

Ethical Theory Exam — Review Guide

I. Aristotle: Virtue Ethics

(Based on John Bowin, “Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics”)

1. The Ethical Turn

- Aristotle’s ethics continues Socrates’ and Plato’s focus on *how to live well*, emphasizing **character** over individual actions.
- *Virtue ethics* asks: “What kind of person should I be?” rather than “What should I do?”

2. The Highest Good – *Eudaimonia*

- Every action aims at some good; the **highest good (summum bonum)** is *eudaimonia* — usually translated as **flourishing** or **living well**, not mere happiness.
- It is **final** (chosen for its own sake) and **self-sufficient** (lacking nothing).
- *Eudaimonia* is an **activity**, not a state — it consists in **living in accordance with virtue** over a complete life.

3. The Function Argument

- Each thing has a **function (*ergon*)**; the human function is **rational activity**.
- Therefore, the good human life is **excellent rational activity**, i.e. activity in accordance with **virtue (*aretē*)**.
- Virtue = excellence in performing one’s function well.

4. The Doctrine of the Mean

- Moral virtue is a **mean** between extremes of excess and deficiency (e.g., courage = mean between cowardice and recklessness).

- The mean is **relative to us**, found by **reason**, as a person of **practical wisdom** (*phronēsis*) would determine.

5. *Phronēsis* (Practical Wisdom)

- Intellectual virtue that enables us to **deliberate well** about what is good and right in particular situations.
- Distinguishes acting rightly *because one knows why* from merely following rules.

6. Social and Political Dimensions

- Humans are **political animals**: flourishing occurs within communities.
 - The good life requires friendship, justice, and participation in shared rational activity.
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II. Kant: The Groundwork of Morals and Korsgaard's Interpretation

(Based on the *Groundwork Introduction* and Christine Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie")

1. The Aim of Kant's Moral Philosophy

- To identify and justify the **supreme principle of morality** — the **categorical imperative (CI)**.
- Morality must be **a priori**, based on **reason**, not on experience, feelings, or consequences.

2. The Good Will

- The only thing good **without qualification** is a **good will**.
- A good will acts **from duty**, not from inclination or desire for reward.

3. Acting From Duty vs. Acting In Accordance With Duty

- **From duty**: motivated by respect for the moral law itself.

- **In accordance with duty:** doing the right thing, but for other reasons (e.g., self-interest or sympathy).

4. The Categorical Imperative (CI)

- **Categorical = unconditional** command; holds regardless of one's desires.
- **Hypothetical imperatives** (e.g., "If you want X, do Y") are conditional.

Formulations of the CI

1. Formula of Universal Law:

- "Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law."
- Tests consistency and universality of moral rules.

2. Formula of Humanity:

- "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means."
- Grounds morality in **respect for rational autonomy**.

3. Formula of the Kingdom of Ends:

- Envisions a community of rational beings who legislate moral law for themselves and each other.

5. Duties of Right vs. Duties of Virtue

- **Duties of Right (juridical duties):** can be externally coerced (e.g., not stealing, keeping contracts).
- **Duties of Virtue (ethical duties):** depend on inner motivation; cannot be externally forced (e.g., beneficence, self-perfection).

6. Grounding Morality in Reason

- Experience is **empirical**, hence contingent and variable; cannot yield universal or necessary laws.
- Morality must rest on **pure practical reason**, binding on all rational beings.

7. Korsgaard's "The Right to Lie"

- **The Dilemma:** Should you lie to the murderer at the door to save a life?
 - Kant says lying is *always wrong* — it undermines the moral law and treats others merely as means.
 - **Korsgaard's Analysis:**
 - The **Formula of Universal Law** might permit the lie (since it could be universalized under those conditions).
 - But the **Formula of Humanity** forbids it — deception denies the other's rational agency.
 - Korsgaard argues Kant's rigorism stems from an **ideal of moral relations based on mutual respect**, not cold legalism.
 - Yet, she suggests morality also needs **principles for dealing with evil** — recognizing that perfect moral relations can break down in a non-ideal world.
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III. Critiques of Virtue Ethics

(Based on Johansson & Svensson, "Objections to Virtue Ethics")

1. Two Aims of Ethical Theory

- **Theoretical aim:** Provide a *criterion of rightness* (what makes actions right).
- **Practical aim:** Offer *guidance* for moral decision-making.

2. Hursthouse's Criterion

- An action is right **iff it's what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances.**

3. Objection: "Circumstances No Virtuous Person Could Face"

- What if one's situation results from past vice (e.g., promises made deceitfully)?
- If no virtuous person could be in such circumstances, the "what would a virtuous person do?" test becomes meaningless.

4. Objection: "The Wrong Right-Maker"

- Even if right actions are what virtuous people would do, *that's not what makes them right.*
- Their rightness must come from **the concrete moral features of the act** (e.g., relieving pain, showing justice).
- Therefore, virtue ethics may describe moral psychology better than it explains moral justification.

5. Possible Replies

- Virtue ethicists can argue their theory provides a **model for deliberation**, not a rival "criterion of rightness."
- It focuses on **moral perception and character formation**—how good agents recognize what is right.

VI. Study Strategies

1. **Memorize key definitions:** *eudaimonia*, *phronēsis*, *categorical imperative*, *autonomy*, *duty of virtue*, *duty of right*.
2. **Practice contrasting Aristotle and Kant:**

- Virtue ethics → *teleological and character-based*.
 - Kantian ethics → *deontological and law-based*.
3. **Review Korsgaard's case of the murderer:** understand both Kant's view and her reinterpretation.
 4. **Know the objections to virtue ethics:** especially "circumstances" and "wrong right-maker."
 5. **Prepare one-sentence rationales** for each multiple-choice question—explain *why* the correct answer fits the text.
 6. **For short answers:**
 - Focus on explaining key concepts clearly (virtue → function argument; duty → moral law).
 - Show you understand how each author builds or critiques a moral framework.
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