

Introduction to Ethics

Part 2: History of Ethics

SMSU

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History of Ethics

- Ethics are conceived as:
 1. a general pattern or way of life
 2. a set of rules of conduct or moral code
 3. an inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct

History of Ethics

- Our discussion will initially be limited to an inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct, or Ethics conceived as Meta Ethics or Philosophical Ethics.
- This will give us a language to speak about ethical problems. This discussion will make it possible for us to ground our discussion in agreed-upon terms.
- For the remainder of the semester, we will concern ourselves with practical problems associated with making moral decisions in light of multiple views of the same issue.

Greek Ethics

- Transition of Greek Society from a largely agrarian one to a commercial one; from an Aristocracy to a Democracy; from traditional theism to rationalism: all engendering dramatic social upheaval.
- Rise of teachers, Sophists as agents of change and as inquirers into the nature of change.
- Traditional values were in opposition to the Sophists and Sceptics.

Greek Ethics

- Socrates (BC 469–399) “believed that by the use of reason man could arrive at a set of ethical principles that would reconcile self-interest with the common good and would apply to all men at all times.”¹ There is a universal moral law. We will discuss this in the essays in the “Trial and Death of Socrates.”
- Perfect clarity about what constitutes moral perfection is no more of this world than is moral perfection itself.

¹ All quotations unless otherwise noted are from the History of Ethics article in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. 3

Greek Ethics

- The Sophists
 - GOOD was a matter of personal decision and law. It was a convention, like green means GO or red means STOP. We decide what is good.
 - The good is not a natural quality but an artifact of personal choice and culture.

Greek Ethics

- Socrates asked what Good, Love, Piety and Justice are constituted by.
- He concluded that earthly justice is only a shadow of true justice which is the idea of justice in its pure form.

Greek Ethics

- Plato (BC 427–347) suggested that there is an ideal world where the true forms of Love, Justice, Piety and Good come from.
- Any instance of love in our world is an imperfect copy of the true form of Love.
- Ethical concepts can never be adequately defined in terms of observable fact alone.

Greek Ethics

- Since Socrates, all Western Ethical theories may be considered alternative explanations of the relation between facts and values.
- Naturalistic theories stress interdependence between facts and values.
- Non-naturalistic theories stress the differences between facts and values.

Greek Ethics

- Socrates, in demanding rational grounds for ethical judgments, brought attention to the problem of tracing the logical relationships between values and facts—creating ethical philosophy.
- Plato's goal in ethical philosophy is to lead the way toward a vision of the Good.
- Aristotle (BC 384–322), unlike Plato, found the standards of value in the basic needs, tendencies and capacities of man — fostering the naturalist tradition.

Greek Ethics

- Aristotle took biology and observable nature to be the model of his ethical system unlike Plato who modeled his system after mathematics.
- "Aristotle identifies the supreme good with 'happiness,' which he defines as the exercise of natural human faculties in accordance with virtue."

Greek Ethics

- Virtue is defined as the golden mean between extremes of emotion or tendencies to action:

Emotion or Tendency	Excess	Mean	Deficiency
Fear	Paranoia Catatonic	Courage	Foolhardy
Eating	Gluttony	Temperance	Anorexia Bulimia
Distributive Justice	Give everything away	Give according to need	Give nothing away
Punitive	Same punishment	According to crime	No punishment

Greek Ethics

- Free will and responsibility were not subjects of great concern for the Greek moralists.
- Only later, with the rise of Christian thought did free will and responsibility take a major role in ethical discussion.

Hellenistic and Roman Ethics

- Fourth century BC to the third century AD:
 - Skepticism: No judgments of fact or value can be adequately proved. (Pyrrho of Elis)
 - Cynicism: (from gr. *kyon* – dog) The good life is one of indifference to pleasure or pain. (Antisthenes, Diogenes)
 - Epicureanism: By use of reason, one could plan one's life and sacrifice momentary pleasures for long-run benefit. (Epicurus, later Lucretius)

Hellenistic and Roman Ethics

- Fourth century BC to the third century AD:
 - Stoicism: The concept of duty acquired a central place in ethics, as conformity to moral rules which they identified with laws of human nature. (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus)
 - Roman Jurisprudence was largely based on a Stoic theory of natural law.

Hellenistic and Roman Ethics

- Third century AD:
 - Neoplatonism: Plotinus concluded that evil does not exist in an absolute sense but only as incompleteness or lack of Good. Virtue is the means to the metaphysical state of blessedness—finding unity with the One. This is somewhat like Plato's forms but personal.

Medieval Ethics

- Human reason and divine will were juxtaposed in one system of ethics. The tension between these two forces was reflected in different theologies.
- Fourth Century AD, Augustine:
 - Augustine rejected the claims of bodily pleasure and community life.
 - Life is a Test!
 - Virtue is the denial of sensual pleasure in preparation for reunion with God.

Medieval Ethics

- Fourth Century AD, Augustine:
 - Reason has a secondary place to faith in God and generating virtues such as: Prudence, justice, wisdom and fortitude.
 - The seeming conflict between freedom, divine foreknowledge and predestination is resolved in Augustine by claiming that free will in man is a primary cause in nature that God created.
 - Moral right and virtue are interpreted in light of obedience to divine authority.

Medieval Ethics

- The fourth to the eleventh Century AD is dominated by Neoplatonic mysticism and preoccupied with faith and salvation.
- In the eleventh century, with St. Anselm, faith is not incompatible with reason but rather prepares the soul for rational understanding.
- Peter Abelard suggests that morality is an inner quality, a property of motive or intention. Virtue can be attained through reason as well as through faith.

Medieval Ethics

- Thomas Aquinas reconciled Aristotle's and Augustine's ethics.
- Aristotle's and Augustine's ethics explained two different domains of ethical discourse — Natural and Theological.

Medieval Ethics

• Thomas Aquinas:

1. Natural law is the divine law as discovered by reason. The Church, the Bible, scientific knowledge of the universal needs and tendencies of man provide complementary standards of ethical judgment.

2. Free will was formulated like Augustine's view though the natural processes of internal causality and deliberation are part of the character of free choice.

3. More congenial to the scientific view of man.