

# Virtue Ethics



# Introduction

- ◆ 1<sup>st</sup> thing to see is that this a normative moral theory
  - That it also is an **objective** (not subjective) theory of morals (virtues of character are moral goods)
    - ◆ That it is about right and wrong, good and bad (but not **just** moral principles as such)
    - ◆ That it is often thought of as the “classical” model of ethics (virtue based) as compared with the “modern” model of ethics (rules based)
    - ◆ That it emphasizes “**being**” as primary and “**doing**” secondary

# Introduction

– But virtue ethics can split into more than one kind category

◆ **Aretaic**—from the greek arete meaning excellence or virtue—

– But can be motivated by **duty** (deontology)

◆ **Teleological** (but not consequentialistic); that is not just focused on consequences for morality

– e.g.: Aristotle's view--→happiness is end in itself

Happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with:

# Virtue

**Intellectual**  
(inheritance and education)

**Moral**  
(**habit**)

resulting in  
States of Character  
i.e., propensities to act  
in accordance with a  
mean of moderation)

Philosophical  
Wisdom

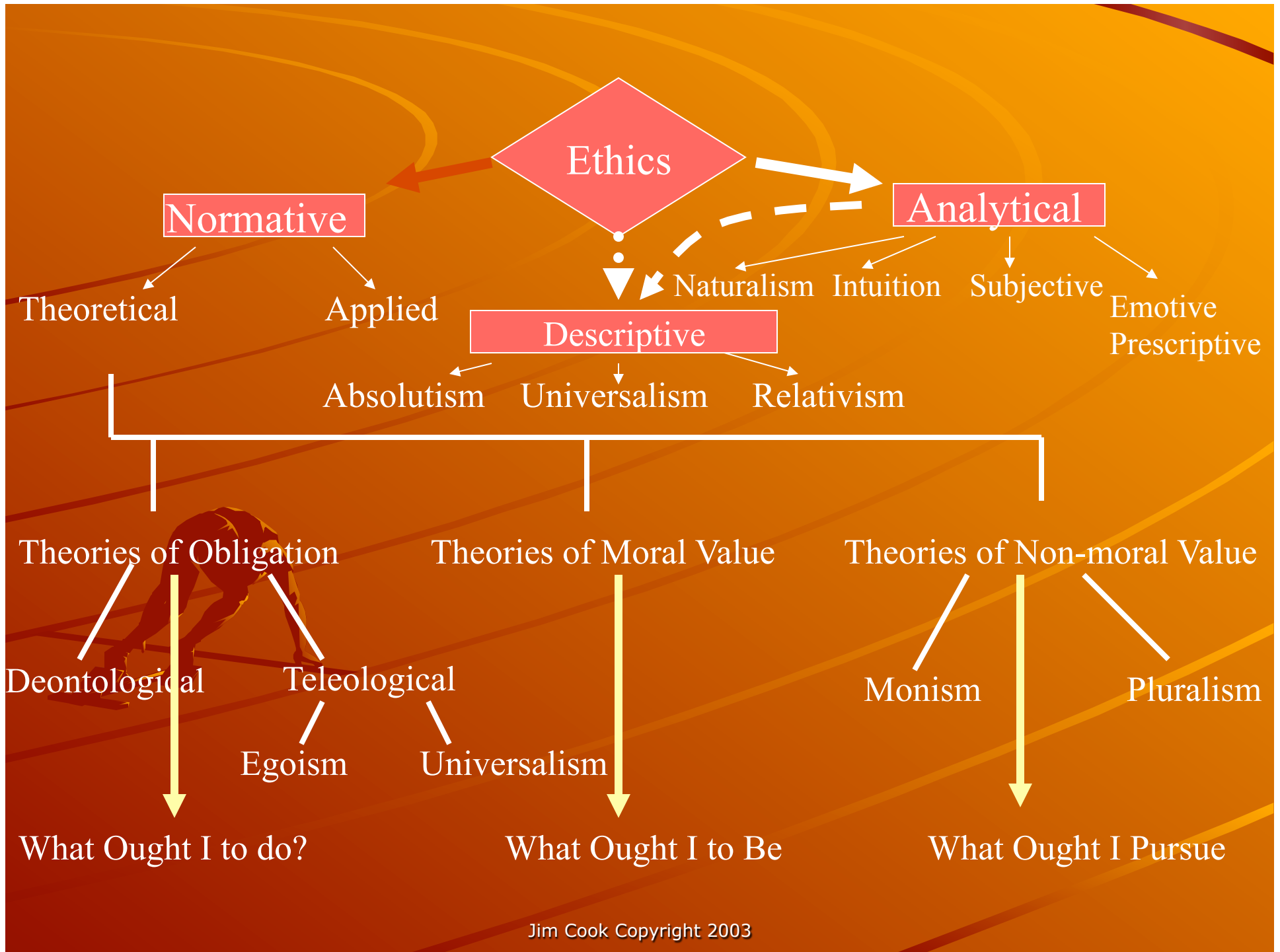
Practical  
Wisdom

Deficiency

Mean

Excess





# Digging a Little Deeper

- ◆ Let's look at the text
  - P. 247
- ◆ Handout



# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

## ◆ Plato

– Taught that each person functions on 3 different levels each of which corresponds to different activities of the soul

◆ **Appetite**—our urges to satisfy physical need such as hunger, thirst or sex

◆ **Spirit**—involves human drives like anger or ambition—higher drive than appetite, and different as shown by the fact that spirit and appetite are often in conflict with each other

# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

◆ **Reason**—the third and highest human function which should “channel appetite and spirit into their proper uses”

◆ Each function has its own virtue

– Basically = proper use

– e.g.: appetite is kept under control, the virtue is temperance

– Thus, an appetite that is tempered or moderated represents the **ideal** use of our physical desires and allows us to concentrate our attention on the higher activities

# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

- **Spirit**, when functioning correctly, manifests the trait of **courage** and puts reason's commands into action, even in the face of resistance
- **Wisdom** is the virtue of our reason and, since reason is the highest of our functions, should control appetite and spirit
- Plato also adds the virtue of **justice**, a harmonizing trait that applies to all three facets of life—gives each part of life its proper due



# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

- Proper balance results in a life that is healthy, in that functions properly—a balanced soul is virtuous because it is used in the best way possible
- So, a major challenge in deciding what to become is the problem of learning to recognize ideal goods and choosing among them which good to aim at as the goal of one's self-fulfilling and **objectively** worthy life.
- Note: for Plato, nothing in the physical world is perfect, whether we are talking about physical objects, the attributes of things or human actions (realism)
- See diagrams:



# Beauty

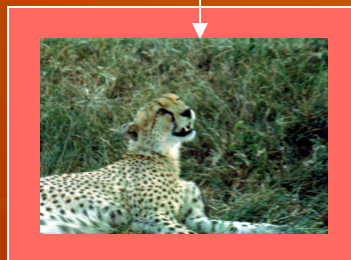
The  
Form of  
Beauty



The Concept  
Of Beauty



Individual  
Beautiful  
Entities



Imitations of  
Beautiful Entities  
(paintings, photos,  
reflections, shadows)

The Individual

Shared Virtues

The State

Rational

Wisdom

Rulers

Spirited

Courage

Soldiers

Appetitive

Moderation

Workers

= Health

= Justice

# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

- ◆ Aristotle, like Plato views ethics primarily in terms of character

- **Two** notable differences

- ◆ Plato's understanding of the virtues is based on a **world of forms** beyond our senses, whereas Aristotle built his ethics closer to earth

- Virtues are known through observing and comparing actual events (nominalism)

- ◆ Plato argues that **acts are virtuous** to the extent that they **emulate an ideal**, such as the form of courage


# Plato & Aristotle on Ethics (compare and contrast)

- Acts of virtue **resemble ideals** while acts of vice do not
- So, in a sense Plato is contrasting virtue with vice
- Aristotle saw gaps in this approach and so he defined virtue differently

- ◆ E.g.: not a choice between courage and cowardice

- ◆ Rather virtue as “a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect”

- ◆ All virtues can be analyzed this way

- ◆ Note: both have a sort of idealism; both hold that virtues are not a matter of personal preference or taste 

Happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with:

# Virtue



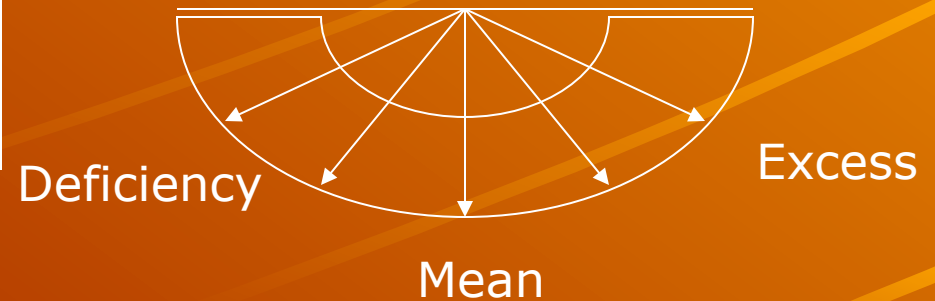
**Intellectual**  
(inheritance and education)

**Moral**  
(**habit**)

resulting in  
States of Character  
i.e., propensities to act  
in accordance with a  
mean of moderation)

Philosophical  
Wisdom

Practical  
Wisdom





# Note

- ◆ Plato and Aristotle represent a sort of teleological view of Aretaic ethics
  - That is, they have a goal for the virtues = happiness or a flourishing life
- ◆ But there are a sort of deontological view of Aretaic ethics as well
  - In this view, the virtues are ends in themselves—virtue for virtue's sake



# Virtue Ethics

## ◆ Positives

– Morality in terms of principles takes “little or no account of qualities, of what people are”

◆ For Kant truth telling was fulfilling an obligation

◆ For Aristotle (and some virtue ethicists) truth telling was a **quality of character** and a **just action** is one such as a **just person would do**

◆ **Avoids moral minimalism** context of morality is entire life—e.g. choosing one’s vocation is “right” in the non-moral sense in the modern rules oriented system, but “right” in the moral in the classic virtue oriented

# Virtue Ethics

– But virtue ethicists do hold that there **is** a connection between being and doing—it is obvious a person cannot just **be**

◆ Obvious fact: **being involves doing**

◆ BUT an ethics of doing may **EASILY** overlook being

– A key criticism of rules oriented ethics

# Virtue Ethics

- They also hold to the importance of **role models** (which we are to imitate) as better fitting our intuitions about the nature of morality
  - ◆ This is notion of the importance of role models could be derived from their view that “**IDEALS**” play an important role in moral theory
    - Ideals admit to partial fulfillment rather than the mere black and white of either success or failure with regard to “rules” ethics
    - Again, they hold this better fits our moral intuitions about the nature of moral judgment

- e.g.: Hitler may have occasionally acted with great compassion toward some individuals, but this does not make him a compassionate man
- e.g.: a good person can act “out of character” and do something that goes contrary to their normal behavior, but a single poor choice usually does not make a person bad







## ◆ Some problems

- Does virtue ethics help us know what to do?

- ◆ It may fill some gaps, but that doesn't mean it is sufficient to replace the other systems

- ◆ The question is whether the theory can stand alone—it just doesn't seem to give enough concrete guidance in actual situations

- e.g.: people disagree about what a “compassionate person” will do

# Virtue Ethics

– Can the virtues be used badly?

◆ According to character ethics, if a person acts in conformity with virtue, then the act is good

– What about the generosity of people donating to suicide bombers?

– Can virtue ethics answer the question, Why be virtuous?

◆ What is good about being good?

– A & P argue that virtues in general are good because they allow us to live a good life

– But isn't this ethical egoism again?



# Virtue Ethics

- ◆ It just seems there is something more basic than virtue itself as the foundation for ethics
- ◆ How do we handle conflicting virtues?
  - e.g.: handle close friend that steals money out of other people's pockets in the dorm (loyalty/honesty)
- ◆ Which list of virtues is correct?
  - There are differences of opinion

# Virtue Ethics

– How do you settle the question?

◆ At the end of the day, however, it still looks like virtue ethics should be a **component** of any ethical theory one ultimately adopts

◆ The problem of whether virtues are present in humans in the form of potentiality or gifts of grace (Norton p. 297)