



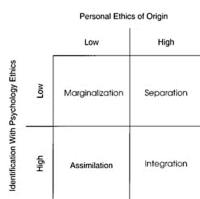
2. Virtue Ethics & Feminist Ethics

📅 Date	@November 10, 2025
🌟 Lectures	Done
🌟 Exam prepp	Done

Literature

Workgroup

Last time



1. Introduction to Ethics

- a. What is it about?
- b. Dilemmas
- c. Metaethics and Challenges

2. Ethics and Psychology

- a. Relation
- b. Acculturation
- c. Course Goals

Conclusions from last week

- Ethics infuses our daily lives.
- As psychologists, we face unique challenges in carrying out our professional duties as therapists, teachers, and researchers.
- In ethics we start from the acting person in the concrete situation.
- Every context is unique.
- Every person is different
- Ethics is therefore complex, no easy answers.
- No absolute objective truth ... but there are better and worse decisions ... and we need both theory and practice to learn how to make them (acculturation)

Normative Ethics

Determining moral standards

"The approach we take to the question of ethics already fashions and delimits the very question of what we consider to be ethical or potentially ethical in the first place" ~ Calum Neill, chapter 5

- What moral principles should we accept? What makes right actions right? Is there a single fundamental principle of morality?
- Justification of values and norms
- **Prescriptive**: what you ought to do, how you ought to live
 - There is descriptive and Prescriptive, differentiëren tussen the "is" and the ought
- This may involve articulating:
 - the **consequences** of our behavior on others
 - the **duties** that we should follow
 - the **virtues** that we should acquire



Normative ethics takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral **standards** that regulate right and wrong conduct.

- This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others.
- They are standards (ruler to measure)
- There are legal, safety and moral standards.
- Standards can help in applying principles – they are based on principles
- One principle may underlie different norms (interpretations)

Theories of right conduct

Central questions of normative ethics:

- What moral principles should we accept?
- What makes right actions right?
- Is there a single fundamental principle of morality?

Normative applied ethics

- The top-down approach to applied ethics:
 - Work out the correct normative theory in general terms.
 - Consider the facts about particular moral problems.
 - Deduce the correct moral stance about each moral problem from the previously worked-out theory.
- Problems with the top-down approach:
 - There is widespread disagreement about which normative ethical theory is correct.
 - One important way of constructing and supporting normative theories is to think about cases.

| We want to work bottom up

Virtue Ethics

| Focus on the process, not on the end product. By learning, so education is important in virtue ethics

Virtue ethics asks: what kind of person should I **be**? (*character*)

- Virtue ethics is about developing **excellence of character** → **goal**
 - An act is morally right just because it is the one that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in that situation
- The ultimate standard: what would a virtuous person do?
 - The virtuous person is a **moral exemplar**, someone who sets a fine example and serves as a role model for the rest of us.
 - Virtue can be acquired only by training, experience, and practice.

What is virtue ethics?

- De-emphasizes
 - intentions
 - consequences
 - rules
- Emphasizes *the person who is acting*
- Inquires whether the person is expressing **good** character

Most moral theories: What is the right thing to do?

- Virtue ethics: NOT what do I do in this particular situation BUT What kind of person should I be?
- Virtue ethics is a family of theories that traces its roots (in the West) back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.
- Virtue ethics focuses on moral character and attends to the characteristics of the individual that lead to moral actions.

The aim of these theories is to discover the conditions and character traits that contribute to human **flourishing** (*conditions*).

Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)

- Morality is not precise (like mathematics) but **complex and messy**
- There are **rules of thumb** that can guide us, but strict obedience will lead to error:
 - Rules can't fully capture the everchanging world, the particularity of real-life situations, the differences and relationships between people
- Moral wisdom is **practical wisdom (phronesis)**, which requires training, experience and intellectual and emotional (some theories don't have this component) maturity
 - **practical wisdom (phronesis) = a skill that you need to practice**
- **Eudaimonea**, on the other hand, must be something else, or more basic, than these obviously desirable things.
 - = het hoogste menselijke doel, vaak vertaald als geluk, welzijn of een 'goed leven'
- Ethics is the examination of eudaimonea.
 - *What does it mean to flourish? Relation to practical wisdom*
- Aristotle defines virtue as **excellence**, something performing its proper function well:
 - A knife needs to be sharp to cut things
 - Humans need to do what they do best (exercise reasoning powers) to flourish

Virtues

- Aristotle: "We are adapted by nature to receive them and are made perfect by the habit"
- Virtue, however, is not to be found in the acts themselves, but in the **character** of the one doing the acting

A virtue [is] not a mere habit, or a tendency to act in certain ways.
 Habits don't define a person, character traits do" ~ **Schafer-Landau**

"Always act in the right way, at the right time, in the right place, and for the right reasons" ~ **Aristotle**

- Virtues are complex **character traits** that affect a person's perceptions, thoughts, motives, and behavior
 - Generous people *perceive* others in need, *think* about how to help, *are moved* by the needs of others and *act* generously
- **Emotions** play an important role in helping us see what is morally relevant, tell right from wrong, motivating us to do the right thing
- **Aristotle** thought of virtues as the **golden mean** between two vices of deficiency and excess.

The Virtues

Vice (Deficiency)	Virtue (Mean)	Vice (Excess)
Cowardly	Brave	Rash
Addictive	Temperate	Ascetic
Stingy	Generous	Extravagant
Self-denigrating	Truthful	Boastful
Boorish	Witty	Buffoonish
Quarrelsome	Friendly	Boastful
Melancholy	Spirited	Boldness
Depraved	Conscientious	Deferential
Envious	Indignant	Refractive
Mean	Benevolent	Self-sacrificing
Lazy	Industrious	Single-minded

- *Dit is meer een gradient/spectrum*
- *Emotions worden in virtue ethics gezien als useful to help us identify the situation and where we want to be*

Productive flourishing

Phronesis

- When virtues **conflict** it is up to us to balance one against the other, using the guidance of **moral exemplars** and our good judgment (**phronesis = practical wisdom**)
 - **Judging** the situation here is a central part. Avoiding **judgement** can be seen as problematic
- Ethics only provides general principles. There is no guidebook, formula, or master rule.
- Practical wisdom is about ethical improvisation: the ability to see the morally important features of a particular situation, and to reason ethically in situ.
 - Comparable to the role of an ethical code like the APA?
 - + Some of its principles correspond to virtues
- The more **experienced** we are, the more nuances we are able to take into account, the less we cling to rules, the more morally wise we are.
- Discuss Kafka example in Niels, page 60.

The nature of virtue

- Virtues are complex character traits that affect a person's perceptions, thoughts, motives, and behavior. Examples:
 - **Generosity (think)**
 - Generous people *perceive* people in need, *think* about how to help, are moved by the needs of others.
 - **Courage (act)**
 - Courageous people *perceive* threats, *manage* fear, are *moved* to **act** nobly.

Virtue as the golden mean

- Aristotle says virtue involves finding the proper balance between two extremes.
 - Excess: having too much of something.
 - Deficiency: having too little of something.
- Not mediocrity, but harmony and balance.
- The Mean **varies** from person to person
 - It's NOT an absolute ethics
 - *Each* person and situation is *different*
- There are many ways of behaving & thus *many ways to be happy*

Examples

DEFICIENCY OF VIRTUE (Vices)	VIRTUE	EXCESS OF VIRTUE (Vices)
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Inferiority	Temperance	Disipation
Stinginess	Generosity	Wastefulness
Clonily	Magnificence	Vulgarity
Auspersion	Magnanimity	Vainglory
Indolence	Industrious	Overambitious
Indifference	Caring	Controling
Self-deprecation	Honest	Boastfulness
Boorishness	Charming	Buffoonery
Quarrelsome	Friendliness	Obsequious
Lying	Tactful	Tactless
Impatient	Tolerant	Doomat
Timid	Confident	Dominating
Faible	Loyal	Outlaw
Unsure	Vigilant	Impetuous
Cowardice	Protective	Bully
Fearful	Patent	Impulsive
Rudeness	Flexible	Rigid
Naive	Practical	Cynical
Wimpy	Assertive	Arrogant
Serine	Nurturing	Mercy
Paranoid	Confident	Arrogant
Pushover	Careful	Stubborn

Emotion: fear

- Vice-deficiency = rashness
- Vice-excess=cowardice
- Virtue-mean=courage

Action: giving money

- Vice-deficiency=stinginess
- Vice-excess=prodigality
- Virtue-mean=generosity

Virtue ethics in psychology

Similarly, the proper function of a therapist is to improve the condition of his or her client's life, so an excellent therapist is one who does so with efficiency and regularity. [Lloyd & Hansen, 31]

- In the helping professions, core virtues include the following:
 - nonmalevolence, the duty to do no harm;
 - benevolence, the duty to do good for clients and the larger society;
 - justice, the duty to treat all fairly;
 - fidelity, keeping a promise - maintaining confidentiality; and
 - respect for autonomy, the duty to ensure that the individual's right to make decisions is maintained.

Ethical Concept	Definition/Description
Nonmalevolence	Obligation to do no harm
Benevolence	Obligation to promote the welfare of others, for example, clients
Justice	Obligation to treat others fairly, for example, avoid special treatment in distribution of services
Autonomy	Right to make free informed choices, one's own free will
Fidelity	Keeping a promise such as a promise of confidentiality

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- Virtue ethics acknowledges moral **complexity** and the importance of character, moral education, moral wisdom, **emotions**, the good life
- But it has problems with tragic dilemma's, offering moral guidance (particularly in cases of **conflict** between virtues/role models), demandingness, and arguing the **priority** of virtue over rightness of action

Feminist Ethics

Feminist Ethics: A Plurality of Perspectives

Five overarching themes that characterize feminist ethics:

1. The assumption that women and their experiences have moral significance (first level)
 - Back to level of morality to the level of ethics
2. The assertion that attentiveness, subjective knowledge, can illuminate moral issues
 - For example to gender differences can help us when engaging in moral dilemma's. You don't have to be a woman but attentive to this perspective to enrich your knowledge
3. The claim that a feminist critique of male distortions (downplaying, lived experience) must be accompanied by a critique of all discriminatory distortions
 - a. **Intersectionality** houdt in dat vormen van onderdrukking elkaar kruisen en versterken; men kan niet volledig begrijpen wat morele rechtvaardigheid inhoudt zonder deze verweven ongelijkheden mee te nemen.
4. The admonition that feminist ethics engage in analysis of the context and attend to the power dynamics of that context
 - a. Machtsposities
5. The injunction that feminist ethics **require action** directed at achieving social justice.
 - a. Links to virtue ethics → not just thinking but acting

Feminist (Plural)

- "Women" are the moral equals of men.
- Views that justify the subordination of women or downplay their interests are thus mistaken on that account.
- The experiences of women deserve our respect and are vital to a full and accurate understanding of morality.
- To the extent that philosophers ignore such experiences, their theories are bound to be incomplete and likely to be biased and inaccurate.

Feminisms ≠ Woman

- There is no such thing as "the female perspective."
 - Niet generaliseren tot ALLE vrouwen is wat ze hiermee bedoelen
- But there are many experiences widely shared among women and uncommon among men:
 - Vulnerability to rape.
 - Threat of domestic abuse.
 - Exclusion from many professions.
 - Economic dependence.
 - Diminished autonomy.
 - Structural oppression and occlusion

Relational feminism

- Responding to centrality of autonomy and individualism
 - **Relational autonomy** → changes in APA and NIP-code
- Centering community, interactions, intersubjectivity/interdependence, responsibility, collectivities, cooperation and human connection (attachment), empathy and growth
- Make space in ethics for emotions, embodiment, and reflection as important sources of knowledge
- Strong objectivity (**Harding**), grounded knowledge and standpoint epistemology as a response to positivism's illusion of neutral objectivity
 - *You need as many perspectives as possible in order to get to that truth*

Examples of Situated Knowledge of Feminine Ethics

- Empathy • Sympathy • Caring • Cooperation • Openness to competing ideas
- Altruism • Mercy • Compassion • Flexibility • Connectedness to others

Radical feminists reject assertions of value neutrality, explaining that behind any claims to neutrality lie the values of dominant group. [Brabeck and Ting, 24]

- What we think is objectivity is an illusion → does objectivity exist?
- Awareness is central in this.
- Link between feminist ethics and virtue ethics
- Double consciousness
 - Being black in America, learning how to live in two different worlds

Feminist Ethics: Power & Morality

Hegel (1807/1977) realized that the distinct standpoints occupied by slave and master produce radically different understandings of both their relationship and the world. Hegel contended that the viewpoints of oppressed and dominant groups are not merely distinct but qualitatively unequal. **Those in positions of power have substantial interest in preserving their hierarchical place. They invest considerable effort in making their standpoint the dominant reality.**

Concerned with **power relations** and power inequality

- Hierarchical relationships of unequal power
 - Supervisor ↔ student;
 - Therapist ↔ client
- Exploitative relationships (Nagy 2011)
 - Psychologists do not exploit persons over whom they have supervisory, evaluative or other authority such as clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, and employees.
- Becoming sensitive to oppression and reducing it
 - Be aware of **biases** in ethical decision-making:

“Psychologists endeavor to be aware of and guard against their own **biases** and the **prejudices** of others that may condone or lead to **unjust practices**” - APA Code Principle D: Justice

Intersectionality & Gender/Race Theory

The focus in this approach is on power (and unequal or hierarchical power relations) and an effort to achieve **justice and equality**.

- The feminist view promotes the equality of all genders and races and advocates for inclusion and justice.
- Its preferred method is an **intersectional** one.
- The feminist perspective is focused on reducing oppression for all.
- The intent of feminist ethics is to challenge binary and hierarchies that are implicit as well as explicit and to develop a sensitivity to discovering oppression (which is unethical).
- The feminist perspective of ethics has been expanded to include many oppressed groups such as those that are oppressed due to sexual preference, race, religion.
- Feminisms connect ethics to **thinking** (*epistemology*) and **action** (*politics*) - critical of liberalism tendency to discursively window dress (e.g. DEI) and circumnavigate material structural injustice such as racism, colonialism, capitalism.
 - Privilege exercise workgroup

Feminist Ethics (Held, recommended reading)

1. Rethinking **reason** and **emotion**

- As opposition; as associated with masculinity and femininity
- Priority of reason over emotion

“If the concept of “human” were built upon what we think about “woman” rather than what we think about “man,” it would be a very different concept. Ethics ... has not been a search for universal...guidance, but a gender-based enterprise” ~ Held

2. Rethinking the **public** and the **private**

- Association of public with the uniquely human
- Public as the model for ethical interactions

“The flourishing of children ought to be at the very center of moral and social and political and economic and legal thought” ~ Held

3. Rethinking the **concept of self**

- The self as autonomous, independent
- Relations as impersonal

Feminist theorists begin ethical theorizing with embodied, gendered subjects who have particular histories, particular communities, particular allegiances, and particular visions of human flourishing” ~ Morgan (in Held)

Care Ethics

- A *normative* ethical theory
- Points to care - especially a **mother’s care** - as the model of moral relations and the basis of ethics
- Care is **contextual**, care emphasizes the importance of **emotions**, and care focuses on maintaining **relationships**
- The **family** as the primary sphere of morality
- **Interdependency** (not autonomous, isolated, rational self-interested individual)
- Prioritization of **human relations** (instead of abstract, universal, impartial rules)

“Caring, empathy, feeling with others, being sensitive to each other’s feelings, all may be better guides to what morality requires in actual contexts than may abstract rules of reason, or rational calculation” ~ Annette Baier (in Held)

Carol Gilligan - Care Ethics

- “In a Different Voice” (1982)
- *Against Kant*: we should NOT focus on responsibilities towards abstract others but on specific responsibilities arising in **relationships**
- *Against Kohlberg*: “**justice reasoning**” is NOT the end stage of moral development

Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Level 1: Preconventional morality

1. Stage 1: Punishment and obedience: Morality is external to the self
2. Stage 2: Individualism and exchange: Realization that rules aren't absolute

Level 2: Conventional morality

3. Stage 3: Good interpersonal relationships: Morality is conforming to the group standard
4. Stage 4: Maintaining social order: Becoming aware of the rules of society on broader scale

Level 3: Postconventional morality

5. Stage 5: Social contract and individual rights: Society should function as a social contract
6. Stage 6: Universal principles: Autonomous development of principles that apply to all

*“[For women] the moral problem arises from **conflicting responsibilities** rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is **contextual** and **narrative** rather than formal and abstract. This conception of **morality as concerned with the activity of care** centers moral development around the **understanding of responsibility and relationships**, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules” ~ Gilligan, “In a Different Voice”*

- Against Kohlberg: “**justice reasoning**” is not the end stage of moral development.
- Gilligan suggests women typically engage more in “**care reasoning**”

Male perspective:

- Independence (separation); responsibility *to oneself*
- Focus on the *political/legal*: rights, justice, social contracts.

Female perspective:

- Interdependence (connection); responsibility *for others*
- Focus on the *social/personal*: communicating, responding, maintaining relationships

Feminist and care ethics & ethical decision-making (summary)

- **Sensitivity** to differences between your own social location and that of others
 - Being aware of your **position of power**
 - Of specific **biases**

- Develop the skill to become **sensitive to the needs of people** you interact with even if you may never have experienced that particular need
- Pay attention to **particular relationships** and their moral relevance
- **Becoming aware of dilemmas** that you yourself might not consider as such