

History of Ethics

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What's the point of these lectures?

- You need to *think* about “ethics” and “morality”
- Our current moral landscape is very complex
- It is possible to understand this complexity by looking at it *historically*.
- *What is a “good” person? What is a “good” life?*

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle

- This was a unique combination of teachers and students never again seen in the history of Western Civilization.
- Information on Aristotle's life comes from lots of sources, some good, some not so good.

Aristotle

- Greek
- Born in 384 BC in Stagira
- Parents were Nicomachus and Phaestis
- His father was court physician to the king of Macedon.
- At 17 he traveled to Athens.

Aristotle



Plato

- At the time Athens was the center of culture and learning
- Became pupil of Plato, who was of course a pupil of Socrates
- He left Athens in 347, it is unclear why. Possibly due to Plato's death

After Plato

- Aristotle went to the court of king Philip II of Macedon where tradition says he was Alexander's main tutor.
- When Alexander became king he went back to Athens and founded the Lyceum

The Lyceum

- "Peripatetics": Based on Greek verb meaning to walk and stroll about
- Aristotle stayed there for about 12 years until he was brought up on charges of impeity as Socrates was
- Unlike Socrates, Aristotle got the hell out of Dodge and left Athens, to prevent Athens from "erring against philosophy a second time"

The Works of Aristotle

- Not all of Aristotle's works have survived.
- Over 20 volumes in a standard Greek-English edition.
- Subjects covered by Aristotle:
 - ▶ Logic
 - ▶ Rhetoric
 - ▶ Morals
 - ▶ Politics
 - ▶ Biology
 - ▶ Physics
 - ▶ Metaphysics, the "first philosophy"

Aristotle's works on ethics

Four extant writings associated with Aristotle that deal with right action and matters of character:

- *Eudemian Ethics*
- *Nicomachean Ethics*
- *Magna Moralia*
- *Virtues and Vices*

Authenticity of VV and MM are generally doubted

Nicomachean Ethics

- Comprises 10 books each divided into a number of chapters
- Chapter divisions likely the work of later editors
- The title is never used by Aristotle himself but may refer to Aristotle's father or son. No one knows.
- The *Nicomachean Ethics* is very carefully organized and is half of a whole work on the "philosophy of human affairs"
- The other half is the Politics
 - ▶ Each book refers to the other
- Question at the heart of NE: What is the human good?
- Another way to phrase the question, What is happiness?

What is Happiness?

- Eudaimonia: Happiness that covers the excellence specific to human beings as human beings, or virtue (arete)
- Virtue can only be identified relative to activity!
- For Aristotle, then, the question of how to be happy is the question of how to live well as a human being.
- Living well is inseparable from attaining the virtues that make possible the best activity.

Aristotle's quest

Humans live in communities, thus there is an unbreakable connection between the *Ethics* and the *Politics*.

- The *Ethics* is about ultimate individual happiness and good.
- The *Politics* is about ultimate priority of the collective human good.

Is Aristotle's quest possible?

- Not in the current day and age.
- Collective wisdom tells us that nobody knows what THE good life is.
- Your answer is as good as Aristotles!
- Is the quest that Aristotle set for himself possible, or merely interesting?
- Is your answer to that question based on actually reading and understanding the *Ethics*, or just on "conventional wisdom"?
- Be open minded

Some of the challenges facing Aristotle

- Are we modern people really the very first ones who have dealt with the issues of "the good" and moral relativism?
- Aristotle had to deal with Sophists like Heraclitus: "the human being is the measure of the things that are that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not"
- The Ancient Greeks knew that our perceptions of the outside world were not reliable access to the objective world.
- At the start of the *Ethics*, Aristotle covers a troubling consequence of this view: If there is no knowable good or end in accord with which human beings can order their lives, then all human longing is finally "empty and pointless"
- ... but see Nietzsche
- Aristotle does NOT refute this claim, but presses on with his mission because the question of our good is too important

Another set of challenges facing Aristotle

- Aristotle also observes that every political community supplies us with an authoritative answer to the question of human good
- Each community has an orthodoxy of good, and every individual in that community is shaped by that community's views on the good and the bad.
- In spite of this, Aristotle presses on with his mission to understand "the good"

The *Nichomachean Ethics*

- The Ethics has at its heart the most important human question: What is our purpose, what is "good"?
- This is in spite of moral relativism and the fact that we already have LOTS of answers for what is "good" for a particular community.
- The most well-known part of the Ethics is the discussions on the moral and intellectual virtues that are most important to human perfection.
- It is *fucking weird*.
 - ▶ Why is "happiness" ignored and moral virtues are covered instead?
 - ▶ Why are there 11 moral virtues? Why not 10? Or 15?
 - ▶ How did Aristotle figure out that these virtues are the most important ones?

Diving into the *Ethics* is tough

- In trying to figure out the answers to these questions and many, many others, your opinions and perspectives will be challenged.
- What's at stake here?
- Aristotle on Friendship:
 - ▶ *"...without friends, no one would wish to live, even if he possessed all other goods"*
- The *Ethics* is Aristotle's intellectual hunt for the life worth living.

Aristotelian influence on the Scholastics

- Aristotelian philosophy was taught as the "truth" in early "universities" established by the Roman Catholic Church following the fall of the Western Roman Empire.
- From roughly 500 AD to 1000 AD, there were no universities anywhere.
- Scholasticism: Method of critical thinking that dominated the teaching of early academics in the earliest universities from about 1100 to about 1700.
- Early Scholasticism dates from around 700 AD
- Places a very strong emphasis on dialectical reasoning, extending knowledge by inference, and resolving contradictions.

St. Thomas Aquinas

- Dominican friar and Roman Catholic priest
- Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church
- Fellow students at the University of Paris called him the "Dumb Ox"
- The greatest thinker to arise from the Scholastic period and one of the most influential philosophers and theologians of Western civilization
- Much of modern philosophy is in response to Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)



Most well-known works of St. Thomas Aquinas

- *Summa Theologica*: One of the greatest works of Western philosophy and literature. Summarizes and explicates the theology of the Catholic Church
- *Summa contra Gentiles*: Apologists "manual" for missionaries.
- Commentaries on Sacred Scripture and Commentaries on Aristotle

All of St. Thomas Aquinas' work reflects a strong influence from Aristotle as he worked to incorporate Aristotle into Catholicism. *Thomism* is the school of thought influenced by his works.

What does a life lived according to Aristotle's principles look like?

What type of person would you be if you were raised in that type of culture?

Beyond the Middle Ages

- From the Middle Ages onward, Aristotle's influence was strong in our view of morality.
- So what happened? Why do we have moral relativism nowadays?

Alasdair MacIntyre

- MacIntyre was well established as a Marxist theorist by the early 1960s
- One of the things he felt he had to do was to defend Marxism against being "stained" by the atrocities of Stalinism.
- He couldn't do it.
- This problem launched him on a life-long quest to figure out why.
- He read the works of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos on the philosophy of science and epistemology.
- Realized he could re-frame his perspective on ethics by looking at modern ethics

... not from the standpoint of liberal modernity, but instead from the standpoint of... Aristotelian moral and political practice

Alasdair MacIntyre



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After Virtue (1981)

- A Disquieting Suggestion: History is essential to understanding philosophy, especially ethics
- Most moral discourse today is disagreement that cannot be resolved. There is an apparent logic among views but they are incommensurable.
- Emotivism: "the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preference". It is not a theory of meaning but a theory of the use of terms and utterances. It is a consequence of attempting to provide rational justification for objective and impersonal moral claims.
- Emotivism obliterates claims to objective standards. There is no basis for any entity in society to appeal to rational criteria. We are left with *bureaucratic authority*.
- Why are we here? The Enlightenment, an attempt to provide objective, rational basis for morality. Kant's categorical imperative fails as as a rational basis for morality.

The Age of Enlightenment

- Roughly from the 1620s to 1780s
- Cultural and intellectual forces in western Europe emphasized reason, analysis, and individualism
- Massively complex set of movements in many different areas in Europe
- One of the primary concerns was to rebel against the cultural and political hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church
- Greatest contributors to the Age of Reason
 - ▶ Francis Bacon (1562 – 1626)
 - ▶ René Descartes (1596 – 1650)
 - ▶ John Locke (1632 – 1704)
 - ▶ Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
 - ▶ Giambattista Vico (1668 – 1744)
 - ▶ Voltaire (1694 - 1778)
 - ▶ David Hume (1711 - 1776)
 - ▶ Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804)
 - ▶ Isaac Newton (1642 - 1727)

The Problem with Aristotle

- Aristotle's moral framework is not entirely rational, and Enlightenment thinkers were primarily concerned with using reason to justify ethical behavior.
- Consequentialists v. Deontologists

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

- Born, lived, and died in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)
- His work in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political theory, and aesthetics continues to influence to this day
- In ethics, Kant is firmly in the deontologist's camp

From assigned reading:

"Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a *good will*. Intelligence, wit, judgement, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called *character*, is not good."

Immanuel Kant



The core of Kantian ethical theory

- "Moral law" is comprised of hypothetical and categorical imperatives
 - ▶ Hypothetical imperative: What to do if we have certain desires
 - ▶ Categorical imperative: Universal and unconditional principle of what we should do regardless of our own wants or needs
- All categorical imperatives may be derived logically from "the" categorical imperative: *"Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"*
- "Perfect duties" v. "Imperfect duties"
- Means-End Principle: *"So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only"*
- People have intrinsic value and dignity simply as a result of being rational beings.

Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832)

- Bentham is one of the founders of Utilitarianism, ultimate consequentialist
- "Panomion": Wanted to create the ultimate moral code
- Based his code on the "Greatest Happiness Principle"

Greatest Happiness Principle

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think ... "

The core of utilitarianism according to Bentham

- Felicific Calculus: Algorithm to calculate the degree of pleasure a specific action is likely to cause
- Bentham specified several "circumstances" to be evaluated in this calculus
 - ▶ Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
 - ▶ Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
 - ▶ Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
 - ▶ Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
 - ▶ Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
 - ▶ Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
 - ▶ Extent: How many people will be affected?

Bentham's philosophy has been extremely influential in many areas including economics, law, human and animal rights, and privacy

Where does this leave us?

an Emotivist culture
... back to MacIntyre

Enlightenment project had to fail

- Fundamentally, Kant and Bentham's moral systems fail because they are incommensurable and also because they each suppose rational bases for morality which each have serious flaws.
- Thus each of the moral systems conceived during the Enlightenment do not support each other, nor can they each stand on their own.
- AM argues that the Enlightenment project *had* to fail, because each thinker had fundamental differences between their understanding of moral rules and their conception of human nature.
- This, in turn, resulted from their rejection of the teleological scheme from which the moral oughts they were trying to justify came from: Aristotle
- Moral oughts cannot be removed from the teleological scheme from where they derive their meaning.

Practice of psychology in an emotivist culture

- For all of us, the only basis for our ethical decisions are MacIntyre's *bureaucratic systems*. There can be no other shared systems.
- Researchers
 - ▶ The Nuremburg Code: Informed consent, ability to withdraw.
 - ▶ APA guidelines, IRB, Federal guidelines
 - ▶ IACUC, USDA,
- Clinicians
 - ▶ APA and other professional societies
 - ▶ Institutional rules and regulations
 - ▶ State and local laws
- Teachers
 - ▶ Most underdeveloped area of rules and regulations, also the most violated
 - ▶ Regulated mostly by institutional rules and regulations
 - ▶ APA and APS also specify standards and codes of conduct