



UNIVERSITÄT
BAYREUTH

Virtue Ethics

Ethics

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2 Today

- I. Aristotle's Ethics
- II. Confucian Ethics
- III. Objections to Virtue Ethics

3 Schema



Aristotle's Ethics

The most important Western philosophers of all time?

So our poll got over 1160 votes (even more than the one eight years ago); in the final round by pro-metaphysics philosophers, leading Hegel to overtake Nietzsche (though he still lost to Aristotle to overtake Plato, and David K. Lewis to crack the top 30. Here are the results:

1. **Aristotle** (Condorcet winner: wins contests with all other choices)
2. **Plato** loses to Aristotle by 458-455
3. **Kant** loses to Aristotle by 678-256, loses to Plato by 623-312
4. **Hume** loses to Aristotle by 721-203, loses to Kant by 606-273
5. **Descartes** loses to Aristotle by 801-105, loses to Hume by 463-365
6. **Socrates** loses to Aristotle by 720-146, loses to Descartes by 417-332
7. **Locke** loses to Aristotle by 855-45, loses to Socrates by 420-237
8. **Wittgenstein** loses to Aristotle by 826-94, loses to Locke by 366-313
9. **Aquinas** loses to Aristotle by 848-33, loses to Wittgenstein by 380-322
10. **Leibniz** loses to Aristotle by 853-43, loses to Aquinas by 337-304
11. **Hobbes** loses to Aristotle by 853-37, loses to Leibniz by 332-257
12. **Marx** loses to Aristotle by 837-72, loses to Hobbes by 318-302
13. **J.S. Mill** loses to Aristotle by 854-47, loses to Marx by 322-283
14. **Spinoza** loses to Aristotle by 846-53, loses to J.S. Mill by 300-274
15. **Augustine** loses to Aristotle by 841-41, loses to Spinoza by 296-276

<https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2017/04/the-most-important-western-philosophers-of-all-time.html>

6 Aristotle: Background

- 384-322 BC
- Student of Plato
- Taught Alexander the Great
- Crucial contributions to metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, ethics, and politics
- Core work in ethics: *Nicomachean Ethics*

7 Eudaimonia

The highest good is **flourishing** (*eudaimonia*) or **living well** (*eu zen*) (1095a)

- Aristotle takes this to be a starting point on which everyone agrees
 - We can also provide an argument: eudaimonia is the only good pursued for its own sake; it is self-sufficient (1097a)
 - Eudaimonia is often translated as ‘happiness’, but this can be misunderstood
 - Eudaimonia is not a subjective state of mind, as ‘happiness’ suggests
 - Aristotle thinks that external goods are necessary for flourishing
 - Aristotle does not have a subjective account of eudaimonia: you can be mistaken about your life flourishing, even if you think you are doing well
- Even though Aristotle emphasises flourishing, his ethics is not egoist

8 The Function (ergon) Argument

P1 The good for an entity of type X is to fulfil the characteristic function of X well
P2 To fulfil a characteristic function well is to exercise it in accordance with the relevant virtues
Therefore,
C1 The good for an entity is to exercise its characteristic function in accordance with virtue

- E.g., a good knife is a knife that cuts sharply; a good painter is someone who paints pleasant pictures
- The ‘virtue’ of a knife then is sharpness, balance, ...; the virtue of a good painter is accuracy, good eye, aesthetic sense, ...

9 Teleology

- Aristotle assumes that everything has some essential function given by nature
... the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. (1252b33-4)
Example. The human tongue exists for two purposes,] namely for the perception of savors and for speech... [moreover, lips] serve both for speech and for the protection of the teeth. (660a1-3)
- We might agree that intentionally designed objects have functions, but it is not so clear what the function of a natural object (e.g. mountain) or living being would be
- One worry is that invoking purposes in ethics commits the naturalistic fallacy
- Another worry is that Aristotle's picture of nature is outdated: evolutionary biology does not show, or rely on the idea, that natural beings have 'functions'

Discussion

1. Does the notion that everything has a function sound plausible?
2. What, if anything, might the function of humans be?

11 The Function (ergon) Argument

C1 The good for an entity is to exercise its characteristic function in accordance with virtue
P3 The characteristic function of humans is rationality
Therefore,
C2 The good for humans (= eudaimonia) is exercising rationality in accord with virtue

- Aristotle distinguishes three parts of the soul
 - The **vegetative** part of the soul is non-rational, and responsible for nutrition and growth (shared with animals and plants)
 - The **sensitive** part of the soul is non-rational but partakes in reason, and is responsible for locomotion and perception (shared with animals)
 - The **rational** part of the soul is responsible for intellect and thought (unique to humans)
- The characteristic function of humans rests on exercising the ‘highest’, i.e. reasonable part of their soul

12 Virtue (arete)

Virtues are excellent, stable character traits

- A virtue is not a mere habit, but an entrenched feature of someone
- Virtues express themselves in regular action
 - You cannot be kind if you never act kindly
- Virtue also requires the right emotional responses to relevant situations
 - You are kind only if you value and enjoy being kind, and abhor unkindness
- Virtues also have a cognitive element: one thinks and deliberates in the right ways
 - Compare 'natural' kindness with kindness as a virtue
- Once learned, virtues often trigger automated responses ('second nature')
 - If you are genuinely kind, you do not need to think about being kind or force yourself to be kind

13 Practical Wisdom (phronesis)

- To enact virtue, you need **practical wisdom**: the ability to appropriately react to a given situation
 - Example: the kind child, the easily-duped generous man
- Practical wisdom is a type of practical skill (knowing-how)
 - E.g., recognise relevant features of a situation, delay or speed up acting, moderate one's response to a situation
 - Not exhausted by rules

14 Doctrine of the Mean

- Every virtue is an intermediate (often called ‘golden mean’) between **excess** and **deficiency** (1106a)
- The intermediate is determined with respect to each individual and each circumstance
 - The virtuous person can have strong feelings or take radical action, if the situation calls for it
- Example: bravery stands between cowardice and foolhardiness (1107b)

15 Aristotle's Virtue Ethics: Overview

1. The highest human good is flourishing
2. We can determine the nature of flourishing by investigating the function of humans
3. As the function of humans is rationality, flourishing is rational activity in accordance with virtue
4. Virtue is the mean between two extremes

Confucian Ethics

17 Confucianism: Background

- Confucianism is a diverse school spanning millennia
- Confucius (Kǒngzǐ = Master Kong 孔子, 551-479 BC)
 - *Analects* (Lúnyǔ, 论语): collection of sayings attributed to Confucius (although likely written in stages by several authors)
- Mencius (Mèngzǐ 孟子, 371-289 BC)
 - *Mencius*, collected writings of Mencius
- The *Analects* and *Mencius* are part of the *Four Books and Five Classics* (四书五经), which constituted the core cultural canon in China for centuries, and the basis for the imperial examinations

18 The Style of the *Analects*

The duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. **Confucius replied, “There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son.”** [...] (*Analects* 12.11)

- No systematic text, perhaps because of a mistrust of simplifying formulas

孔子對曰：「君君，臣臣，父父，子子。」...

- The text here uses the ability of ancient Chinese to use the same word as both a noun and a verb: ‘the prince prince(s), the minister minister(s), ...’
- The passage emphasises the importance of **roles**: a good government is where a prince fulfils the role of a prince, the minister fulfils the role of a minister, etc.

19 Goodness (rén 仁)

Yan Hui asked about goodness (rén 仁). The Master said, “Restraining yourself and returning to the rites (lǐ 禮) is goodness (rén 仁). [...]” (*Analects* 12.1)

Zhong Gong asked about goodness (rén 仁). The Master said, “When in public, comport yourself as if you were receiving an important guest, and in your management of the common people, behave as if you were overseeing a great sacrifice.’ Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire. [...]” (*Analects* 12.2)

Fan Chi asked about goodness (rén 仁). The Master said, “Care for others (愛人).” [...] (*Analects* 12.22)

愛 (ài) = love, care; 人(rén) = human, person, people

20 Goodness (rén 仁)

- In the *Analects* rén (仁) usually means ‘goodness’ (i.e., virtue overall) or ‘supreme virtue’; etymologically related to humanity/humaneness (人 rén)
- The *Analects* do not offer a single formulation of what rén (仁) is or requires
 - At a different point in the *Analects*, Confucius’ teaching is summarised by reciprocity (shù 恕) (*Analects* 15.24) or by dutifulness (zhong 忠) and reciprocity (4.15)
- Confucius gives different answers at different times—perhaps because different disciples require different advice!
- The *Analects* discuss many particular people who are criticised or praised for different aspects of their character; the implied standard is holistic and contextual

Example. Ji Wenzi always reflected three times before acting. The Master, hearing of this, remarked, “Twice would have been enough.” (*Analects* 5.20)

21 Ritual (lǐ 禮)

- The *Analects* stress that there is a close connection between goodness (rén 仁) and ritual (lǐ 禮) (*Analects* 3.3, 3.8)
- Often translated as ‘rites’ or ‘ritual’, lǐ (禮) also includes norms of politeness, manners, civility, and proper behaviour in general
 - Confucius does not have a rigid view of ritual; it can be adjusted to context and the times (*Analects* 9.3, see also *Mencius* 4A17)
 - Confucius also emphasises genuine emotion over blind following of ritual (1.12)
- The Confucian position emphasises **community** and **tradition**
 - An analogy: becoming virtuous is like dancing with others; it is not something we (can) do ourselves, and we follow established patterns when doing so

22 Mencius on Human Nature

- Mencius: Everyone feels natural sympathy for others and possesses a natural potential for goodness (*Mencius* 2A6, 7A15)
Humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others. [...] Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries. [...] The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. (2A6)
- Note: In ancient Chinese philosophy, the heart (xin 心) is not only responsible for emotions, but also thinking, understanding, knowing, etc.
 - For this reason, xin 心 often gets translated as ‘mind’ or ‘heart-mind’

23 Mencius on Moral Development

- One idea: we learn to extend our natural sympathy by analogical reasoning (*Mencius* 1A7, 7A15, 7B31)
 - The (uncaring) King sympathizes with the plight of the ox (1A7); Mencius tries to convince him to extend his sympathy to his subjects
- Two metaphors for moral development: **water flowing downhill** (*Mencius* 6A2) and **growing sprouts** (of a plant) (6A7)

Discussion

1. How do the two metaphors of water flowing downhill and growing sprouts differ?
2. Which model of moral development seems more appropriate?

25 Xunzi on Human Nature

[...] if people follow along with their inborn nature and dispositions, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and disorder, and end up in violence. So, it is necessary to await the transforming influence of teachers and models and the guidance of ritual and the standards of righteousness, and only then will [...] turn to culture and order, and end up under control. Looking at it in this way, it is clear that people's nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. (*Xunzi* 23)

- The difference should not be overstated: Mencius and Xunzi agree that learning and intentional effort are necessary for attaining goodness
- Nonetheless, Xunzi offers a different picture of moral development: human nature is more like a wild-growing plant that needs to be constantly pruned

26 Partiality and Roles in Confucian Ethics

The Duke of She informed Confucius, saying, “Among us here there are those who may be styled upright (zhí 直) in their conduct. If their father have stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact.” Confucius said, “Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father.

Uprightness (zhí 直) is to be found in this.” (*Analects* 13.8)

- While utilitarianism and Kantianism embrace impartiality, Confucius here endorses partiality towards one’s family
- Confucianism requires that one show filial piety; e.g., one should not travel far while one’s parents are alive (*Analects* 4.19)
- Five core Confucian relationships: ruler—subject, father—son, husband—wife, elder brother—younger brother, friend—friend

27 Similarities and Differences

- Both types of ethics avoid stating general rules, both focus on character formation and cultivation
- Both types of ethics build on a notion of what is natural
- Confucian ethics puts a bigger emphasis on family, community, and traditional social norms (li)
- Confucian ethics has a more developed discussion of moral development, and different models of how people become virtuous

Objections to Virtue Ethics

Discussion

1. What are the advantages of virtue ethics over utilitarianism and Kantianism?
2. What objections to virtue ethics can you think of?

30 The Problem of Action-Guidance

Problem: virtue ethics lacks a precise guide on how to act

First Answer: virtue ethics tells us to be kind, brave, generous, honest, charitable, ..., and not to be reckless, irresponsible, unjust, arrogant, ...

- Objection 1: but this seems to provide little action-guidance in many situations; often our question is what precisely kindness (etc.) requires
- Objection 2: this provides no action-guidance if different virtues conflict, as seems to be the case in most interesting moral dilemmas

31 The Problem of Action-Guidance (cont.)

Problem: virtue ethics lacks a precise guide on how to act

Second Answer: An action is morally right if and only if it is what the virtuous person would do

- Objection 1: it is difficult to know what the virtuous person would do, if we ourselves are not virtuous
- Objection 2: this rule is action-guiding but it delivers the **wrong results**
 - Example: the angry loser

32 The Problem of Action-Guidance (cont.)

Problem: virtue ethics lacks a precise guide on how to act

Third Answer: Virtue ethics provides us with action-guidance, but this guidance is relative to a specific context, culture, and person

- Analogy: reading cookbooks is not sufficient to learn how to cook well
- Perhaps this is where Confucian ritual is useful: we get action-guidance from our culture (plus culture-specific paradigms, teachers, ...)
- Objection: but do we have a way to check whether this context-sensitive action-guidance is correct? Don't we need to higher-order standards?

33 The Problem of Cultural Relativity

Problem: what is recognised as a virtue differs between cultures (and even subcultures)

- First Response: so what?
- Second Response: the virtues don't differ between cultures, only how they are enacted in specific contexts
- Third Response: we can find a non-relative account of the virtues if we follow Aristotelian teleology

34 The Problem of Justification

Problem: utilitarianism and Kantianism have clear metaphysical and philosophical foundations, whereas virtue ethics does not

- First Response: Aristotle's ethics suggests clear foundations (but they're dubious)
- Second Response: we do not need foundations

35 Summary

- Virtue ethics starts with virtues—excellent character traits—and tends to avoid general rules for acting; this has led to objections from action-guidance
- Virtue ethics tends to start from an emphasis on human nature (Mencius) or function (Aristotle), but one might also see virtue as something artificial to be imposed (Xunzi)
- Virtue ethics assigns greater importance to moral emotions, development, and embeddedness within a particular community or tradition

36 Next Week

- **Primary Text:** excerpts from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*
- **Secondary Text:** overview article, Russell, Daniel. 'Virtue ethics, happiness, and the good life' in Russell, Daniel, ed. 2013. *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.
- **Next Week:** Autonomy and Consent