

9/7 & 9/8

The First Ethicists - A Glance at Early Wisdom

The idea of ethical thinking and philosophy using logic and reasoning first emerged in the West around 500BC and in the East around 1000BC
I've chosen 5 philosophers/ways of thinking from the West and 5 from the East, but this by no means covers all ways of thinking during these times

these ideas were not new at this time - we just have preserved written histories about them

whatever existed before these have been mostly lost due to conflict, disasters like fires and floods, or other destruction

I have only included main ideas and generalizations about each line of thinking below. This is not meant to be a complete representation of these ideas

IN THE WEST

500BC

Protagoras - moral codes are made by humans

what is good varies from culture to culture, and morality is tied to those cultures

there is no ultimate truth - everything is relative and subjective

475BC

Socrates - questioning everything, almost like a game

can never get to perfect ethical answers, but we should try

strives to simplify complicated topics into rational parts

uses logic more to disprove things than to prove them (easier to disprove things with logic)

425BC

Plato - theory of forms

everything in the world has a "perfect" form - and infinite copies

"good" is the highest form of all things and everything we do should focus on how to emulate that good

the greatest of these goods can be understood as God

morality is a process of understanding the natural hierarchy of all the forms, or coming as close as possible

some things/people/ideas/actions are inherently good or bad

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380BC

Aristotle - supreme good is good done for its own sake
some things are virtuous - good in themselves
follow the rules of those virtues, and they will lead to good outcomes
there is no perfect way to do good in all situations - everything is relative
the best good happens when it is not done solely for one's own pleasure
but, pleasure does follow a good deed, when good is done correctly

300BC

Epicurus - ultimate stoicism

the more free we are from mental pain, the more good we are doing
but, we should not indulge in things that give worldly pleasure
"pleasures of the mind" has a lot to do with logical thinking and freedom
from anxiety

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IN THE EAST

1000BC

Upanishads - early collection of texts that formed Hindu tradition

focused on epistemology (understanding how humans can know things)
but also on existential philosophies (attaining goodness through physical
means)

the goal is to fully know the self

Brahman (ultimate reality) vs Atman (your own existential understanding)

500BC

Buddhism - the absence of knowing causes suffering

we should always strive to understand the true nature of things

this knowledge causes goodness in the world

we can attain this knowledge through logic, rationality and meditation

500BC

Confucianism - connecting to ancestral values of the past provides a path to
goodness

following rituals and behaviors of the past leads to social and familial
harmony

humans are fundamentally good, and connecting to the humanism of
others leads us to goodness

400BC

Legalism - focused on laws and government as the best way to achieve
societal goodness

very structured around power dynamics and leaders in society

a lot of the focus in on providing food stability, military power and ways of maintaining order in society

a controlled, functioning society will ultimately lead to goodness within it
the control should come from a structured government, not a single leader

300BC

Taoism - attaining harmony and balance is the way to achieve goodness
every living thing shares in the same life-force, and we are bound to each other

spiritual things are tied to our physical being - it is our job to work toward harmony between the two

Keep in mind that this was all before the Roman Empire, and long before Christianity. We're talking 2500-3000 years ago here.