a series of increasingly justified beliefs, at what point does justification cross the threshold to become knowledge? There seems to be no precise point at which this transformation occurs, suggesting that the boundary between knowledge and justified belief is arbitrary. This problem becomes more concrete in cases of “knowledge from falsehood,” where a belief counts as knowledge despite being based on a false premise (e.g., the stopped clock that gives the correct time by accident). Such cases reveal that our concept of knowledge may not admit of precise boundaries, making applications in particular contexts potentially arbitrary.

The lottery paradox, introduced by Henry Kyburg, exemplifies how vagueness in epistemic concepts creates arbitrariness problems. If I buy a lottery ticket with a one-in-a-million chance of winning, I rationally believe my ticket will lose. Yet if I extend this reasoning to all tickets, I must believe every ticket will lose, which contradicts the knowledge that one ticket will win. This paradox highlights the arbitrariness in setting thresholds for rational belief. What probability threshold justifies belief? If I set it at 0.999, why not 0.998 or 0.997? Any precise threshold appears arbitrary, yet without some threshold, we cannot distinguish rational from irrational beliefs. Similar problems arise in the preface paradox, where an author rationally believes each statement in their book yet also rationally believes that some statement must be false (given the fallibility of human knowledge). These paradoxes reveal that our epistemic concepts may be inherently vague, making their application in specific cases vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness.

Timothy Williamson’s epistemicism offers one response to these challenges by arguing that vagueness is epistemic rather than semantic—there is a fact of the matter about boundaries, but we cannot know what it is. Applied to epistemic concepts, epistemicism would hold that there is a precise boundary between knowledge and mere belief, though we may never discover exactly where it lies. However, this approach faces objections about why such boundaries should exist and what determines their location. If the boundary between knowledge and belief is determined by some unknown feature of reality, what non-arbitrary principle explains why this feature should have the significance it does? The alternative view—that epistemic concepts are genuinely vague without precise boundaries—avoids this problem but leaves epistemology with

the challenge of how to make non-arbitrary judgments about knowledge and justification in particular cases. The problem of epistemic vagueness thus reveals a fundamental tension: our demand for precise boundaries in epistemic concepts conflicts with the apparent continuity of the phenomena they describe, making any precise application potentially arbitrary.

Rationality and its standards present a fourth arena where arbitrariness objections operate at a deep level in epistemology. The very standards we use to evaluate beliefs as rational or justified themselves face questions about their own justification. What non-arbitrary principle justifies the laws of logic, the rules of inference, or the methods of science? David Hume's problem of induction exemplifies this challenge by questioning our justification for believing that the future will resemble the past. If we have observed the sun rising every day, what non-arbitrary principle allows us to infer that it will rise tomorrow? Hume argued that such inferences rely on the principle of the uniformity of nature, which cannot be justified without circular reasoning (using induction to justify induction). This arbitrariness objection suggests that our most fundamental methods of forming beliefs about the world lack non-arbitrary justification, potentially undermining the edifice of empirical knowledge.

Lewis Carroll's paradox, presented in his dialogue "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles," illustrates a similar problem regarding deductive reasoning. The tortoise challenges Achilles to force him to accept the conclusion of a modus ponens argument (if A then B, A, therefore B) even if he accepts the premises but refuses to accept the rule of inference itself. The paradox shows that deductive reasoning cannot be forced on someone who rejects the rules of inference, suggesting that these rules themselves cannot be justified without circularity. If we attempt to justify modus ponens by appealing to its reliability, we must already accept modus ponens to draw that conclusion, making the justification arbitrary for anyone who doubts the rule. This problem extends to all fundamental standards of rationality, raising the question of how any rational standard can be non-arbitrarily justified without presupposing the very standard it is supposed to justify.

The challenge of alternative rational frameworks exacerbates these concerns. Thomas Kuhn, in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," argued that scientific paradigms are incommensurable, with different paradigms employing different standards of rationality, methods of verification, and even meanings of terms. If rationality is paradigm-relative, what non-arbitrary principle justifies preferring one paradigm over another? Kuhn's work suggests that scientific revolutions involve changes in rational standards themselves, raising questions about how such changes can be evaluated rationally. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that our standards of rationality may reflect historical contingencies, cultural biases, or pragmatic interests rather than non-arbitrary principles. This challenge becomes even more acute when we consider cross-cultural differences in rationality. If different cultures employ different standards of reasoning, evidence, and justification, what non-arbitrary principle allows us to judge one as superior to others? The danger of ethnocentrism looms large, as any attempt to privilege Western scientific standards might appear arbitrary from the perspective of alternative epistemic traditions.

The problem of rational relativism, advanced by philosophers like Richard Rorty, takes this challenge further by arguing that rationality is always relative to a particular language game or form of life. On this view, there are no universal standards of rationality that can justify privileging one set of beliefs over another,

making all knowledge claims ultimately arbitrary from a universal perspective. While few philosophers embrace this extreme view, it highlights the difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for rationality itself. The arbitrariness objection in this context strikes at the heart of epistemology, suggesting that without non-arbitrary standards of rationality, our claims to knowledge may be grounded in convention, power, or historical accident rather than justified reason.

The arbitrariness objections in epistemology reveal a profound tension at the foundation of the theory of knowledge. Foundationalist attempts to establish non-arbitrary basic beliefs face the problem of the given and the challenge of justifying the move from basic beliefs to the rest of knowledge. Coherentist responses avoid arbitrary starting points but struggle with the problem of alternative coherent systems and the isolation objection. Vagueness in epistemic concepts creates boundary problems that resist non-arbitrary resolution, while questions about the justification of rational standards themselves strike at the very possibility of non-arbitrary epistemology. These challenges have led some philosophers to embrace naturalized epistemology, which treats knowledge as a natural

1.6 The Arbitrariness Objection in Philosophy of Language

The challenges of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for rational standards and knowledge claims in epistemology naturally extend to the philosophy of language, where questions about meaning, reference, and linguistic categories present their own distinctive arbitrariness objections. If our standards of rationality appear contingent and potentially arbitrary, what does this imply for the very language we use to formulate knowledge claims and express rational thoughts? The philosophy of language confronts arbitrariness at its most fundamental level—in the relationship between words and their meanings, in the rules that govern linguistic behavior, and in the categories we use to classify reality. Here, the arbitrariness objection takes the form of asking why linguistic signs relate to their meanings in particular ways, why we follow certain rules rather than others in language use, and why our linguistic categories carve up reality in specific ways rather than alternatives. These questions strike at the heart of how language connects to thought and reality, revealing the precariousness of our attempts to ground meaning in non-arbitrary principles.

1.6.1 6.1 Saussure's Arbitrariness of the Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist whose posthumously published “Course in General Linguistics” (1916) revolutionized the study of language, identified arbitrariness as one of the fundamental principles of linguistic systems. Saussure’s insight was that the relationship between the linguistic signifier (the sound-image or written form of a word) and the signified (the concept it represents) is essentially arbitrary—there is no natural, necessary connection between them. This principle, which Saussure considered “the first principle of linguistics,” challenged previous views that saw language as primarily a naming device, where words were connected to their meanings through some inherent or divinely ordained relationship. For Saussure, the arbitrariness of the sign meant that there was nothing in the sound sequence /tri/ that inherently connects

it to the concept of a tree; the connection is established purely by convention within a particular linguistic community.

This revolutionary insight had profound implications for understanding how language functions. Saussure illustrated the principle with examples from different languages, showing how the same concept is represented by entirely different signifiers across linguistic communities. The animal referred to as “ox” in English is “bœuf” in French, “Ochse” in German, and “bue” in Italian—demonstrating that the signifier varies independently of the signified. More strikingly, Saussure pointed out that even onomatopoeic words, which might seem to have a natural connection between sound and meaning, are still largely arbitrary. Words like “bow-wow” for a dog’s bark vary significantly across languages (French “ouaoua,” German “wau-wau”), showing that even these seemingly natural connections are mediated by linguistic convention rather than direct sound-meaning correspondence.

Saussure’s theory went beyond mere observation of arbitrary connections to develop a systematic account of how language functions despite this arbitrariness. The key, he argued, lies in the systemic nature of language—what he called “langue” as opposed to “parole” (individual speech acts). While individual signs are arbitrary, their values are determined by their relationships with other signs within the linguistic system. The meaning of “sheep” in English is determined not by any inherent connection to woolly ruminants but by its contrast with “ewe,” “ram,” “lamb,” and related terms. This relational understanding of meaning allows language to function as a coherent system despite the arbitrariness of individual sign-signified connections. As Saussure famously put it, “in language there are only differences without positive terms”—meaning emerges from the differential relationships between signs rather than from any intrinsic connection to reality.

The arbitrariness of the sign has significant implications for theories of meaning, reference, and communication. If the connection between words and their meanings is arbitrary, then meaning cannot be discovered through examination of the words themselves or the concepts they represent; instead, meaning must be understood as a social phenomenon, established and maintained through collective agreement within a linguistic community. This view challenges referential theories of meaning that see language as primarily representing reality, suggesting instead that meaning is constructed through the differential play of signs within a linguistic system. The arbitrariness principle also explains why languages can change over time—signifiers can shift their signifieds because there is no necessary connection holding them together—and why different languages can develop such radically different ways of categorizing the same reality.

Saussure’s emphasis on arbitrariness represented a significant departure from earlier linguistic traditions. Previous approaches, particularly those influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, had often assumed a more natural connection between words and things. Plato’s “Cratylus” dialogue explores whether names belong to things by nature (*physis*) or by convention (*nomos*), with Hermogenes arguing for the conventionalist position that Saussure would later systematize. However, Saussure’s development of structural linguistics provided a much more sophisticated account of how arbitrary signs could function within a coherent system, influencing not only linguistics but also anthropology, literary theory, and philosophy. The structuralist movement, which extended Saussure’s insights to cultural phenomena beyond language, rested fundamentally on the recognition that cultural elements (myths, kinship systems, literary texts) function like linguistic

signs—their meanings derived from their relationships within a system rather than from any inherent connection to reality.

The recognition of arbitrariness in linguistic signs also raises profound questions about communication and understanding. If the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary, how do speakers of the same language manage to understand each other? Saussure's answer emphasized the social nature of language—meaning is maintained through the collective agreement of the linguistic community, enforced through education and socialization. This social dimension of language suggests that meaning is not a property of individual words or speakers but of the linguistic system as a whole, existing in the collective consciousness of the language community. The arbitrariness of the sign thus points to the fundamentally conventional nature of language, challenging notions of natural meaning or universal categories while explaining the diversity of linguistic systems across human cultures.

1.6.2 6.2 Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Considerations

The questions raised by Saussure about the conventional nature of meaning received their most radical development in the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in his posthumously published "Philosophical Investigations" (1953). Where Saussure had emphasized the arbitrariness of individual signs but found stability in the systematic nature of language, Wittgenstein pushed the arbitrariness objection deeper, challenging our understanding of how rules govern language use and what it means to follow a rule correctly. The rule-following considerations, developed primarily in sections 185-242 of the "Investigations," present a skeptical paradox about meaning and understanding that strikes at the heart of the relationship between language and reality.

Wittgenstein introduces the problem with a seemingly simple example: teaching someone to continue a mathematical series like 2, 4, 6, 8... When the learner correctly continues with 10, 12, 14, we assume they have understood the rule "add 2." But Wittgenstein asks what justifies this assumption. Why should we think they will continue with 16 rather than, say, 20, or any other number? The problem, he suggests, is that any past behavior is compatible with multiple different future continuations. The learner's past actions (writing 10, 12, 14 after being given 2, 4, 6, 8) underdetermine which rule they are following, because there is always some rule that would make their past actions correct while requiring a different continuation in the future. As Wittgenstein puts it, "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning."

This skeptical paradox about rule-following extends far beyond mathematical examples to all aspects of language use. When I use a word like "game," what determines that I am applying it correctly to board games, card games, and Olympic sports, but not to cooking or driving? The problem is that any finite set of past uses is compatible with multiple different rules for future application. There is always some rule that would make my past uses correct while requiring different future applications. Wittgenstein's challenge suggests that there is no fact about my past behavior or mental state that determines which rule I am following, and thus no fact that determines what I mean by my words. This radical skepticism about meaning raises

arbitrariness objections to the very idea of determinate linguistic meaning—if nothing determines that I mean one thing rather than another by my words, then linguistic meaning appears fundamentally arbitrary.

Saul Kripke's influential interpretation of Wittgenstein, presented in "Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language" (1982), develops this skeptical paradox into a full-blown skeptical solution. Kripkenstein (as this interpretation is sometimes called) argues that the rule-following paradox shows that there can be no fact about what a speaker means by their words, because any candidate fact (past behavior, dispositions, mental states) is either circular or fails to determine future use. For instance, if I claim that my past intention to follow the rule "add 2" determines what I should do next, Kripke asks what fact about my past intention makes it the intention to add 2 rather than some other rule. The intention itself seems to require interpretation, leading to an infinite regress. Similarly, if we appeal to dispositions to behave in certain ways, Kripke points out that dispositions are finite and can be mistaken—I might be disposed to say "1000" after "998" but this disposition could be wrong if the rule actually requires "1004." Dispositions thus fail to determine correct rule-following.

The skeptical solution proposed by Kripkenstein is that meaning and rule-following are not determined by facts at all, but by communal agreement within a "form of life." According to this view, we judge that someone is following a rule correctly not because there is some fact that makes their behavior correct, but because their behavior agrees with how we (the linguistic community) would judge and act. The solution is skeptical because it denies that there are facts about meaning, but it is a solution because it shows how we can still talk meaningfully about rule-following by appealing to communal agreement. As Kripke puts it, the solution lies in "the existence of a community, all of whose members (or at least a majority of them) share this way of acting and judging."

Wittgenstein's own response to the rule-following paradox, while similar in spirit to Kripke's interpretation, places greater emphasis on the notion of "forms of life" and "language games" as the background against which rule-following makes sense. For Wittgenstein, the problem of rule-following arises when we abstract language use from the practical contexts and shared forms of life that give it meaning. When we ask what justifies continuing the series 2, 4, 6, 8... with 10, 12, 14..., the answer is not to be found in some fact about the rule itself or the speaker's mental states, but in the shared practices of the mathematical community. Rule-following is fundamentally a social practice, embedded in forms of life that provide the background against which particular applications of rules can be judged as correct or incorrect.

This approach to rule-following has profound implications for the possibility of a private language. Wittgenstein famously argues that a truly private language—one that refers to private sensations and whose rules can only be known by the individual speaker—is impossible. The reason is that rule-following requires a standard of correctness, and in the case of a private language, there can be no distinction between what seems right to the speaker and what is right. As Wittgenstein puts it, "to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it." The private language argument extends the arbitrariness objection to the idea of private meaning, suggesting that meaning requires public standards of correctness that can only exist within a linguistic community.

The rule-following considerations deepen the arbitrariness objection in the philosophy of language by showing that it applies not just to the relationship between signifiers and signifieds (as Saussure had argued) but to the very idea of following a rule correctly. If there is no fact that determines that a speaker is following one rule rather than another, then linguistic meaning appears to be grounded in nothing more than communal agreement, making it fundamentally conventional and arbitrary. This radical conclusion challenges traditional views of language as representing reality through determinate meanings, suggesting instead that meaning is a social practice embedded in forms of life. The arbitrariness objection here strikes at the heart of the relationship between language and reality, raising profound questions about how language can be about the world if its rules and meanings are determined by social convention rather than by the facts themselves.

1.6.3 6.3 Natural Kinds and Linguistic Categories

The challenges posed by the arbitrariness of linguistic signs and the indeterminacy of rule-following lead naturally to questions about the relationship between linguistic categories and reality itself. If language is fundamentally arbitrary and conventional, does this imply that our linguistic categories do not correspond to real divisions in the world? Or are there natural kinds—real divisions in reality—that our language can and should track? This debate between essentialist and anti-essentialist views of natural kinds represents a crucial battleground for arbitrariness objections in the philosophy of language, raising questions about whether linguistic categories carve nature at its joints or impose arbitrary divisions on a continuous reality.

The essentialist tradition, with roots in Aristotle's philosophy, holds that there are real natural kinds in the world with essential properties that define them. On this view, terms like "gold," "water," or "tiger" refer to natural kinds whose membership is determined by possession of essential properties (e.g., atomic number 79 for gold, H_2O for water, a particular DNA structure for tigers). This essentialist view was revitalized in the 1970s by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, who argued that natural kind terms are rigid designators that refer to the same kind in all possible worlds, and that their reference is determined not by descriptions in the minds of speakers but by an initial baptism and a causal chain of communication. Kripke's "Naming and Necessity" (1972) and Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (1975) challenged the then-dominant descriptivist theories of reference, arguing that meaning is not "in the head" but depends on external factors.

Putnam's famous "Twin Earth" thought experiment illustrates this externalist view. Imagine a planet exactly like Earth in every respect except that the clear, drinkable liquid that fills its oceans, lakes, and rivers is not H_2O but a different chemical compound with the formula XYZ. Despite the phenomenal similarity, this liquid has different underlying properties. Putnam argues that when an Earthling says "water" and a Twin Earthling says "water," they are referring to different substances, even though their internal psychological states are identical. This shows that meaning and reference depend on external factors—specifically, the actual

1.7 The Arbitrariness Objection in Aesthetics

Putnam's externalist approach to natural kinds suggests that linguistic meaning can be grounded in the causal structure of reality, with terms like "water" referring to actual properties of the world regardless of speakers' understanding. This attempt to anchor language in reality faces a distinct challenge when we turn to aesthetic categories, which seem to resist such straightforward grounding. What happens when we ask about the referent of terms like "beauty," "art," or "elegance"? Do these terms pick out natural kinds with essential properties, or do they reflect social constructions with boundaries drawn by convention, power, and historical accident? The arbitrariness objection in aesthetics operates at multiple levels, challenging our classifications of art, our judgments of aesthetic value, our interpretations of artworks, and the canonical hierarchies that structure our understanding of artistic achievement. In the aesthetic domain, the question "Why here rather than there?" becomes "Why this rather than that qualifies as art?" "Why this object is beautiful but that is not?" and "Why these works are canonical but those are marginalized?"—questions that reveal the profound difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for aesthetic discourse.

1.7.1 7.1 Artistic Classification

The problem of defining art represents one of the most persistent arenas for arbitrariness objections in aesthetic theory. Unlike natural kind terms such as "water" or "gold," which appear to refer to entities with discoverable essential properties, the term "art" has resisted satisfactory definition despite centuries of philosophical effort. The history of attempts to define art reads like a series of increasingly desperate responses to the arbitrariness objection, each attempt to establish necessary and sufficient conditions for art-hood eventually encountering counterexamples that reveal the arbitrary boundaries of the proposed definition. Consider the traditional mimetic theory of art, which held that art essentially involves imitation or representation. This definition worked reasonably well for painting and literature but failed to account for music, abstract painting, and much contemporary art. When asked why representation should be considered essential to art, defenders could offer no non-arbitrary justification beyond historical precedent—a response that satisfies no one seeking principled foundations.

The transition from mimetic theories to expressionist theories in the early twentieth century represented an attempt to address these limitations by shifting the essential property of art from representation to emotional expression. R.G. Collingwood, in "The Principles of Art" (1938), argued that art is essentially the expression of emotion, distinguishing it from craft, entertainment, and amusement. Yet expressionist theories faced their own arbitrariness objections. What non-arbitrary principle explains why emotional expression should be considered the essence of art? And how do we distinguish artistic expression from ordinary emotional display? The boundaries proposed by expressionist theories appear no less arbitrary than those of their mimetic predecessors, reflecting changing cultural values rather than discoverable facts about art's nature.

The mid-twentieth century saw the emergence of formalist theories that identified art with significant form. Clive Bell, in "Art" (1914), famously argued that all visual art shares "significant form"—combinations of lines and colors that produce aesthetic emotion. This approach attempted to ground artistic classification in

perceptual properties rather than representational or expressive content. Yet formalism too faced devastating arbitrariness objections. Bell could provide no non-arbitrary explanation for why certain formal combinations produced aesthetic emotion while others did not, beyond the tautological claim that significant form is whatever produces aesthetic emotion. Moreover, formalist definitions excluded much traditional art that clearly qualified as art by other standards, while potentially including non-art objects that happened to possess the right formal properties. The boundaries of formalist art appeared to reflect Bell's particular aesthetic preferences rather than any principled distinction.

The challenge of defining art took a radical turn with the emergence of avant-garde movements in the early to mid-twentieth century, which deliberately sought to subvert traditional categories and definitions. Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917)—a standard urinal submitted as sculpture under the pseudonym R. Mutt—represented a direct assault on conventional notions of artistic classification. By presenting a mass-produced, utilitarian object as art, Duchamp forced viewers to confront the arbitrariness of traditional boundaries between art and non-art. If a urinal could be art, what couldn't be? The question was not merely theoretical but practical, as museums, galleries, and critics struggled to determine whether such works deserved serious consideration. The arbitrariness objection here became self-conscious and deliberate, with artists actively exploiting the apparent lack of non-arbitrary criteria for artistic classification.

The institutional theories of art developed in the 1960s and 1970s represented a sophisticated response to these challenges. Arthur Danto, in "The Artworld" (1964), argued that what transforms an ordinary object into art is not some intrinsic property but its relationship to an "atmosphere of artistic theory" and its place within the "artworld"—a network of artists, critics, curators, and institutions. George Dickie, in "Art and the Aesthetic" (1974), developed this idea into a more systematic institutional theory, defining a work of art as "an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public" and "a candidate for appreciation by such public." These theories effectively embraced the arbitrariness objection by acknowledging that artistic classification depends on social institutions rather than intrinsic properties. However, this embrace came at a cost—by making art-hood dependent on institutional recognition, institutional theories seemed to reduce artistic classification to a matter of social power and convention, leaving no room for principled criticism of institutional decisions.

The arbitrariness objection to institutional theories asks why the artworld's decisions should be considered authoritative. What non-arbitrary principle explains why museum curators, critics, and gallery owners should have the power to transform ordinary objects into art simply by displaying them? The problem becomes particularly acute when we consider that institutional recognition has historically excluded works by women, people of color, and artists from non-Western traditions. If artistic classification is determined by the artworld, and the artworld has been dominated by specific social groups, then the boundaries of art appear to reflect power relations rather than any principled distinctions. Institutional theories thus address the arbitrariness objection by embracing it, acknowledging that artistic classification is indeed conventional while arguing that this conventionality does not undermine the significance of art.

The challenge of conceptual art in the late twentieth century further tested the limits of artistic classification. Works like Joseph Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs" (1965)—consisting of a physical chair, a photograph

of that chair, and a dictionary definition of “chair”—deliberately blurred the boundaries between art, philosophy, and ordinary objects. Similarly, Yoko Ono’s instructional pieces, such as “Voice Piece for Soprano” (1961), which simply instructs the performer to “Scream against the wind,” challenge traditional notions of artistic media and presentation. These works force us to confront the arbitrariness of artistic categories by questioning whether there are any non-arbitrary limits to what can count as art. If a set of instructions, a dictionary definition, or a scream can be art, what meaningful boundaries remain?

Recent attempts to define art have increasingly acknowledged the difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary boundaries while still seeking to preserve some distinction between art and non-art. The cluster concept approach, advanced by Berys Gaut in “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept” (2000), argues that art is defined by a cluster of properties that are individually neither necessary nor sufficient but collectively characteristic. These properties include positive aesthetic properties, expressing emotion, being intellectually challenging, being formally complex or coherent, being the product of skill, belonging to an established artistic form, and being innovative. While no single property is essential, the more of these properties a work possesses, the more confidently it can be classified as art. This approach acknowledges the arbitrariness objection by rejecting essentialist definitions while still providing criteria for evaluation. However, critics argue that the selection of properties included in the cluster itself appears arbitrary, reflecting particular cultural values and historical traditions rather than universal principles.

The question of whether artistic categories reflect natural kinds or social constructions remains central to debates about artistic classification. Unlike natural kind terms such as “water,” which appear to refer to entities with discoverable essential properties, artistic categories seem to reflect historically contingent social practices and institutional conventions. The arbitrariness objection suggests that our classifications of art reveal more about our cultural values, power structures, and historical circumstances than about any intrinsic properties of the objects themselves. This does not necessarily mean that artistic classifications are meaningless or unjustified—social conventions can be meaningful and functional even if arbitrary—but it does challenge the notion that there are non-arbitrary foundations for distinguishing art from non-art. As we move from questions of classification to considerations of aesthetic value, we encounter a related but distinct set of arbitrariness objections that challenge our judgments about artistic quality and beauty.

1.7.2 7.2 Aesthetic Value and Judgment

The challenge of justifying aesthetic judgments represents a second major domain where arbitrariness objections operate with particular force in aesthetic theory. While artistic classification asks whether something qualifies as art, aesthetic judgment asks whether it is good art, beautiful, or aesthetically valuable—and on what grounds. The arbitrariness objection here targets the very possibility of non-arbitrary standards for evaluating aesthetic quality, suggesting that our judgments of beauty and artistic merit may reflect subjective preferences, cultural biases, or social conventions rather than objective properties of the works themselves. This challenge strikes at the heart of aesthetic discourse, raising profound questions about whether there can be such a thing as a “correct” or “justified” aesthetic judgment, or whether all such judgments are ultimately arbitrary.

David Hume, in “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), provided one of the most sophisticated early attempts to address the arbitrariness objection to aesthetic judgment. Hume acknowledged the apparent subjectivity of aesthetic experience, noting the great variety of taste among individuals and across cultures. “Beauty is no quality in things themselves,” he wrote, “it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them.” Yet Hume sought to rescue aesthetic discourse from complete relativism by identifying standards of taste that could distinguish between qualified and unqualified judges. According to Hume, a true judge of aesthetic value possesses “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.” Such judges, when free from prejudice and operating in their optimal condition, would largely agree in their aesthetic judgments, establishing a standard of taste despite the variability of individual responses.

Hume’s approach represents a nuanced response to the arbitrariness objection, acknowledging the subjective element in aesthetic judgment while still seeking objective standards. However, his solution faces its own arbitrariness challenges. What non-arbitrary principle justifies selecting these particular qualities (strong sense, delicate sentiment, etc.) as the marks of a true judge? Why not include other qualities, such as moral virtue or religious devotion? The selection of criteria for qualified judges appears to reflect Hume’s particular cultural context and philosophical commitments rather than universal principles. Moreover, Hume’s standard faces practical difficulties—how do we identify true judges in practice, and what do we do when they disagree? The history of art criticism reveals persistent disagreements among presumably qualified critics, suggesting that even the ideal of consensus among expert judges may be unattainable.

Immanuel Kant, in the “Critique of Judgment” (1790), developed a more systematic approach to aesthetic judgment that sought to establish its universal validity without relying on objective properties of objects. Kant argued that judgments of beauty are based on a feeling of pleasure that arises from the free play of our cognitive faculties—imagination and understanding—when they are in harmony without being constrained by determinate concepts. This subjective yet universal character of aesthetic judgment distinguishes it from mere personal preference. When I judge something to be beautiful, Kant argued, I am not merely reporting my private pleasure but making a claim that others ought to agree—“this is beautiful” means “this ought to please everyone.” The universal validity of aesthetic judgment thus stems not from objective properties but from the shared cognitive faculties of all human beings.

Kant’s sophisticated account attempts to address the arbitrariness objection by grounding aesthetic judgment in the universal structure of human cognition. Yet this approach faces its own distinctive challenges. The arbitrariness objection here asks why the free play of cognitive faculties should be considered the basis of aesthetic value rather than some other feature of experience. Kant’s response—that aesthetic judgment involves a unique kind of pleasure distinct from sensible, practical, or intellectual pleasure—appears to introduce an arbitrary distinction between types of pleasure. Moreover, Kant’s emphasis on disinterestedness—judging beauty without concern for the object’s existence or practical utility—has been criticized as reflecting a particularly modern, Western conception of aesthetic experience that may not apply to other cultural contexts. The arbitrariness objection suggests that Kant’s theory, despite its systematic nature, may still reflect particular historical and cultural values rather than universal principles of aesthetic judgment.

The challenge of cultural relativism in aesthetic judgments represents a third dimension of the arbitrariness objection in this domain. Anthropological evidence reveals striking differences in aesthetic preferences across cultures—what one culture considers beautiful, another may find unremarkable or even ugly. African body modification practices, Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics, and Western classical ideals of beauty all reflect different conceptions of aesthetic value that appear difficult to reconcile. The arbitrariness objection here asks what non-arbitrary principle could justify privileging one cultural aesthetic over another. If aesthetic values are culturally relative, then judgments of beauty and artistic merit appear to be arbitrary from a universal perspective, reflecting particular cultural traditions rather than objective standards.

Some philosophers have responded to this challenge by arguing for a form of aesthetic pluralism that acknowledges cultural differences while still allowing for meaningful critical discourse. Monroe Beardsley, in “Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism” (1958), developed an objectivist theory of aesthetic value based on the capacity of artworks to produce aesthetic experience characterized by unity, complexity, and intensity. Beardsley acknowledged that different cultures might emphasize different aspects of aesthetic experience but argued that there are still objective standards for evaluating the quality of aesthetic experience within any cultural framework. However, this approach faces questions about why unity, complexity, and intensity should be considered the definitive criteria of aesthetic value rather than other possible criteria. The selection of these particular properties appears arbitrary without further justification.

The question of whether aesthetic properties are real or projected represents a fourth arena where arbitrariness objections operate in debates about aesthetic value. Realist theories of aesthetics hold that aesthetic properties like beauty, elegance, and balance are real properties of objects that can be perceived and judged. Anti-realists, by contrast, argue that aesthetic properties are projected onto objects by perceivers rather than discovered in them. Frank Sibley, in “Aesthetic Concepts” (1959), advanced a sophisticated realist position by arguing that aesthetic concepts are not rule-governed but require perceptual experience and taste. While we cannot define beauty in terms of non-aesthetic properties, Sibley argued, we can still make non-arbitrary judgments about aesthetic qualities through trained perception and critical discourse.

Anti-realist responses, such as those advanced by Kendall Walton in “Categories of Art” (1970), argue that aesthetic properties depend on the categories in which we perceive objects. Walton’s famous example involves *Guernica*, which appears angry and violent when perceived as a painting but not when perceived as a cushion (even if it had the same visual properties). This suggests that aesthetic properties are not objective features of objects but depend on the perceptual categories we bring to our experience. The arbitrariness objection here takes a radical form—if aesthetic properties depend on arbitrary choices of perceptual categories, then aesthetic judgments themselves appear arbitrary. Walton attempts to address this by arguing that some categories are more “standard” or “correct” for perceiving particular objects, but this response faces questions about how we determine which categories are standard without circularity.

The problem of aesthetic disagreement provides a fifth dimension of the arbitrariness objection to aesthetic value judgments. Even among presumably qualified critics and within the same cultural context, disagreements about aesthetic value persist in ways that suggest the possibility of multiple equally valid perspectives. Consider the longstanding critical debates about the relative merits of abstract versus representational art, or

the disagreement between critics who find minimalism profound and those who find it empty

1.8 The Arbitrariness Objection in Metaphysics and Ontology

The persistent disagreements in aesthetic judgment that challenge our ability to establish non-arbitrary standards of artistic value find a parallel resonance in the deeper metaphysical questions about how we categorize reality itself. As we move from the contested domain of aesthetic properties to the fundamental structure of being, we encounter arbitrariness objections that strike at the most basic level of philosophical inquiry—how we divide the world into kinds, determine what counts as an object, and distinguish between different modes of existence. In metaphysics and ontology, the arbitrariness objection takes on renewed urgency, asking not merely about the justification of aesthetic or moral categories but about the very framework through which we understand reality. The question “Why here rather than there?” transforms into inquiries like “Why these fundamental categories rather than others?” “What determines the boundaries of an object?” and “On what grounds do we distinguish possible from impossible worlds?” These questions reveal the profound challenge of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for our most basic conception of reality.

1.8.1 8.1 Ontological Categories

The problem of ontological categories represents one of the most fundamental arenas for arbitrariness objections in metaphysics. Every philosophical system and natural language implicitly or explicitly divides reality into fundamental kinds of being—substances, properties, relations, events, states, facts, and so on. These categories form the basic structure of our conceptual scheme, determining what kinds of things we can meaningfully talk about and how they relate to each other. Yet the selection and definition of these categories appear vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness, as different philosophical traditions and cultural frameworks propose radically different ways of carving up reality.

Aristotle’s *Categories* provides one of the earliest systematic attempts to establish fundamental ontological divisions. In this foundational work, Aristotle identified ten primary categories: substance (*ousia*), quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection. Substance, for Aristotle, is the primary category—the underlying substratum that persists through change—while the other nine categories are accidents that inhere in substances. This categorization reflects Aristotle’s empirical approach to metaphysics, derived from observation of how we actually speak about the world. Yet the arbitrariness objection immediately surfaces: why these particular categories and not others? Why include relation but exclude process, or include time but exclude possibility? Aristotle provides no non-arbitrary justification for his selection beyond his analysis of Greek grammar and common experience, suggesting that his categories may reflect linguistic conventions rather than discoverable features of reality.

The challenge of justifying ontological categories becomes even more acute when we consider alternative categorial schemes proposed across different philosophical traditions. The Nyāya school of Indian philosophy, for instance, recognized seven fundamental categories: substance, quality, action, generality, particularity, inherence, and absence (*abhāva*). The inclusion of absence as a fundamental category represents a

striking departure from Western categorial schemes, reflecting the sophisticated analysis of negative entities in Indian thought. Similarly, Buddhist philosophy developed complex categorial systems that emphasized momentariness and interdependence, often rejecting the very notion of substantial existence that Aristotle placed at the foundation of his system. The existence of these diverse categorial schemes raises a powerful arbitrariness objection: if fundamental ontological categories were discoverable features of reality, we would expect greater convergence across philosophical traditions that have developed independently. The radical differences suggest instead that ontological categories may reflect linguistic, cultural, or methodological commitments rather than non-arbitrary divisions in reality itself.

W.V.O. Quine's influential essay "On What There Is" (1948) brought a new dimension to the arbitrariness objection by challenging the very idea that we can make meaningful distinctions between different kinds of being. Quine argued that ontological disputes are not about different kinds of entities but about what we commit ourselves to when we accept a theory. His famous criterion of ontological commitment—"to be is to be the value of a variable"—suggests that our ontological categories are determined by the quantificational structure of our best theories rather than by discovering fundamental kinds of reality. This approach, while avoiding some traditional metaphysical disputes, faces its own arbitrariness objections. What non-arbitrary principle justifies privileging quantificational structure as the determinant of ontological commitment? Why not, for instance, prioritize causal structure or phenomenal experience? Quine's naturalized epistemology, which treats ontology as continuous with science, provides a response but one that may reduce ontological categories to the current state of scientific inquiry—hardly a non-arbitrary foundation.

The problem of ontological relativity, developed by Quine in later work, further intensifies the arbitrariness objection by suggesting that alternative translation manuals might yield radically different ontologies from the same evidence. In "Ontological Relativity and Other Essays" (1969), Quine argued that reference itself is indeterminate—there is no fact of the matter about what our words refer to, because different reference schemes can be made compatible with all observable behavior through appropriate adjustments in other parts of the language. This radical conclusion implies that our ontological categories may be underdetermined by evidence, making their selection fundamentally arbitrary. If we cannot even determine non-arbitrarily what our terms refer to, how can we establish non-arbitrary categories of being?

Contemporary metaphysics continues to grapple with these challenges through debates about the relationship between language, thought, and reality. E.J. Lowe, in "The Four-Category Ontology" (2006), proposed a systematic categorial scheme distinguishing objects, kinds, modes, and attributes, arguing that this scheme avoids the problems of both traditional substance-attribute ontologies and bundle theories. Yet Lowe's system faces questions about why these particular categories should be considered fundamental rather than others. Similarly, the movement toward "neo-Aristotelian" metaphysics, exemplified by philosophers like Jonathan Schaffer, has revived debates about whether reality is fundamentally composed of substances or whether processes, events, or facts might be more fundamental. The persistence of these debates, despite centuries of philosophical inquiry, suggests that the arbitrariness objection to ontological categories remains a powerful challenge to metaphysical realism.

The challenge of cross-cultural ontological differences provides a further dimension to the arbitrariness ob-

jection. Anthropological evidence reveals that different cultures employ fundamentally different conceptual schemes for dividing reality. The Kalam of the Congo, for instance, have been reported to lack a general concept of “object” comparable to that in Western thought, instead classifying entities according to their dynamic interactions and relationships. Similarly, many Indigenous Australian languages employ conceptual categories based on kinship relations and geographical features rather than the substance-property distinctions common in Western philosophy. These cross-cultural variations raise profound questions about whether ontological categories discover universal features of reality or impose particular cultural frameworks on experience. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that our most basic metaphysical categories may reflect linguistic and cultural inheritance rather than non-arbitrary divisions in reality itself.

1.8.2 8.2 Objects and Their Boundaries

The problem of material constitution presents a second major domain where arbitrariness objections operate with particular force in metaphysics. This problem arises from the observation that the same portion of matter can apparently constitute multiple distinct objects that occupy the same space at the same time. Consider the classic example of the Ship of Theseus: over time, each plank of the original ship is replaced until no original material remains. Is the resulting ship the same ship as the original? If not, when did the original ship cease to exist? More troublingly, if someone had saved all the removed planks and reassembled them, there would apparently be two ships in the same place, both claiming to be the original—a metaphysical impossibility. This thought experiment, dating back to ancient Greece, reveals the arbitrariness in determining when an object begins and ends, and what counts as the “same” object through change.

The Ship of Theseus puzzle is not merely a philosophical curiosity but has real-world implications. Consider a statue and the lump of clay from which it is made. Intuitively, the statue and the clay are different objects—the statue can survive being squashed (though it would cease to be a statue), while the clay cannot. Yet they occupy the same space and are composed of the same matter at the same time. How can this be? Philosophers have proposed various solutions, each facing its own arbitrariness objections. Some argue that the statue and clay are distinct objects that share the same parts, but this raises questions about what distinguishes them if not their parts or matter. Others suggest that the statue is not a separate object but a mode or phase of the clay, but this counterintuitive conclusion faces objections about our ordinary practices of counting and referring to statues.

The problem becomes even more acute with living organisms. Consider Tibbles the cat, a normal cat sitting on a mat. Now consider Tibbles-minus, the entity composed of all of Tibbles except the tip of its tail. Are Tibbles and Tibbles-minus distinct objects? If so, they differ by only a few cells and occupy almost exactly the same space. Yet we can imagine scenarios where they might come apart—if Tibbles loses the tip of its tail, Tibbles-minus would continue to exist while Tibbles would be altered. This thought experiment, developed by David Lewis and others, suggests that there may be countless overlapping objects wherever we thought there was only one. The arbitrariness objection here asks why we should privilege certain ways of carving up matter into objects rather than others. What non-arbitrary principle determines that Tibbles is a genuine object while Tibbles-minus is not?

The sorites paradox, which we encountered in previous sections, applies with particular force to questions about object boundaries. Consider a heap of sand: if we remove one grain, it remains a heap; remove another, still a heap. Yet at some point, if we continue removing grains, it ceases to be a heap. When exactly does this transformation occur? There appears to be no precise point where a heap becomes a non-heap, suggesting that the boundary between heap and non-heap is arbitrary. This problem generalizes to virtually all ordinary objects. When does a developing embryo become a fetus, a fetus a baby, a baby a child? When does a river begin? At what point does a mountain become a hill? These questions resist non-arbitrary answers, suggesting that our ordinary concepts of objects may impose boundaries on a continuous reality in ways that are fundamentally arbitrary.

Philosophers have proposed various responses to these challenges, each attempting to address the arbitrariness objection while preserving our ordinary conceptual schemes. One approach, advocated by philosophers like Peter van Inwagen, is to deny that most of what we consider composite objects really exist. Van Inwagen's "material simples" view holds that only living organisms and mereological simples (indivisible particles) genuinely exist; tables, chairs, and statues do not exist as distinct objects but are merely "ways arranged simples have." This radical view eliminates the problem of material constitution by denying that there are multiple coincident objects, but it faces the arbitrariness objection of why only living organisms should be considered genuine objects. What non-arbitrary principle explains the special ontological status of life?

Another approach, developed by philosophers like David Lewis and Ted Sider, embraces unrestricted mereological composition—the view that any collection of objects, no matter how disparate or gerrymandered, composes a further object. On this view, Tibbles and Tibbles-minus both exist, as do countless other objects composed of arbitrary portions of Tibbles. While this view avoids arbitrary restrictions on composition, it faces the arbitrariness objection of why we should care about or refer to some of these objects but not others. If there are as many objects as there are ways of carving up matter, what non-arbitrary principle explains our ordinary practices of counting and referring?

A third approach, associated with philosophers like Lynne Baker, attempts to address the problem through constitution relations that hold between distinct objects without identity. On this view, the statue and the clay are distinct objects, but the statue is constituted by the clay without being identical to it. This approach preserves ordinary intuitions about objects while avoiding contradiction, but it faces questions about what constitutes a legitimate constitution relation. What non-arbitrary principle explains why some constitution relations are ontologically significant while others are not? The challenge becomes one of drawing non-arbitrary boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate cases of constitution.

The temporal dimension of object boundaries raises further arbitrariness objections. Consider a person's life: when exactly does it begin? At conception? At implantation? At viability? At birth? Each potential boundary faces the same challenge as the sorites paradox—there appears to be no precise point where non-person becomes person. Similarly, when does a person end? At the cessation of heartbeat? At brain death? At the dissolution of the body? These questions have profound practical implications in medical ethics and law, yet they resist non-arbitrary resolution. The arbitrariness objection suggests that our concepts of objects

with precise temporal boundaries may be theoretical constructs imposed on a more continuous reality.

1.8.3 8.3 Universals and Particulars

The problem of universals and particulars represents a third fundamental domain where arbitrariness objections operate in metaphysics. This ancient debate concerns the nature of properties and relations—whether they exist as universal entities that can be instantiated by multiple particulars, or whether each property is particular to the object that has it. The arbitrariness objection here challenges both sides of the debate, asking why reality should be structured in one way rather than the other, and what non-arbitrary principles determine which universals exist or how particulars are individuated.

Platonic realism about universals, as developed in Plato’s theory of Forms, holds that universals exist as abstract entities separate from the particulars that instantiate them. The Form of Beauty, for instance, exists independently of beautiful objects, which participate in or imitate this Form. This view attempts to explain how different objects can share the same property—by participating in the same universal. Yet it faces a powerful arbitrariness objection: why these particular Forms rather than others? Plato’s dialogues suggest Forms for moral and mathematical properties (Justice, Beauty, Equality) but not for most ordinary properties (being a chair, being red, being larger than). What non-arbitrary principle explains why some properties have Forms while others do not? The third man argument, presented in Plato’s own *Parmenides*, further challenges the theory by showing that it leads to an infinite regress—if a set of particulars participate in a Form, and the Form resembles the particulars, then there must be a further Form explaining the resemblance between the first Form and the particulars, and so on *ad infinitum*. This regress suggests that the participation relation itself may be arbitrary and unjustified.

Aristotelian realism offers a modified view by locating universals in the particulars that instantiate them rather than in a separate realm. For Aristotle, universals exist immanently in substances—the universal “redness” exists in red objects, not independently. This view avoids the problems of Platonic separation but faces its own arbitrariness objections. What determines which universals exist in reality? Why should there be universals corresponding to our predicates rather than others? The problem of instantiation—how a universal can be wholly present in multiple particulars simultaneously—remains mysterious and potentially arbitrary. If the universal “redness” is entirely present in each red object, what explains its ability to be multiply located without division? If it is divided, then each object has only a part of the universal, raising questions about what makes these parts the same universal.

Nominalism represents the major alternative to realism, denying the existence of universals altogether. According to nominalists, only particulars exist, and what appear to be shared properties are either collections of similar particulars (resemblance nominalism) or particularized properties called “tropes” (trope theory). Resemblance nominalism, defended by philosophers like D.C. Williams, holds that objects are red not because they instantiate a universal but because they resemble each other in certain ways. This view faces the arbitrariness objection of why these particular resemblance relations exist rather than others. Moreover, it must explain the resemblance of resemblances without invoking universals—a challenge that may lead to an infinite regress or circularity.

Trope theory, developed by philosophers like D.C. Williams and Keith Campbell, offers a more sophisticated nominalist approach by treating properties as particular entities—tropes—that are exactly similar to other tropes of the same type. On this view, the redness of an apple is a particular trope that is distinct from but exactly similar to the redness trope of a cherry. This approach avoids the problem of instantiation by making all properties particular, but it faces the arbitrariness objection of what determines which tropes exist and what makes them exactly similar. If tropes are primitive unanalyzable entities, their similarity relations appear arbitrary. If their similarity is grounded in something else, this threatens to reintroduce universals by the back door.

The problem of uninstantiated universals provides a further dimension to the arbitrariness objection against realism. If universals exist independently of their instantiation, what prevents there from being universals for every possible combination of properties? Could there be a universal of being a golden mountain, even if no such mountain exists? If not, what non-arbitrary principle explains which unin-

1.9 Responses to the Arbitrariness Objection

The previous section (Section 8) dealt with the Arbitrariness Objection in Metaphysics and Ontology, specifically covering: 8.1 Ontological Categories 8.2 Objects and Their Boundaries 8.3 Universals and Particulars 8.4 Possible Worlds and Modality

The section ended with a discussion about the problem of uninstantiated universals, raising questions about what determines which universals exist.

Now I need to write Section 9 on “Responses to the Arbitrariness Objection” which will examine various philosophical responses to arbitrariness objections across different domains.

The outline for this section includes: 9.1 Foundational Responses 9.2 Coherentist Approaches 9.3 Pragmatic Responses 9.4 Conventionalist and Constructivist Responses

I’ll need to create a smooth transition from the metaphysical discussion in Section 8 to the responses to arbitrariness objections in Section 9. The transition should acknowledge the challenges raised in metaphysics about how to respond to arbitrariness objections, and then introduce the various philosophical responses that have been developed.

I’ll maintain the same authoritative yet engaging tone, rich in detail, with flowing narrative prose rather than bullet points. I’ll include specific examples and case studies to illustrate each type of response to arbitrariness objections.

Let me plan the content for each subsection:

9.1 Foundational Responses - Define foundational responses as attempts to establish non-arbitrary foundations for knowledge, morality, language, etc. - Discuss self-evident principles and intuitions as foundational bases - Examine challenges to foundationalist responses (circularity, regress) - Include examples like Descartes’ foundationalism in epistemology, Kant’s categorical imperative in ethics - Discuss strengths and weaknesses of foundational approaches

9.2 Coherentist Approaches - Explain coherentism as an alternative to foundationalism - Discuss reflective equilibrium as a method - Examine how coherentism attempts to avoid arbitrariness through systematic coherence - Include examples like Rawls' reflective equilibrium in political philosophy, Quine's web of belief in epistemology - Discuss challenges from alternative coherent systems

9.3 Pragmatic Responses - Explain pragmatic approaches that focus on consequences and utility - Discuss how pragmatic responses bypass arbitrariness concerns - Include examples like William James' pragmatism, utilitarian approaches in ethics - Examine limitations of pragmatic approaches to fundamental questions

9.4 Conventionalist and Constructivist Responses - Explain how conventionalism embraces conventional elements while avoiding problematic arbitrariness - Discuss constructivist approaches like Rawls' political constructivism - Examine the role of intersubjective agreement and social practices - Discuss questions about stability and justification of conventions

I'll write approximately the target word count for this section, maintaining the same style and quality as the previous sections. I'll end with a transition that leads to the next section (Section 10: Contemporary Debates and Applications).

Now I'll write the section:stantiated universals exist? If there can be uninstantiated universals for any conceivable property, the realm of universals becomes bloated with entities for merely possible states of affairs, raising questions about what non-arbitrary principle could limit their proliferation. The problem of uninstantiated universals thus intensifies the arbitrariness objection against realism, suggesting that our attribution of universals may reflect our conceptual schemes rather than discoverable features of reality.

The challenge of possible worlds and modality presents a fourth fundamental domain where arbitrariness objections operate in metaphysics. Philosophers from David Lewis to Saul Kripke have employed possible worlds frameworks to analyze modal concepts like necessity, possibility, and counterfactual conditionals. Yet the very existence and nature of possible worlds face powerful arbitrariness objections. Lewis's modal realism holds that possible worlds are concrete entities that exist in exactly the same way as the actual world—they are causally isolated spatiotemporal systems that are equally real. This bold view aims to provide a non-arbitrary analysis of modal concepts by reducing them to quantification over possible worlds. Yet it faces the arbitrariness objection of why we should believe in the existence of these countless concrete worlds, especially since they are causally inaccessible to us and their existence appears to be a matter of philosophical stipulation rather than empirical discovery.

Alternative accounts of possible worlds, such as David Armstrong's combinatorialism or Alvin Plantinga's ersatzism, avoid the ontological excesses of modal realism but face their own arbitrariness objections. Combinialist views, which treat possible worlds as recombinations of actually existing elements, face questions about what determines the basic elements and their possible combinations. If the basic elements and their recombinatorial principles are themselves arbitrary, then the resulting possible worlds framework inherits this arbitrariness. Ersatzist views, which treat possible worlds as abstract representations, face questions about what determines which representations qualify as genuine possible worlds. What non-arbitrary principle explains why some representations represent genuinely possible states of affairs while others do not?

The arbitrariness objection here suggests that possible worlds frameworks, regardless of their specific metaphysical commitments, may introduce arbitrary elements into our understanding of modality.

The problem of transworld identity further complicates the arbitrariness objections in modal metaphysics. If we accept the existence of multiple possible worlds, we must address how individuals can exist across different worlds while maintaining their identity. What non-arbitrary principle determines whether the person in one possible world is the same as the person in another? Saul Kripke's theory of rigid designators and essential properties attempts to address this by holding that proper names refer rigidly to the same individual in all possible worlds where that individual exists, and that individuals have essential properties that they must possess in every world where they exist. Yet this approach faces arbitrariness objections regarding which properties should be considered essential. What non-arbitrary principle explains why biological origin, for instance, should be essential to human identity while social roles are not? The selection of essential properties appears to reflect particular theoretical commitments rather than discoverable facts about identity across worlds.

These challenges in metaphysics and ontology reveal the profound difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for our most basic conception of reality. The arbitrariness objection operates at every level of metaphysical inquiry, challenging our categorial schemes, our understanding of objects, our theories of universals and particulars, and our analyses of modality. Yet the persistence of these challenges has not led to metaphysical quietism but has instead spurred the development of sophisticated responses that attempt to address arbitrariness concerns while preserving meaningful metaphysical discourse. The examination of these responses represents the next crucial step in our exploration of the arbitrariness objection across philosophical domains.

The recognition of these profound metaphysical challenges naturally leads us to examine the various philosophical responses that have been developed to address arbitrariness objections across different domains of thought. How have philosophers attempted to establish non-arbitrary foundations for knowledge, morality, language, and reality itself? What strategies have been developed to avoid, embrace, or transcend the problem of arbitrariness? These questions take us to the heart of methodological debates in philosophy, revealing both the ingenuity of philosophical responses and the enduring power of arbitrariness objections as critical tools. The examination of these responses not only illuminates the current state of philosophical discourse but also points toward promising directions for future inquiry.

Foundational responses to arbitrariness objections represent the most direct approach to the problem, seeking to establish non-arbitrary starting points for philosophical inquiry that can serve as secure foundations for further reasoning. These responses draw on a long philosophical tradition stretching back to Aristotle's first principles and Descartes' indubitable cogito, continuing through contemporary efforts to identify self-evident truths and incorrigible experiences. In epistemology, foundationalist theories of justification attempt to identify basic beliefs that are justified independently of other beliefs, thereby avoiding the threat of infinite regress and circular reasoning that would otherwise make justification arbitrary. These basic beliefs might include self-evident logical truths (like the law of non-contradiction), incorrigible experiences (like the appearance of red when looking at a ripe tomato), or analytic truths (like "all bachelors are unmarried"). The

strength of foundationalist responses lies in their promise of ending the regress of justification by identifying secure starting points that do not themselves require justification from other beliefs.

In moral philosophy, foundational responses seek to establish non-arbitrary moral principles through various strategies. Kant's categorical imperative, for instance, attempts to ground morality in the very structure of rational agency, claiming that the moral law can be derived through pure practical reason without appeal to contingent facts about human nature or society. By grounding morality in what is required for rational agency itself, Kant aims to avoid the arbitrariness that would result from basing morality on particular desires, cultural norms, or divine commands that might have been otherwise. Similarly, natural law theorists attempt to ground moral principles in human nature, arguing that certain moral truths follow necessarily from what it means to be human. The appeal to human nature as a foundation for morality aims to provide non-arbitrary standards by showing that moral principles are not mere conventions but necessary consequences of our essential characteristics.

The philosophy of language has also seen foundational responses to arbitrariness objections, particularly in theories that attempt to ground meaning in reference to mind-independent reality. The causal theory of reference, developed by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, represents one such foundational approach by arguing that the meaning of a term is determined not by descriptions in the minds of speakers but by a causal chain connecting current usage to an initial "baptism" where the term was introduced to refer to a particular entity. By grounding meaning in causal connections to reality, this theory aims to avoid the arbitrariness that would result if meaning were determined solely by subjective associations or social conventions. The strength of this approach lies in its promise of securing reference to real kinds in the world, providing a non-arbitrary foundation for linguistic meaning.

Despite their intuitive appeal, foundational responses face significant challenges from arbitrariness objections. The most fundamental challenge is the problem of identifying genuinely foundational elements that are themselves non-arbitrary. In epistemology, the question of what makes a belief "basic" appears vulnerable to arbitrariness objections. Why should self-evident logical truths or incorrigible experiences be considered foundational rather than other candidates? The selection of basic beliefs appears to reflect particular epistemic values or theoretical commitments rather than non-arbitrary principles. Moreover, the transition from basic beliefs to the rest of knowledge faces charges of arbitrariness. Even if we accept that certain beliefs are basic, what non-arbitrary principles justify the inference from these basic beliefs to more complex knowledge claims? Descartes' attempt to move from the cogito to knowledge of the external world through appeal to a non-deceiving God has been widely criticized as circular, raising questions about how foundationalists can avoid arbitrary leaps in their reasoning.

In moral philosophy, foundational responses face similar challenges regarding the selection and justification of foundational principles. Why should rational agency be considered the foundation of morality rather than human well-being, divine command, or cultural tradition? The selection of a foundational principle appears to reflect particular moral intuitions or values rather than non-arbitrary reasoning. Moreover, the application of foundational principles to particular cases often involves interpretive judgments that appear arbitrary. Kant's universalization test, for instance, can yield different results depending on how maxims

are formulated, raising questions about what non-arbitrary principle determines the correct formulation of maxims in particular cases.

The causal theory of reference in the philosophy of language faces its own arbitrariness objections regarding the initial baptisms that establish reference chains. What non-arbitrary principle determines how a term is initially attached to its referent? The process of baptism appears to involve social conventions and contextual factors that might have been otherwise, suggesting that the causal chain itself may have arbitrary origins. Moreover, the theory faces challenges in accounting for reference shifts and meaning changes over time, raising questions about what non-arbitrary principles determine when a term continues to refer to the same kind despite changes in usage or understanding.

Coherentist approaches to arbitrariness objections represent a fundamentally different strategy by rejecting the search for foundational elements in favor of holistic systems of justification. Rather than seeking non-arbitrary starting points, coherentists argue that justification emerges from the mutual support among beliefs within a coherent system. This approach, developed in epistemology by philosophers like W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson, treats justification as a network property rather than a linear process terminating in basic beliefs. Quine's metaphor of the web of belief illustrates this approach, with statements at the center (logic and mathematics) more resistant to revision than those at the periphery (concerning particular experiences), but no statement absolutely immune to revision in light of recalcitrant experience. The strength of coherentism lies in its ability to avoid the arbitrariness of selecting foundational elements by treating justification as holistic rather than linear.

In moral philosophy, coherentist approaches have been developed through the method of reflective equilibrium, most famously employed by John Rawls in "A Theory of Justice." Rawls sought to justify principles of justice not by appeal to foundational moral truths but through a process of mutual adjustment between considered judgments about particular cases and more general principles. When conflicts arise between judgments and principles, we revise either the judgments or the principles until we reach a state of equilibrium where they cohere with each other. This method aims to avoid arbitrariness by demanding that moral principles fit with our considered moral judgments while also being able to justify those judgments. The strength of this approach lies in its recognition that moral justification is a complex process involving multiple considerations rather than simple deduction from foundational principles.

The philosophy of language has also seen coherentist responses to arbitrariness objections, particularly in theories that emphasize the holistic nature of meaning. Michael Dummett's semantic holism, for instance, argues that the meaning of a term is determined by its role in the language as a whole, particularly by its contribution to the truth conditions of sentences in which it appears. By treating meaning as a holistic property of linguistic systems rather than a relation between individual words and their referents, this approach aims to avoid the arbitrariness that might result from atomistic theories of meaning. The strength of semantic holism lies in its recognition that meaning emerges from systematic linguistic practices rather than isolated word-world connections.

Despite their sophistication, coherentist approaches face distinctive arbitrariness objections. The most fundamental challenge is the problem of alternative coherent systems. If justification depends solely on internal

coherence, what non-arbitrary principle justifies preferring one coherent system over another? This problem becomes acute when we consider that multiple mutually incompatible systems might be equally coherent internally. In epistemology, the isolation objection highlights this concern by pointing out that a coherent system of beliefs might be entirely disconnected from reality, yet still perfectly coherent. Consider a paranoid delusional system that incorporates all apparent contradictions into an elaborate conspiracy theory—such a system might be internally coherent yet fundamentally disconnected from the actual world. Coherentists must explain why we should prefer systems that are connected to experience, but this appeal to experience seems to reintroduce a foundational element that coherentism was designed to avoid.

In moral philosophy, coherentist approaches face similar challenges regarding the selection of considered judgments with which principles must cohere. What non-arbitrary principle explains why some moral intuitions should count as “considered judgments” while others are excluded? The selection of starting points for reflective equilibrium appears to reflect particular moral traditions or cultural values rather than non-arbitrary principles. Moreover, the process of achieving reflective equilibrium may yield different results depending on which judgments and principles are initially given priority, raising questions about whether this method can truly avoid arbitrary elements in moral justification.

Semantic holism in the philosophy of language faces objections regarding the determinacy of meaning. If meaning is determined by the role of terms in the language as a whole, what non-arbitrary principle explains why terms have the specific meanings they do rather than alternative compatible meanings? Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation intensifies this challenge by arguing that multiple incompatible translation manuals might be equally compatible with all evidence of behavior, suggesting that meaning itself may be underdetermined by the facts. This radical conclusion implies that the meanings of terms may be arbitrary relative to the available evidence, challenging the coherentist aspiration to establish non-arbitrary linguistic meaning through holistic systems.

Pragmatic responses to arbitrariness objections represent a third major strategy by shifting the focus from questions of justification to questions of practical consequences and utility. Rather than seeking non-arbitrary foundations or coherent systems, pragmatic approaches evaluate beliefs, principles, and practices based on their practical value in guiding action and solving problems. This tradition, with roots in American pragmatism and extending to contemporary pragmatic theories across multiple domains, addresses arbitrariness concerns by showing that even if distinctions cannot be grounded in non-arbitrary foundations, they can still be justified by their practical consequences.

In epistemology, pragmatic theories of justification, developed by philosophers like William James and Richard Rorty, evaluate beliefs based on their practical utility rather than their correspondence to reality or coherence with other beliefs. James famously argued that the truth of a belief is its “cash-value in experiential terms”—its practical consequences in guiding action and producing satisfying results. This approach addresses arbitrariness objections by showing that even if we cannot establish non-arbitrary foundations for knowledge, we can still justify beliefs based on their practical value. The strength of pragmatic epistemology lies in its recognition that human inquiry is fundamentally practical in orientation, aimed at solving problems and guiding action rather than achieving correspondence with an unknowable reality.

In moral philosophy, pragmatic approaches have been developed through various forms of consequentialism and pragmatic ethics. Utilitarian theories, for instance, evaluate moral principles based on their consequences for human well-being rather than their foundation in reason, nature, or divine command. By focusing on outcomes rather than foundations, utilitarianism aims to avoid arbitrariness objections by providing a practical criterion for evaluating moral principles. Similarly, pragmatic ethicists like John Dewey have evaluated moral practices based on their ability to resolve problematic situations and promote human flourishing. The strength of these approaches lies in their recognition that moral justification is fundamentally about improving human life rather than discovering abstract moral truths.

The philosophy of language has also seen pragmatic responses to arbitrariness objections, particularly in theories that emphasize the practical functions of language rather than its representational accuracy. Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, with its emphasis on language games and forms of life, represents a profound pragmatic turn in the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of linguistic expressions is determined by their use in particular language games embedded in forms of life, not by their correspondence to reality or their place in a coherent system. This approach addresses arbitrariness objections by showing that linguistic meaning is grounded in practical social practices rather than abstract relations between words and things. The strength of this view lies in its recognition that language is fundamentally a tool for human interaction, not a mirror of reality.

Despite their practical appeal, pragmatic responses face significant limitations and arbitrariness objections. The most fundamental challenge is that pragmatic approaches may simply displace rather than resolve arbitrariness concerns. Even if we evaluate beliefs, principles, or practices based on their practical consequences, what non-arbitrary principle determines which consequences should be valued? In epistemology, pragmatic theories face questions about why certain practical consequences should be considered valuable. Why should we prefer beliefs that help us predict and control our environment rather than those that provide aesthetic satisfaction or social cohesion? The

1.10 Contemporary Debates and Applications

selection of practical consequences appears to reflect particular values or interests rather than non-arbitrary principles. This challenge becomes even more acute in moral philosophy, where utilitarian theories face questions about why utility (however defined) should be considered the ultimate moral value. What non-arbitrary principle explains why we should maximize overall well-being rather than, say, respect individual rights or promote spiritual development? The selection of the utilitarian standard appears to reflect particular ethical commitments rather than non-arbitrary reasoning.

Conventionalist and constructivist responses represent a fourth major strategy for addressing arbitrariness objections by embracing the conventional elements of our beliefs, practices, and categories while seeking to avoid problematic forms of arbitrariness through intersubjective agreement and rational justification. Unlike foundational approaches that seek non-arbitrary foundations, or coherentist approaches that demand systematic coherence, or pragmatic approaches that focus on practical consequences, conventionalist and constructivist responses acknowledge the conventional nature of many distinctions while arguing that this

conventionality does not necessarily lead to arbitrariness if the conventions are established and maintained through appropriate processes.

In political philosophy, conventionalist approaches have been developed through theories that emphasize the role of social contract and intersubjective agreement in establishing political legitimacy. David Hume's conventionalism, for instance, argued that political obligation arises from convention rather than natural law or rational deduction, but that these conventions are justified by their utility in maintaining social order and cooperation. Similarly, contemporary conventionalists like Gilbert Harman have argued that moral obligations are based on social agreements that arise through mutual advantage. The strength of conventionalist approaches lies in their recognition of the social nature of many of our most important distinctions while still providing standards for evaluating conventions based on their consequences and the processes through which they are established.

Constructivist approaches represent a more sophisticated development of conventionalist thinking, particularly in the work of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Onora O'Neill. Rawls's political constructivism, developed in "Political Liberalism," aims to establish freestanding political principles that can be endorsed by individuals with diverse comprehensive views through overlapping consensus. By focusing on public reason—the reason of free and equal citizens—constructivism attempts to avoid the arbitrariness of appealing to controversial metaphysical or moral foundations while still establishing legitimate political principles. The strength of this approach lies in its recognition that political justification must be acceptable to diverse citizens who disagree about fundamental questions, making intersubjective agreement rather than metaphysical truth the standard of legitimacy.

In the philosophy of language, conventionalist approaches have a long history dating back to Aristotle's discussion of nominal definitions and continuing through contemporary theories that emphasize the conventional nature of linguistic meaning. David Lewis's theory of convention, developed in "Convention: A Philosophical Study," provides a sophisticated account of how linguistic conventions can arise and be maintained through repeated interactions among rational agents who have common interests in communication. Lewis shows how conventions can solve coordination problems without requiring explicit agreements, providing a non-arbitrary foundation for linguistic meaning despite its conventional nature. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to explain how linguistic meaning can be conventional without being arbitrary, by showing how conventions emerge from and serve practical needs.

Despite their sophistication, conventionalist and constructivist responses face distinctive challenges from arbitrariness objections. The most fundamental challenge is the problem of justifying the processes through which conventions are established and maintained. In political philosophy, conventionalist approaches face questions about what non-arbitrary principles determine which conventions should be accepted and which rejected. If political legitimacy depends on convention, what non-arbitrary principle explains why some conventions (like those supporting basic rights) are legitimate while others (like those supporting tyranny) are not? The appeal to utility or mutual advantage as a standard for evaluating conventions appears to introduce a non-conventional element that conventionalism was designed to avoid.

Constructivist approaches in political philosophy face similar challenges regarding the scope and limits of

public reason. What non-arbitrary principle determines which reasons count as public and which are excluded from political justification? Rawls's distinction between comprehensive doctrines and political conceptions appears to reflect particular liberal values rather than non-arbitrary principles. Moreover, constructivist approaches face questions about how to handle deep disagreements that cannot be resolved through public reason. If citizens fundamentally disagree about the nature of justice or the good society, what non-arbitrary principle determines which constructivist principles should be adopted? The problem of reasonable pluralism, while motivating constructivism as a response, also represents its most significant challenge.

In the philosophy of language, conventionalist approaches face questions about what determines which conventions become established in a linguistic community. Lewis's theory explains how conventions persist once they exist but does not fully explain how particular conventions arise in the first place. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that the specific conventions that emerge in a linguistic community may reflect historical accidents or power dynamics rather than rational principles. Moreover, conventionalist theories face challenges in accounting for the normative force of linguistic conventions. Why should speakers feel obligated to follow linguistic conventions, and what non-arbitrary principles determine when conventions can be legitimately revised or abandoned?

These responses to arbitrariness objections—foundational, coherentist, pragmatic, and conventionalist/constructivist—represent the major strategies philosophers have developed to address the challenge of arbitrariness across different domains of thought. Each approach has its strengths and limitations, and each faces distinctive arbitrariness objections that reveal the enduring difficulty of establishing non-arbitrary foundations for our most important beliefs, practices, and categories. Yet the persistence of these challenges has not led to philosophical skepticism or quietism but has instead spurred ongoing debate and refinement of these responses, demonstrating the vitality of philosophical inquiry in the face of fundamental questions about justification and legitimacy.

The examination of these responses provides a framework for understanding how arbitrariness objections operate across different philosophical domains and how philosophers have attempted to address them. However, abstract philosophical responses gain their true significance only when applied to concrete contemporary issues where arbitrariness objections play a crucial role in shaping debates and guiding practical decisions. The application of these philosophical responses to contemporary problems reveals both their practical value and their limitations, showing how the arbitrariness objection continues to inform and challenge our thinking about pressing ethical, social, legal, and technological issues.

In applied ethics, arbitrariness objections have become increasingly prominent in debates about the beginning and end of life, challenging our ability to draw non-arbitrary boundaries that determine moral status. The question of when personhood begins, for instance, has profound implications for abortion rights, stem cell research, and reproductive technologies. Philosophers and policymakers have proposed various criteria for personhood—conception, implantation, viability, birth, the development of certain cognitive capacities—but each criterion faces arbitrariness objections. Consider the debate about abortion: those who argue that personhood begins at conception must explain why the fertilization of an egg should be considered the morally significant moment rather than implantation, which occurs several days later and is necessary for continued

development. Conversely, those who argue that personhood begins at viability or birth must explain why these particular moments should be considered morally significant rather than earlier developmental stages. The gradual nature of fetal development makes any precise boundary appear arbitrary, yet practical decisions require drawing boundaries somewhere.

This challenge is vividly illustrated by the case of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that established a right to abortion while balancing this right against the state's interest in potential life. The Court's solution was to create a trimester framework, with different levels of state regulation permitted at different stages of pregnancy. However, this framework faced arbitrariness objections regarding why the trimester divisions should be considered morally significant. The Court later abandoned this framework in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), replacing it with the "undue burden" standard, which focused on whether a regulation imposed substantial obstacles to abortion before viability. Yet this approach too faced arbitrariness objections regarding why viability should be considered the morally significant threshold for state interest. The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision in 2022, which overturned *Roe* and *Casey*, highlighted the enduring significance of these arbitrariness objections in shaping legal and ethical debates about abortion.

Similar arbitrariness objections arise in debates about the end of life and euthanasia. The question of when exactly death occurs has become more complex with advances in medical technology that can maintain bodily functions after brain activity has ceased. The distinction between brain death, persistent vegetative state, and minimally conscious state raises questions about what non-arbitrary principles should determine when life-sustaining treatment can be withdrawn. The case of Terri Schiavo, a woman in a persistent vegetative state whose husband sought to remove her feeding tube while her parents opposed this decision, became a national controversy in the United States in 2005. The legal and ethical debates surrounding this case revealed deep disagreements about what non-arbitrary principles should determine end-of-life decisions, with some arguing for the primacy of prior expressed wishes, others emphasizing the sanctity of life regardless of cognitive function, and still others focusing on quality of life considerations.

Environmental ethics presents another domain where arbitrariness objections play a crucial role in contemporary applied ethics. The question of what entities deserve moral consideration—humans, sentient beings, all living things, ecosystems—raises fundamental arbitrariness objections about where to draw moral boundaries. Peter Singer's argument for extending moral consideration to all sentient beings based on their capacity to suffer faces arbitrariness objections regarding why sentience should be considered the morally relevant criterion rather than, say, rationality, biological complexity, or ecological role. Similarly, deep ecologists who argue for the intrinsic value of all living things must explain why biological life should be considered the boundary of moral concern rather than, for instance, ecosystems or the entire biosphere. The difficulty of drawing non-arbitrary boundaries in environmental ethics has led some philosophers to adopt a pluralistic approach that recognizes multiple sources of value, though this approach faces its own arbitrariness objections regarding how to balance these different values when they conflict.

The challenge of drawing non-arbitrary moral boundaries extends to questions about future generations and our obligations to people who do not yet exist. Derek Parfit's "non-identity problem" illustrates this challenge

through thought experiments involving reproductive choices that affect both the identity and number of future people. If we choose between policies that will result in different sets of future people, what non-arbitrary principles determine which policy is better, given that neither set of people would be harmed by not being brought into existence? This problem has significant implications for climate ethics, population policy, and intergenerational justice, yet it resists non-arbitrary resolution because our moral intuitions appear to conflict when applied to cases involving different possible people.

Questions about social categories and identity represent a second major domain where arbitrariness objections have become increasingly prominent in contemporary philosophical debates. The social construction of race, gender, and other identity categories has been a subject of intense philosophical scrutiny, with arbitrariness objections playing a central role in challenging traditional understandings of these categories. The recognition that racial categories do not correspond to significant biological divisions but are instead social constructs with historical origins in systems of oppression has led to profound questions about the role of arbitrariness in maintaining and challenging racial hierarchies. Anthony Appiah's work on race, for instance, argues that while racial categories are socially constructed without biological foundation, they have real social effects that cannot be ignored. This creates a tension between recognizing the arbitrariness of racial categories and acknowledging their social reality—a tension that has profound implications for anti-racist politics and policy.

The arbitrariness objection to racial categories is powerfully illustrated by the historical variation in how race has been classified. In the United States, the “one-drop rule” classified anyone with any African ancestry as Black, regardless of appearance or ancestry. This rule contrasts with systems in other countries like Brazil, which have historically recognized multiple racial categories based on appearance rather than ancestry. The arbitrariness of these classifications is further demonstrated by the changing criteria for racial classification in U.S. census forms, which have varied significantly over time, reflecting changing social and political contexts rather than biological realities. These variations raise questions about what non-arbitrary principles should determine racial classification in contemporary society, and how to address the ongoing effects of historically arbitrary racial categories.

Gender categories face similar arbitrariness objections, particularly in light of feminist and queer theory challenges to binary understandings of gender. Judith Butler's argument that gender is a performance rather than an essence highlights the arbitrary nature of gender norms and the ways in which they are enforced through social practices. The recognition of non-binary and transgender identities has further challenged traditional gender categories, raising questions about what non-arbitrary principles should determine gender classification. The debate about bathroom access for transgender people, for instance, reveals deep disagreements about whether gender should be determined by biological sex, gender identity, or legal documentation—each criterion facing arbitrariness objections regarding why it should be considered definitive. The arbitrariness of traditional gender categories is also illustrated by cross-cultural variation in gender systems, with some societies recognizing more than two genders or different criteria for gender classification.

The role of arbitrariness in social ontology extends beyond race and gender to other social categories that structure our lives. The distinction between childhood and adulthood, for instance, is marked by arbitrary

chronological boundaries (age 18 for voting, age 21 for drinking in the U.S.) that do not correspond to any clear developmental threshold. Similarly, the distinction between sanity and insanity, competence and incompetence, or citizenship and non-citizenship all involve drawing boundaries that appear arbitrary when examined closely. The question of what non-arbitrary principles should determine these boundaries has significant implications for law, policy, and social justice, yet it resists easy resolution.

Identity politics adds another dimension to these debates by raising questions about how to respond to the arbitrariness of social categories. On one hand, recognizing the arbitrary nature of categories like race and gender can support efforts to dismantle systems of oppression based on these categories. On the other hand, these categories may be necessary for collective action and resistance against oppression. This tension is vividly illustrated by debates about affirmative action, where the arbitrariness of racial categories is invoked both by critics who argue that race should not be considered in college admissions or hiring decisions, and by defenders who argue that despite their arbitrary nature, racial categories are necessary to address the ongoing effects of historical discrimination. The challenge is to acknowledge the arbitrariness of social categories while still recognizing their social reality and effects—a challenge that requires navigating complex questions about justice, recognition, and social change.

Arbitrariness in law and legal theory represents a third domain where contemporary debates reveal the enduring significance of arbitrariness objections. The interpretation of legal texts raises fundamental questions about whether legal meaning can be determined non-arbitrarily or whether it inevitably involves arbitrary elements. Originalist theories of constitutional interpretation, which hold that the meaning of constitutional provisions is fixed by the original understanding at the time of ratification, face arbitrariness objections regarding why the original understanding should be considered definitive rather than, say, the original intent, original meaning, or contemporary understanding. The debate between originalists and living constitutionalists thus involves competing claims about which interpretive approach can avoid or minimize arbitrary elements in constitutional interpretation.

The challenge of legal interpretation is vividly illustrated by debates about the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Originalists like the late Justice Antonin Scalia argued that the amendment protects an individual right to bear arms based on the original understanding at the time of ratification. Critics argue that this interpretation arbitrarily prioritizes the second clause over the first, which emphasizes the militia context, and that it fails to account for changes in technology and society that make the original understanding difficult to apply to contemporary circumstances. The arbitrariness objection here suggests that both originalist and non-originalist approaches may involve arbitrary elements in how they interpret and apply constitutional text.

The problem of legal boundaries and their moral significance raises another set of arbitrariness objections in legal theory. Legal systems often draw bright-line rules that create arbitrary distinctions between similar cases. The age of majority, for instance, creates an arbitrary distinction between a day before and a day after one’s eighteenth birthday, with significant legal consequences for rights and responsibilities. Similarly, statutory deadlines create arbitrary distinctions between cases filed on time and those filed one day late,

regardless of their merits. The question of what non-arbitrary principles justify these bright-line rules has significant implications for how we evaluate legal systems and their claims to justice. Legal philosophers like Frederick Schauer have argued that bright-line rules, despite their arbitrariness, may be justified by their ability to reduce decision costs, increase predictability, and prevent biased decision-making. This pragmatic defense of legal arbitrariness acknowledges the arbitrary nature of many legal distinctions while arguing that they serve important social functions.

Challenges to legal positivism and natural law from arbitrariness concerns represent a third dimension of contemporary debates in legal theory. Legal positivism, which holds that law is fundamentally a matter of social

1.11 Cross-Cultural Perspectives

fact rather than moral truth, faces arbitrariness objections regarding why social facts should be considered authoritative in determining legal validity. If law is simply what is commanded by sovereigns or recognized by officials, what non-arbitrary principle explains why these social facts should generate legal obligations? Natural law theorists, by contrast, argue that law must conform to moral principles to be valid, but they face arbitrariness objections regarding what determines these moral principles and how we can know them. The debate between legal positivists and natural lawyers thus involves competing responses to arbitrariness objections about the foundation of legal authority.

The examination of arbitrariness objections in these contemporary domains—applied ethics, social categories, and legal theory—reveals their ongoing significance in shaping philosophical debates and practical decisions. These objections challenge our ability to draw non-arbitrary boundaries that determine moral status, social identity, and legal validity, forcing us to confront the limitations of our conceptual frameworks and the contingency of our classifications. Yet these challenges also spur innovation in philosophical thinking, leading to new approaches that acknowledge the conventional nature of many distinctions while still seeking to avoid problematic forms of arbitrariness. The enduring power of arbitrariness objections in contemporary debates suggests that they are not merely abstract philosophical concerns but have profound implications for how we understand ourselves, organize our societies, and navigate the complexities of modern life.

The significance of arbitrariness objections becomes even more apparent when we examine how different cultural and philosophical traditions approach the problem across the globe. While Western philosophy has developed sophisticated responses to arbitrariness objections through foundationalism, coherentism, pragmatism, and constructivism, these represent only one set of approaches among many. Eastern philosophical traditions, indigenous frameworks, and postcolonial perspectives offer alternative ways of understanding and responding to arbitrariness that both challenge and enrich Western philosophical discourse. The cross-cultural examination of arbitrariness objections not only reveals the diversity of human philosophical thought but also suggests possibilities for dialogue and mutual learning across traditions that may help address the persistent challenge of arbitrariness in contemporary philosophy.

Eastern philosophical traditions provide distinctive approaches to arbitrariness that often differ significantly

from Western frameworks. Buddhist philosophy, for instance, addresses questions of boundaries and classification through the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which holds that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence or self-nature (*svabhāva*). This perspective directly challenges the notion that there are non-arbitrary boundaries between things, suggesting instead that the distinctions we draw are conceptual impositions rather than reflections of reality's true nature. The Madhyamaka school, founded by Nāgārjuna in the second century CE, develops this idea through rigorous analysis that demonstrates the interdependence of all phenomena and the impossibility of establishing their independent existence. Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way) systematically dismantles claims about the inherent existence of entities like cause and effect, motion, and the self, showing how such claims lead to contradictions when examined closely. For Nāgārjuna, the recognition of emptiness is not a form of nihilism but a way to avoid the extremes of reification (treating conceptual constructs as real) and denial (failing to acknowledge conventional reality). This approach to arbitrariness does not seek to establish non-arbitrary foundations but rather to transcend the very distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary through insight into the nature of reality.

Zen Buddhism, with its emphasis on direct experience and the limitations of conceptual thinking, offers a complementary approach to arbitrariness. Zen koans—paradoxical riddles used as meditation subjects—often deliberately target the arbitrary nature of conceptual boundaries. The famous koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” challenges the arbitrary distinction between sound and silence, action and inaction, encouraging practitioners to move beyond conceptual thinking to direct experience. Similarly, the koan “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?” with its seemingly contradictory answer “Mu” (no), disrupts conventional categories and invites a different kind of understanding that transcends arbitrary distinctions. Zen practices like meditation and mindfulness aim to cultivate awareness without the constant imposition of arbitrary conceptual categories, suggesting that liberation comes not from finding non-arbitrary foundations but from recognizing the constructed nature of our conceptual frameworks.

Taoist philosophy, particularly as expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* attributed to Laozi, presents another Eastern approach to arbitrariness that emphasizes the limitations of classification and distinction. The famous opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* state: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” This passage immediately challenges the arbitrary nature of linguistic categorization, suggesting that the fundamental reality (the Tao) transcends the distinctions imposed by language and thought. Taoism emphasizes the value of *wu-wei* (non-action or effortless action), which involves acting in harmony with the natural flow of things rather than imposing arbitrary human distinctions and categories. The concept of yin and yang in Taoist thought represents a dynamic interplay of complementary forces rather than fixed oppositions, challenging arbitrary dichotomies while still acknowledging the practical value of distinction. Chuang Tzu, the other great Taoist philosopher, uses parables and stories to illustrate the arbitrary nature of human categories and judgments. In the famous butterfly dream parable, Chuang Tzu dreams he is a butterfly, then awakens wondering if he is a man who dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming he is a man. This story challenges the arbitrary distinction between dream and reality, self and other, suggesting that our ordinary categories may not reflect the true nature of existence.

Confucian philosophy approaches questions of arbitrariness from a different angle, emphasizing the im-

portance of conventional order while seeking to ground it in natural harmony. Confucius, in the *Analects*, stresses the importance of *li* (ritual propriety) in maintaining social harmony, suggesting that conventional practices are not arbitrary but reflect the natural order of human relationships. The concept of *ren* (benevolence or humaneness) represents the ideal of proper relationality that gives meaning to conventional practices. For Confucian thinkers, the apparent arbitrariness of social distinctions and rituals is overcome through their embodiment of deeper patterns of relationship and harmony. Mencius, the second great Confucian philosopher, develops this idea through his theory of human nature, arguing that humans have innate moral sprouts that can be cultivated through proper practice. This view suggests that while specific conventions may vary, they are grounded in universal aspects of human nature, providing a response to arbitrariness objections. Xunzi, by contrast, takes a more conventionalist position, arguing that human nature is inherently disordered and that social conventions are artificial constructs necessary for civilization. Despite this difference, both Mencius and Xunzi seek to justify conventional order against charges of arbitrariness, either through appeal to human nature or through the practical necessity of social order.

Indigenous philosophical frameworks offer yet another set of perspectives on arbitrariness that challenge Western assumptions and provide alternative approaches to classification and ontology. Many indigenous traditions emphasize relationality and interconnectedness in ways that question the arbitrary boundaries drawn in Western thought. The Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life), for instance, emphasizes balance and harmony among all beings, challenging arbitrary distinctions between humans and nature, individuals and community. Similarly, the Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) reflects a relational understanding of human connection to the environment that transcends arbitrary boundaries between people and land. These indigenous frameworks often emphasize that categories and classifications emerge from specific relationships and contexts rather than from abstract principles, suggesting a different approach to questions of arbitrariness.

Indigenous approaches to classification frequently reflect practical needs and contextual relationships rather than abstract principles. The traditional classification systems of many indigenous peoples often categorize plants and animals based on their uses, relationships to humans, and roles in ecosystems rather than on abstract morphological characteristics. For example, the Navajo (Diné) classification of plants emphasizes their medicinal properties and ceremonial uses rather than their botanical relationships. This contextual approach to classification challenges the Western assumption that classifications should be based on inherent properties or universal principles, suggesting instead that classifications are tools for navigating relationships and meeting practical needs.

The relationship between language, reality, and arbitrariness in indigenous perspectives often differs significantly from Western views. While many Western traditions following Saussure emphasize the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, some indigenous languages embody different relationships between words and their referents. For instance, many indigenous Australian languages incorporate complex spatial orientation systems that reflect specific relationships to land and environment, challenging the arbitrary nature of spatial categories in Western languages. Similarly, some Native American languages like Hopi incorporate temporal concepts that differ from Western linear time, suggesting alternative ways of conceptualizing temporal boundaries that may be less arbitrary from certain perspectives. These linguistic differences reflect broader

philosophical orientations toward reality that question the arbitrariness of Western conceptual frameworks.

Indigenous challenges to Western philosophical assumptions about arbitrariness are particularly evident in debates about ontology and the nature of reality. Many indigenous traditions reject the Western distinction between natural and supernatural, instead recognizing multiple dimensions of reality that interact in complex ways. The Lakota concept of *wakan tanka* (the Great Mystery or Great Spirit), for instance, represents a reality that transcends arbitrary distinctions between sacred and profane, spiritual and material. Similarly, the Yoruba concept of *ashe* (spiritual energy or life force) permeates all existence, challenging arbitrary boundaries between animate and inanimate, living and non-living. These indigenous ontologies suggest that Western philosophical frameworks may impose arbitrary categories on reality that do not reflect the actual nature of existence.

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy's Great Law of Peace provides a specific example of how indigenous frameworks address questions of arbitrariness in political organization. The Great Law, which established a confederacy of six nations with a sophisticated system of governance, incorporates principles of representation, consensus decision-making, and balance of powers that challenge arbitrary distinctions between rulers and ruled. The concept of the Seventh Generation, which requires considering the impact of decisions on people seven generations into the future, represents a non-arbitrary approach to intergenerational justice that contrasts with the often arbitrary time horizons of Western political systems. These indigenous approaches to political organization suggest alternative ways of addressing arbitrariness objections that may offer insights for contemporary political philosophy.

Comparative approaches to arbitrariness reveal both common themes and divergent responses across cultural traditions. One common theme is the recognition that human conceptual frameworks inevitably involve some element of convention or construction. Both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions acknowledge that language and conceptual categories shape our understanding of reality in ways that introduce arbitrary elements. The Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, the Taoist emphasis on the limitations of naming, and the Western recognition of the conventionality of language all point to this shared insight. Similarly, many traditions recognize the practical necessity of drawing distinctions despite their conventional nature. Confucian emphasis on ritual, Western legal systems, and indigenous classification systems all reflect the practical value of maintaining distinctions even while acknowledging their constructed nature.

Despite these common themes, different traditions offer divergent responses to the challenge of arbitrariness. Western philosophy has often focused on establishing non-arbitrary foundations through reason, empirical evidence, or intersubjective agreement. Eastern traditions like Buddhism and Taoism have often sought to transcend the distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary through insight into the nature of reality. Indigenous frameworks have frequently emphasized contextual relationship and practical function over abstract principles. These divergent responses reflect deeper differences in cultural values and metaphysical orientations that shape how different traditions approach philosophical problems.

The possibility of cross-cultural dialogue on arbitrariness objections represents an important area for contemporary philosophy. Comparative philosophy has the potential to enrich our understanding of arbitrariness by exposing us to alternative approaches that may not be apparent within any single tradition. For instance,

the Buddhist concept of emptiness might offer new perspectives on Western debates about realism and anti-realism, while indigenous approaches to classification might inform contemporary discussions about natural kinds and social construction. Similarly, Confucian emphasis on relational harmony might contribute to Western political philosophy's attempts to address arbitrariness in social arrangements. The challenge of such dialogue is to avoid both uncritical appropriation of ideas from other traditions and the assumption that all traditions are addressing the same questions in the same way. Genuine cross-cultural dialogue requires careful attention to the specific contexts and concerns that shape different philosophical traditions.

Comparative approaches also reveal how questions of arbitrariness are embedded in broader cultural frameworks and practices. The way a tradition addresses arbitrariness often reflects its broader metaphysical commitments, ethical values, and social practices. For example, the Western focus on establishing non-arbitrary foundations reflects a broader concern with justification and rationality that has shaped many areas of Western thought. The Buddhist emphasis on transcending arbitrary distinctions reflects a broader concern with liberation from suffering that informs Buddhist practice. Indigenous approaches to classification reflect broader relationships to land, community, and spiritual reality that shape indigenous worldviews. Understanding these broader contexts is essential for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue about arbitrariness.

Postcolonial perspectives bring a critical dimension to cross-cultural examinations of arbitrariness by highlighting how colonial power has imposed arbitrary categories that continue to shape contemporary thought and practice. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrated how Western scholarship constructed the "Orient" as an arbitrary category that served imperial interests, creating a distinction between "West" and "East" that reflected power relations rather than meaningful cultural differences. This arbitrary categorization had profound effects on how non-Western traditions were understood and evaluated, often leading to their marginalization or misrepresentation in Western academic discourse. The postcolonial critique of Orientalism challenges the arbitrariness of civilizational categories that continue to structure global power relations.

The role of arbitrariness in maintaining systems of oppression extends beyond the categories of Orientalism to include colonial constructions of race, culture, and development. The arbitrary racial categories established during colonialism continue to structure social relations and access to resources in postcolonial societies, despite their lack of biological or moral justification. Similarly, the arbitrary distinction between "developed" and "developing" nations reflects colonial power relations rather than meaningful differences in social organization or cultural achievement. These arbitrary categories serve to naturalize global inequalities and obscure the historical processes that produced them. The persistence of these categories demonstrates how power operates through the imposition of arbitrary distinctions that come to be accepted as natural or inevitable.

Decolonial approaches to questioning arbitrary classifications have emerged in response to these colonial legacies. Walter D. Mignolo's concept of "decoloniality" involves delinking from the colonial matrix of power that has imposed arbitrary categories and ways of knowing. This approach challenges the arbitrariness of epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western knowledge systems over indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing. Similarly, Aníbal Quijano's analysis of the "coloniality of power" examines how arbitrary racial

classifications established during colonialism continue to structure global power relations. These decolonial approaches seek to expose the historical contingency and political function of seemingly natural categories, opening space for alternative ways of thinking and being that are not constrained by colonial legacies.

Specific examples of colonial categorization and resistance illustrate the practical implications of these post-colonial perspectives. The British colonial classification of Indian society through the census system created rigid religious and caste categories that had not previously existed with such clarity, fundamentally shaping Indian society in ways that continue to resonate today. The arbitrary division of Africa by colonial powers created nations that grouped together peoples with different histories and separated others with shared histories, leading to ongoing conflicts and challenges to postcolonial state formation. In response to these arbitrary colonial impositions, various decolonial movements have sought to reclaim indigenous categories and ways of knowing, challenging the arbitrary distinctions imposed by colonialism. The Zapatista movement in Mexico, for instance, has created autonomous communities based on indigenous principles of governance that challenge arbitrary state boundaries and categories.

Postcolonial theory engages with questions of arbitrariness not only by exposing the arbitrary nature of colonial categories but also by exploring the possibilities of hybridity and creolization that transcend colonial binaries. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity describes how cultural mixing in postcolonial contexts can create new forms of identity that challenge arbitrary colonial distinctions between colonizer and colonized, tradition and modernity, local and global. Similarly, Édouard Glissant's

1.12 Conclusion and Future Directions

...concept of "creolization" describes how cultures in the Caribbean and beyond have created new syntheses that transcend arbitrary colonial categories. These postcolonial approaches suggest that addressing the arbitrariness of colonial categories involves not just exposing their contingency but creating alternative frameworks that emerge from the lived experiences of colonized peoples.

The examination of these diverse cultural perspectives on arbitrariness reveals both the universality of the challenge and the richness of possible responses. From Buddhist emptiness to indigenous relationality to postcolonial hybridity, different traditions offer distinctive ways of understanding and responding to the problem of arbitrary distinctions. This cross-cultural exploration not only enriches our philosophical understanding of arbitrariness but also suggests possibilities for dialogue and mutual learning across traditions that may help address the persistent challenge of arbitrariness in contemporary thought.

These diverse approaches to arbitrariness across philosophical traditions and cultural contexts bring us to the final stage of our examination: synthesizing the insights gained from our exploration and considering the future directions for philosophical inquiry into arbitrariness objections. The journey through multiple domains of philosophy and across cultural traditions reveals both the pervasiveness of arbitrariness as a philosophical concern and the diversity of responses it has inspired. By bringing these threads together, we can better understand the significance of arbitrariness objections in philosophical discourse and identify promising directions for future research and exploration.

1.12.1 12.1 Synthesizing Arbitrariness Objections Across Domains

The examination of arbitrariness objections across multiple philosophical domains reveals a striking pattern of common structures and concerns despite the diversity of specific contexts. In moral philosophy, political philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of language, aesthetics, metaphysics, and beyond, the arbitrariness objection consistently takes the form of challenging boundaries, classifications, and principles by asking “Why here rather than there?” This fundamental question manifests in domain-specific ways—asking why moral status begins at one point rather than another, why political authority extends to these boundaries but not those, why knowledge claims are justified by these standards but not others—but the underlying structure remains remarkably consistent. This common pattern suggests that arbitrariness objections represent a fundamental mode of philosophical critique that transcends specific domains, revealing tensions in our attempts to categorize, justify, and understand reality.

One of the most significant patterns across domains is the challenge of drawing boundaries in continuous phenomena. The sorites paradox, which we encountered in multiple contexts, illustrates how arbitrariness objections arise when we attempt to draw precise boundaries in continuous properties or processes. In moral philosophy, this appears in debates about the beginning and end of personhood; in epistemology, in questions about thresholds for knowledge and justification; in metaphysics, in problems of material constitution and object boundaries; and in aesthetics, in questions about artistic classification. The persistence of this pattern across domains suggests that it reflects a fundamental challenge in human cognition—our need to impose discrete categories on a continuous reality inevitably introduces elements of arbitrariness that can be exposed through philosophical critique.

Another common pattern across domains is the tension between universalism and particularism in responses to arbitrariness objections. Philosophical traditions that seek universal foundations for knowledge, morality, or reality face arbitrariness objections regarding the selection and justification of these foundations. Conversely, approaches that emphasize particular contexts, conventions, or perspectives face objections about the relativity and potential arbitrariness of their claims. This tension manifests differently across domains—in epistemology as the debate between foundationalism and coherentism, in ethics as the contrast between universalist principles and contextual judgments, in political philosophy as the opposition between universal rights and cultural traditions—but the underlying structure remains consistent. This pattern suggests that arbitrariness objections reveal a deeper tension in philosophical thought between the aspiration for universal justification and the recognition of contextual particularity.

The problem of underdetermination represents a third significant pattern across domains. In epistemology, Quine’s thesis of the underdetermination of theory by evidence shows how multiple incompatible theories might be equally compatible with all available evidence. In the philosophy of language, the indeterminacy of translation thesis extends this underdetermination to meaning and reference. In ethics, the underdetermination of moral principles by moral intuitions creates similar challenges. In metaphysics, the underdetermination of ontological categories by empirical evidence raises parallel questions. This pattern suggests that arbitrariness objections often highlight how our evidence and experience fail to uniquely determine our philosophical commitments, leaving room for multiple compatible systems that must be justified on addi-

tional grounds.

The role of power and social context in shaping seemingly objective distinctions represents a fourth cross-domain pattern. In feminist philosophy, the exposure of how gender categories reflect power relations has challenged the apparent naturalness of these distinctions. In postcolonial theory, the analysis of how racial and civilizational categories served imperial interests has revealed their arbitrary nature. In political philosophy, the examination of how property rights and political boundaries emerged from historical accidents rather than rational principles has similar implications. This pattern suggests that arbitrariness objections often serve a critical function by revealing how what appears to be natural or inevitable may actually reflect particular social arrangements and power dynamics.

The methodological significance of arbitrariness objections represents a fifth important pattern across domains. In each domain we examined, arbitrariness objections function as a critical tool that tests the coherence and justification of philosophical systems. They force philosophers to examine the foundations of their claims, the boundaries of their categories, and the implications of their principles. This critical function transcends specific domains, suggesting that arbitrariness objections represent a fundamental methodological tool in philosophical inquiry. The ability to formulate and respond to arbitrariness objections thus emerges as a central philosophical skill, essential for developing robust theoretical frameworks.

The diversity of responses to arbitrariness objections across domains reveals both the creativity of philosophical thought and the difficulty of resolving these challenges. Foundationalist approaches seek secure starting points that can avoid arbitrariness, coherentist approaches emphasize systematic justification, pragmatic approaches focus on practical consequences, and conventionalist/constructivist approaches embrace social agreement. Each response has its strengths and limitations, and no single approach has emerged as definitively superior across all domains. This diversity suggests that arbitrariness objections may not have a single solution but may require domain-specific responses that acknowledge the particular nature of the challenges in different areas of philosophy.

The cross-cultural examination of arbitrariness objections adds another dimension to this synthesis, revealing both common concerns and distinctive responses across philosophical traditions. The Buddhist concept of emptiness, the Taoist emphasis on transcending arbitrary distinctions, indigenous approaches to relational classification, and postcolonial critiques of colonial categories all offer perspectives that complement and challenge Western philosophical responses to arbitrariness. This cross-cultural dimension suggests that addressing arbitrariness objections fully may require philosophical dialogue that transcends cultural boundaries, drawing on the insights of multiple traditions to develop more comprehensive approaches.

1.12.2 12.2 Evaluating Responses to Arbitrariness

The examination of responses to arbitrariness objections across philosophical domains reveals a complex landscape of strategies with varying degrees of success in different contexts. Foundational responses, which seek to establish non-arbitrary starting points for philosophical inquiry, have shown particular strength in formal domains like logic and mathematics, where self-evident principles can provide secure foundations.

In mathematics, for instance, foundational approaches like axiomatic systems have successfully reduced arbitrariness by establishing clear starting points from which theorems can be rigorously derived. Similarly, in formal logic, foundational principles like the law of non-contradiction have proven resistant to arbitrariness objections by their very nature as presuppositions of rational discourse. However, in domains dealing with empirical reality, value, or social phenomena, foundational responses face greater challenges. In ethics, for example, attempts to establish non-arbitrary moral foundations through divine command, rational intuition, or human nature have all faced compelling objections that reveal the contingency of these supposed foundations.

Coherentist approaches to arbitrariness have demonstrated particular strength in domains where systematic interconnectedness is more important than secure foundations. In scientific reasoning, for instance, coherentist models like Quine's web of belief effectively capture how scientific theories are justified through their mutual support and empirical adequacy rather than derivation from foundational principles. The success of science in producing reliable knowledge despite the lack of certain foundations suggests that coherentist approaches can successfully address arbitrariness objections in certain contexts. Similarly, in legal interpretation, coherentist approaches that emphasize the systematic nature of legal texts and principles have proven more effective than foundationalist attempts to discover original meanings or fundamental rights. However, coherentist responses face significant challenges in explaining why one coherent system should be preferred to another when both are internally consistent but incompatible with each other. This problem of alternative coherent systems remains a persistent challenge for coherentist approaches across multiple domains.

Pragmatic responses to arbitrariness have shown particular strength in domains where practical consequences are more significant than theoretical justification. In applied ethics, for instance, pragmatic approaches that focus on the consequences of moral principles have proven more effective than attempts to discover non-arbitrary moral foundations. The utilitarian tradition in ethics, despite its philosophical challenges, has provided a practical framework for addressing moral problems that has informed policy decisions in areas from healthcare to environmental regulation. Similarly, in political philosophy, pragmatic approaches that evaluate institutions based on their consequences rather than their foundations have proven valuable in assessing different forms of governance. However, pragmatic responses face challenges in determining which consequences should be valued, introducing a potential element of arbitrariness in the selection of practical standards. The question of why utility should be valued over other considerations, for instance, remains a persistent challenge for pragmatic approaches in ethics and political philosophy.

Conventionalist and constructivist responses to arbitrariness have demonstrated particular strength in social and political domains where intersubjective agreement is more important than objective foundations. In political philosophy, Rawls's constructivism has provided a powerful framework for justifying political principles without appealing to controversial metaphysical foundations, instead focusing on what could be agreed to by free and equal citizens. This approach has proven influential in constitutional theory and human rights discourse, where the legitimacy of principles depends on their acceptability to diverse perspectives rather than their foundation in objective truth. Similarly, in the philosophy of language, conventionalist approaches like Lewis's theory of convention have successfully explained how linguistic meaning can be conventional without being arbitrary by showing how conventions emerge from and serve practical needs.

However, conventionalist and constructivist responses face challenges in explaining the normative force of conventions—why individuals should feel obligated to follow conventions that are merely conventional rather than grounded in objective truth.

The relative success of these different responses across domains suggests that there may be no single best approach to addressing arbitrariness objections but rather a plurality of approaches appropriate to different contexts. Foundationalist responses may be most effective in formal domains with clear necessary truths, coherentist approaches in domains emphasizing systematic interconnectedness, pragmatic approaches in domains focused on practical consequences, and conventionalist/constructivist approaches in social domains involving intersubjective agreement. This domain-specific pluralism suggests that philosophers should be flexible in their responses to arbitrariness objections, selecting approaches appropriate to the particular domain and question under consideration.

Despite the strengths of these various responses, several persistent challenges remain unresolved. The problem of circularity continues to challenge foundationalist responses, as any attempt to establish foundations must itself rely on principles that require justification. The problem of alternative coherent systems continues to challenge coherentist responses, as internal coherence alone cannot distinguish between incompatible but equally coherent systems. The problem of selecting practical standards continues to challenge pragmatic responses, as the appeal to consequences introduces questions about which consequences should be valued. The problem of normative force continues to challenge conventionalist and constructivist responses, as conventions require explanation of why they should be followed. These persistent challenges suggest that arbitrariness objections may reveal fundamental limitations in human attempts to achieve complete justification, pointing toward the provisional and contextual nature of much philosophical inquiry.

The methodological implications of these responses to arbitrariness are significant. If no single approach can definitively resolve arbitrariness objections across all domains, then philosophical methodology may need to embrace a more pluralistic and contextual approach. This does not mean that all responses are equally valid or that arbitrariness objections cannot be effectively addressed in particular cases. Rather, it suggests that philosophical justification may be domain-specific, with different standards and methods appropriate to different questions and contexts. The recognition of this domain-specific pluralism may help philosophers move beyond unproductive debates about the single correct method and toward more nuanced discussions about appropriate responses to arbitrariness in particular contexts.

1.12.3 12.3 Future Research Directions

The examination of arbitrariness objections across multiple domains and cultural traditions reveals several promising directions for future philosophical research. One particularly fruitful area for investigation is the application of arbitrariness objections to emerging fields of philosophical inquiry, particularly those related to technological development. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, for instance, raises profound questions about the moral status of AI systems and the arbitrariness of boundaries between human and machine intelligence. As AI systems become increasingly sophisticated, questions about whether they deserve moral consideration, rights, or personhood become more pressing, yet they resist non-arbitrary resolution.

The same applies to questions about the moral status of enhanced humans, cyborgs, and other technologically modified entities. These emerging technological contexts create new arenas for arbitrariness objections, challenging our ability to draw meaningful boundaries in rapidly evolving domains.

Neuroethics represents another emerging field where arbitrariness objections are likely to play an increasingly significant role. Advances in neuroscience are revealing the complex and continuous nature of cognitive processes, challenging traditional distinctions between conscious and unconscious states, rational and emotional decision-making, and even life and death. The development of brain-computer interfaces, neuroenhancement technologies, and potential consciousness transfer all raise questions about the arbitrariness of boundaries that we have traditionally taken for granted. Future research in neuroethics will need to address these arbitrariness objections while developing frameworks for ethical evaluation that can accommodate the complexity and continuity of neural processes.

Environmental philosophy and climate ethics represent additional domains where arbitrariness objections are likely to become increasingly prominent. As we face global environmental challenges, questions about the boundaries of moral consideration—why some entities deserve moral concern while others do not—become more urgent. Traditional anthropocentric views that limit moral consideration to humans face arbitrariness objections regarding why humans should be considered the sole bearers of moral status. Conversely, biocentric and ecocentric views that extend moral consideration to all living things or ecosystems face objections about how to draw meaningful boundaries within these broader categories. The development of climate ethics will require addressing these arbitrariness objections while developing frameworks for environmental decision-making that can gain broad acceptance across diverse perspectives.

The intersection of arbitrariness objections with social justice movements represents another promising area for future research. Contemporary movements for racial justice, gender equality, indigenous rights, and economic justice all challenge arbitrary boundaries and classifications that have perpetuated oppression and inequality. Future philosophical research can contribute to these movements by examining the philosophical foundations of arbitrary classifications and developing frameworks for more just alternatives. This work will likely involve interdisciplinary collaboration with sociologists, historians, political scientists, and activists to understand how arbitrary categories have been constructed and maintained, and how they might be transformed. The philosophical examination of social justice movements can both benefit from and contribute to these broader social struggles.

Cross-cultural philosophy represents a particularly rich area for future research on arbitrariness objections. As we have seen, different philosophical traditions offer distinctive approaches to questions of classification, justification, and reality that can complement and challenge Western philosophical perspectives. Future research can build on this foundation by developing more systematic comparative analyses of how different traditions address arbitrariness objections. This work might involve collaborative research projects bringing together philosophers from diverse traditions to examine specific questions of arbitrariness from multiple perspectives. Such cross-cultural dialogue has the potential to generate new approaches to arbitrariness that transcend the limitations of any single tradition, while also fostering greater mutual understanding between philosophical communities.

The development of new philosophical tools for addressing arbitrariness represents another promising direction for future research. The challenges posed by arbitrariness objections across multiple domains suggest the need for innovative methodological approaches that can transcend traditional responses. One possibility is the development of more sophisticated pluralistic frameworks that can integrate elements of foundationalist, coherentist, pragmatic, and constructivist approaches in domain-specific ways. Another possibility is the exploration of non-binary approaches that transcend the distinctions between objective and subjective, universal and particular, foundation and superstructure that have structured traditional responses to arbitrariness. The development of such new philosophical tools will require both theoretical innovation and careful attention to how these tools function in addressing concrete problems across different domains.

Interdisciplinary research represents a crucial dimension of future work