What is Philosophy?
Responding to the World: Approaches to Ethics

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Terms & Concepts

- "Ethics" and "morality."
- A few non-equivalent pairs:
  - Praiseworthy vs. blameworthy.
  - Preferable vs. unpreferable.
  - Virtuous vs. vicious.
  - Good vs. bad.
- Where are we looking … ?
  - … with regard to action and result?
    - Agents *(habits, character).*
    - Activities *(individual choices, decisions, impulses to act).*
    - Outcomes *(consequences, results).*
  - … with regard to people and things?
    - At the agent alone, or at other people, too?
    - At individuals, or aggregates (communities, etc.)? *(Distinguish ethical from political?)*

Three Basic Approaches

- Virtue ethics.
  - Greek: *aretē* ("virtue, excellence").
    - Canonical Greek virtues: courage, moderation, wisdom, justice, piety.
  - Sanskrit: *pāramitā* ("perfection, completion").
  - Aristotle (384–322 BCE): virtue as both a midpoint, and a summit.
- Duty & deontology.
  - Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).
  - Sanskrit: *Dharma.*
    - A complex web of meanings: duty; custom; a body of teaching & observance; etc.
    - Conflicting duties in the *Bhagavad Gītā.*
- Utilitarianism & consequentialism.
  - Classical utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) & J.S. Mill (1806–1873).
  - Acts vs. rules.
  - Agent-neutrality.

Choosing Between Approaches

- "'Ought' implies 'can.'"
  - Epictetus (c. 50–c. 135 CE) on what is "up to us."
- Intentions and outcomes. (And which outcomes?)
  - Śāntideva (8th cent. CE) on the Buddha's generosity.
- Distinguishing self, body, possessions?
  - Plato (428–348 BCE), *Gorgias.*

- Is the good determined from within, or from without?
  - Can an account of my own human nature directly motivate ethics?
  - Divine and human "fiat."
  - Singer: "Why be moral?"
- Can we recast other approaches in terms of "consequences"?

Some Challenging Issues

- Is pursuing my own good selfish?
  - Being in relationship.
    - The "ethics of care."
  - Is <u>my own</u> flourishing up to me? What about the flourishing of others?
  - Flow, exchange, stagnation.
- Too much focus on being self<u>less</u>?
- Rule-following and obedience.

Readings & Resources

The literature on philosophical ethics is incredibly vast. These resources provide only the most basic starting points for thinking about the issues raised in our workshop.

Some More Detailed Overviews

For the basic Western approaches to ethics, the articles in the (free, online) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on virtue ethics and deontological ethics are excellent, and quite detailed. The authors do a very good job of situating these theories in comparison and contrast with other (mostly western) ethical approaches. The article on consequentialism is also not bad, though a bit more myopic. (The article on the history of utilitarianism, on the other hand, is full of sweeping unsupported value judgements, and seems to think that the history of philosophy began less than 400 years ago, and that all of that history was written entirely in English. It's not somewhere I'd recommend starting.)

Also in the Stanford Encyclopedia, the article on ethics in Buddhism has a nice balance of theoretical reflection and practical application. Section 3 does a nice job of showing the limits of the Western categories for trying to categorize Buddhist ethical traditions.

The article on ethics in Chinese philosophy is a little more challenging, but includes extensive discussion on the place of care in Confucian ethical theory, the nature of ethical cultivation, and the role of ritual and tradition in ethics. It also invites us to reflect critically on some approaches to ethics that might be elided or hidden by Western categories.

In all these cases, the bibliographies will provide extensive suggestions for diving even deeper into each topic.

Historical Authors & Texts

Plato's arguments for distinguishing self, body, and possessions are presented especially clearly in the the *Gorgias*. The translation by Donald J. Zeyl (Hackett, 1987) is good; a variety of other translations are also available.

Aristotle's discussions of *eudaimonia* and virtue are in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. An accessible translation is by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999; second edition), though even with Irwin's introduction and notes, this is a very challenging text. (It was likely written as a set of notes, rather than something nicely polished for publication. You can imagine some of the difficulties that arise from that.) Before you dive in to this important and influential text, you might want to get your feet wet with Peter Adamson's overview in his podcast episode on Aristotle's ethics.

An excellent translation of Epictetus' works (*Discourses, Fragments, & Handbook*) is by Robin Hard (Oxford World's Classics, 2014). Start with the *Handbook* (pp. 287–304), then feel free to jump around to whatever topics are of interest.

Translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are abundant. I'm personally fond of the version by Barbara Stoler Miller (Bantam, 1986), though there are plenty of other good options.

Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* gives a commonly studied account of the six perfections in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The translation by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Oxford World's Classics, 1995) is solid.

The standard source for Kant's ethics is his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, of which many translations are available (some in the public domain).

The early utilitarians, Bentham and Mill, wrote in English, so their works have long been in the public domain.