Lecture 19 – Virtue Ethics and Confucianism

Rosalind Hursthouse – “Virtue Ethics”
JeeLoo Liu – “Confucius (Kongzi) in the Analects”
Agenda

1. Virtue Ethics
2. Aristotle
3. Practical Wisdom
4. Confucius
   - Zhong or Loyalty
   - Shu or Empathy
   - Ren or Humanity
   - Li or Ritual Propriety
Virtue Ethics

• Virtue ethics is often viewed as an approach toward moral theorizing that is distinct from deontology or utilitarianism.

• Virtue ethics does not focus on what rules (The Categorical Imperative versus The Greatest Happiness Principle, for example) our action should follow to be morally right.

• Rather, virtue ethics focuses on what character traits (virtues) one should have in order to be a morally good or virtuous person.
Aristotle

• 384-322 BCE
• Student of Plato
• Teacher of Alexander the Great
• Wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*
• Proponent of virtue ethics
Rosalind Hursthouse

- 1943–
- New Zealand moral philosopher
- Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist
- Professor at the University of Auckland
What are Virtues?

Virtues are “character traits that we praise and admire people for having because they constitute being a morally good person” (782).

Examples:
Benevolence
Courage
Generosity
Honesty
Justice
Kindness
Loyalty
Trustworthiness
Practical Wisdom

• Phronesis or Practical Wisdom: “knowledge that enables its possessor to make correct moral decisions about what to do—to reason correctly about what is right” (782).

• “We should not reason about what to do in terms of what will maximize the best consequences, and not in terms of what will be in accordance with correct moral principles such as ‘Do not lie’ or ‘Keep promises,’ but in terms of what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances” (782).
Practical Wisdom

• Practical wisdom cannot be captured in any simple straightforward rule, but is instead a sort of knowledge that is subtle, nuanced, and sensitive to particular circumstances.

• For example, do trustworthy people always keep their promises?

• Do honest people always volunteer the truth?
Practical Wisdom

• “You can’t have *phronesis* without having virtue and you can’t have virtue without having *phronesis*” (787). People with practical wisdom know “what is truly important in life, what matters, what is worthwhile.” (786)

• Practical wisdom is acquired through experience and habit. It is a sort of know-how.
Practical Wisdom

• Does ethics or morality require rules?
• What might be some problems with practical wisdom?
• Compare what utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics say about honesty. Is it ever okay to lie? When is it ethical to lie and why?
Confucius

• 551-479 BCE
• Wrote *The Analects*.
• Lived in a time of political upheaval with many competing nation-states.
• Traveled from one nation-state to the next in an attempt to morally educate rulers.
JeeLoo Liu

- Professor at CSU Fullerton
- Works in analytic Chinese philosophy, in particular Chinese metaphysics, Confucian moral psychology, and Neo-Confucian virtue ethics
Confucius

• Confucius “did not take a definitional approach... Confucius did not think that there could be a universal definition for a moral concept, which would be applicable to everyone in every situation” (48).

• Four Key Concepts:
  1. *Zhong* or Loyalty
  2. *Shu* or Empathy
  3. *Ren* or Humanity
  4. *Li* or Ritual Propriety
Zhong or Loyalty

• Moral hierarchy

• “Loyalty is not a devotion directed specifically toward one’s superior; rather, it is directed toward the role one plays – being loyal means doing one’s best in whatever one does. In this sense, loyalty can be defined as ‘doing what one is supposed to do’ or ‘being loyal to one’s role.’ In other words, a social role is not simply a social assignment; it is also a moral assignment” (50).

• Filial piety

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        The ruler
         |   |
The ministers |
         |   |
        The subjects
        Father    Husband    Elder brother    Teacher    Friend — Friend
         |   |    |       |    |            |
        Son    Wife    Younger brother    Student
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Zhong or Loyalty

• What might be some criticisms of Confucius’ notion of zhong?
• Why does Confucius think loyalty is so important?
• When everyone fulfills their roles, there is social harmony and no chaos. “It will be a ‘correct’ structure” (51).
Shu or Empathy

• Confucian Golden Rule: “Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” (53).

• How do zhong and shu work together to establish Confucius’ ideal society?

• With shu or empathy, one can imaginatively place oneself in the social roles of others to understand their wishes and desires.
Ren or Humanity

• *Junzi* (gentlemen) → Men of *ren* → Sages

• *Junzi* have superior moral character. Men of *ren* help others to cultivate their moral personhood. Sages help all people and the multitude in their moral self-cultivation.

• Morality requires habituation.

• “*Ren* is not a moral principle that gives us specific guidance in life... *Ren* is not about action; rather, it is about a state of being. ... *ren* represents an ideal state of being” (57-8).
Li or Ritual Propriety

• “Li is about propriety, about what is the right thing to do in a given context. The formalized aspect of li is rituals and rites, but there has to be more to it than this” (59).

• Li provides external guidance, but also “the observance of propriety has to come from an internal moral sense – righteousness” otherwise we may be blindly following inflexible or arbitrary social convention (59).

• “The essence of propriety comes from self-restraint. ...to restrain oneself as a way to return to propriety is simply ren itself” (60).

• Is etiquette a part of morality?
The Confucian Political Ideal

• Ideal ruler is the sage king. The virtue of a ruler sets an example for the people to emulate.
• The virtuous ruler is compared to the Pole Star. Also, the virtuous ruler is compared to the wind and the people to the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends.
• Rejects strict laws and harsh punishment.
Compare Confucianism

• Emphasis on duties and not rights
• No straightforward applicable rules
• Ritual propriety (similar to etiquette) and politics are of a piece with ethics
• Social/moral structure, hierarchy, and harmony are important

Is Confucianism more like deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, or its own distinct brand of moral theorizing?