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COURSE MODULE

COURSE CODE: ETHICS(Ethc)

Module 11

2nd Semester, S.Y. 2024-2025

Introduction

This module explores the foundational principles of ethics as articulated by ancient Greek philosophers, highlighting the interplay between theoretical inquiries and practical applications in everyday life. It delves into the contributions of prominent thinkers and philosophers who laid the groundwork for philosophical thought and ethical inquiry.

Intended Learning Outcomes

The Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for this module focus on what you are expected to achieve after engaging with the lessons and activities. These outcomes are designed to guide your understanding and application of ethics, both as a theoretical discipline and as a practical tool for navigating everyday life.

Intended Learning Outcomes:

- *Explore the historical context and key concepts of ethics as developed by ancient Greek philosophers, and to apply these ethical theories to contemporary moral dilemmas.*

Lesson – *Selected/Required Readings in Ethics*

READING NO. 1: ETHICS AND THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS
Boone, Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2017

Philosophy as we know it, at least in the Western world (Europe and the Americas), sprung up around the sixth century B.C. in Greece. The Greek schools of thought dominated philosophy and all of its subsets until the first century A.D. In their attempts to decipher the big questions about life, the universe, and humanity, the philosophers of ancient Greece incorporated all the knowledge they had at the time. They didn't see much of a distinction between the theoretical secrets of the unknown universe and the quantifiable, physical world.

As such, these philosophers used every tool and discipline at their disposal, including ethics, logic, biology, the nature of art, the nature of beauty, and especially, political science. For the ancient Greeks, particularly for those in Athens, politics and public life were among the most important concerns. Their inquiries into ethics frequently focused not just on the individual's duties but also on the proper ways to lead and govern.

Many philosophers wrote and taught in ancient Greece. But this golden era of Greek philosophy is dominated by three of the most famous and influential thinkers in Western history: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.
Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.) believed that rational ability is one of the things that separated humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, as we are the only animals capable of logic and reason.

Carrying on the Socratic traditions was one of his primary students, Plato (ca. 428-348 B.C.). In Athens, Plato formed the first higher learning institution in the West, the Academy. One of his major contributions to moral philosophy is the theory of forms, which explores how humans can live a life of happiness in an ever-changing, material world.

The third pillar of ancient Greek philosophy is Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), a student of Plato at the Academy and later a professor at the same institution. One of his main theories deals with universals. He questioned whether universals exist and what they might be. This remains a major focus of ethical inquiry today.
The theories of these three philosophers created the Western philosophical canon and represent the first major entries into the study of ethics.

READING NO. 2: PHILOSOPHY VERSUS MORAL PHILOSOPHY

While philosophy is ultimately the question of what is and isn't human nature, it is most definitely human nature to wonder. This is something that separates us from other creatures—we are self-aware of our existence and mortality, and we have higher brain functions that give us the ability to reason. The earliest humans most certainly wondered about the same questions "official" philosophers and students formally posed: Why was the Earth created? What is it made of? Why are humans here? What is the purpose of it all? How can we live happy lives? To even think about asking these questions is philosophy at its most basic and raw.

Philosophers have sought to answer these questions or at least inch closer to universal truths. These same questions have led to centuries of religious development. Most religions are like philosophy in that they are about the pursuit of answers to the big questions—however, religion is much more likely than philosophy to claim to have the answers. Philosophy is about asking questions—always asking questions.

Formal philosophy began in Greece in the seventh century B.C. Hundreds of years before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would solidify the foundations of Western thought (and even before Confucius and Buddha would do the same in the East), philosophers such as Heraclitus and Anaxagoras were considering the makeup of the universe and the nature of life. Anaxagoras, for example, wrote that "there is a portion of everything in everything." That's some very sophisticated thinking, and it's an idea that has resonated throughout the centuries of philosophy and will continue to resonate for centuries to come.

Types of Philosophy

Ideas about the nature of the universe logically lead to the idea that all people are connected. We all occupy the same planet, and within it, individual societies and countries have their own sets of standards of behavior. Why are those standards in place? The answer is straightforward: to maintain the peace and to keep things humming along so that some, many, or all may live lives of worth and fulfillment. This is where the philosophical branch of moral philosophy comes into play.
"Moral philosophy"—a term that is used interchangeably with ethics—is its own realm of study. It sits apart from the broad ideas of general philosophy, as well as the other branches of philosophy. In fact, there are many branches of general philosophy. The main offshoots are:

- Metaphysics – This is the study of all existence. This is about the really big questions. For example: Why is there life? What else is out there? Why are we here?

- Epistemology – This concerns the intricacies of acquiring knowledge and perception. Epistemology isn't so much about the truth so much as it is about determining how we know what we know. One question in this field might be: How do we know that what we think is the truth really is the truth?

  Ethics. Much more on this to come!

- **Political philosophy.** The ancient Greeks developed political philosophy in tandem with individual philosophy because, as they were laying the groundwork for democracy, it was crucial for them to determine the best way to govern so as to achieve "the greater good." Political philosophy is

about the underpinnings of government and rule so as to maintain peace, prosperity, and happiness for some, many, or all.

- **Aesthetics.** This is about defining beauty, art, and other kinds of expression and appreciation thereof; the things that make being a human worthwhile.

You may have noticed that there is a hierarchy of the branches. Starting from metaphysics, the individual areas move from the biggest and broadest of questions about the biggest and broadest things, and progress down through finer and finer parts of existence. For example, metaphysics sits atop the list because it is about the study of all existence and why it is; aesthetics is at the bottom, because it's about how to improve and appreciate life itself.

THE HOWS AND WHYS OF LIFE

The philosophical branch that will be studied in this book is, of course, ethics. Ethics is about the application of philosophy. What good are answers, or at least very informed or deeply held opinions, about the nature of the universe and the meaning of life if you don't know how to apply those "truths" to how you live your day-to-day life and interact with the world around you? Ethics seeks to determine how and why one should behave in a way that is the most virtuous.

At its most elemental, ethics is about doing the right thing; the philosophy behind it is about determining what those right things are, in a way that benefits the individual and society at large in a fair, just, and kind manner. In other words, ethics is about right versus wrong—both in terms of defining those extremes and how to act on the side of "right."

READING NO. 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

Ethics are obviously important constructs of civilization, born out of a primal human need to understand the world. But why, exactly, are ethics important? Because humanity needs structure to make sense out of the world. As we collect information, we order and categorize it. This helps us decode the vast and seemingly impossible-to-understand universe. Ethics is part of this ongoing crusade of decoding.

If knowledge defines the "what" of the universe, then philosophy is an attempt to unlock the "why." Ethics is then how that "why" is carried out, giving us standards, virtues, and rules by which we use to direct how we behave, both on a daily basis and in the grand scheme of things.

Why Act Ethically?

Philosophers have pinpointed different reasons why humans can and should act in a virtuous manner. Here are a few:

- **It's a requirement for life.** It's our biological imperative as humans to survive and thrive. Ethics are part of the complicated structure of humanity that helps us determine how to act and how to live a long, productive life. Acting virtuously helps ensure that our actions are not pointless or random. By narrowing down the vastness of the universe to a lived experience with purpose and meaning—especially if it's one shared by a society or cultural group—goals and happiness are more within reach.

- **It's a requirement for society.** To be a member of society in good standing, one must follow the codes and laws that govern that culture. Everybody has a role to play, and if the social fabric breaks down, the happiness of others is threatened. Ethics builds relationships, both individually and on a grand scale. Kindness matters, and it helps forge the underlying bonds that unite a society.

- **For religious purposes.** Some people try to act in a way they have decided is the most morally upstanding, drawing their cues from religion. This plays into a type of ethics called divine command theory. People who subscribe

to this type of ethics act in accordance with the rules set forth by an organized religion, and those rules are derived from holy texts or the direction of a divine entity. While some religions say it is important to act appropriately because it is the right thing to do, they also provide the crucial incentive of consequences: be good enough, and a person will reach paradise when they die; be bad enough, and eternity in torment awaits.

- **For self-interest.** Some ethicists believe that humans ultimately act out of self-service—that they do things with their own interests in mind. This viewpoint even informs their moral behavior. As hinted at in the Golden Rule ("do unto others as you would have done unto you") and the similar Eastern idea of karma, being good can be a self-serving pursuit. Hence, if a person behaves morally, respectfully, and kindly to others—for whatever reason, and even if those reasons are motivated by self-interest—good things will happen to that person in kind.

- **Because humans are good.** This is a major theme in moral philosophy. The essential question is this: Are humans ethical because they have to be, or do humans pursue a moral life because certain acts are just naturally good, or naturally bad? This plays out in the idea that humans, by and large, are naturally good, and they tend to act accordingly.

READING NO. 4: VIRTUE ETHICS

Theories that fall under the heading of virtue ethics are all an evolution and exploration of philosophical themes first outlined thousands of years ago in the writings of Aristotle. In virtue ethics, moral fortitude is based on rules, but only because the rules are applied by the agent, or person. Virtue ethics is agent-based because agents use a moral code they've adopted for themselves, and that moral code is made up of true, honorable, and just virtues that guide their actions. Most of these virtues are qualities (which are, by nature, positive or "quality" character traits) that the individual's culture or society has ingrained upon him or her as being very important. These virtues are the building blocks of a truly moral individual.

Understanding virtue ethics begins by recalling deontological theories. Like virtue ethics, deontological theories involve living by steadfastly held moral truths. In deontology, these virtues are examined closely so as to become second nature and used to develop good, moral character habits. In virtue ethics, by contrast, those ethics don't require thought or careful planning or thinking because they become second nature and affect, in theory, every thought and action an individual undertakes without the individual even realizing it.

Although it's difficult to find universal truths about most aspects of ethics, the same cannot be said for virtues. How virtues are applied and defined may vary wildly from person to person, culture to culture, or era to era, but certain character traits nonetheless have become bona fide virtues due to their almost universal acceptance and admiration. Such character traits that are turned into virtues include things like wisdom, generosity, justice, temperance, keeping a level head, and kindness. Another virtue that's important in applied ethics is passing on those virtues: it's virtuous for adults to pass on virtues to their children, as it is their responsibility to do so.

Some of the ethical notions that come under the "virtue ethics" umbrella that we'll discuss in this chapter include:

- **Divine command theory**, the idea that all good behaviors—and the virtues that guide them—are laid out explicitly by a divine figure, such as God. If God said it's good, it's good, and if God said it's bad, it's bad.

- **Natural law ethics**, a theory developed by Thomas Aquinas that finds human nature is one and the same with ethical goodness, and that it is human nature to adopt virtues and act virtuously.
- **Relativism**, the notion that virtues—and thus ethical strictures—can vary from culture to culture because of the different values and needs of each culture. Relativism holds that it's not correct to judge or make statements about absolutes.
- **Moral realism**, an opposing viewpoint to relativism. Under this philosophy, there are some moral truths and values that are objectively good, whether or not an individual or even a community chooses to accept them as such. (**Moral antirealism** then is the idea that there are no objectively morally right virtues.)

So far, we've covered two of the three primary approaches to moral philosophy, or ethics. More specifically, we've discussed mainstream or normative ethics. We have also examined deontological ethics and utilitarian ethics. This leaves us, finally, with virtue ethics, which is also called virtue theory.

Let us return for a moment to a few of the ethics theories we've discussed. Recall that deontology seeks to find the secrets of ethics with rules and duties, and consequentialism and utilitarianism are about the potential ramifications (good or bad) of human actions. A utilitarian would point to a person needing help and find that the consequences of helping maximize well-being, suggesting a positive moral act. A deontologist will help a person if doing so follows the moral rule that it is good and right to help. Deontology provides a subtle but important difference from virtue ethics.

A virtue ethicist acts because helping another is charitable, benevolent, or just the "right thing to do." It's a virtue-based, not rule-based, ethic. The ideas or principles behind the rules that a deontologist sets are what a virtue ethicist follows, and similarly, such rules are what must be followed. Or perhaps it's the other way around? That is, the deontologists make and follow their rules based on the virtues that the virtue ethicists established. All three approaches to ethics make room for virtues, especially deontology, because virtues inform those rules that must be adhered to. (Any good normative ethical theory will have something to say about all three concepts.) What makes virtue ethics different, and its own discipline, is the centrality of virtue in the theory itself. The others use virtues as a means to an end, not the end in and of itself.

The Need for Virtues

Virtue ethics was the dominant school in moral philosophy until the Enlightenment of Europe in the eighteenth century. After falling out of favor somewhat, it returned to prominence in the twenty-first century. Perhaps this is because the moral philosophy of virtue ethics is the only major school that takes into consideration the interplay between virtues and vices, motives and morality, moral education, wisdom and discernment, relationships, a concept of happiness, and what sorts of persons we ought to be.

Defined simply, a virtue is a highly regarded personality trait or aspect of character. While many so-called virtues are almost universal, they are broadly defined as deeply held values by a person that intrinsically lead him or her to behave in a certain way. Virtues affect how we absorb the world around us and act in the world. Virtues influence actions, feelings, desires, choices, and reactions—all of which are predictable in a person if that value is deeply held. While these values may lead a person to act instinctively, they are learned behaviors that are well thought out and deeply felt, much like religious beliefs. The most precious virtues seem intrinsic to a

person's nature, so affirmed they can be. These virtues are authentic and adhere to rules that benefit the way people live and function together in a society. These virtues also take feelings into consideration, as well as personal well-being and the well-being of others. (Contrast this approach to deontology, which asserts that "the rule says it's right.")

Virtuous people are not perfect, but this does not affect the purity or inspirational component of the virtue itself. In its application, human frailty, weaknesses, and contradictions come into play. This is due to the very human lack of practical wisdom or moral wisdom. Such knowledge could also be called applied wisdom, as these actions demonstrate virtues. Virtuous actions make a person good, and it is those actions that make a person good, not just good intentions, as other ethical schools may argue.

There are a few different approaches to virtue ethics, although each shares the same core argument in putting virtues first and foremost. The three approaches that concern us here are eudaimonism, ethics of care, and agent-based theories.

Eudaimonism

In ancient Greece and up through the medieval era, the type of virtue ethics now called eudaimonism was synonymous with virtue ethics. This approach holds that the ideal goal of human existence is individual *eudaimonia*, which translates variously (but similarly) to "happiness," "well-being," or "the good life." This goodness is attainable by the acting out of those virtues (which the Greeks called *phronesis*) day in and day out in one's thoughts and actions.The main problem is that *eudaimonia*, or happiness, is vaguely defined, self-defined, and quite subjective. It's hard to have a universal approach to the ethical outlook of humanity if everyone defines the goal differently. What is objective and seemingly universal, however, is that *phronesis* is the tool by which happiness can be achieved. However, good intentions are not enough—one must act ethically to be ethical.

Ethics of Care

Another form of virtue ethics is ethics of care. It is a relatively recent addition to the world of ethics, developed in the late twentieth century as an outgrowth of feminist theory, particularly the works of Annette Baier (1929–2012). The theory supposes that normative gender roles influence the way a person thinks and acts, particularly as it concerns that person's ethical outlook.

Generally speaking, men form philosophies based on linear, "masculine" ideals such as justice and personal autonomy, which are more abstract, objective, and less emotionally based or sympathetic. Women, on the other hand, may think less linearly and consider whole beings, taking empathy and care into consideration more so than masculine-based ideals. Ethics of care argues for an approach to moral philosophy from a more traditionally "female" viewpoint—where the most important virtues are taking care of others, being patient and nurturing, and being willing to sacrifice one's own happiness to bring happiness to others. This perspective challenges universal ethical standards that have been established over thousands of years by male-dominated thought. Instead, it promotes the virtuous ideas of community and relationship-building from a female point of view. In such a perspective, the interests of those close to us take on importance alongside our own interests, though they still come before those of strangers. although, the community can and should always be growing, so as to become ever more unified).

Agent-Based Theories

The third type of virtue ethics falls under the umbrella of agent-based theories. A twentieth-century development, primarily by philosopher Michael Slote, these theories rely on creating virtues from commonsense notions about what virtues are. This approach uses the largest, the most normal, and the most lauded virtues across time and culture.Such general virtues, for example, include being kind and showing mercy. Agent-based theories move the burden of ethics to the inner life of the agents who perform those actions, and away from the interpreter of moral philosophy. Virtue-based ethics exist in other morally decent people, and so we try

to be more like them, as we do our best to embody and adopt their virtues as our own.

READING NO. 5: APPLIED ETHICS

Ethics can only take us so far if we only focus on a bunch of theories about how humans are or how we ought to act. Ethics don't exist solely as theories and ideas; ethics are meant to lead directly to action. Therefore, we have applied ethics, or moral philosophy in action and in practice.

Although the most prominent moral philosophies were hammered out centuries ago, their finer points remain open to question. Ethics don't exist in a vacuum, and they don't stand still. They're systems that contain multitudes of practical rules that can be learned and adapted into any number of real-life situations.
Indeed, ethicists have attempted to find the universals of morality that apply to all humans and, it would seem, all walks of life. Ethics are a big part of the decision-making processes in many of today's professions and fields, and are especially relevant as the world faces rapidly changing and as-yet unknown challenges both now and in the future.

This chapter will look at how to apply some of the ethical concepts covered earlier in this book. Ethics, or virtues, are a vital tool in a civilized society, and they apply to nearly every sector of the professional world. The reasons to be ethical are, of course, complicated and will be discussed. Is it important to be ethical because it's good for business to be ethical? Or is it ethical to be morally correct in business because it's important to be ethical to human beings, period? There are arguments for both positions and more.

5.1 ETHICS IN POLITICS

Way back when, philosophy started as guidelines for politicians. In ancient Greece (and to major philosophers such as John Locke and Niccolò Machiavelli), philosophy and politics were intertwined. Socrates, Plato, and others frequently wrote about and discussed the best way by which men (only men at the time) could reach down deep and apply the noble virtues they possessed so as to lead others in a just and ethical way. The baseline of personal ethics informed politics, but then personal ethics also became a subject of its own inquiry.

Today, with so much work already done to develop ethics and investigate the meaning of terms like "just" and "ethical," it's incumbent upon politicians to lead in an ethical manner. Politicians chosen by the people (or born into power) face many specific ethical challenges, all ultimately boiling down to a need to rule and govern in ways that are just and fair. But how do they do that, and who do they most serve? Running for office or holding an elected position brings great power and responsibility. A vote for a candidate is an expression of trust, and politicians must try to both represent the voters' interests and keep their own campaign promises to the best of their abilities. And yet politicians by and large do not enjoy a reputation as a group of people who have a great deal of integrity or moral fiber. Every election season, the same displeasures with politicians soak the cultural ether, primarily revolving around negative campaigning, truth-bending or outright lying, and a collective curiosity as to just why someone is interested in pursuing power.

Most politicians have a genuine interest in public service, but many politicians have differing ideas on what that means. Simply defining who "the public" is can be a challenge. Do politicians serve the people? If so, then which people? All the people or just their voters? Do politicians serve an area's interests, and do the needs of the individuals of that area differ from those of the major institutions or employers that also occupy that area?

Or is it the responsibility of a politician to serve legal constructs, ideals, or constitutions in an effort just to keep the peace? All of these targets may have

conflicting values. Democracy works slowly, and change is hard to come by, so a commitment to change to the morally good requires resolve.

Public Versus Personal Life

Another ethical issue with regard to politicians is their personal life. In the US, there are countless examples of elected officials who, when news of their extramarital affairs becomes public, have to issue a public apology and then resign their position.

In other countries, such as France, it's more culturally acceptable for adults, and politicians, to have affairs. Constituents in such countries are able to separate a politician's personal life from his or her public life, and then judge the political performance of their elected officials solely on that basis.
It's an ethical quandary to determine if politicians' private lives are indeed private because they are also public figures. Moreover, opinions of political figures can change if they fail to uphold long-held cultural values, and their performance as public figures can then be called into question.

Money can also certainly cloud the ethical purity of politicians. When campaigns receive money from individuals or organizations who are not also their constituents, a potential conflict of interest is created. Who are well-funded politicians truly beholden to: their donors or their voters?

Best Intentions

We also wonder about a politician's intentions. There are certainly benefits to the job—being famous and having tremendous power and influence are very attractive to some people. But political jobs bring with them intense scrutiny and criticism. Everything one says, does, or votes on is fair game. It makes a person wonder why anybody would ever want to be a politician.

There are lots of reasons, and they come from all over the ethical spectrum. Some politicians have a genuine desire to effect change via legislation or work from inside "the belly of the beast." Others might be coming from a place of self-interest—the desire for power, for example.

Motivations can be multiple, of course, and some politicians feel compelled by a desire to defeat "evil"—or their opponent, who, if the negative campaign ads are to be believed, would be a very bad choice for voters. But no matter what reasons politicians give on the campaign trail for wanting the job, we can't help but wonder why they're really running for office.

Politics and Virtues
Despite the persistent cliché that all politicians are corrupt liars, we do, on the whole, demand and expect our politicians to be trustworthy and truthful. Perhaps this is because we have to—we have to vote for somebody, and we want to believe that the candidate we select is the morally superior one.

It's in our self-interest and that of the greater good to elect the candidates who we think are the most virtuous and to reject the ones who will be easily swayed by money and "special interests." In American democracy, the "checks and balances" innate in the system (along with whistle-blowers, a free press, and an impeachment process) have been set in place to help limit that kind of corruption and the idea that leaders are above the law.

We want, and expect, our politicians to be a little bit better than average. We want them to lead by example and be the best of the best (an image we sometimes force upon them with fervor and hagiography, elevating them to demigod status as a way to justify giving them so much power and trusting they use it wisely). We want them to exhibit virtue ethics and to be the very best. We want them to be

truthful and responsible, to truly care, and to work hard to find solutions to the problems we face.

5.2. BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Business ethics are moral values that a company employs in shaping its strategies and practices, and/or in creating a standard to which it holds its employees. Like an individual, ethics must address big-picture concerns (how it does business) and individual ones (how employees are treated).

Determining what actions are or are not moral is tricky for a business. A business is not an individual, but neither is it a single entity with the power of reason. Rather, it is at the mercy of the opinions and interests of many. Additionally, a business is not a governing body with a moral obligation to its people.

Is there even a place for ethics in the world of business? It depends on what you consider to be the imperative of a business. One could argue that businesses don't need to worry about ethics because they are not rational beings that must adhere to a moral code. Instead, they exist solely to make money for their owners or shareholders (which, in a way, is not unlike the ultimate human goal of "happiness"). From a Machiavellian perspective, businesses should be allowed to do whatever it takes to make money—however they can.

But they would have to do that while still operating within the confines of the law. From an ethical perspective, it would be against the self-interest of a business to break the law, antagonize its employees, engage in price-gouging, or sell a faulty product because that would harm the public image of the business. Decreased public trust—not to mention charges of causing harm—leads to decreased revenues, thus hurting its imperative to make money.

A company that operates in an entirely legal way might not do so in ways that are just or even palatable. For example, a business that fires a large number of employees and then reroutes that money to executives isn't behaving illegally, but this action would have an incredibly negative impact on a lot of people and cast the company's decision-makers in a negative light. Even if such practices were perfectly legal, most ethical schools would probably find them morally suspect.

But businesses are a part of society and an influential one. They are publicly present and have a huge impact on the economy by way of selling goods or services, paying employees, paying taxes, and so forth. For these reasons, businesses are not immune to the moral standards that guide individuals or governments. Ultimately, it's in a company's best interest to maintain good relations with the public (as well as its shareholders and customers) by operating from a morally good standpoint.

Labor Ethics

Relativism comes into play in a big way with business ethics. For example, it's considered unethical—and illegal, actually—to pay workers in the United States anything less than the minimum wage. (Some would argue for a higher standard, such as a "fair" or "livable" wage, but those standards are harder to define).

Though the minimum wage varies from state to state, it is set at a federal level, and no one can be paid less than that minimum on an hourly basis. For this reason, labor costs for manufacturing in the United States are quite high. This is the main reason why many American companies have moved operations overseas.

A shoe manufacturer, for example, may choose to produce shoes overseas, whereas that same operation in the U.S. could cost a hundred times that in labor. (There is also far less regulation of factories and working conditions in other nations, both of which cost money and slow down production.)

Also potentially problematic is the issue of child labor. In the United States, labor laws prevent children from working in factories, and certainly not for eighteen hours a

day because such practices are considered immoral in our culture. Other countries have different standards in regard to child labor.

At the end of the day, businesses operate overseas to maximize profits. But such businesses are actually skirting moral-based U.S. laws. A business engages in exploitation when it pays workers overseas as little as possible simply because it can get away with it. This is all due to moral relativism.

One might try to explain away these practices using the tenets of moral relativism. But such arguments fall apart because the relative comparison itself is false: two different cultures and two different moral blueprints are being compared on a relative basis. That shoe company is exploiting cultural differences in an overseas location to drive down costs and drive up profits—it is not providing low-wage jobs out of respect for the moral standards of another culture.

Advertising Ethics

There's more moral shaky ground in the areas of advertising and marketing. Advertising "works" on everyone, even the most sophisticated consumer, because messages about products find a way to embed themselves in our brains over time. (If advertising didn't work, it wouldn't be used.)

However, ethical concerns accompany that power to manipulate. For example, most reasonably savvy adults understand that advertising claims are exaggerations. Such claims are either stated directly (e.g., "It's the dog food your dog will love best!") or dramatized or suggested (e.g., a dog happily eating the food and then dancing on its hind legs, thanks to the magic of visual special effects).

In other words, advertisements lie. Is it ethical to proclaim falsehoods, even if people know the claims are false and know to take them with a grain of salt? Perhaps not, because some viewers are highly impressionable, children in particular.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the federal government cracked down on advertising to children because many thought their trust and innocence were being exploited. The main purveyors of ads to children at the time were makers of sugar cereals and fast food, products that could be tied to a growing childhood obesity epidemic. Businesses have a responsibility not to harm their clients in the pursuit of making money, and advertising practices can easily cause a company to step over this boundary.

5.3. SOCIAL ETHICS

Moral philosophy is concerned with determining the virtues and reasons behind ethics. Laws are the practical, political, and codified applications of those ethics. Between those two systems are social ethics, the formal name for the moral standards, norms, and unofficial code of conduct that's expected from a person in the world, or in one's particular society, culture, or community.

Social ethics are built on the shared values of many. But social values are different from individual values. Individual values are virtues that each person seeks out for oneself, and they can be as varied as the person. These personal values don't necessarily become social values, nor do they become part of the framework that is social ethics. This is because of the intent of the value itself. Individual values, while virtuous and good (bravery, courage, and integrity are all examples), merely benefit the individual, or at least frame how that individual should lead his or her individual life. Social values, by contrast, are explicitly concerned with the welfare of others. The drive to help others—or even the abstract idea of "other people"—is what makes a value a social value. Having those social values in mind affects an individual's thoughts and behaviors. Individuals then take on these ethics, and that, in turn, helps build the social ethics of a society.

How Social Ethics Are Created

Obligations to others in a community are what drive social ethics. We have an obligation to help others, be they less fortunate or not, because sharing fuels society. Each of us is a part of society, and as we enjoy the benefits of living in that society, we are obligated to take part in it to help it function.

Part of that is sharing, either directly via giving money or food to the less fortunate, for example, or indirectly, by using each of our unique talents and abilities to prop up one another so that we may help society both operate and progress. Social accountability also factors into social ethics. Because we each have a role, we are trusted to fulfill that role, and thus we are accountable for our actions. This relationship between individual and society is precious and fragile because other people are counting on you and your contributions to help make society hum.
A refusal to play a part affects others, and it's unethical to impinge on the happiness of others or to prevent them from living their best life.

While every society or culture has its ethical standards, how are these created or developed over time? Some factors include dominant religious beliefs, economic factors, and practicality. These prevailing social values are the ones that help a society meet its goals, particularly those that relate to peace and prosperity. Governmental organizations then respond to emerging norms by setting laws based on prevailing ethical standards.

This can be a difficult ask, however, as some of the more controversial topics in modern society are controversial specifically because their ethical nature is not clear-cut. For the sake of comparison, take murder and assisted suicide. It's a universal moral norm that an individual taking the life of another human is wrong.
But what about assisted suicide? There are several moral factors that complicate the issue. Some may find it extremely ethical to help another person achieve his or her goal—of ending a life beset with pain and sickness—out of the belief that humans should control their own destiny. Others may liken the practice to murder because they believe that humans don't have the right to determine when life ends. Both are legitimate arguments within the field of ethics, but the laws about assisted suicide vary from place to place. In this instance, it is up to those in charge of the jurisdiction to consciously respond to the dominant moral opinions of the community and set the law that best reflects those concerns. This is how social ethics become laws and thus become ingrained as moral or ethical norms.

READING NO. 6: THOMAS AQUINAS AND NATURAL LAW ETHICS

Natural law ethics is an approach to moral philosophy that takes its cues from the ways of nature and the natural world. Now, this does not mean that we should simply do "what comes naturally." That's a pretty tricky thing to define anyway—a lot of ethics and philosophy is concerned with trying to figure out just what "nature" or "human nature" is, and if that nature can be changed, developed, or forced to evolve. Rather, in the school of natural law moral theory, the idea is that the moral standards or expectations that govern human behavior ought to be objectively derived from the nature of human beings and the world. We act the way we do because, well, that's the way we act. Natural law theory adherents believe it's best to figure out what that means and apply it to everything from politics to the law to religious dogma. (Put another, more cynical way, this theory is as dismissive and dispassionate as chalking up bad behavior to the maxim that "boys will be boys.")

The Different Types of Laws

At the forefront of natural law theory are the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). He attested that we are the way we are and act the way we act because God, or at least the Christian conception of God, is what made us that way.

In one of his major texts, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas posits that there are four types of natural laws that govern the universe and everything in it. They are eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law.

- Eternal law is what keeps the universe, or *kosmos* in Greek, in proper working order. It exists, as it always has, and always will, says Aquinas, within the mind of God (whom Aquinas calls *Logos*).
- **Natural Law** is the contribution and participation by the rational creature (man) in the eternal law. Aquinas argues that this ability to help the natural order of things hum along is imprinted on us as rational beings.
- **Human law** is different from natural law, which is essentially the essence of humanity. Human law, however, is the morally-based earthly laws by which human societies function.
- **Divine law** is how eternal law is applied, and Aquinas says that this is all the will of God, and it's laid out plainly in the Old Testament and New Testament.

The Importance of Divinity

Aquinas's fourth law, divine law, offers a specific plan of action. Like the difference between normative ethics and descriptive ethics, the difference between eternal law and divine law is a matter of theory versus action. Aquinas argues that divine law (and Christianity, and the Bible) is crucial, because humans need divine guidance on how to act correctly because of another aspect of our nature, namely our innate uncertainty and incompetence. Aquinas also clearly lays out that old chestnut of ethical arguments: that there are consequences for our actions that we need to be made aware of.

On Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)
Thomas Aquinas, or St. Thomas Aquinas, as he's known within the Catholic Church, was both a theologian as well as a philosopher. His writings uniquely combined the tenets of Christianity and faith with the notions of reason and rationality. As such, he's regarded as a pillar in a theological approach called Thomism, as well as a pillar of the neoclassical, logic-based Aristotelian philosophical movement of Scholasticism, which combines both cultural religious tradition as well as church dogma.

READING NO. 7: NEGATIVE VIEWS ON ETHICS: FOCUS ON NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI
By and large, ethics is the study of how and why one should act good. But that's just part of the equation. Ethics seeks to quantify and explain human behavior, and despite the presence of true human goodness, one can't deny that people have a dark streak. Some philosophers have explored that darkness and negativity as it relates to ethics. For instance, if being good is part of life, then isn't being "bad" also a part of life? And if it's natural to be selfish or cruel, then could it also be considered ethical to be selfish or cruel? Some philosophers went down this road, as did others who explored the ethical ramifications of the possibility that humanity exists apart from any sort of moral or divine framework whatsoever.

- Niccolò Machiavelli, in the sixteenth century, urged people to use ethics to manipulate others and strive at all costs to obtain and keep power, often ruthlessly. Why? Because it is in our nature to do so.
- Jean-Paul Sartre was a twentieth-century proponent of existentialism, the idea that life has no innate meaning and man has no true purpose. This lack of predetermination means that all humans have freedom and choice, and utter and complete free will to live a life as they see fit on their own terms.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, wrote about man's duty to create life in one's own image—to make oneself as great and varied a person as possible and to reject traditions and institutions along the way, for they were outdated and held back true moral growth.
- Arthur Schopenhauer, diverging from most other moral philosophers, was an early nineteenth-century thinker who believed that the universe is an

essentially irrational place, which has major consequences on how humans behave ethically.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, an important twentieth-century philosopher, called all of moral philosophy into question by questioning the veracity of the one real tool philosophers have at the ready: their words.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI
The Darker Side of Ethics

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) represents the dark, underhanded, and manipulative side of moral philosophy. In seminal works like *The Prince*, Machiavelli explored how ethics can be used for personal means to an end, particularly as a way to obtain and keep fame, power, and money by any means necessary. He is understandably a controversial philosopher, but not an unpopular one, because he focused on the darker, undeniable side of human nature that many ethicists choose to ignore or believe can be worked out of a person.

Machiavelli lived in the city-state of Florence during Renaissance Italy and served as a diplomat in the early 1500s. By 1512, Florence was under the control of the rich and powerful Medici family, and as part of the old guard, he was tried for treason and exiled. In 1513, he wrote *The Prince*, and, taking a bit of his own advice on the tricks to get what he wanted, he dedicated it to Lorenzo de' Medici. The trick to win favor didn't work, but the book has since become a de facto handbook for calculating movers and shakers.

What's scary is that he wrote *The Prince* as a how-to guide for public figures, politicians, and others who wanted to get an upper hand on others and obtain power. The term "Machiavellian" refers to scheming, power-crazed behaviors because Machiavelli himself told people it was not only ethical to behave this way, per the reasoning of his argument, but that they simply must.

Serve Thyself

In an overarching sense, Machiavelli is a consequentialist. Writing in the early 1500s, he was one of the first to explore the notion that actions should be judged solely in terms of their consequences—that is, what one can gain from them.

However, Machiavelli departed from other consequentialist thinkers because he was not concerned with the resulting happiness for others or the moral fortitude of the action, the agent, or the consequences. The only thing Machiavelli said to worry about is yourself. Like a consequentialist, Machiavelli didn't judge an action based on some divine order from a god or because it was born out of a cherished virtue. He was concerned only with the end result: getting power, holding on to that power, and keeping that power - at any cost.

In Machiavellian ethics, the individual's grab for power is, technically speaking, ethical. That means that the actions leading to that end are also ethical, even though they may appear cold, callous, calculating, or cruel to others. Clearly, Machiavelli didn't think too highly of humans. Specifically, he believed that we retained all the nastiness of animals but had been gifted the ability to reason and scheme. Humans, he wrote, are depraved, cruel, heartless, and selfish, and we ought to just accept those things as being real and innate.

In the language of ethics, because those negative qualities are innate, they are thereby "good." This means that these negative qualities are virtues, and one should use these virtues (or anti-virtues) to get what they, and only they, want out of life and others.

Of course, this philosophy influences how one should treat people—by exploiting them in any way possible to get closer to the goal, whatever it may be. And because everyone is grabbing for power, everyone is looking for opportunities to

best everyone else. Trust no one, Machiavelli said, because your neighbors, coworkers, and friends are just like you. They, like you, are after power, and they, like you, are willing and ready to step all over you to get it.

For example, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues for breaking the rules, even moral rules, because such rule-breaking was a way to gain and hold power over others. ("Politics," he once wrote, "have no relation to morals.") He advocated breaking contracts if doing so was of personal benefit, because the other person might break the contract with you if it suited his or her wicked nature. He advised treating everything like a tool and making judgments on a black-and-white moral basis: something is a "good" tool if it helps you achieve your goals, and it's a "bad" tool if it doesn't—or if it allows others to gain power over you.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND EXISTENTIALISM

Good News, Nothing Matters

Some philosophers say we should look to broad societal indications to learn what is moral. Others argue that there are innate truths about what is and is not moral. Some believe that human nature is inherently good and that this determines our drive to be moral and reflects our virtues. But what if none of these is the case? What if humans, both collectively as a race and individually at birth, are a blank slate with no kind of inclination whatsoever? This is the central moral tenet of the radical philosophy of existentialism, as best represented by French writer Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

Extreme Personal Responsibility

Most would agree, at least on some level, with the existentialist idea that people are entirely responsible for not only what they already are but what they will ultimately become. Existentialism holds that this determination includes whether a person is going to be moral or virtuous. The key term here is "going to be" because nothing is predetermined—at all. Those morals and virtues are entirely up to the individual and, beyond that, however one chooses to define it.

Happiness does not derive from preexisting virtues, or if it does, it is because a person has chosen to live a traditionally virtuous life and does so at their pleasure. It is entirely up to the individual. Neither other people, nor the universe, nor any external force can be blamed for unhappiness, because in existentialism, all ideas and decisions come from within. Sartre argues that much of what we mistake for moral behavior is simply our need to get along with others and keep things civil. However, the need to keep things civil indicates a lack of moral courage.
Without moral courage, an individual cannot be true to oneself or live an authentic life and is instead constantly manipulated by external factors.

On Existentialism

Existentialism enjoys a reputation as an extraordinarily negative, pessimistic, or even sad philosophy. This perception is understandable, as it asserts that "life is meaningless." However, this view is merely a response to organized religion. If Christianity gives life meaning by placing God at its center and promising heaven as a reward for good behavior, then in existentialism, life is meaningless because there is no great creator, no guiding deity, and no promise of an afterlife paradise. However, this lack of predetermination grants humankind—and each individual—absolutely limitless freedom and choice.

Alone In The Universe

Sartre affirms that humans have no innate nature. We are thrown into a world of someone else's making and must figure out our place. He writes that "existence precedes essence." In other words, we exist first, and then we choose what we are. There is nothing innate—there is only what we ultimately choose to be.

We are not held to any kind of moral standard or divine or natural law. Since none of these exist, this philosophy offers a special kind of freedom. Indeed, it is an overwhelming freedom, as each of us must determine how to live life entirely on our own. We are, as Sartre says, "a plan aware of itself."

Through our own choices, we determine or create the ideal moral human by figuring out what that ideal is and then acting it out. Since you choose what sort of person you should be, it is your responsibility to create yourself in that ideal.
That is a lot of pressure, but it also means you can choose whatever you want your virtues to be, serving as a model for how everyone should choose.

Anguish arises when we deny ourselves the responsibility of creating our ideal self and instead go along with others. Such denial is self-deception or bad faith. Being forlorn comes from abandoning the idea that we are our only source of value. There is a certain amount of despair in being alone in the universe—without reward, grand plan, or afterlife. Sartre writes that humans are, after all, condemned to be free.

Sartre never published a book outlining his specific ethical views or virtues. And why would he? He had his virtues, and you have yours. In this way, he was the ultimate relativist.

THE ETHICS OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

From Man to Superman

Although he wrote in the nineteenth century, German philosopher, writer, and philology professor Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was among the first "contemporary philosophers." Writing about timeless absolutes, the origins of ethics, and critiquing or expanding upon the work of philosophers from hundreds of years earlier did not interest Nietzsche as much as the emerging modern society.

Industrialization was rapidly transforming the world as it moved headlong into the twentieth century, and Nietzsche was fascinated by the philosophical and ethical foundations of modern civilization and his contemporary world. In his writings, he sought to tear down long-held, traditional ideas about ethics and human nature.
He held that a commitment to one's own integrity requires living a life that aims to acquire power and express inner strength. To do that, a person must strive—passionately and always—to live life in his own way. He believed that an individual should set his own moral code, apart from what everybody else was doing, because everyone else was doing just that.

Striking Out On One's Own

Successfully living in your own way requires determining your own interpretation of life, and then taking on new and diverse experiences in hopes of actually challenging that interpretation. One must have a fluid view of the world to have a more fluid inner life, which in turn will cultivate a rich, sophisticated, and singular interpretation of how to live life.

Nietzsche's philosophy, however, is in opposition to traditional ethics—or at least to how traditional ethics had been presented and discussed up to the nineteenth century. He said that the traditional ways of determining ethics left little room for the creation and cultivation of the individual. In fact, he determined that that was a fatal flaw of ethics: in trying to determine universal truths about how everyone ought to be and behave, philosophers focused too heavily on the overarching principles, and this created a herd mentality.

By and large, ethical systems of the past did very little analysis of the development of the individual on that person's own terms—merely they looked at the way an individual ought to fall in line and have the same strictures and principles as everyone else. The guidelines to be like everyone else (in the name of harmony and

the pursuit of happiness) resulted in what Nietzsche said caused mass conformity to interpretations of life that had been created by some stranger long ago. And that was not okay.

Ethics can become so internalized, Nietzsche argued, that they can actually harm you. But there is a way out, and it is for the individual to work his way out of the ethical codes that have been deeply ingrained by culture and rearing. Nietzsche asserted that virtuous behavior can't be separated from the individual. This is, however, a form of deontology, in that ethics should not focus on what a person actually does (or the consequences of those actions) but on the moral fortitude that motivates that person.

This is getting into the "good intentions make all the difference" method of ethics, but in Nietzsche's reading, it means that if ethics are beyond strict categorizations and are left up to billions of different motivations in billions of different people, then there are a lot more pathways in life that are possible—and perfectly morally correct—than simply "good" or "bad." An acceptance of the possibility of multiple pathways can lead to integrity.

Creating a New Sense of Self

For Nietzsche, the road to a life of integrity is paved with expressing one's individuality, or creating oneself. That doesn't necessarily mean recreating one's personality in his own image, but it could. What he meant was that people should always be looking for—and taking on—new ways with which to enrich their lives. Doing this means being passionate, learning new things, and trying new experiences so as to gain sophistication, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

It leads an individual to have a better understanding of life, of the world, and helps a person create an interpretation of the world on his or her own terms. As such, one does not need to have these things dictated by a religion (which are flawed, corrupted, and outdated, according to Nietzsche) or an ethical system or even one's own past interpretations. Nietzsche believed the mind and spirit, for lack of a unifying word, should never be at rest, but should always be in a place of challenge and flux.

Doing this, however, requires a great deal of virtues. To step out of one's comfort zone and face challenges takes inner strength, power, courage, and resolve - virtues all. To that end, in 1883 he wrote about the Ubermensch, or "Superman." Nietzsche's ideal was a person who was so dedicated to self-improvement and perfection that he transcended labels, even that of man. This ideal man becomes instead a superman, a near-perfect being of his own creation.

"God Is Dead"

Nietzsche's most famous quote, and the inspiration for a lot of what would later be called existentialism, was found in his 1882 book *The Gay Science*. A character named the madman says, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of murderers, console ourselves?" Nietzsche doesn't really mean that the actual being of God, the Christian God, is dead.

He is trying to say that humans can better serve their individuality and self-creation by rejecting their past notions of "God." Or religion. Or ethical frameworks. Why? Because it's simply too easy to just blame God for things, because to not think or explore the reasons for things can lead to an unchallenged life, which Nietzsche was decidedly against. With God dead, individuals can take charge of their own lives on their own terms. It's scary, but that's where the inner virtues come into play.

THE PHILOSOPHIES OF ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER
East + West = Pessimism

Among the few Western philosophers to draw on the Eastern tradition, rather than just to expound on the Western philosophers who came before, was Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Born in Poland, Schopenhauer married Buddhist principles with Western philosophical concepts, especially those of Immanuel Kant. One of his theories was the idea that no experiences are universal, because we can only experience things as they appear or seem to us; that the world is never as it actually is. He asserted that, as the Buddhists believe, the world is an unknowable illusion.

The concept of acknowledging and accepting that there is naturally going to be pain and suffering in life isn't something Schopenhauer made up. It's firmly rooted in two Eastern philosophical traditions: Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism calls for an acceptance of suffering as a part of life, while Taoism describes the constant interplay of positive and negative forces, and how life is made up of the movement between the two. Another thing Schopenhauer expanded on from Buddhism is the idea that the world, or rather all that we can experience and thus know, is an illusion. We don't really know the world; we can only know that which we can see and experience through our own perspectives, which is invariably going to be a subjective distortion of reality according to our wants and needs.

Master of the Universe

All that can be experienced and understood, including ethical ideals, is part of one's representation of reality. This is the ultimate in subjectivity, in saying that the world is unknowable, only one's idea of it, and that everything must be filtered through this concept. Also, this means that the world isn't really the world at all, because you can't know the world.

Rather, the world is your world, and so nothing that isn't part of your representation can enter it. Schopenhauer expands on and departs from Kant in using this subjective view of reality to find a place for the Will (the tool by which you shape this world) as a formative force stronger than the intellect, because it is the Will that has to drive what is now "the world."

Schopenhauer states that our influence on the world is tremendous and all-powerful, in that because you are the master of the world and because you perceive it as only you can, the world is completely what you make of it. Acknowledging this influential power affects not only your opinions and moral judgments but also time, space, your body, and your actions. It is up to you then to find your moral codes. The Will is thus central to the human experience; with the Will humans shape and form everything, which is to say that nothing is innate, nothing is inherent, at least from person to person. One person chooses his ideas based on his Will; another person chooses her ideas based on her Will; and you choose your ideas based on your Will. There is no objective or innate morality to actions, rules, or agents, or even a situation: morality is merely what you perceive ethics to be in your worldview, which you then make happen with your Will.

The Dilemma of Desire

Life being an expression of the Will makes for a goal-oriented life. Because we have the tool of the Will (a hammer), then we are always looking for something to use it on (a nail). This is true for higher-consciousness animals, such as humans. Even as we seek goals, we are not satisfied, and so unfulfilled desires move us forward. And if we don't satisfy that desire, we remain unfulfilled. But once all goals are fulfilled, there can be no more motivation because we are satisfied. If that happens, then what's the point of life? Schopenhauer might point out that the desire for life is motion toward some kind of goal. Without that motion, there is no life. This then is the dilemma of desire, which ties back in with Buddhism, and how suffering is life, and particularly how suffering arises from the attachment to desire. And when someone is unfulfilled and suffering, Schopenhauer suggests, on come the dangers of pessimism.

The Virtues of Pessimism

In his 1819 work *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer describes another pretty out-there idea: pessimism. More than just a negative outlook on life, Schopenhauer had a view that absolutely everything was ultimately bad. (Such is his prerogative, as that is his Will's formation of the world as he sees it.) Pessimism means to see life in a generally negative way. He had some proof of the world being a terrible place: examples of injustice, disease, pain, suffering, and general cruelty abounded. Buddhism agrees with him, but Buddhism also accepts the positive flow of goodness. But as Sartre argued that existentialism was ultimately freeing (it's not so bad that the world is so bad), Schopenhauer argued that if the world was any worse, it wouldn't exist. That's because existence is futile, as it is characterized by wants and desires that can never be attained.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF ETHICS

Choose Your Words Wisely

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) is among the major twentieth-century philosophers of any style or school. He earned this distinction despite that he wrote just a single seventy-five-page book on the subject, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (roughly *Logical Philosophical Treatise*). Wittgenstein believed this work to be so devastating to the study of philosophy that he thought he permanently destroyed the discipline entirely, allowing him to retreat into a relatively quiet life of becoming an elementary school teacher in his native Austria. Wittgenstein was certainly a character with a dark streak, befitting that of his philosophical role model, the eternally pessimistic Arthur Schopenhauer. The key to Wittgenstein's observations is that the inherent flaws in human communication don't allow us to fully express ourselves or share the same outlook or observations as anyone else. If we can't come together, Wittgenstein implied, then there can be no universals, and no universal meanings.

One of Wittgenstein's main areas of study was the philosophy of language, including its origins, what it means, how it's used, and how language reflects or doesn't reflect reality. Instead of asking what things mean, Wittgenstein would ask, "What is meaning?" Instead of finding the right words to describe what is true and right, he asked, "How does language reflect reality?"

With *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein applied his analysis and skepticism of language. His findings: a solution to every major philosophical problem of all time...by means of dissolving philosophical inquiry. (But he was not happy about it; he wrote in the preface that "it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.")

His primary argument in the treatise was that philosophical issues only ever develop due to misunderstandings because of flaws in language. Wittgenstein held that meaning was related to certain nuances of speech and how things were communicated, not so much to the actual words themselves.

Determining the nature of meaning is not easy to ascertain. Simply put, meaning is the formation sent from one person to another via verbal or written communication, using a common language. This is broken down into types of meaning: conceptual meaning and associative meaning. Conceptual meaning is the more objective kind, the definitions of words, and associative meaning has to do with how the speaker and the listener uniquely and individually understand those words.

Picture this

Wittgenstein came up with the "picture theory of meaning" to describe his take. As pictures represent the world visually, language represents the way reality is. But language depictions are not as accurate as picture depictions. A picture is a

picture, and it captures the physical state of an object in time. Interpretation isn't debatable. Words and communication are different. Humans are able to discuss reality, to a degree, because they have the words to describe it.

However, sentence structure and language rules cloud the meaning of the individual words, thus making perfect, true communication of a thought from one person to another virtually impossible. Boiled down, sentences lack meaning because they don't convey truth, and thus language doesn't truly reflect the true state of reality (or even an individual's interpretation thereof).

Wittgenstein nonetheless thought that humans could analyze thoughts and sentences and use better language to express themselves in a more perfect or "true logical form." But he noted that difficult abstract philosophical concepts that are different from one person to the next and based on thoughts and feelings, rather than observable criteria, cannot be discussed because there are no universal words to express them. That means, as far as Wittgenstein is concerned, all of philosophy is impossible to discuss because their finer points are inexpressible.

However, these observations led Wittgenstein not to entirely abandon philosophy, but to advocate for the adoption of "ordinary language philosophy." That approach, Wittgenstein claimed, would involve using language that was as simple as possible when discussing ethical concepts so that everyone could understand them - because everyone should be able to understand the big questions and discuss the big concepts of existence. And yet, in the end, such elements of philosophical study would amount to little more than "language games" and thought exercises—because language's flaws prevent anything more than a superficial dive.

Young Wittgenstein
The nuances of language and speech were important to Wittgenstein at even a young age. After being homeschooled, he studied at Realschule in Linz, Austria, in 1903 (alongside classmate Adolf Hitler) and reportedly spoke only in intricate High German, with a stutter, and used formal forms of address with classmates. He's said to have had a hard time fitting in.

READING NO. 8: EASTERN MORAL PHILOSOPHIES

In the Western tradition, ethics is viewed as a subgenre of the larger, broader field of philosophy proper. Ethics describes ways that we can practically apply (theoretically) universal principles to the situations of everyday life. Because of the predominant Judeo-Christian ethic in Europe and the Americas, philosophy has had to contend with religion for space in academic and mental spheres. More or less, philosophy has been an outgrowth of faith, and for hundreds of years philosophers in Europe and the Americas either willingly or forcibly tried to reconcile their ideas about man's true nature with what their religions had told them was true about God, the universe, and human nature.

But in the vastly large parts of the world collectively referred to as the East, which includes India, China, Japan, and the Middle East, quite the opposite is true. In the East, religion sprang from philosophy. For example, Buddhism is viewed as a major world religion, but it's really a spiritual system and life plan based around the teachings of a man known as the Buddha, a philosopher who was not immortal or divine, but a man who was thought to have unlocked the secrets of the universe. Taoism is also a spiritual system, not a religion, based on the ideas that opposite forces control everything, and that change is always happening and we ought to accept it and live within that framework.

There are more differences between Western and Eastern philosophies, of course. In some ways, the philosophies that came out of the East are more "pure" than Western philosophies, in that, theoretically, Eastern philosophies can be seen as

approaching truth without the burden, competition, and shadows of politicized religion that bog down things in the Western world.

Eastern philosophies are also much older than Western philosophies, and it's interesting to see how key concepts in Western philosophy developed completely independently from Eastern philosophical forms. People are people, after all. We all have the same questions, regardless of where or when we're from. In this light, perhaps there are indeed objective truths that can be discovered about ethics and morality.

In this chapter, we'll be looking at the philosophical contributions of some of the most important thinkers in the ancient East, and especially how those contributions are applied in the form of ethics or moral philosophy. It's worth noting that many of these thinkers developed, honed, and spread their theories and wrote them down more than 1,000 years ago.

8.1. BUDDHIST ETHICS

Suffering and Noble Truths

In the West, ethical systems have derived from religions, such as the Greek pantheistic system, or the monotheistic worldview of Christianity and Judaism. In the East, religions such as Taoism and especially Buddhism derived from moral and ethical systems. Buddhism isn't even a religion, it's more of an organized system of ethics, a way of life, and a "spiritual tradition" that guides people to ultimate truths, understanding, and enlightenment, which is also called nirvana.

The founder of Buddhism is a man from Nepal formerly known as Siddhartha Gautama (circa 563–483 BC). Years of intense study, meditation, and reflection transformed him into the Buddha, a word in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit that means "enlightened one." But "Buddha" or "the Buddha" almost always refers to this Buddha, such is his influence on spirituality, philosophy, and ethics.

Buddhism developed in South Asia and spread throughout the continent over the centuries in part because it presents such an aggressively human approach to how to live well. During the time Buddha was alive, a movement called Sramana was common. This was an ascetic movement that advocated the active rejection and shunning of all earthly pleasures, if not self-punishment. In contrast to that, and in answer to an everyday life of too many earthly pleasures, the Buddha came up with the moderate, thoughtful, Middle Way, which is the spiritual path casually referred to today as Buddhism.

The Four Noble Truths

At the core of Buddhism is a proclamation and acceptance of the Four Noble Truths. All of the Buddha's teachings can essentially be boiled down to these four profound talking points, which invite as many questions as they answer:

- Life is suffering
- Suffering arises from attachment to desires
- Suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases
- Freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path

Adherents to the Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment, or nirvana, are expected to follow these eight abstract guidelines. These guidelines describe virtues for leading an ethical life, which is then the path to the right way and a life of enlightenment. The entire basis of Buddhism isn't just a series of edicts but a description of several specifically ethics-related principles. The Buddha, after years of study, contemplation, and meditation, created this eight-part method. This method is quite literally the Middle Way, and it sets Buddhism apart from other spiritual and ethical traditions.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The eight steps are grouped into themes. The first two steps on the Noble Eightfold Path lead to the cultivation of wisdom.

- **Right view:** Take on the Buddhist viewpoint about life. This includes the concepts that actions have consequences, death is not the end of life, and that the actions in one life affect that of the other.

- **Right resolve:** Dedicate one's life, body, mind, and soul to the pursuit of nirvana.

The next three steps on the Noble Eightfold Path involve how to live out these ethical instructions and requirements.

- **Right speech:** Words matter, and they can harm and hurt. To practice right speech means to refrain from lying, deception, gossip, and chitchat. Buddha believed in speaking only when necessary, and with honest, carefully chosen words that promote love and growth.

- **Right action:** More or less, this is a conscious, considerate living out of the Five Precepts of Buddhism (see the following). Right action means to behave so as not to harm, or to harm as little as possible, a sentient being in any way, be it physically, emotionally, or spiritually. (The old story about a Buddhist monk who won't even harm an insect? That's an example of living out this step on the Noble Eightfold Path.)

- **Right livelihood:** One should be ethical in one's profession, and make one's living in a peaceful, unharmful way. Buddha specifically named four careers that ought to be avoided entirely, because they bring about nothing but added pain to the universe: dealing with weapons, dealing with living things (which includes slavery, the sex trade, and animal slaughter), meat production, and being involved in the manufacture or sale of poisons or intoxicants.

The final three steps on the Noble Eightfold Path lead toward greater development of the mind.

- **Right effort:** An individual must actively try his best, and with all his energy, might, and will, to develop and cultivate a clean and clear state of consciousness and openness.

- **Right mindfulness:** An individual has to put aside earthly and superficial desires so as to allow the mind to be aware and resolute, and to not be distracted by fleeting emotions or changing mental states.

- **Right concentration:** Also called Samadhi, it's a commitment to actively focusing and then maintaining one's thoughts on achieving a place of clarity and enlightenment.

The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts handed down by the Buddha are core virtues that can direct a person onto the path of enlightenment. These virtues are expressed as mantras or prayers. Buddhists are forever training themselves to abide by the practices described in these mantras. These practices are certainly not ones restricted just to Buddhism, although a Buddhist recites these mantras daily as a reminder of them. Adherents chant these mantras either in the original Sanskrit or in their native tongue.

- **Don't kill.** *Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, or "I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures."
- **Don't steal.** *Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, or "I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given."
- **Be chaste.** *Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, or "I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct."
- **Speak well and choose your words carefully.** *Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, or "I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech." (This concept is so important to ethical development in Buddhism that it's included in the Noble Eightfold Path as well as the Five Precepts.)
- **Stay away from drugs and alcohol.** *Sura-meraya-maja pamadathana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, or "I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness."

There is no overarching divine figure in Buddhism, not even the Buddha. There's only the universe, life, you, and the goal to reach nirvana. Instead of a god, there's just a general law of the universe that states that some behaviors lead to enlightenment and others bring about suffering. If a behavior brings you closer to enlightenment, it's ethical. If a behavior brings suffering, then it's not ethical. Fortunately, there are the Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Paths, and Five Precepts to help make ethical decisions a lot easier.

8.2. CONFUCIANISM AND ETHICS

The Interplay of Jen and Li

Kong Qiu, known in the West under the Latinized form of his name Confucius, was a philosopher born in China in 551 B.C. Confucius wrote aphorisms and ethical models for everything from family life to public life to educational systems. One of the most broad and all-encompassing philosophical and ethical frameworks bears his name: Confucianism.

What is Jen?

Two of the basic concepts of Confucianism are called jen and li. Jen is the idea that humans are made distinctively human by an innate, natural goodness. Confucius himself said that jen was the main human virtue or "the virtue of virtues," and that any and all other virtues are an outgrowth of this one. It's telling though, and in line with other difficult to quantify and difficult to universalize concepts of ethics across the board, that Confucius never gave a specific definition of jen, merely characterizing and describing it in practice. To Confucius, jen and all its attendant qualities, is more important than life itself. In other words, it is more important for us to maintain the ethical, natural standard of humans, that innate goodness, than it is to pursue one's own personal fulfillment. In this regard, jen is quite similar to the Western philosophical concept of "the greater good."

Jen gives dignity to human life, and this plays out in two ways. The first is that jen drives humans to be kind to other humans—thus it's a natural imperative to be kind. The other is also just as natural: jen provides self-esteem for the individual, which in turn leads that person to commit moral acts. Confucianism also teaches that there isn't a set amount of jen in any one person, nor is it the same in everyone. Indeed, everyone has some natural human goodness in them, but some have more than others.

However, it is possible to obtain more jen, as Confucius also taught of our ability to obtain perfection (or at least something close to that). How does one get more jen, and thus become more perfect? To find jen, and peace, and goodness, it is more ethical to reject the notion of satisfying one's needs and desires and work instead at bringing kindness and goodness to others. Therefore, the predominant motivator of human action, or the first principle of Confucianism, is to act according to jen, and to seek to extend jen to others. This increases the jen of others and also one's

own jen. Confucius realized that a well-ordered culture or society was necessary in order for jen to be expressed or shared.

What is Li?

This is where the other major aspect of Confucianism, li, comes in. Li is the guide of human action that leads to gains, benefits, and a stable, pleasant order of things. Li is the system or moral framework by which one can share and spread jen.

Confucius broke down the system of li into several "senses," the first being the First Sense, or a guide to human relationships, or how humans ought to interact with one another in the most moral way possible. (In other words, "propriety.") Propriety is all about people being open and kind to one another; it is about focusing on positive words and actions rather than negative ones—which is to say choosing good concrete moral acts instead of actively choosing bad ones. And what is, exactly, a good way to act, so as to be the most kind and pass on the most jen in a gentle way? Confucius called that the Law of the Mean, or "the middle." For Confucius, the most moral choice often meant that one should aim to shoot right down the middle so as to maximize happiness for all.

The Five Relationships

Another element of the First Sense of li is "The Five Relationships." Again, this is the way Confucius argues things ought to be done, in accordance with maximizing jen. In this regard, the Five Relationships show us how to take the best moral actions in social interactions with friends and family. But these are specific actions, rather than universal actions, as Confucius has broken down all human engagements into one of five categories. They are:

- **Father and son.** The father should be loving to his boy, the boy ought to be reverential to his father.

- **Elder brother and younger brother.** The elder brother should be gentle to his young brother, while the younger brother needs to be respectful to his older sibling.

- **Husband and wife.** A husband is to be "good to his wife." A wife should "listen" to her husband.

- **Older friend and younger friend.** The older should be considerate of the younger, and the younger should be deferential to the older.

- **Ruler and subject.** Rulers ought to be kind and just. Subjects in turn should and must be loyal.

The idea of age factors into almost all five relationships. This is a concept called "respect for the age," as Confucius wrote that age and by extension, life experience gives value and wisdom to lives, institutions, and even objects.

The Concept of Yi

Confucius gave a name to the natural sense of humans to go and be good: yi. It is necessary to have yi to have jen. Yi is a natural sense that humans get, because they are humans and can think and reason, and more important, feel, the moral sense when something is right or when something is wrong. Yi also includes our natural ability to know the right thing to do in most any circumstance. This isn't a moral wisdom (or chih), which can be both learned and natural, but intuition—it's just there. You're going to have some sense of right or wrong. How you act is a different matter entirely.

COURSE MODULE

Confucianism is, then, a form of deontology, not consequentialism. The acts themselves are good, regardless of intention or consequence. Acting from a sense of yi is very close to the ideal of practicing jen. The reason is, if an action is done for the sake of yi—an innate moral ability to do good—it's the right thing to do. But if an action is done out of a sense of jen, that respect for others and a desire to spread goodness, then the act adds good and moral intention to the already moral act.

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