Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

2. The Greek Ethical Tradition

Sunday, May 8, 2005
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.
Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever..

- Book of Common Prayer, p. 254
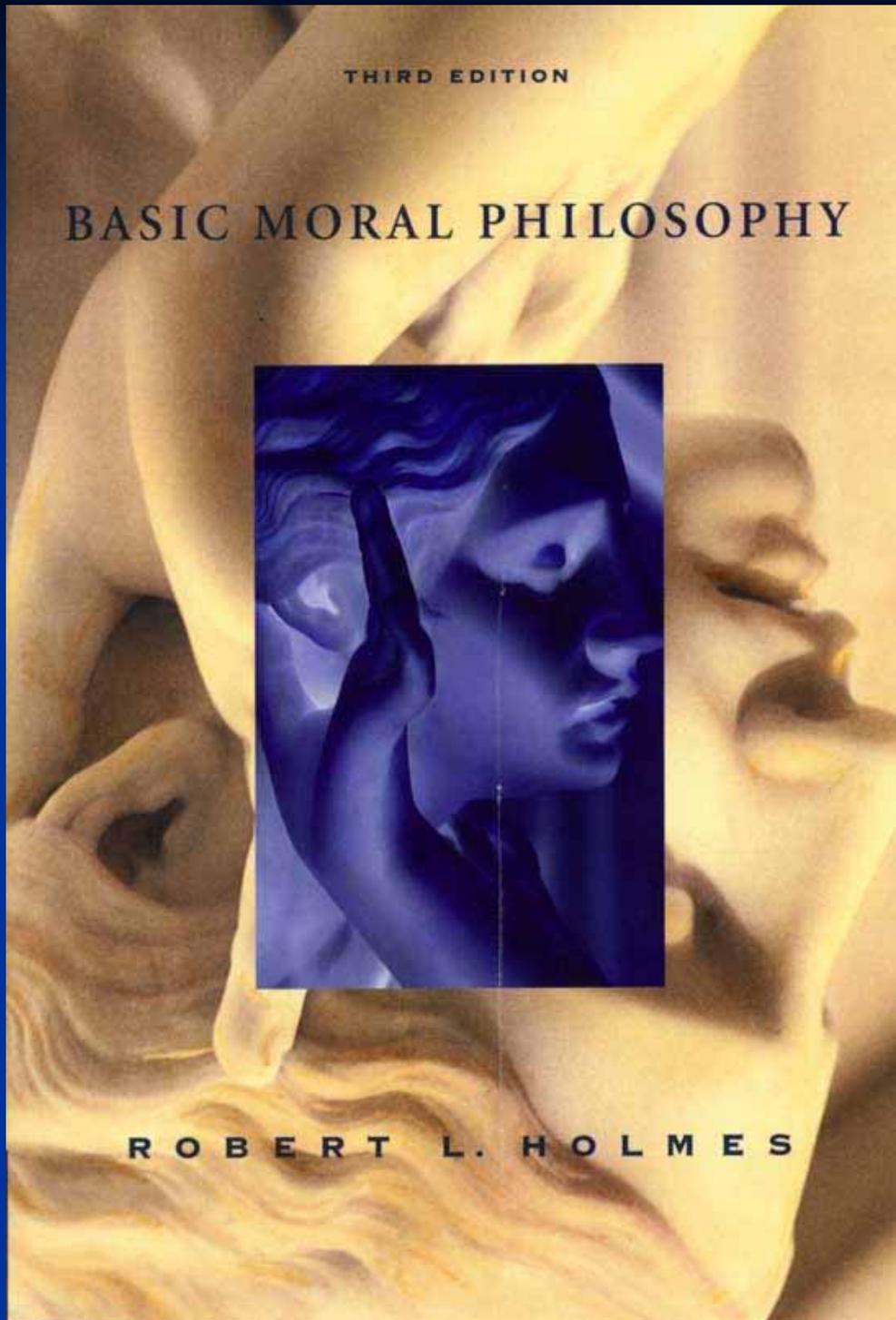
- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2

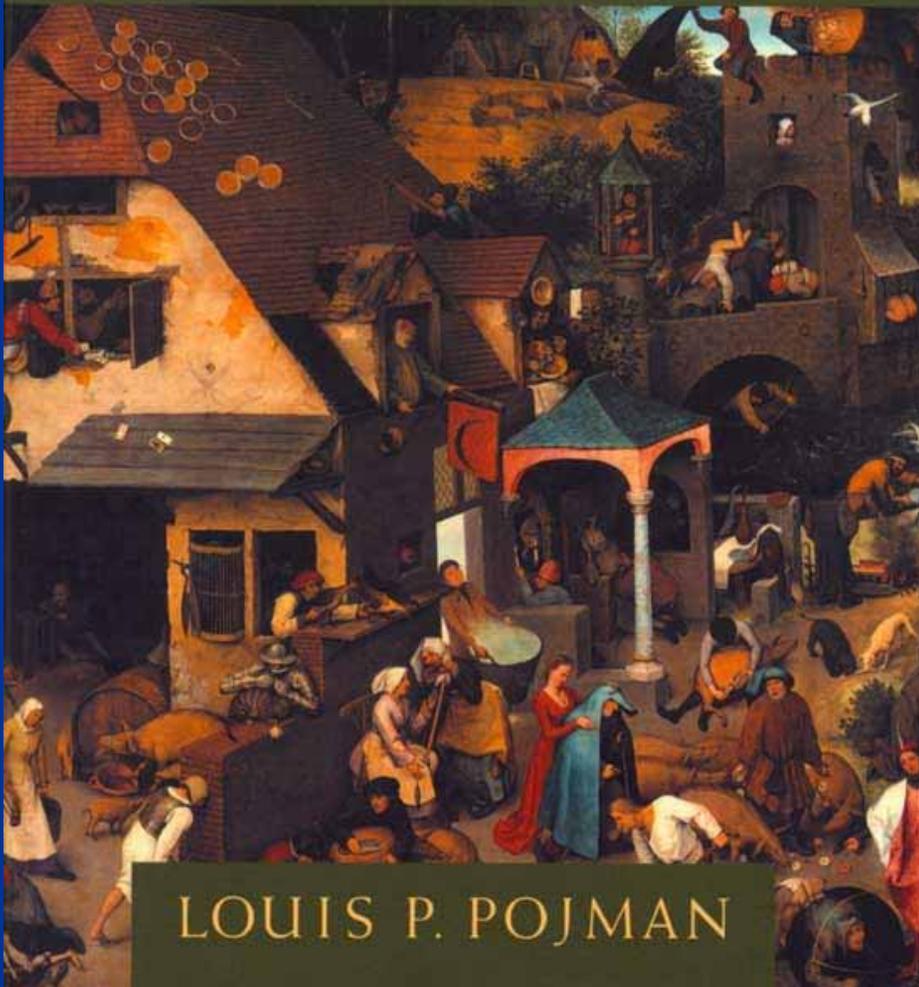- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

- **The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics,** Stanley J. Grenz. InterVarsity Press, 2000. ISBN: 0-830-81568-6.

- Dr. Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey / Regent College in Vancouver, B.C.

- **How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics,** Louis P. Pojman, Wadsworth Publishing, 2005. ISBN: 0-534-55657-4.

- Dr. Pojman is professor of philosophy at the United States Military Academy

Introduction
Ethics of Doing vs. Being

- There are two ways of approaching the question of what it means to be moral or ethical:

  - 1. **Ethics of Doing** = **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**. Asks the question: *What should I do?*

  - 2. **Ethics of Being** = **Virtue-based Ethics** = **Aretaic Ethics**. Asks the question: *What should I become?*

- The ancient Greeks approached ethics as virtue-based. In modern times, action-based ethics have dominated ethical discussions.

Introduction
Ethics of Doing

- There are two major divisions in **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**):

  - 1. **Relativism**: *all* moral principles are **relative**, and will vary from culture to culture (= Conventional Ethical Relativism or Conventionalism) or even from person to person (= Subjective Ethical Relativism or Subjectivism)

  - 2. **Objectivism, Absolutism**: there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place, or time that they live.

    - **Absolutism**: the **universal moral principles** do not conflict with each other. It should (at least theoretically) be possible to find one correct answer to every moral problem.

    - **Objectivism**: some of the **universal moral principles** may override others in some situations.

Introduction
Ethics of Doing

- All Christian ethical theories of doing agree there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place or time that they live.

- A Christian system of ethics may be:
  - An **Absolutist** system.
  - An **Objectivist** system.

Introduction
Ethics of Doing

- A second major division in **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**) is whether the act itself is *intrinsically* right or wrong, or whether the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the *consequences* of the act:

  - 1. **Teleological Ethics** = **Consequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based on the outcome or consequence of the act.

  - 2. **Deontological Ethics** = **Nonconsequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based in the act itself.

- Most Christian ethics of doing are *primarily* deontological or nonconsequentialist.

Introduction
Greek Ethical Tradition

- Today we examine the foundation of Western ethics laid down by the ancient Greeks.
    - We will look primarily at Aristotle's theory of ethics.

Introduction

Christian Ethics and Greek Ethics

- The Christian gospel expanded into a gentile world, where it met the Greek philosophical tradition.

- Paul visited Athens, the famous center of Greek philosophy, and spoke with various Greek philosophers during his missionary trips (Acts 17:16-21).

- The ethics of the ancient Greeks significantly influenced Christian ethics.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Aristotle

- Aristotle
  - First thinker in Western civilization to write a systematic work on ethics.
  - Lived from 384 to 323 B.C.
  - Born in small town of Stagira in northern Greece (Thrace), on the frontier with the advancing "barbarian" Macedonian empire.
  - Father was Nicomachus, a physician in the court of Macedonia.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Aristotle

- **368 B.C.:** at age 18, his father died, and Aristotle left for Athens to join Plato's Academy, where he remained for 20 years, first as student, then as teacher.

- **348 B.C.:** Plato died, and Aristotle left Athens after he did not get appointed head of the academy.

- **343 to 340 B.C.:** Served as tutor for the son of Philip, the king of Macedonia.

  - Philip's son would become known as Alexander the Great.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Aristotle

- **335 B.C.:** returned to Athens and founded his own academy of philosophy, the Lyceum.
  - His lecture style of walking back and forth earned the school the nickname of Peripatos (the "covered walk" or "walk about").
- **323 B.C.:** Alexander the Great died suddenly without a heir.
  - Athenian resentment against their Macedonian overlords flared against Aristotle because of his connection with Philip and Alexander.
  - Aristotle was charged with acts of impiety.
- He left Athens and exiled himself in Chalcis in Euboea.
- **322 B.C.:** died at the age of 63.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Virtue Ethics & the Greeks

- The ethics of the ancient Greeks were **Ethics of Being** = **Virtue-based Ethics** = **Aretaic Ethics**. They approached ethics by asking: *What should I become?*

- As virtue ethicists, they were not primarily interested in *particular actions*, but rather in identifying the *type of person* who would act properly.

  - The type of person who would act properly is the "virtuous person," a person who possesses certain characteristics or virtues that dispose that person to act properly.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Human *Telos*

- Everything in the world has an end, a purpose, a *telos*:
  - The purpose or *telos* of an acorn to become a oak tree.
  - The purpose or *telos* of an egg is become a chicken.
  - The purpose or *telos* of architecture is to produce buildings.
  - The purpose or *telos* of medicine is to promote health.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Human *Telos*

- Human beings also have an end, a purpose, a *telos*: to exercise that which makes us distinctive: our ability to think, contemplate and reflect: our reason.

  - Aristotle believed God was engaged in pure and eternal contemplation.

  - The human end, purpose, or *telos* was to approximate this divine activity.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Virtues

A virtue is any **characteristic that enables us to perform or achieve our purpose, our *telos*.**

- A **virtue**, in other words, is any characteristic that contributes to excellence in our ability to think, contemplate, reflect, and thus approximate the divine activity of pure contemplation.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Human Soul

- For Aristotle, the **soul** was not, as it was for Plato, an immortal entity distinct from the **body**, but was instead was a phenomenon of the physical world (the world of matter) that arose when the elements of matter combined in particular and special ways.

- The soul in human beings had three functions:
  - 1. a rational function; reason
  - 2. a non-rational appetitive function
  - 3. a non-rational vegetative function

- The soul in animals had functions (2) and (3); the soul in plants had function (3) only

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Intellectual Virtues

- Characteristics that produce excellence in the *rational function* of the soul (= **reason**) are **intellectual virtues**. There are two intellectual virtues:

  - 1. **Theoretical wisdom**: excellence in gaining, discovering, learning knowledge.

  - 2. **Practical wisdom**: excellence in the *practical* use of knowledge. That is: knowing how to apply or use *in practice* the knowledge that theoretical wisdom has enabled us to learn.

- Our reason is functioning at its best when we have both **theoretical wisdom** and **practical wisdom**.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Intellectual vs. Moral Virtues

- One of the functions of **reason** is to direct and control the *non-rational appetitive* and *vegetative functions* of the soul.
  - Reason should direct and control to the degree it can; it cannot control digestion for example.
- When reason functions well to direct the non-rational appetitive and vegetative functions of the soul, it promotes **moral virtue.**
- **Moral Virtues**: characteristics that produce excellence in the *non-rational functions* of the soul.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Moral Virtues

- **Moral virtues** include:
  - Pride
  - Courage
  - Temperance
  - Truthfulness
  - Friendliness
  - Magnificence
  - Justice
  - … etc

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Virtues: Summary

Part of the Soul	Function	Corresponding Virtue
Rational		**Intellectual Virtues**
"scientific" aspect	Learning, gaining, discovering knowledge, fundamental principles	Theoretical Wisdom
"calculative" aspect	Practical use and application of knowledge	Practical Wisdom
Nonrational		**Moral virtues**
Appetitive	Emotion	Character dispositions
Vegetative	Physical growth	(none)

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Developing Virtue

- How do we develop our virtues?

- **Intellectual virtues**: because they are capacities of reason, can be *taught*.

- **Moral virtues**: because they are habits and dispositions of character, can only be *acquired by practice*.

  - To become a generous person, we must perform or practice generous acts.

  - To become a courageous person, we must perform or practice courageous acts.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Golden Mean

- How do we know what acts are "good" practice for us? What acts, if we practice them assiduously, will help develop our moral virtues?

- Aristotle's answer: we should act in accordance to the "**golden mean**."
    - Virtue is always a mean between two extremes:
        - a vice of deficiency
        - a vice of excess

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Golden Mean

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue (Moderation)	Vice of Excess
Cowardice	**Courage**	Foolhardiness
Insensibility	**Temperance**	Licentiousness
Stinginess	**Generosity**	Prodigality
Meanness	**Magnificence**	Vulgarity (ostentatious display of wealth
Humility	**Highmindedness**	Vanity
Lack of ambition	**Wholesome ambition**	Overambitiousness

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Golden Mean

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue (Moderation)	Vice of Excess
Impassivity	**Gentleness**	Irascibility
Self-deprecation	**Truthfulness**	Boastfulness
Boorishness	**Wittiness**	Buffoonery
Contentiousness	**Friendliness**	Flattery
Shamelessness	**Modesty**	Bashfulness
Maliciousness	**Righteous Indignation**	Enviousness
Injustice	**Justice**	Injustice

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
The Golden Mean

- But how do you determine what the **golden mean** is in a particular situation?

- Aristole's answer is unclear, but he seems to be saying we have to take into all the facts of the particular situation, and then *intuit* the moral quality in the situation.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics
Happiness

- Happiness or well-being, human fulfillment can only be found in developing that which is our purpose, our *telos*.

- Happiness or well-being therefore must involve the blossoming and realization of our rationality, our ability to think, contemplate and reflect.

- To find happiness or well-being by developing our *telos*, our rationality, we must develop intellectual and moral virtues – that is, we must each become a virtuous person.

- Next session: **Virtue and Happiness**