



NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

# Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- Explain the key ideas of virtue ethics.
- Explain two versions of virtue ethics found in the works of Aristotle and al-Farabi.
- Identify the similarities and differences between Aristotle's and al-Farabi's theories of an ethical life.
- Evaluate arguments for and against virtue ethics.



# Outline

The following topics will be covered in this lecture:

- Aristotle and Al-Farabi
- Virtue Ethics
- Eudaimonia
- The Doctrine of the Mean
- Applicability of Virtues
- Al-Farabi's Virtue Ethics
- Pros and Cons of Virtue Ethics





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 01: Aristotle and Al-Farabi

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# Discussion Question 1

How would you complete the following sentences?

- A person has a good life when...
- A person has a happy life when...
- A person has an ethical (moral) life when...

Do you think that having a good and happy life requires leading an ethical life?

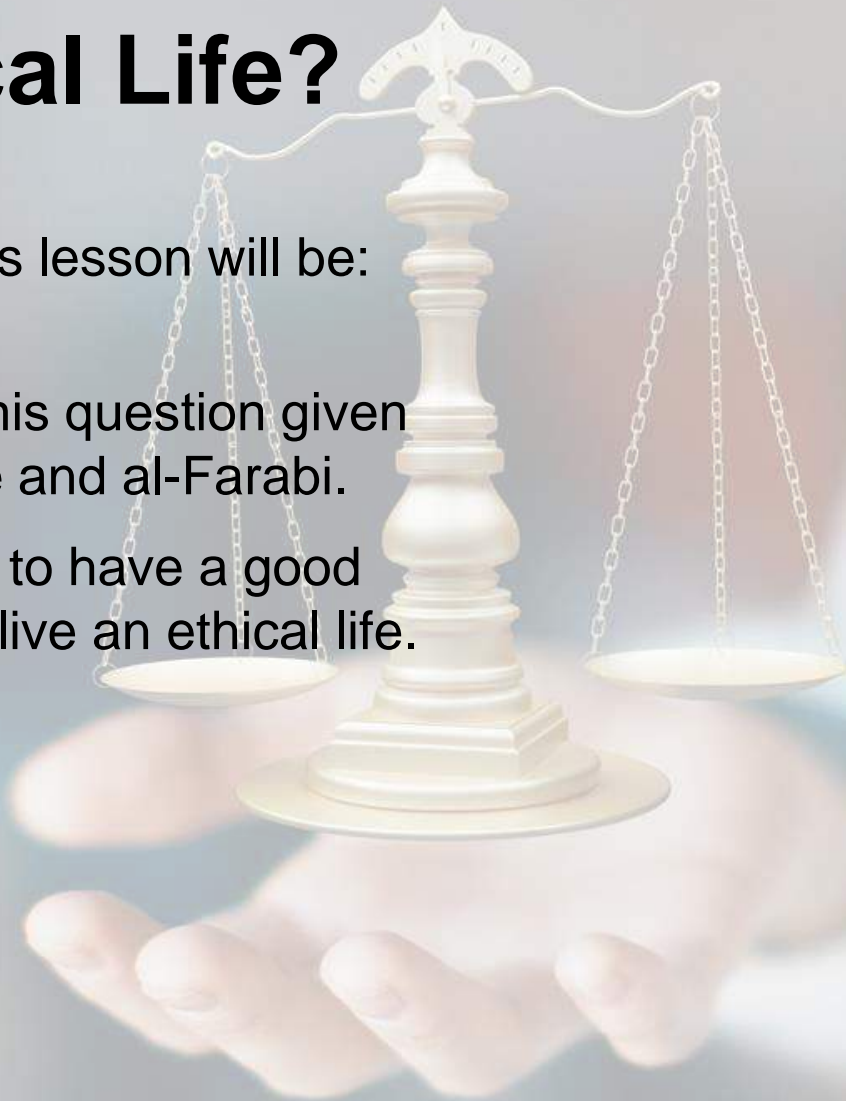


# What is an Ethical Life?

The overarching question of this lesson will be:

**What is an ethical life?**

- We'll explore the answer to this question given by two philosophers: Aristotle and al-Farabi.
- Both philosophers argue that to have a good and happy life, one needs to live an ethical life.

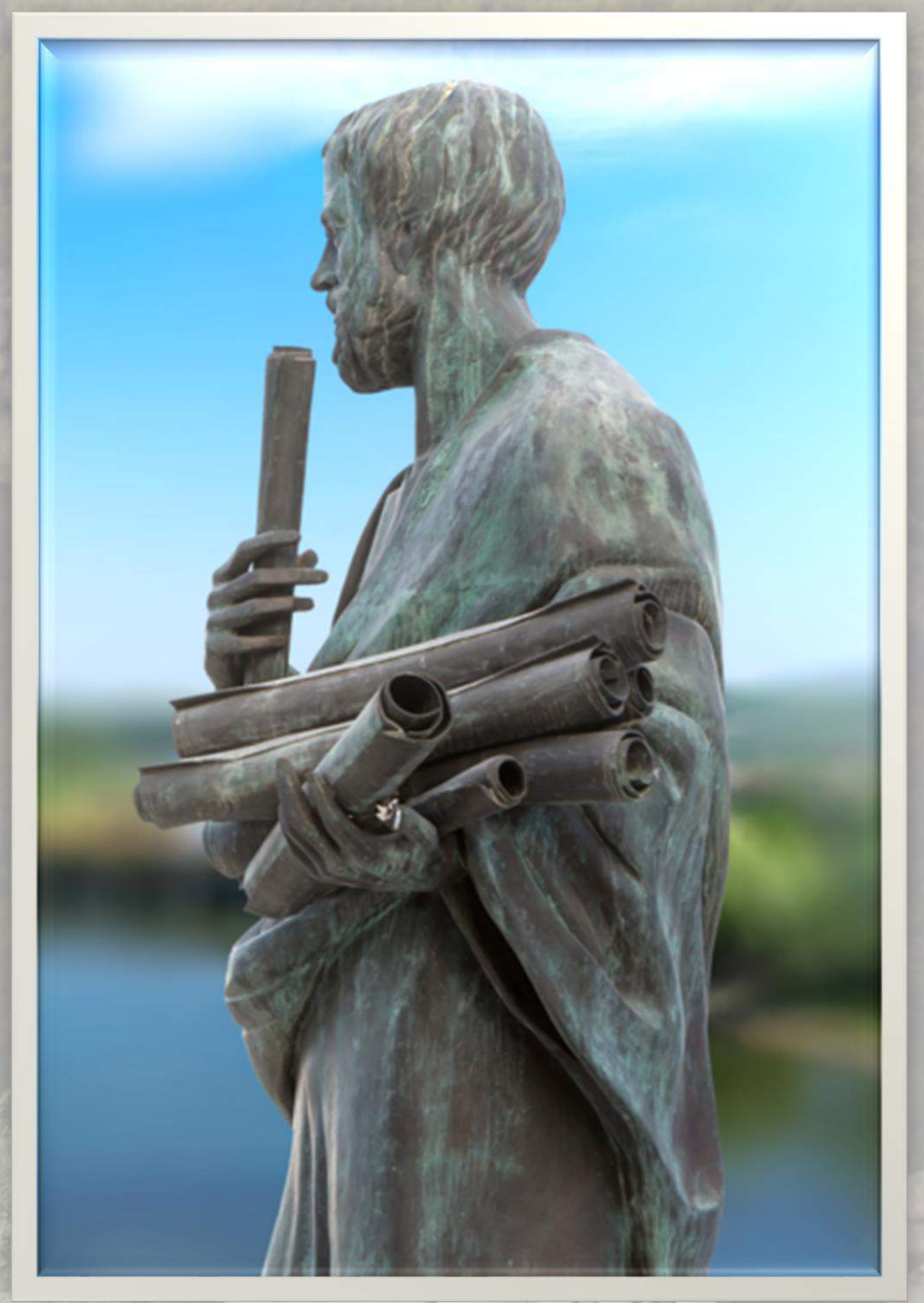




# Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle is one of the three greatest ancient Greek philosophers, other than Socrates and Plato.

- Socrates was Plato's teacher, and Plato was Aristotle's teacher.
- Aristotle was the founder of the Lyceum Academy.
- He was the tutor of Alexander the Great.
- He made lasting contributions to biology, physics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy.
- He developed another extremely influential version of virtue ethics.

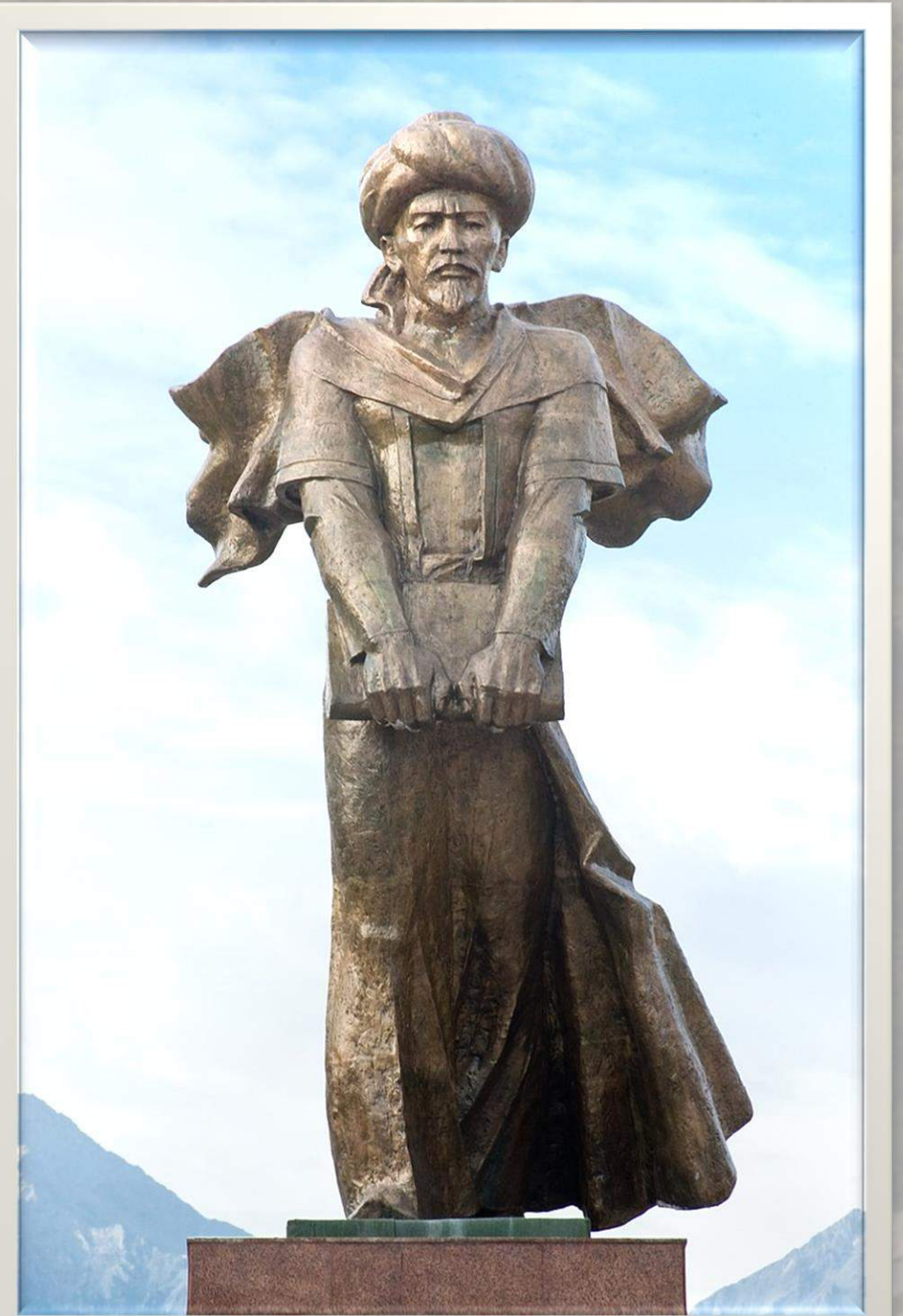




# Al-Farabi (c. 878–c. 950)

In the medieval Islamic world, al-Farabi was regarded as the greatest philosopher after Aristotle.

- He was deeply influenced by Aristotle. One of his nicknames was the “Second Teacher,” with Aristotle being the “First”.
- His primary works were in logic, metaphysics, ethics, and politics.
- Al-Farabi also conceived a version of virtue ethics that is different in important ways from Aristotle’s.





# Acknowledgements:

Slide 1 and 4: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 2: Jd-Photodesign (n.d.). Idee / Innovation / Kreativität [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/idee-innovation-kreativitat/202200437>

Slide 3: Momius (n.d.). Key topics [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/key-topics/167344594>

Slide 5: Sosiukin (n.d.). Just a lot of question marks on colored papers. vintage background [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. [https://stock.adobe.com/sg/search/images?load\\_type=search&is\\_recent\\_search=&search\\_type=usertyped&k=questions&native\\_visual\\_search=&similar\\_content\\_id=&asset\\_id=334683814](https://stock.adobe.com/sg/search/images?load_type=search&is_recent_search=&search_type=usertyped&k=questions&native_visual_search=&similar_content_id=&asset_id=334683814)

Slide 6: Aldeca Productions (n.d.). Mano con bilancia, tribunale e giustizia [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/mano-con-bilancia-tribunale-e-giustizia/197380212>

Slide 7 and 8: Panos (n.d.). Aristotle statue located at Stageira of Greece [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/aristotle-statue-located-at-stageira-of-greece/46639974>

Slide 7: Ververidis (n.d.). Statue of Aristotle a great greek philosopher [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/statue-of-aristotle-a-great-greek-philosopher/110839498>

Slide 7: Kenny, A. J.P. and Amadio, Anselm H. 2021, March 2. Aristotle. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle>

Slide 8: Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2014, April 11. Al-Fārābī. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Farabi>

Slide 8: Yesken Sergebayev. (2020, September 23). In Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesken\\_Sergebayev](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesken_Sergebayev)





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 02: Virtue Ethics

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





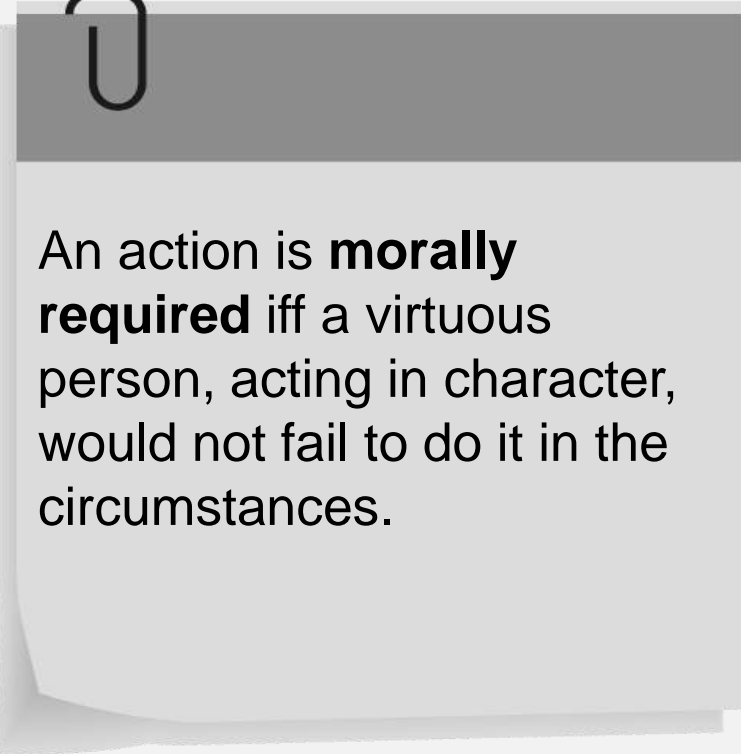
# What is Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics is a family of moral theories according to which morally right actions are explained by the nature of a good life, and the good character traits (virtues) needed to live such a life (Shafer-Landau 2021: 273).

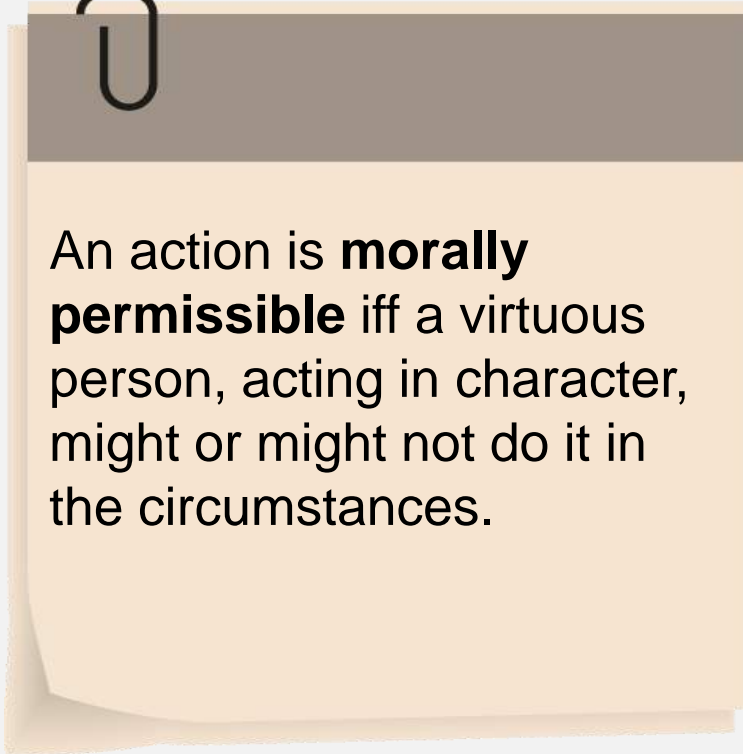
- We studied Confucius's version of virtue ethics last week.
- Long after Confucius, Aristotle and al-Farabi each devised their own distinctive versions of virtue ethics.

# Right and Wrong Actions

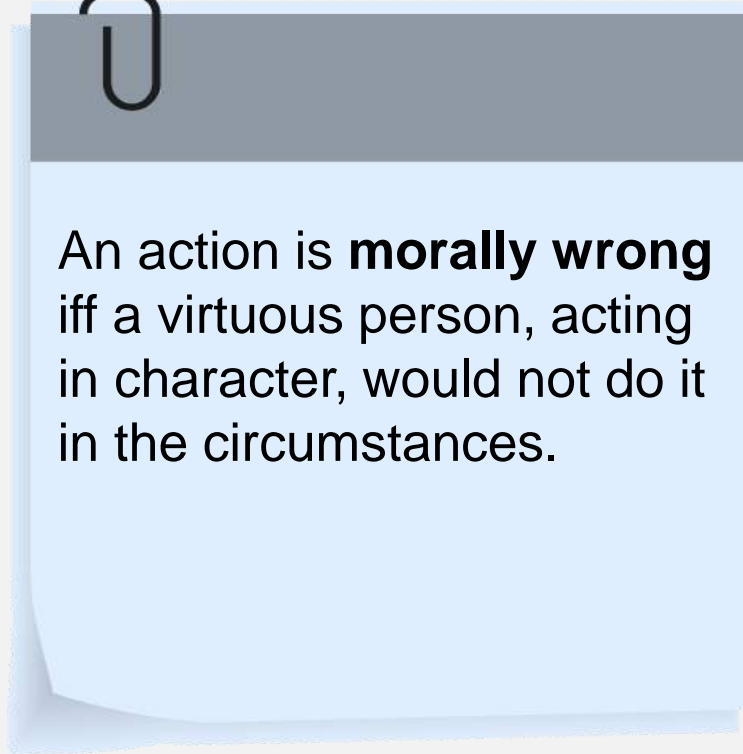
In general, virtue ethics says this about right and wrong actions:



An action is **morally required** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, would not fail to do it in the circumstances.



An action is **morally permissible** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, might or might not do it in the circumstances.



An action is **morally wrong** iff a virtuous person, acting in character, would not do it in the circumstances.

(Timmons 2013: 280; Shafer-Landau 2021: 273, 288)



# Virtue

To understand virtue ethics, we have to understand what a virtuous person is.

- According to virtue ethics, a virtuous person is a (hypothetical or actual) person who fully possesses **all** the virtues (Shafer-Landau 2021: 273-274).
- A **virtue** is an admirable character trait that enables its possessor to achieve what is morally good (Shafer-Landau 2021: 279).
- A **vice** is the opposite of a virtue. It is a character trait that hinders its possessor from achieving what is morally good.



# Aristotle on Virtue and Good Life

- Aristotle explained his brand of virtue ethics in his book the *Nicomachean Ethics* (published in 349 BCE).
- According to Aristotle, a virtue enables its possessor to have a **good human life** (Shafer-Landau 2021: 280-282).
  - More precisely, Aristotle argued that the virtues are **necessary** elements of a good human life.
  - Aristotle took a good human life to be a life of **eudaimonia** (i.e., a life of “happiness” or “flourishing”) (Shafer-Landau 2021: 280; NE I.7).
- In Aristotelian virtue ethics, the moral good that virtues enable their possessors to achieve is a life of *eudaimonia*.



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 10: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 11: Nirutft (n.d.). Change concept, Open paper. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/change-concept-open-paper/214892227>

Slide 11 and 12: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, p. 273.

Slide 12: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, p. 288.

Slide 12: Timmons, M., 2013. Moral Theory: An Introduction. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 280.

Slide 13: Ipopba (n.d.). Woman praying and free bird enjoying nature on sunset background, hope concept [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/woman-praying-and-free-bird-enjoying-nature-on-sunset-background-hope-concept/311664549>

Slide 13: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 273 - 274, 279.

Slide 14: Gustavofrazao (n.d.). Good Life written on rural road [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/good-life-written-on-rural-road/88140436>

Slide 14: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 280 - 282.

Slide 14: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press.





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 03: Eudaimonia

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# What is Eudaimonia?

- What is eudaimonia, then?
  - According to Aristotle, eudaimonia (happiness, flourishing) is the exercise of reason.
  - Moreover, eudaimonia is the highest good that human beings can attain.
- So, for Aristotle, a supremely good human life is a life of eudaimonia, and eudaimonia is the active exercise of reason. But why should we believe this?

# Is Eudaimonia the Human Good?

To show that a good human life is a life of eudaimonia, and that eudaimonia consists of the exercise of reason, Aristotle proposed a three-part test to determine what is good for human beings (Shafer-Landau 2021: 281).

First, the human good must not merely be **instrumentally good**; rather, it must be **intrinsically good**.

Second, the human good must be **self-sufficient**.

Third, the human good must involve something that is **uniquely human**.



# Instrumental vs. Intrinsic Goodness

Aristotle argued that the human good, whatever it is, must be an intrinsically good thing, and not an instrumentally good thing (Shafer-Landau 2021: 281).

Something is **instrumentally good** iff it brings about other good things (Shafer-Landau 2021: G-4).

Something is **intrinsically good** iff its goodness depends on features that are inherent to it (Timmons 2020: 2-3).

# Eudaimonia is Intrinsically Good

Aristotle thought it was obvious that eudaimonia (happiness, flourishing) is intrinsically good, and not instrumentally good. He wrote:

“Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.” (Aristotle, NE I.7)

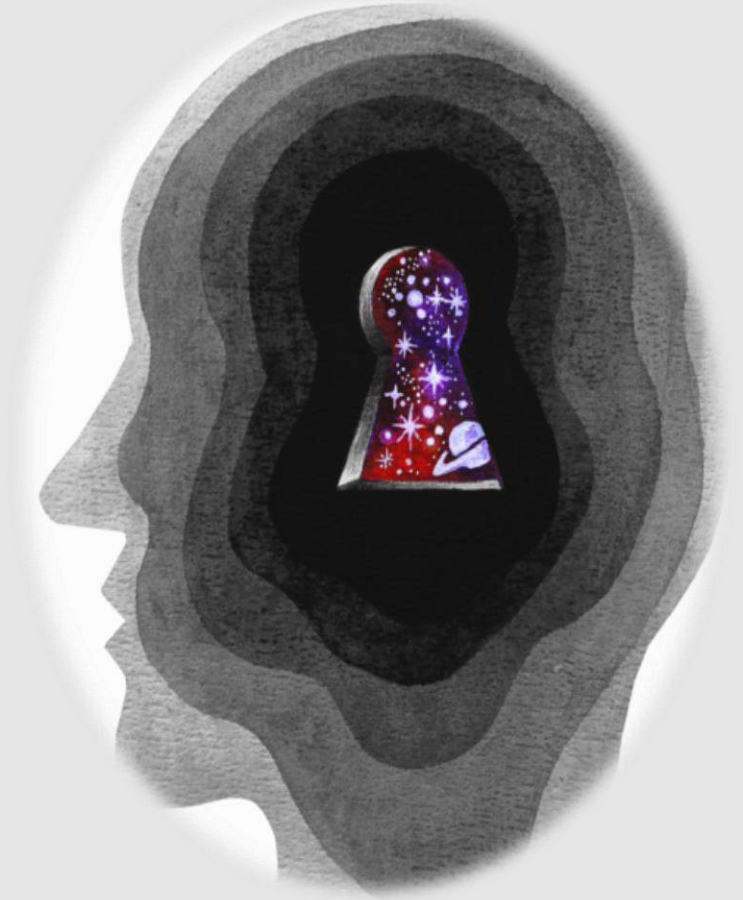




# Eudaimonia is Self-Sufficient

Furthermore, Aristotle argued that the human good must be **self-sufficient**, meaning that possessing it is, all by itself, enough to make a person's life a good one (Shafer-Landau 2021: 281; NE I.7).

- Aristotle thought that power over others is not self-sufficient, as power can be used unwisely. Hence power cannot be the human good.
- In contrast, happiness (**eudaimonia**) is enough, all by itself, to give someone a good life.



# Eudaimonia is Distinctive

Aristotle famously argued that eudaimonia is the active exercise of reason. He argued for this claim from the premise that the faculty of reason distinguishes human beings from all other living things (Shafer-Landau 2021: 281; NE I.7).

- Pleasure and the nourishment are not the highest human good, because other living things can be nourished and feel pleasure.
- In contrast, the human capacity for reason distinguishes us from all other living beings. Therefore, Aristotle concluded, the highest human good must be the excellent exercise of reason.





# Virtue is Necessary for Eudaimonia

Another main tenet of Aristotle's virtue ethics is that the virtues are a necessary element of a good human life. Let's trace Aristotle's argument for this claim (see Shafer-Landau 2021: 281-282; NE I.13, II.1, II.2 II.6).

The key premise of this argument is that the virtues necessarily involve the excellent exercise of reason.



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 16: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 17: Quality Stock Arts (n.d.). Close up red dart arrow hit the center target highest score of dartboard. Business management and planning to success go winner goal concept. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/close-up-red-dart-arrow-hit-the-center-target-highest-score-of-dartboard-business-management-and-planing-to-success-go-winner-goal-concept/434529993>

Slide 17: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press.

Slide 18: Ipopba (n.d.). Woman praying and free bird enjoying nature on sunset background, hope concept [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/woman-praying-and-free-bird-enjoying-nature-on-sunset-background-hope-concept/311664549>

Slide 18 and 19: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, p. 281.

Slide 19: Pashigorov (n.d.). VS. One against another. versus. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/vs-one-against-another-versus/204901436>

Slide 19: Timmons, M., 2020. Disputed Moral Issues. 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 2 - 3.

Slide 20: Nivens, S. (n.d.). Trying to concentrate on positivity. [Mixed media]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/trying-to-concentrate-on-positivity-mixed-media/144144079>



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 20 - 23: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press.

Slide 21: Kovarzh, K. (n.d.). Dipinto acquerello religione. Fede, speranza, amore. Rilassamento, concentrazione. Serratura nella testa umana [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/dipinto-acquerello-religione-fede-speranza-amore-rilassamento-concentrazione-serratura-nella-testa-umana/441116459>

Slide 22: Baramееfotolia (n.d.). Lightbulb brainstorming creative idea abstract icon on business hand. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/lightbulb-brainstorming-creative-idea-abstract-icon-on-business-hand/122492580>

Slide 21 and 22: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, p. 281.

Slide 23: Rolffimages (n.d.). Mind power [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/mind-power/267990813>

Slide 23: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 281 - 282.





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 04: The Doctrine of the Mean

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# What is the Doctrine of the Mean?

To see how the virtues involve the exercise of reason, we need to look at another key idea in Aristotle's virtue ethics: The doctrine of the mean.

- The doctrine of the mean is the thesis that every virtue is a “mean” between extremes—an intermediate state between a deficiency and an excess (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 89-90; NE II.2, II.6).
- The same idea is found in the philosophy of Confucius. Aristotle independently discovered the idea over 100 years later.



# Drives and Emotions

According to Aristotle, virtues appropriately constrain drives and emotions (Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 89-90).

- Any virtue has two related vices: On the one hand, a deficiency of the drive/emotion, and on the other hand, an excess of the drive/emotion.
- A virtue ensures that its possessor's actions are motivated by neither too little nor too much of the drive/emotion.





# Relationship Between Virtues and Vices

Drive or Emotion	Vice: Excess of Drive or Emotion	Virtue	Vice: Deficiency of Drive or Emotion
Risk-taking	Rashness	<b>Courage</b>	Cowardliness
Sympathy	Extravagance	<b>Generosity</b>	Stinginess
Pleasure	Intemperance	<b>Temperance (in relation to bodily pleasures)</b>	Insensibility
Social esteem	Boastfulness	<b>Truthfulness (about oneself in social contexts)</b>	Self-deprecation
Social relationships	Flattery	<b>Friendliness</b>	Quarrelsomeness

Virtues bring about an intermediate state between two vices: An excess and a deficiency in some drive or emotion.

# Relationship Between Virtues and Vices (Cont.)

Drive or Emotion	Vice: Excess of Drive or Emotion	Virtue	Vice: Deficiency of Drive or Emotion
Anger	Irascibility	<b>Gentleness</b>	Impassivity
Admiration	Vanity	<b>Pride</b>	Diffidence
Acquisition	Gain	<b>Justice</b>	Loss
Civility	Servility	<b>Dignity</b>	Churlishness
Goal-attainment	Cunning	<b>Wisdom</b>	Naivety

Virtues bring about an intermediate state between two vices: an excess and a deficiency in some drive or emotion.



# Practical Wisdom

Aristotle suggested that all the virtues involve the exercise of reason, because it takes reasoning to identify the mean—the virtuous state—between vices of excess and vices of deficiency.

- Aristotle believed that the ability to find the mean between extremes required another virtue called practical wisdom (“phronesis”).
- **Practical wisdom** is the ability to reason well about how one ought to act in particular circumstances, and act accordingly.



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 26: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 27 and 28: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, pp. 89 - 90.

Slide 29 and 30: Wolff, J. 2021. An Introduction to Moral Philosophy. 2nd ed. W. W. Norton & Company.

Slide 29 and 30: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press.

Slide 27, 28 and 31: Baramееfotolia (n.d.). Lightbulb brainstorming creative idea abstract icon on business hand. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/lightbulb-brainstorming-creative-idea-abstract-icon-on-business-hand/122725418>





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 05: Applicability of Virtues

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# Are the Virtues the Same for Everyone?

- Aristotle's view was that some virtues are needed by all human beings to live well. These were the virtues he was concerned about.
- To see why Aristotle thought so, it helps to reflect on how the virtues are needed to bring about good things that any human being needs:

**Courage**

**Honesty**

**Generosity**

**Loyalty**



# The Unity of Virtues



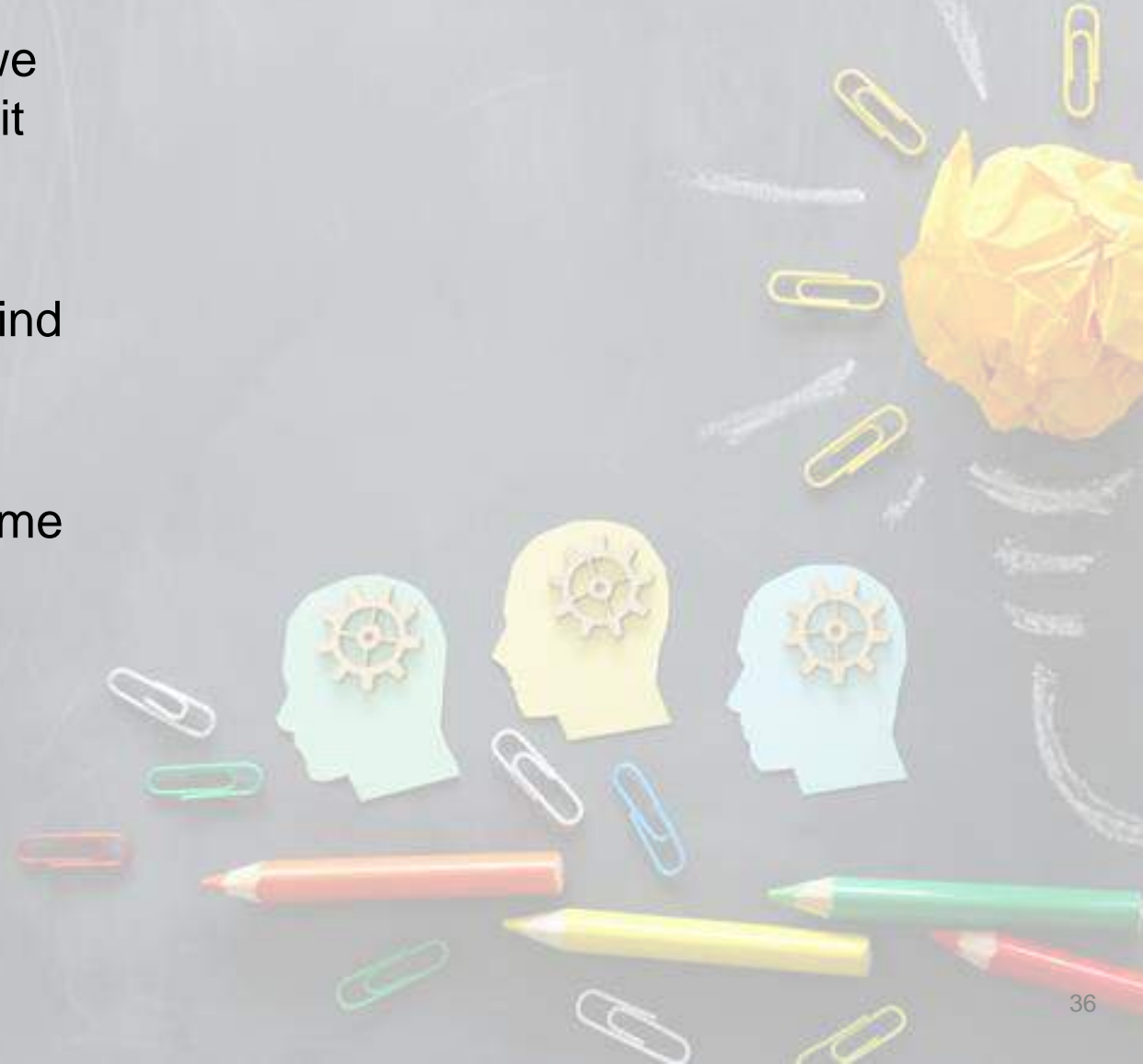
Another key idea in Aristotle's virtue ethics is the unity of the virtues.

- The **unity of the virtues** is the thesis that having any one virtue requires having them all (Timmons 2013: 276).
- The reason Aristotle thinks the unity of virtues thesis is true is that practical wisdom is necessary and sufficient for all the virtues (Driver 2007: 143).

# Moral Education

How to acquire the virtues? Aristotle thought that we learn virtues through training, experience, and habit (Shafer-Landau 2021: 277-278).

- To be trained in the virtues, we need the right teachers, and we need to be raised in the right kind of environment. This is partly a matter of luck.
- Habit is also important to acquiring the virtues. Aristotle suggested that by doing good, we become good.





# Acknowledgements:

Slide 33: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 34: Fizkes (n.d.). Perfect choice for everyone. Close up of multiethnic men and women hands raised in thumbs up gesture approving recommending best contract or loan terms conditions, qualified goods service assistance [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/perfect-choice-for-everyone-close-up-of-multiethnic-men-and-women-hands-raised-in-thumbs-up-gesture-approving-recommending-best-contract-or-loan-terms-conditions-qualified-goods-service-assistance/392620260>

Slide 34: Timmons, M., 2013. Moral Theory: An Introduction. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Slide 34: Rachels, S. and Rachels, J., 2019. The elements of moral philosophy. 9th ed.

Slide 35: Kzenon (n.d.). Gears with one little red wheel - concept for innovation [3D rendering]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/3d-rendering-of-gears-with-one-little-red-wheel-concept-for-innovation/189925685>

Slide 35: Timmons, M., 2013. Moral Theory: An Introduction. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 276.

Slide 35: Driver, J., 2007. Ethics: the fundamentals. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, p. 143.

Slide 36: Tomertu (n.d.). Education concept image. Creative idea and innovation. Crumpled paper as light bulb metaphor over blackboard [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/education-concept-image-creative-idea-and-innovation-crumpled-paper-as-light-bulb-metaphor-over-blackboard/290711146>

Slide 36: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 277 - 278.





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 06: Al-Farabi's Virtue Ethics

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# Similarity: Al-Farabi's and Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Al-Farabi's virtue ethics contains many of the same features as Aristotle's, including:

- The claim that the highest human good is happiness, which consists of the excellent exercise of reason (Fakhry 2002: 92)
- The doctrine of the mean
- The unity of the virtues
- The idea that only the most virtuous people should hold political office



# Contrast: Al-Farabi's and Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

- On the other hand, al-Farabi's virtue ethics has some distinctive characteristics.
- In particular, al-Farabi offers an analysis of practical wisdom into four components:

**Deliberative virtue**

**Moral virtue**

**Natural virtue**

**Theoretical virtue**



# Deliberative Virtue

Deliberative virtue, for al-Farabi, is a kind of foresight:  
It is the ability to recognise the results of actions  
(Bonevac & Phillips 2009: 111; al-Farabi, ch. II).

↳ Deliberative virtue is what enables a person to  
know the means that are necessary to achieve  
their ends (goals).

↳ Through deliberative virtue, you can figure  
out how to get what you want.





# Deliberative Virtue is Not Sufficient

Deliberative virtue, however, is not sufficient to be wholly virtuous.

- A person's ends (goals) may be evil. In that case, the means to achieving those ends are also evil (al-Farabi, ch. II).
  - For example, sadists take pleasure in the suffering of other people. A sadist may have excellent deliberative virtue, in that they can find ingenious ways to make others suffer.
  - Still, the sadist is not wholly virtuous.



# Moral Virtue

According to al-Farabi, a virtuous person must also have moral virtue. Moral virtue is the virtue that enables a person to discover what is morally good. On moral virtue, al-Farabi writes:

“It is obvious that the one who possesses a virtue by which he discovers what is most useful and noble, and this for the sake of a virtuous end that is good...cannot possess this faculty without possessing a moral virtue.”

(Al-Farabi, ch. II)



# Moral Virtue is Not Sufficient

- However, al-Farabi points out that having deliberative virtue and moral virtue isn't sufficient for being wholly virtuous, either.
- Moral virtue enables a person to discover what is morally good. But someone who discovers what is morally good isn't necessarily motivated to attain it.
  - For instance, I could discover that it is morally good to drive less, fly less, eat less meat, and so on, because it will help to stem climate change. Even so, I might lack the motivation to actually do these things.



# Natural Virtue

So, al-Farabi suggested that a virtuous person must also have natural virtue. Natural virtue is what provides a person with the motivation to pursue a morally good end.

Al-Farabi: “...there must be some other moral virtue - other, that is, than the one discovered by the deliberative virtue - which accompanies the deliberative virtue and enables the possessor of the deliberative virtue to wish the good and the virtuous end. That virtue must be natural and must come into being by nature...”

(Al-Farabi, ch. II)



# Theoretical Virtue

Theoretical virtue is the general ability to gain knowledge of the surrounding world.

- As al-Farabi describes it, theoretical virtue consists of “those sciences whose ultimate goal is to gain certain knowledge of existing entities as intelligibles only” (Fakhry 2002: 92).
- Al-Farabi says that deliberative virtue is “subordinate” to theoretical virtue, because in order for someone to know how to achieve their ends, they need general knowledge of how the world is (al-Farabi ch. II).



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 38: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 39: Reisman, D. 2004. Majid Fakhry, Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence, Great Islamic Thinkers (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002). International Journal of Middle East Studies, p. 92.

Slide 39 and 40: Tomertu (n.d.). Education concept image. Creative idea and innovation. Crumpled paper as light bulb metaphor over blackboard [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/education-concept-image-creative-idea-and-innovation-crumpled-paper-as-light-bulb-metaphor-over-blackboard/290711146>

Slide 41 - 46: Al-Farabi, from the Attainment of Happiness: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, pp. 89 - 90.

Slide 41: Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S., 2009. Introduction to world philosophy. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, p. 111.

Slide 41: PhotoGranary (n.d.). Business or success concept. Arrows aims at a dartboard target. Winning situation. Reach goal of success. Achievement concept. Business target. [3D rendering]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/business-or-success-concept-arrows-aims-at-a-dartboard-target-winning-situation-reach-goal-of-success-achievement-concept-business-target-3d-rendering/431553700>

Slide 42: Talaj (n.d.). Evil goal [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/evil-goal/165518824>



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 43: Sulit.photos (n.d.). Cupped hands holding a white heart in white background. Charity, pure love, compassion and kindness concept. Top view. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sq/images/cupped-hands-holding-a-white-heart-in-white-background-charity-pure-love-compassion-and-kindness-concept-top-view/355103398>

Slide 44: Fiedels (n.d.). pfeile1610b [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sq/images/pfeile1610b/123833922>

Slide 45: Blacksalmon (n.d.). Enjoying Life, Harmony and Positive Mind Concept. Stack of Stable Pebble Stone with Smiling Face Cartoon and Leaf. Serene, Balancing Body, Mind, Soul and Spirit. Mental Health Practice [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sq/images/enjoying-life-harmony-and-positive-mind-concept-stack-of-stable-pebble-stone-with-smiling-face-cartoon-and-leaf-serene-balancing-body-mind-soul-and-spirit-mental-health-practice/441698603>

Slide 46: Monticellllo (n.d.). Composition with books on the table [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sq/images/composition-with-books-on-the-table/163581047>

Slide 46: REISMAN, D. 2004. MAJID FAKHRY, Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence, Great Islamic Thinkers (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002). International Journal of Middle East Studies, p. 92.





NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY  
SINGAPORE

VALUES

RESPECT

# Topic 07: Pros and Cons of Virtue Ethics

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 05:

## Living an Ethical Life

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# Pros of Virtue Ethics: Moral Complexity

Should we accept virtue ethics? Let us consider some arguments that may be made in favour of it.

One argument is that virtue ethics allows us to cope with the complexity of moral decisions (Shafer-Landau 2021: 274-275).

- Deciding the right thing is complicated. A single moral principle is too simplistic.
- Instead, virtue ethics entails many moral principles which correspond to many virtues.
- A virtuous person, endowed with practical wisdom, would be able to judge the virtuous, and hence morally right, course of action.



# Pros of Virtue Ethics: Moral Dilemmas

Another argument that might be made in favour of virtue ethics is that it can provide practical guidance in **moral dilemmas**.

- According to virtue ethics, *any* course of action that a virtuous agent might choose in a moral dilemma is morally permissible.
- Only actions that a virtuous person would definitely not do are wrong.



# Cons of Virtue Ethics: No Practical Guidance

However, critics of virtue ethics often deny that it provides guidance in moral dilemmas (Rachels 2019: 183; Shafer-Landau 2021: 284-85).

- There are situations where different virtues would incline one to do different things.
  - For instance, honesty may favour being “brutally honest.” Kindness may favour a “white lie.”
- In these situations, virtue ethics would tell us to do whatever the virtuous agent would do. But that advice is not helpful if we don’t know what a virtuous person would do in the first place.





# Cons of Virtue Ethics: Happy Without Virtue?

Another criticism of virtue ethics suggests that human beings can achieve a state of eudaimonia (happiness, flourishing) without being virtuous.

- This directly contradicts the claim of Aristotle and other virtue ethicists that having the virtues is necessary for a good human life.
- The philosopher Sarah Conly has argued that it is indeed possible to flourish without being virtuous. As an example of someone who flourished without being virtuous, Conly offers Lorenzo de' Medici (Conly 1988).



Lorenzo de' Medici  
(1449–1492)

# Cons of Virtue Ethics: Demandingness

A third objection to virtue ethics is that it is excessively “demanding”, i.e., it expects too much of people, in two different ways (Shafer-Landau 2021: 285-286).

- First, hardly anyone can be motivated to act as a virtuous person would. Only a saint is a virtuous person.
- Second, it is sometimes morally permissible **not** to do what a virtuous person would do.



Mahatma Gandhi



# Further Discussion Questions

**Question 2:** Aristotle argued that the highest human good, Eudaimonia, is the activity that is distinctive of human beings. Do you agree?

**Question 3:** Both Aristotle and al-Farabi suggest that happiness or flourishing consists of the excellent exercise of reason. Is this true? Can't people be happy without being good at reasoning?

**Question 4:** People sometimes disagree about who is virtuous, and who is not. Is this a problem for virtue ethics? (Virtue ethicists think that if this is a problem, it can be solved, because they think it's possible to discover the correct theory of virtue.)





# Acknowledgements:

Slide 49: Tryfonov (n.d.). Human head and compass points to the ethics, integrity, values, respect. The concept on the topic of business, trust, psychology etc. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/human-head-and-compass-points-to-the-ethics-integrity-values-respect-the-concept-on-the-topic-of-business-trust-psychology-etc/228118489>

Slide 50: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 274 - 275.

Slide 52: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 284 - 285.

Slide 52: Rachels, S. and Rachels, J., 2019. The elements of moral philosophy. 9th ed, p. 183.

Slide 53: Conly, S., 1988. Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue. Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 13, pp.83-96.

Slide 53: Lorenzo de' Medici (2021, July 22). *In Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo\\_de%27\\_Medici](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_de%27_Medici)

Slide 54: Shafer-Landau, R., 2021. A concise introduction to ethics, 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 285 - 286.

Slide 54: Mahatma Gandhi (2021, August 9). *In Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi)

Slide 19: Timmons, M., 2020. Disputed Moral Issues. 5th ed. Oxford University Press, pp. 2 - 3.

Slide 20: Nivens, S. (n.d.). Trying to concentrate on positivity. [Mixed media]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/trying-to-concentrate-on-positivity-mixed-media/144144079>

**No part of this video shall be filmed, recorded, downloaded, reproduced, distributed, republished or transmitted in any form or by any means without written approval from the University.**