Welcome back. Today we are beginning what will be the last part of the course. This part of the course will cover both ethics and political philosophy. And because we’re covering quite a broad swath of subjects and a lot of material, there’s gonna be a bit more by way of preliminary remarks than in previous parts of the course. So my general remarks on ethics and politics which will introduce this part of the course will take up both today’s lecture and the next lecture. And so you have a little bit of time to catch up on your reading. There won’t be any specific readings for today or for next time. Just sit back and let’s orient ourselves into this new and final — into these new and final subjects that we’ll be discussing.

Ethics and politics speak to the question of how we ought to behave and live, as individuals and as societies. They are among the most ancient subjects to be addressed by philosophers. The discussion of moral and political subjects goes back at least as far as Socrates and probably go back farther than that. How we answer either one of these questions, how we answer the question how we ought to behave, how we ought to live, either at the individual level or at the social level, depends a lot upon how we think about human nature, our conception of human nature.

At the risk of over-generalizing, there are some fundamental commonalities between the conceptions of human nature that prevailed prior to the modern era and those that prevailed in the modern era and after. This is, of course, over-simplifying, but there are certain characteristics of how Western civilization thought about human nature prior to the 17th and 18th centuries and there are certain commonalities to how Western civilization thought about human nature after the 17th and 18th centuries.
There are, of course, then fundamental differences between these two ways of thinking. I’m gonna refer to these alternatively as the pre-modern and the modern, always remembering and keeping in mind that these are gross oversimplifications and are just intended to give some general characteristics to help you make some basic fundamental distinctions.

We’ll see that in tracing the history of some of the more influential moral and political ideas you’re going to see — notice an historical evolution in ways of thinking about human beings in these sort of crucially different assumptions about human nature, human life, human behavior, and so on. So today I’m going to deal just with giving you a general introduction to the subject of ethics and next time we’ll talk about political philosophy interwoven into my discussion of the sort of general subject areas that fall within these topics. There will be some discussion of historical context and the different consumptions of human nature that are in play.

So let’s talk about ethics for a little while. Ethics is concerned primarily with how we behave, how we ought to behave and live as individuals. Now, ethics is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of subjects. I’m going to highlight just three of the areas that fall within the umbrella of ethics, three of the most prominent areas, two of which we will explore to some degree of depth in this course. The third you’d have to pursue in another course.

The first is virtue ethics. So this is one subject that falls within the umbrella of ethics. It’s called virtue ethics or virtue theory. The chief question of virtue ethics is what is the good life. Now, of course, this need to be analyzed because we haven’t yet
defined the word *good*. The way that virtue ethicists tend to understand the word *good* is in terms of excellence or flourishing. So when a virtue ethicist asks the question what is the good life, what he really means is what is the excellent or flourish in life. What is the praiseworthy life.

The greatest example -- the most famous example of a virtue ethic is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* of the mid-300s B.C. Indeed, Aristotle's virtue ethics sets the standard for virtue theories after him and that includes — that's all the way up until the present day. Every virtue theory that has sort of come down the pike over the course of history has in some way been influenced by or grounded in Aristotle's ethics.

Now, to be able to answer the question what is a good life, what is an excellent life, what is a praiseworthy life, one has to have a conception of what one is talking about. So when we ask if something is an excellent X where X is a variable that refers to any thing — when we say that something is an excellent X or that something is flourishing as an X or something is praiseworthy with respect to being X, this presupposes some notion of what X is and, more importantly, what its purposes or function is.

So let's take a very simple example. If I say that a hammer is a good hammer, in this sense of good, in the sense of excellent or praiseworthy is a bit of a stilted way of speaking — you know, I say to you, “Well, this hammer is an excellent hammer.” Of course, my use there of the word *excellent* presupposes some conception of what a hammer is and what a hammer is for. We have such a conception, of course. Hammers are for pounding nails. And so when I say to you that X is an excellent
hammer, what I’m really saying to you is X pounds — that this hammer pounds nails well. Good in this sense is a functional notion, a functional concept. It’s a concept in which the value of the thing is determined by its filling some end that is conceived to be tied to its essential nature, tied to its nature as an X, whatever sort of thing it is.

And so when we apply the word *good* in this sense of excellence, flourishing, praiseworthiness, when we apply the word *good* to human beings as we do in a virtue ethic, this is going to presuppose some conception of human nature, what a human being is, and some conception of the human purpose. What human beings are on this earth for. What human life is for.

Given this sort of focus of virtue ethics, it’s unsurprising — well, it’s unsurprising to those of us who are in the know, but I hope this will become clear to you. It’s unsurprising that virtue theories were predominant in the pre-modern West. And here’s sort of why. Because the concept of a virtue, the concept of an excellence, relies upon some common conception of a thing’s purpose, virtue ethics was most — sort of most plausible in those societies which were relatively homogeneous, both religiously, ethically, culturally. If a notion of excellence presupposed that everyone kind of share a notion of what a human being is and what a human being’s purpose in life is, this is most likely going to occur in societies where everyone is roughly the same: where everyone comes from the same ethnic background, where everyone has the same religious beliefs, where everyone is part of a common culture. And pre-modern societies — that is, societies of ancient Greece and Rome and later of medieval Europe — were characterized by relatively small, homogeneous -- religiously and culturally and
ethnically homogeneous, societies.

The idea of a virtue ethic, however, is much more difficult to sustain in modern societies because modern societies tend to be characterized by pluralism, by diversity to use an overused word. Modern societies tend to be cosmopolitan. They tend to include people of many different religious backgrounds, many different ethnic backgrounds, and so it’s much more unlikely — it’s much less likely in a modern society that you’re going to have widespread, shared, agreed notions of human nature, of the human purpose, and thus of the human good in this sense of good as excellence or praiseworthiness.

Indeed, in the modern world where the focus is primarily on the individual, one cannot assume that one’s own conception of one’s self and one’s purpose in life is going to be at all the same as the next person’s. And so the very predicate on which a virtue ethic is based, the shared conception of human nature of the human purpose and of the human good, is simply absent in modern societies and is much more characteristic of pre-modern societies which is why virtue ethics probably was at its strongest in the pre-modern world, in pre-modern Europe and in the pre-modern Mediterranean rather than in the modern and in the post-modern. That’s not to say that there aren’t virtue theories today. Indeed, virtue ethics has enjoyed a bit of a revival, at least in academic philosophy, over the last 30 years. But certainly the heyday of virtue ethics belongs to the pre-modern era.

Virtue theories tend to focus on a person’s whole character, over the whole of their life more than on individual actions. When Aristotle speaks of a person being
virtuous, he’s really making an assessment of their overall character. When he speaks of a human life being a good life, he really is speaking of that life in its entirety. Indeed, at one point in Aristotle’s ethics, Aristotle says that one can never really make an evaluation of whether someone has led a good life until after they’re dead.

And there’s some really sort of interesting reasons for this. One of the most interesting is that the Greeks were inclined to afford fortune or luck a substantial role in the evaluation of a person’s life. That is, for the Greeks whether or not one’s life has been good is in some measure due to forces outside of one’s control. This is very alien — a very alien way of thinking to us. We tend to think that any sort of moral evaluation of a person should only address those things of which the person has direct and complete control. The Greeks in this sense, I think, were perhaps a bit more mature than us. They recognized that in any evaluation of a person’s life, that luck is going to play a role. Whether your life was excellent or not isn’t only going to be a matter of what you’ve done but what circumstances you found yourself in, some of which will be under your control but much of which will not be under your control.

And, indeed, Aristotle believes that one can have an excellent life but that that excellent life can be undone by one’s ancestors after one has died. So you could’ve sort of very carefully set up the kind of life that Aristotle would call excellent, only to have it undermined and have all of your efforts undone by your progeny, by those who follow you.

But it’s important to understand that for the ancient Greeks for whom virtue ethics was the sort of sensual moral ethical notion — for the ancient Greeks the individual
action is relatively insignificant. When we talk about an excellent life, a good life, a flourishing life, when ancient Greeks like Aristotle ascribe virtues to someone, they are taking into account the whole of their character, not merely the individual action or an individual moment. Indeed, they are taking into account, at the end of the day, the entirety of their lives.

So that’s virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is one branch of ethics. As I said, virtue ethics — certainly there are virtue theories today and some of them have attracted quite a bit of support. Virtue ethics is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of the pre-modern era. On a personal note, I am one of those who is quite in favor of reviving virtue ethics in the modern context. Not only because I think that virtue ethics have a lot of important things to tell us about human flourishing, about the human good, but also because of what I take to be some very serious shortcomings in the next area of ethics that I’m going to discuss: moral theory, or moral philosophy as it’s sometimes called, which is overwhelmingly represented in modern philosophy and modern thought. So why don’t we turn to talk about — a little bit about moral theory or also known as moral philosophy next.

When we talk about moral theories, moral philosophies, I would suspect that this is what most people today think of when we think about ethics. So if our discussion of virtue ethics sounded a bit alien to you, I suspect — you know, you might be saying, “Well, wait a minute. This doesn’t sound like what I mean when I think of the word ethics” — I think that you’ll find moral theory and moral philosophy to be a bit more in keeping with what you’d expect when you hear the word ethics.
The task of a moral theory is to identify the common characteristics of right and wrong actions. So the purpose of a moral theory is to determine what is it that makes right actions right and what is it that makes wrong actions wrong. Unlike virtue theories, then, moral theories focus almost entirely on individual actions. A moral theory is an evaluating tool, so to speak, for individual — discrete individual actions. Moral theories tend not to focus on a person’s overall character or on the whole of their lives.

Moral theories fall into two broad categories. Again, at the risk of over-simplification, there are, of course, not only two types of moral theories. But what is true is that there are predominated two types of moral theories. In other words, if you look at the history of moral theories, the vast majority of the moral theories that have been proposed by philosophers have fallen into one of these two categories.

The first category of moral theory is known as consequentialism, which is a fortunate name because what it means is exactly what it sounds like. The consequentialist thinks that the right making, wrong making characteristics of actions lie outside the action, specifically in the consequences. That it is the consequences of actions that give them their moral standing, that make them either right or wrong. So according to a consequentialists’ moral theory what makes an individual action — let’s say punching someone in the face or stealing someone’s money or committing an act of charity — what makes those individual actions wrong or right lies in the consequences of those actions. And specifically, whether those consequences are deemed good or bad. Of course, the moral theory is going to have to sort of identify and explain what
constitutes good or bad consequences. That’s gonna be part of the task of a consequentialist moral theory.

The other type of moral theory — the other predominant type of moral theory are deontological theories. Deontological theories. According to deontology, the right making and wrong making characteristics, don’t lie external to the act but are intrinsic to the act. Typically, the deontologist will ascribe the moral value of an action to the principle that the action represents. So deontologists tend to see actions as the material manifestations or realization of principles, and it’s those principles that determine whether the action is right or wrong.

Now, historically the two most popular moral theories — and again, we’re talking in generalizations but again, this is definitely — it’s definitely accurate to say that the overwhelming number of consequentialist and deontological theories that have been proposed fall into one of these two camps. The most popular consequentialist moral theory historically has been utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist moral theory according to which an action is right to the degree that it increases people’s happiness and is wrong to the degree that it decreases people’s happiness. Of course, happiness is — defining happiness is part of the utilitarian’s job.

All right. So the utilitarian is gonna say, “Look. The consequence that counts for whether an action is right or wrong — the consequence that determines the moral value of an act is whether an action makes people happy or unhappy. Part of what the utilitarian has to do is to define what he means by happiness. And every utilitarian has some — gives off some account of what counts as happiness and what counts as
unhappiness.

The most popular deontological theory has been the theory promoted by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. It's sometimes simply referred to as Kantianism. According to Kantianism, action is right only if one can rationally will that everyone should perform it. So Kant's idea is that — what determines whether this action is right or wrong is whether or not you could rationally will that everyone should act in this way. If you can, then the action is right. If you cannot, then the action is wrong. Whether or not you can rationally will the action has something to do with the principle that it embodies. So these are two examples of the two most popular moral theories, Kant's one to the first consequentialist, the second deontological.

Now, the chief value of a moral theory lies in the moral principles and moral rules which one can derive from it. The reason why you want to be able to identify the right making and wrong making characteristics isn't just that you can hurl epithets at people. The point isn't just so you can say, “Ah, that's wrong.” That would be uninteresting. To simply have right and wrong be epithets you hurl at people when they ask is not the reason why we want moral theories. The reason why we want moral theories is because moral theories can yield us moral principles and ultimately moral rules.

So let's just sort of give an example, first in the abstract and then give a specific example. Suppose that — let the letter F refer to any characteristic of an action. Let's suppose, just for the sake of argument, that we have a moral theory which has determined that F things are wrong. So anything which is any action which is F is wrong. From this one can derive a moral principle that says one ought not to do F
One ought not to do things that are F.

Now, suppose that we discover that the following things cause actions to be F: A, B, or C. One can then derive specific moral rules that say don’t do A, don’t do B, don’t do C. Let’s be specific. For those of us who don’t like trafficking in abstractions, let’s be specific. According to utilitarianism, as we’ve said, what makes an action wrong is that it causes some amount of unhappiness in those that the action affects. So one can derive a moral principle from utilitarianism that says one ought not to do those things that cause substantial unhappiness.

Now, let’s presume that punching people in the face and stealing their money causes people unhappiness. We can then, from the utilitarian moral theory, derive specific moral rules that say you ought not to punch people in the face, you ought not to steal their money. Or better, don’t punch people in the face, don’t steal people’s money.

Now, unlike virtue theories moral theories rarely presume a substantial common notion of the good. At most, they tend to rest upon a relatively bare generic conception of human nature and of human fulfillment. And the conception of human nature that moral theories tend to rest upon, aside from being bare and generic, tend to be derived either from science or from some sort of philosophic analysis of the concept of a human being. Whether or not this is true, both of these sources — both of these ways of deriving a view of human nature have historically been treated as culturally neutral. In other words, whether or not this is true — and it probably isn’t — the basis upon which moral theorists have come to their conclusions about human nature upon which they
rest their moral theories — the bases have tended to be either natural science, the scientific view of human beings, or some sort of philosophical analysis of the concept of a human. And whether or not it’s accurate to say so, these sources have been historically perceived as being culturally neutral.

So my point is, moral theories have tended not to implicate a specific set of cultural or religious agreements about human nature and about the human good, unlike virtue theories. And for this reason, moral theories have been particularly suitable to modern societies. It’s not an accident that in the modern era you have a far greater number of moral theories being proposed than virtue theories. One of the things that characterizes society in the modern era is an increasing heterogeneity of population. As we’ve already said, in the modern era societies become much more cosmopolitan. That is, you have a much greater mixture of people from different religious and cultural backgrounds. So there can’t be assumed these sorts of shared conceptions of human nature and of the human good that are required for virtue theories. Moral theories, on the other hand, don’t really presuppose any such shared conceptions and thus are perfectly suited to modern cosmopolitan, by which you mean heterogeneous societies.

Furthermore, the fact that moral philosophy focuses on individual actions and is concerned primarily with providing rules is suitable to the modern need for ethics. In the ancient world, ethics was part of an overall view of life. The idea of ethics was to sort of provide a framework within which the people who belonged to a common culture could work together towards some common notion of fulfillment. In the modern era, society is characterized much more by a looser collection of individuals, each pursuing
their own individual interests.

And so your primary interest in ethics, your primary need for ethics in the modern world, is simple control. To get people to sort of leave each other unmolested. And the moral theorist’s primary concern with individual actions and with rules, deriving rules of conduct, speaks to this need. It speaks to this need to sort of have a set of rules of behavior that will sort of allow individual people to pursue their individual interests, unmolested by others.

So we have virtue ethics on the one hand, moral theories on the other. There’s a very general sense in which virtue theories belong to the premodern era of western civilization, moral theories to the modern era. Although again, this is an oversimplification. There is, of course, criss-crossing across. But generally speaking and as a sort of historical point, this is definitely true.

The third area that I want to talk about just very briefly — and it’s not an area that we’ll discuss in this course. We will discuss both virtue theory and moral theory in the course. But the third area that I think sort of we have to mention is an area of ethics that’s simply referred to as applied ethics. And in applied ethics what one does is address the distinctive ethical problems that arise from different areas of professional practice. The most prominent areas of applied ethics are business ethics, environmental ethics and bioethics. And the reason simply is is that it’s in business dealing with the environment -- which includes dealing with animals, incidentally — and medicine. It is in these contexts, in these areas of practice that the greatest number of ethical issues arise. These are some of the most ethically charged areas of human life.
This is why they're sort of the most prominent areas of applied ethics.

To a certain extent — you sort of say, “Well, what does it apply to? What do we do in applied ethics?” To a certain extent, what we do in applied ethics is apply moral theories to these ethical problems. One of the things that an applied ethicist might do is — let’s say if he or she is a Kantian, he or she may bring Kantian moral principles to bear on, let’s say, stem cell research or on whistle-blowing or on the treatment of animals, etc., etc. This is sort of one thing that applied ethicists do, is they bring the moral theories that they prefer to bear upon these distinctive problems that arise within these areas of practice.

But this is not primarily what applied ethicists do. I would say that more commonly what applied ethicists do is engage and attempt to negotiate the common moral intuitions that arise in the context of deliberation over the moral difficulties and dilemmas that surround business, medical, and other ethically charged practices. In other words, when the ordinary person is confronted with a medical problem or with an ethical dilemma concerning the treatment of animals, or ethical problems that arise in the workplace, there are often or commonly sort of common intuitive moral responses that arise within these ethically charged situations. A lot of what applied ethicists do is try to engage and manage these common moral intuitions that arise in these contexts, in these specifically and highly ethically charged contexts. So applied ethics is not simply a matter of sort of an application of theories to practices. It’s a matter of, in a sense, developing and honing the moral sense as we confront these areas of practice.

Next time I want to give sort of an overview of political philosophy that will require
us to do even more history and to make more distinctions between what I'm calling the premodern and the modern, all the while being sure not to oversimplify. Next time we'll give an overview of political philosophy. Once that's done, we'll really be ready to dive into the material that I've assigned for the course.

So until next time, have a good day and I will see you then.