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Contemplative Exercise: Drawing Your Moral Circle (A Reflection on Agency, Relationships, Responsibility, and Interdependence)

This exercise is based on the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Ecological Systems Theory is a framework for understanding how individuals interact with their environment and how these interactions influence development over time. It emphasizes that human development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, ranging from the immediate surroundings to larger societal and cultural contexts. The theory is often represented as concentric circles, with the individual at the center, surrounded by five interrelated systems.

The goal of this exercise is to help us clarify and understand the scope of our responsibilities toward others and the orientation of our agency. In other words, "how big is your forest"?

Step 1: Create the Circle Diagram

1. Start by drawing **five nested circles** on a piece of paper.
 - The smallest circle in the center represents *you*.
 - Each larger circle represents one of Bronfenbrenner's systems. Label them as you go:
 - **Microsystem** (closest to the center)
 - **Mesosystem**
 - **Exosystem**
 - **Macrosystem**
 - **Chronosystem** (outermost circle)

Step 2: Reflect and Fill In Each Circle

1. **Microsystem (Closest Circle)**
 - Think about the people you interact with daily (e.g., family, friends, teachers, coaches, classmates)
 - Write their names or draw symbols to represent these relationships in this circle.
 - **Questions to consider:**
 - i. Who has the biggest influence on your daily life?
 - ii. How do these people support or challenge you?
2. **Mesosystem (Second Circle)**
 - Reflect on the connections between the people or groups in your Microsystem (e.g., how your family interacts with your school)

Name:

- Draw lines or arrows between people in your Microsystem to show these connections. Add notes if you'd like.
 - **Questions to consider:**
 - i. How do interactions between these groups affect your life?
 - ii. Do they inspire a sense of responsibility or duty?
 - 3. **Exosystem (Third Circle)**
 - Think about environments or systems that indirectly influence you (e.g., your parent's workplace, community organizations, or local government).
 - Write or draw these influences in this circle.
 - **Questions to consider:**
 - i. What external factors impact your daily life, even if you don't interact with them directly?
 - ii. How have decisions or events in this system affected you? What responsibility do you owe them?
 - 4. **Macrosystem (Fourth Circle)**
 - Reflect on your cultural, social, and economic environment. This includes your cultural values, societal norms, and broader societal influences.
 - Write or symbolize the big ideas, values, or trends that have shaped you.
 - **Questions to consider:**
 - i. What cultural or societal beliefs have shaped your choices or worldview?
 - ii. How do societal trends (e.g., technology, social movements) influence you?
 - 5. **Chronosystem (Outer Circle)**
 - Think about the changes and events in your life over time (e.g., family transitions, moving, global events).
 - Write or draw these milestones in the outermost circle.
 - **Questions to consider:**
 - i. What major life events or changes have shaped you?
 - ii. How have your relationships, roles, or environments evolved over time? Does your sense of the scope of your responsibilities change over time as well?
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Step 3: Reflect on the Whole Diagram

Once your diagram is complete, take a moment to look at it as a whole.

Name:

Questions to guide your final reflection:

- Which circle feels the most significant in your life right now?
- How do these systems interact to support or challenge you? Did seeing a map of these relationships surprise you or lead to any insights?
- How do you discern and prioritize your responsibilities across these relationships?
- Related to the question of one's "true north" or moral center, what is the extent of your moral concern at this moment in your life (i.e. how big is your moral circle)? How might that change over time?

**Draw your Moral Circle below, and respond to one of the above questions on the back.
Make relevant connections to our readings in this chapter where possible.**