

Ethics and Culture

Ethics in a Time of Polarization

Osher Course

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Cultural sources of ethics

- A society's ethics is shaped by its **cultural** and/or **religious** origins.
 - *How can we reconcile this with the rationalism and **universality** of deontological ethics?*
 - *Is ethics really **different** in other cultures?*

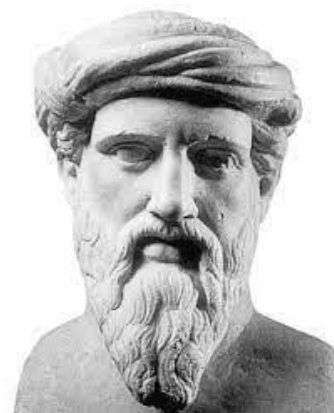


Cultural sources of ethics

- First step: Beware of the **genetic fallacy**.
 - *Showing that ethics is a product of culture does not show that it is **only** a product of culture.*
 - Ethics may yet have **validity**, independently of its cultural origins.
 - *For example, Western **mathematics** has cultural and **religious** origins.*
 - Yet we don't deny its **validity** on that basis.



Mahavira
599-527 bce



Pythagoras
570-495 bce

Western ethics

- Western ethics has two main **cultural sources**.
 - *Judeo-Christian religious tradition.*
 - *Greek rationality.*
- These have intermingled for centuries.
 - *Both remain part of our culture.*

Western ethics

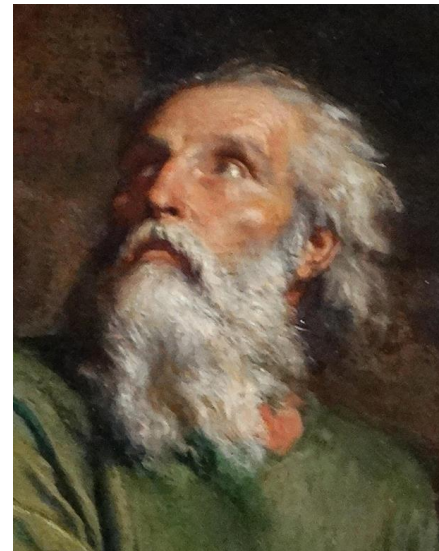
- Judeo-Christian religious tradition.
 - *Fusion of Hebrew monotheism and Sumerian law.*
 - Sumerians were apparently first to codify **law**.
 - If the divine lawgiver Yahweh is the only God, then law must be **universal**.
 - See story of Jonah, missionary to Nineveh.

Code of
Hammurabi
ca. 1750 bce



Western ethics

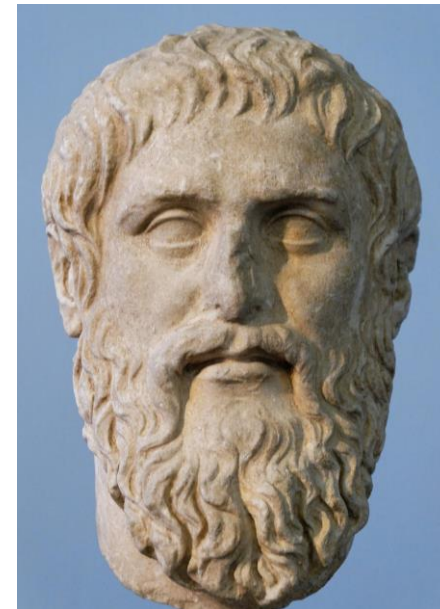
- Judeo-Christian religious tradition.
 - *Humans are, at root, **children of God**.*
 - *Emphasis on **justice**, especially in the sense of **obligation** to the poor and unfortunate.*
 - As in Isaiah chap. 1 (justice for the oppressed, orphans, widows, etc.), also Jeremiah, Amos
 - As in Matthew chap. 25 (solidarity with the hungry, sick, prisoners, etc.).



Isaiah
8th-7th c. bce

Western ethics

- Greek rationality.
 - *Humans are, at root, **rational animals**.*
 - *Emphasis on **the good**.*
 - For Plato, the good can be **analyzed rationally** like any other concept (εἶδος).
 - Mainly concerned with the **good life** or the **good polis**.
 - Concern with **justice** in the sense of an orderly state and civic responsibility.
 - As in Plato's *Republic*.

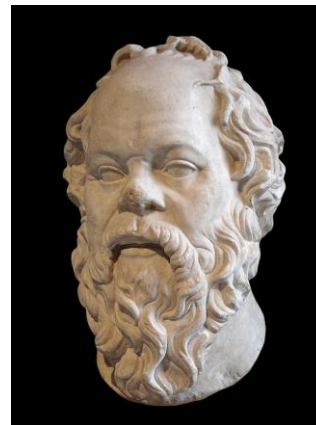


Plato
ca. 427-347 bce

Western ethics

- Why are people **unethical**?
 - **Persian tradition (Zoroastrianism)**
 - Cosmic struggle between the forces of **good and evil** (gods Ahura Mazda vs. Angra Mainyu).
 - Human evil is failure to resist **temptation**.
 - **Ancient Greek tradition**
 - Evil results from **ignorance** of the good.
 - Therefore, virtue can be **taught** (Socrates).

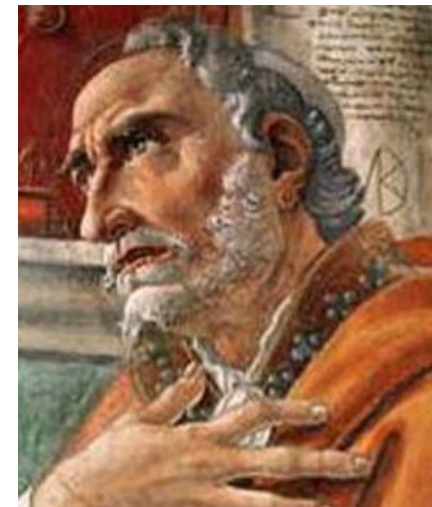
Zoroaster
(Zarathustra)
ca. 7th-6th c. bce



Socrates
ca. 470-399 bce

Western ethics

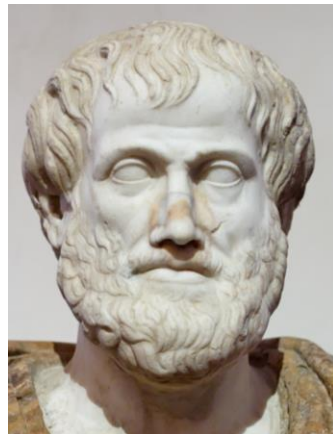
- Why does ethics assume a **rationale** for actions?
 - *Part of the **rationality-based** Greek tradition.*
 - Humans are autonomous rational agents.
 - *As in Augustine's Confessions.*
 - One of the key writings in Western civilization.
 - Gave clear expression to Western emphasis on the **individual**.
 - See story of the **stolen pears**.
 - The **lack of a rationale** made the theft worse than the atrocities of the worst Roman emperors.
 - Evil = **absence** of ethical action.



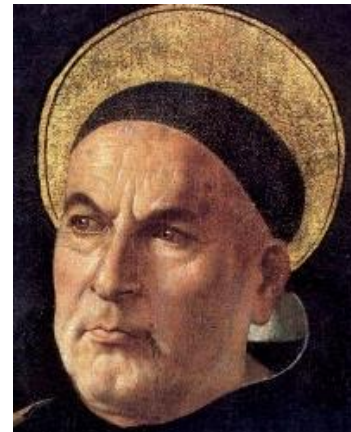
Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 ce

Virtue ethics

- Virtue ethics is taught worldwide in Roman Catholic schools.
 - Also known as *natural law theory*.
 - Based on philosophy of *Thomas Aquinas*.
 - Ultimately inspired by *Aristotelian ethics*.



Aristotle
384-322 bce



Thomas Aquinas
1225-1274

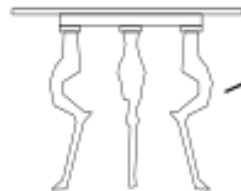
Virtue ethics

- Aristotle's theory of **explanation** (the 4 causes).

Material Cause:
Wood



Final Cause:
Dining



Formal Cause:
Design



Efficient Cause:
Carpentry



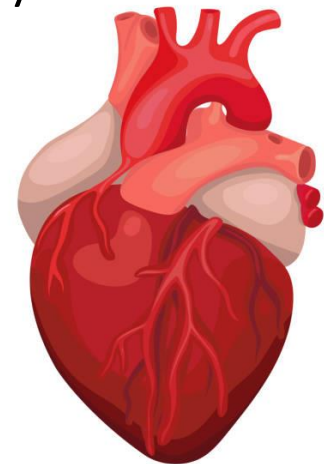
Virtue ethics

- The **final** cause is the **purpose**.
 - *Teleological explanation* (Telos = *purpose*).
 - *A substance moves from **potentiality** to **actuality**.*
- Its **essence** encoded in its **potential**.
 - *Striking parallel to our concept of DNA.*



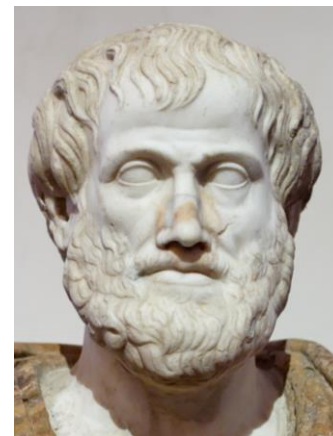
Virtue ethics

- The **essence** enables the substance to achieve its **purpose** (final cause).
 - *The purpose is what the substance is **uniquely suited to achieve**.*
 - The **heart** is uniquely suited to pump blood.
 - This is the **purpose** of the heart in the body.
 - Maybe no creator gave it this purpose, but **we** give it this purpose to help us **explain** how the body works.
 - Compare with science of **ecology**.



Virtue ethics

- What is the purpose of a **human being**?
 - *What a human is **unique suited** to achieve.*
 - *Aristotle identified several traits that are uniquely human.*
 - *We call them the Aristotelian **virtues**, for example:*
 - Courage.
 - Friendship.
 - Industry (applied intelligence).
 - Honesty, truth.
 - Humor, wit.
 - Moderation (*sophrosyne*).



Virtue ethics

- **Excellence** is the ability to achieve a thing's purpose well.
 - *For example, an excellent **tool**.*
 - Aristotle's name (Ἀριστοτέλης) means "best purpose."



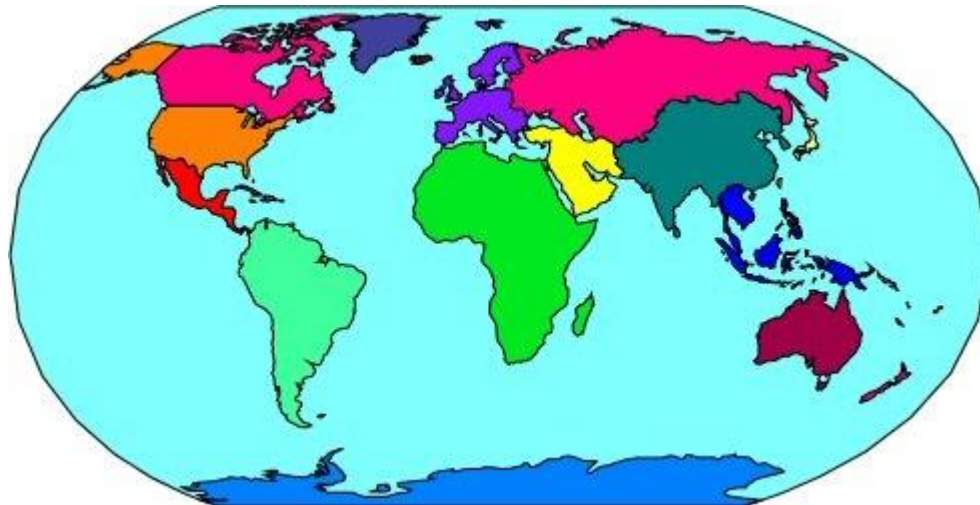
Virtue ethics

- **Excellence** is the ability to achieve a thing's purpose well.
 - *For example, an excellent **tool**.*
 - Aristotle's name (Ἀριστοτέλης) means "best purpose."
 - *An **excellent human being** achieves the **virtues**.*
 - This results in the **good life** (example).
 - **No concept of obligation** in the Judeo-Christian sense.
 - In politics, **aristocracy** (rule of the best, most excellent).
 - A form of **naturalistic ethics**.
 - Deliberately commits the **naturalistic fallacy**.
 - Example: slavery.



Culture and ethics

- Every culture has **ethical norms** that allow the culture to function.
 - *But cultures often operate **differently**.*
 - *So, they often have different **norms**.*



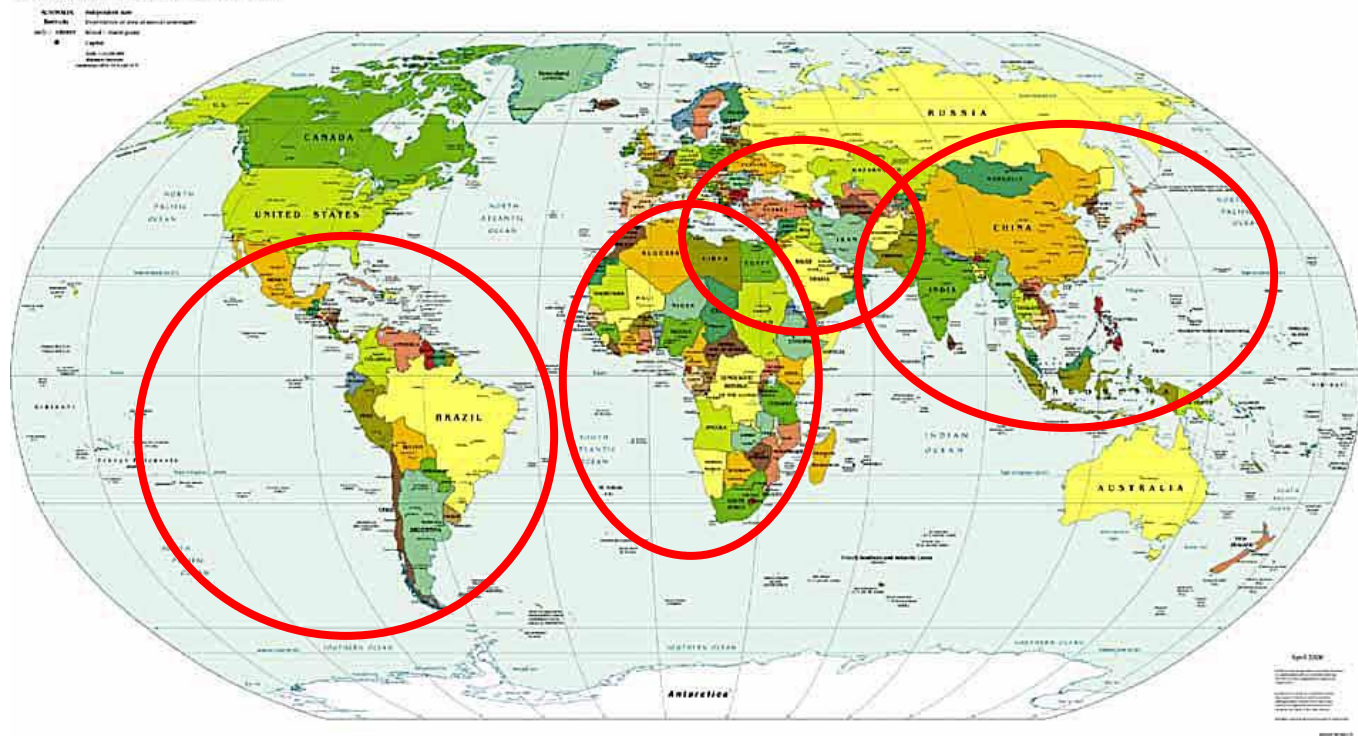
How cultures differ

- There are 5000+ cultures in the world.
 - *Some are very different.*
- But they can be classified roughly as:
 - ***Relationship-based.***
 - Life revolves primarily around relationships and the obligations they incur.
 - ***Rule-based.***
 - Life revolves primarily around rules of conduct that bind all individuals equally.

How cultures differ

- Relationship-based
 - *Life is organized primarily around personal relationships.*
 - *Africa, Asia, Middle East, South America*

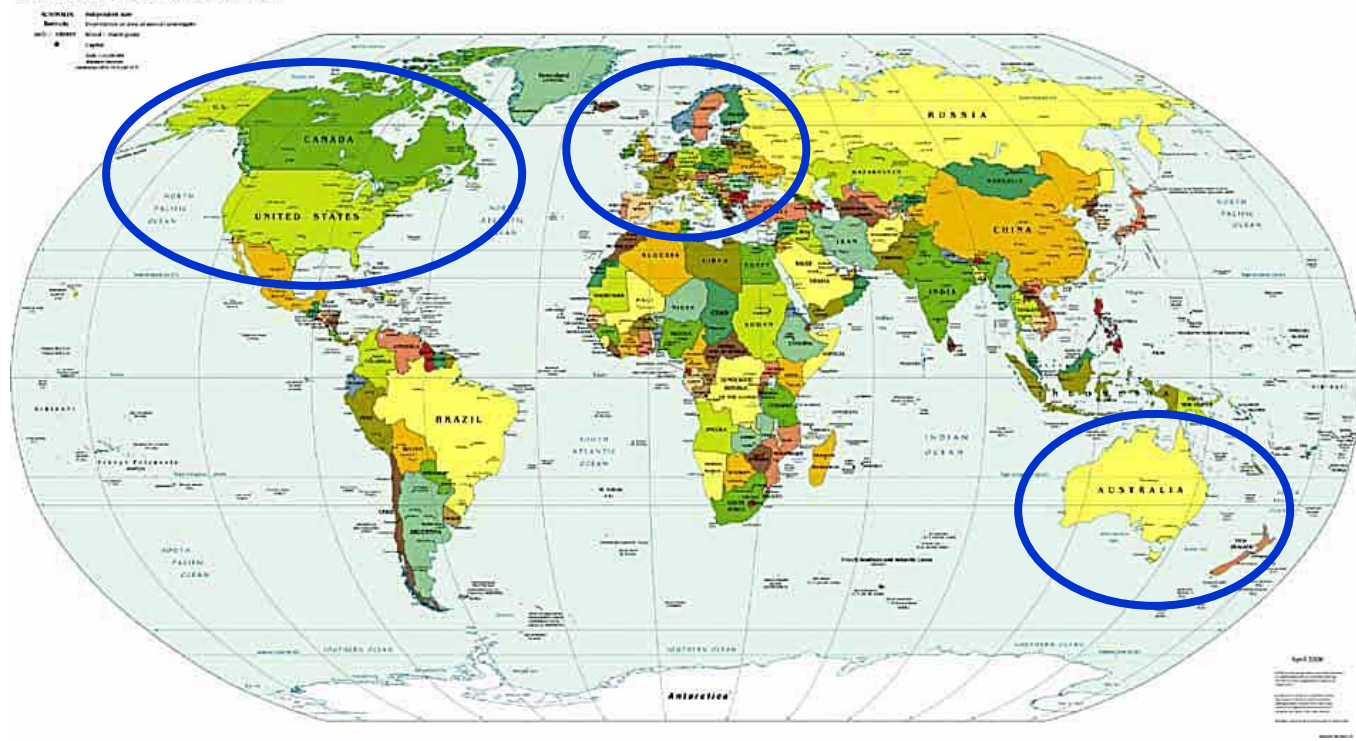
Political Map of the World, April 2000



How cultures differ

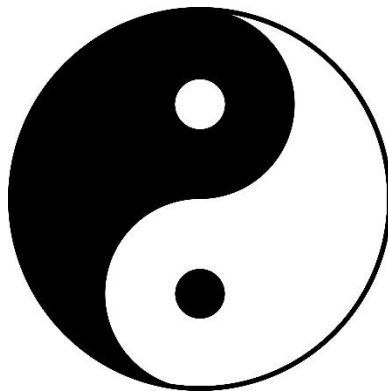
- Rule-based
 - *Life is organized primarily around rules.*
 - *Australia, Europe, North America.*

Political Map of the World, April 2000



How cultures differ

- No culture is purely relationship-based or rule-based.
 - *Nonetheless, one system tends to dominate.*
 - *Cultures change, but not necessarily in a Western direction.*
 - *We now see some movement in the opposite direction.*



How cultures differ

- Getting things done.
 - *Work through personal connections.*
 - *Go by the book.*
- Business.
 - *It's all about forming a relationship.*
 - *Trust the person, not the system.*
 - *It's all about making deals.*
 - *Rely on the system to enforce the deal.*



How cultures differ

- Traffic.
 - *Negotiate your way through it.*
 - *Follow traffic laws.*



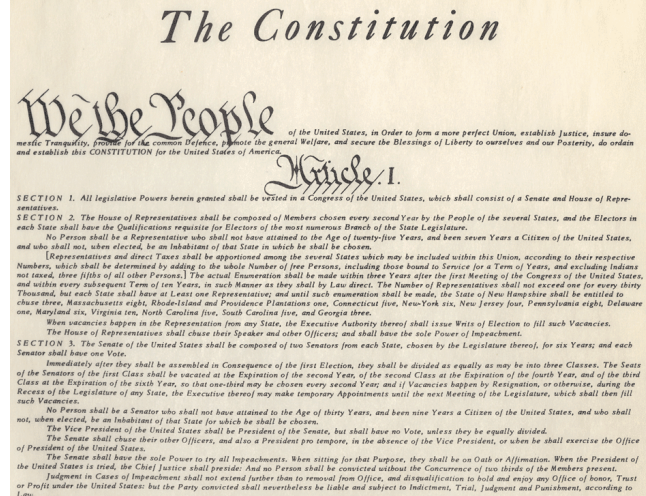
Intersection in Varanasi, India

How cultures differ

- Concept of **authority**.
 - *Authority rests in the person.*
 - *Authority derives from rules.*



Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques
King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud



Supreme Law of the Land
U.S. Constitution

Implication for ethics

- Source of authority.
 - *Because we rely on **relationships**, **someone** must have authority to coordinate us.*
 - We **must respect** parents, grandparents, ancestors, boss, ruler.
 - **Care** and **respect for authority** lie at the heart of ethics.

Implication for ethics

- Source of authority.
 - *Because we rely on **relationships**, **someone** must have authority to coordinate us.*
 - We **must respect** parents, grandparents, ancestors, boss, ruler.
 - **Care** and **respect for authority** lie at the heart of ethics.
 - *Because we rely on **rules**, **no one** has inherent authority over us.*
 - We **must respect** the **rules**.
 - The rules must be inherently **logical** and **reasonable**, because only logic and reason are **universal**.
 - **Equality** and **respect for autonomy** lie at the heart of ethics.

Cultural traits

Relationship-based	Rule-based
Collectivism	Individualism
Shame-based	Guilt-based
High-context	Low-context

Cultural traits

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Cultural traits

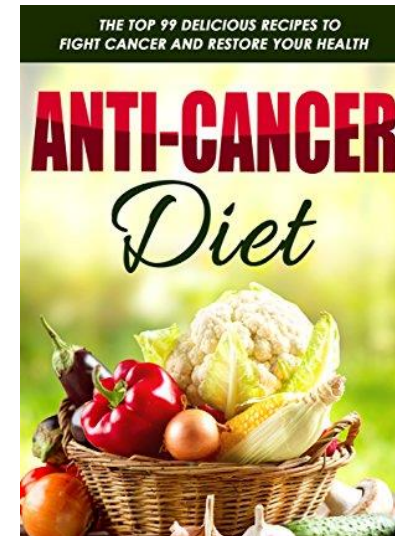
- Relationship-based cultures are **collectivist**.
 - *They rest on loyalty to the **group**.*
 - The family (most of the world)
 - The village (e.g., Bantu cultures)
 - The company or boss (e.g., Confucian cultures)
 - *People rely on family and friends for **support**.*



Filipino family

Cultural traits

- Rule-based cultures are **individualist**.
 - *The first loyalty is to oneself.*
 - *People rely on the **system** and **themselves**.*
 - Medical technology, social services, psychiatry, legal action
 - **Individual responsibility**
(even for illness)

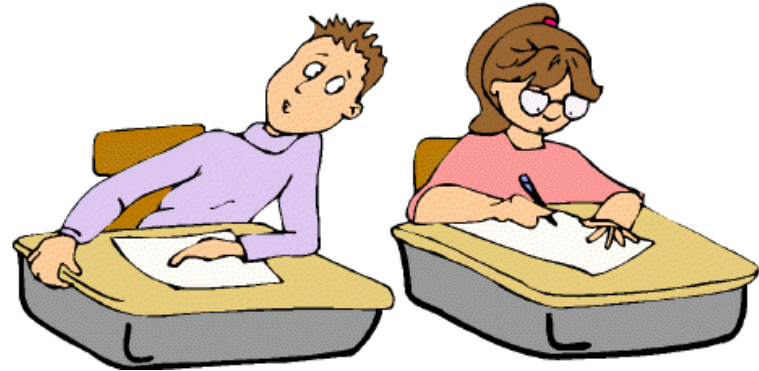


Cultural traits

Relationship-based	Rule-based
Collectivism	Individualism
Shame-based	Guilt-based
High-context	Low-context

Cultural traits

- Relationship-based cultures enforce behavior norms by **shame**.
 - *Loss of face.*
 - *Humiliation.*
- **Close supervision**
 - *A good boss provides **direct and constant supervision***
 - *Failure to supervise **gives permission to break the “rules.”***
 - E.g., cheating
 - *Corruption as **bribery.***



Cultural traits

- **Guilt** is more important in **rule-based** cultures
 - *Guilt encourages obedience to rules without close supervision.*
 - *But it may be a poor motivator and carry high psychological cost.*
 - *Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen.*
 - *Guilt is reinforced by fear of punishment.*
 - *Corruption as **cheating**.*



Cultural traits

Relationship-based	Rule-based
Collectivism	Individualism
Shame-based	Guilt-based
High-context	Low-context

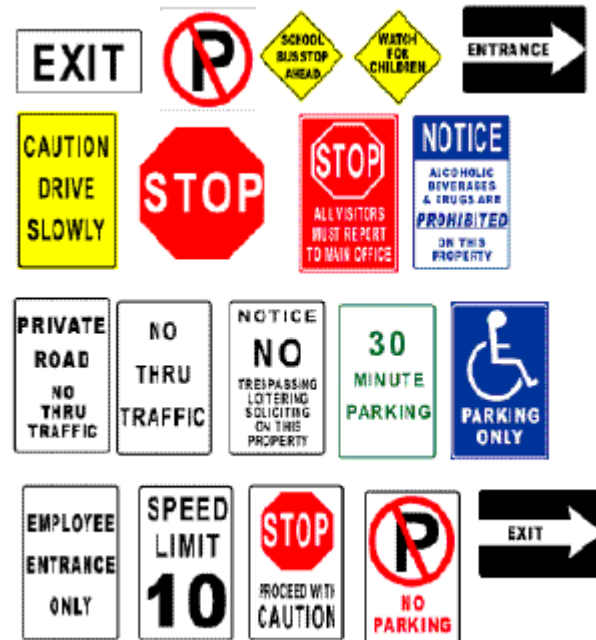
Cultural traits

- In **high-context** cultures, information is absorbed from the social context.
 - *Behavior norms are **personally transmitted**.*
 - *People don't pay attention to **written rules**.*
 - Expect personal correction, e.g. no smoking.
 - **Contracts** may be **vague** or non-existent.
 - **Less reliance** on legal system.



Cultural traits

- **Low context cultures:** information is spelled out.
 - Many posted *signs, timetables, maps.*
 - Norms transmitted *in writing.*
 - People are expected to *pay attention to written rules.*
 - Long, detailed contracts.

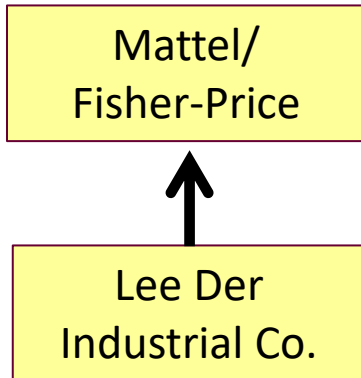


Mattel in China

- Mattel discovered **lead-based paint** on many of its toys (2007).
 - *Lead additive tastes sweet but is toxic to children.*
 - *The company had to recall about 1 million toys.*
 - *What went wrong?*



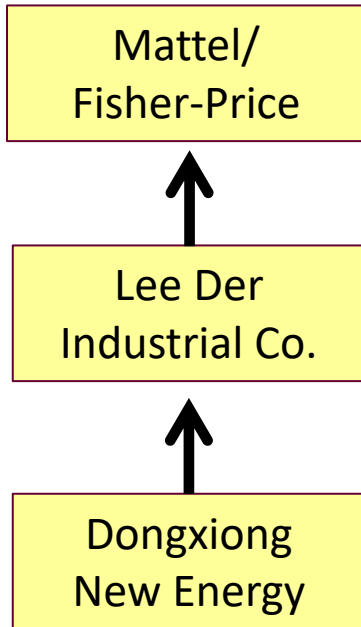
Mattel in China



- Mattel sourced the toys from China.
 - *From Zhang Shuhong, manager of Lee Der Industrial company.*
 - Zhang was totally dedicated to his job.
 - He even slept in a small room at the factory.



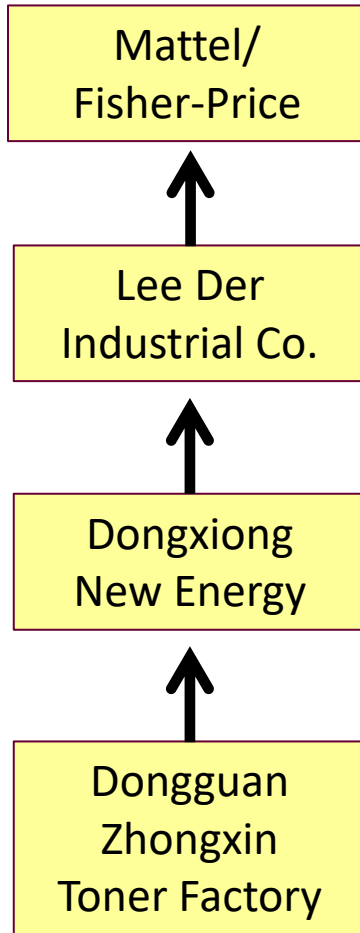
Mattel in China



- *Zhang obtained paint from his trusted guanxi partner Liang Jiacheng at Dongxiong New Energy.*



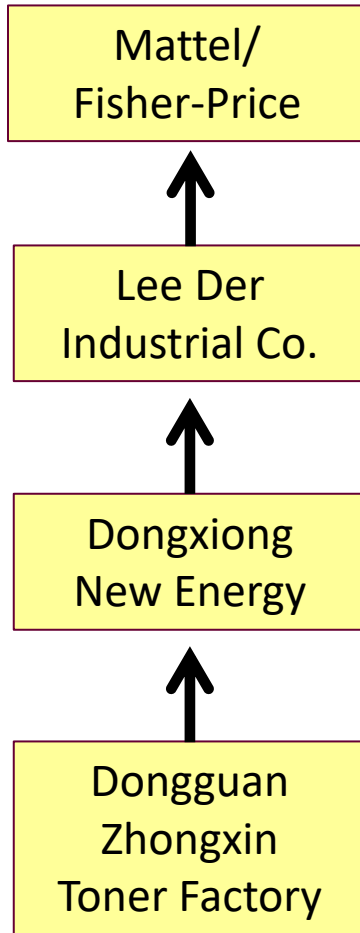
Mattel in China



- *Liang was short of pigment and ordered it over the Web from people he didn't know.*



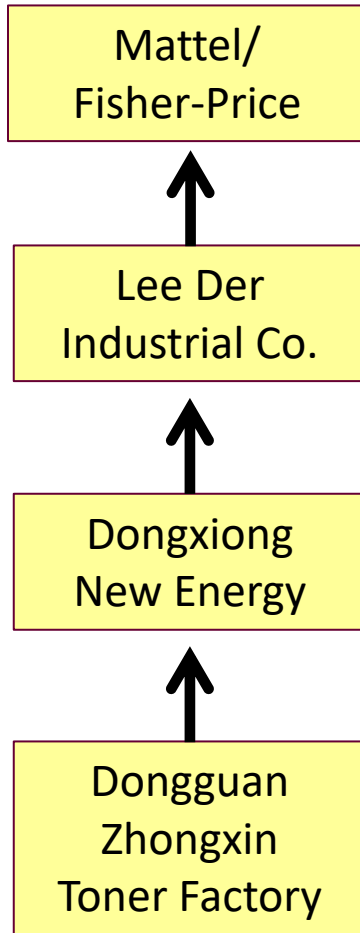
Mattel in China



- *The supplier sent lead-based pigment along with a forged certificate.*



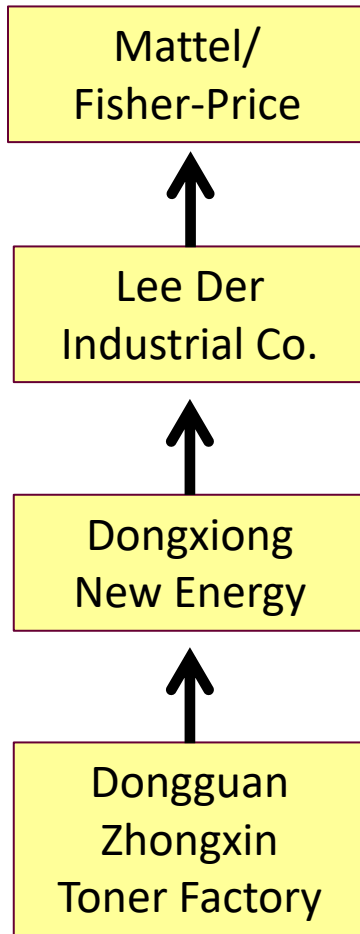
Mattel in China



- *The supplier sent lead-based pigment along with a forged certificate.*



- *When Mattel discovered the problem, the Chinese government revoked Lee Der's export license.*



- *Overcome with shame, Zhang retreated into his office and hung himself.*

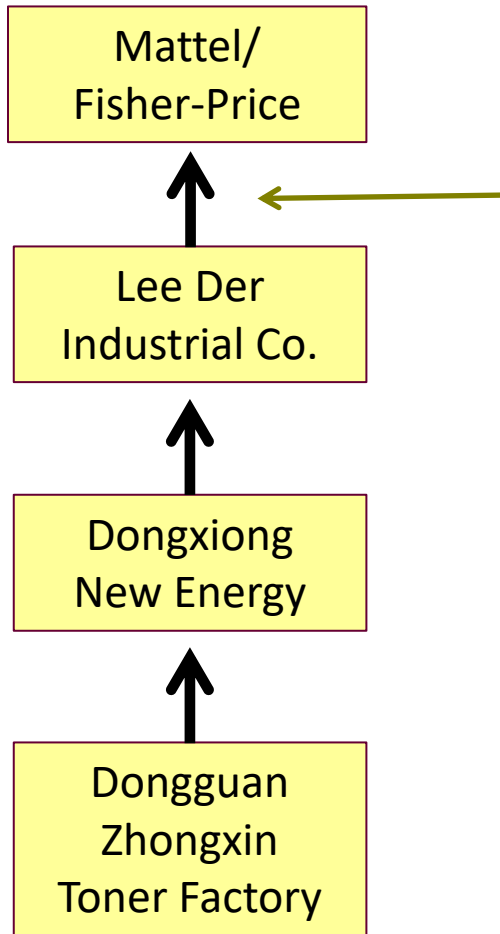


Chinese Toy Exec Commits Suicide After Recall

China banned exports
from the company

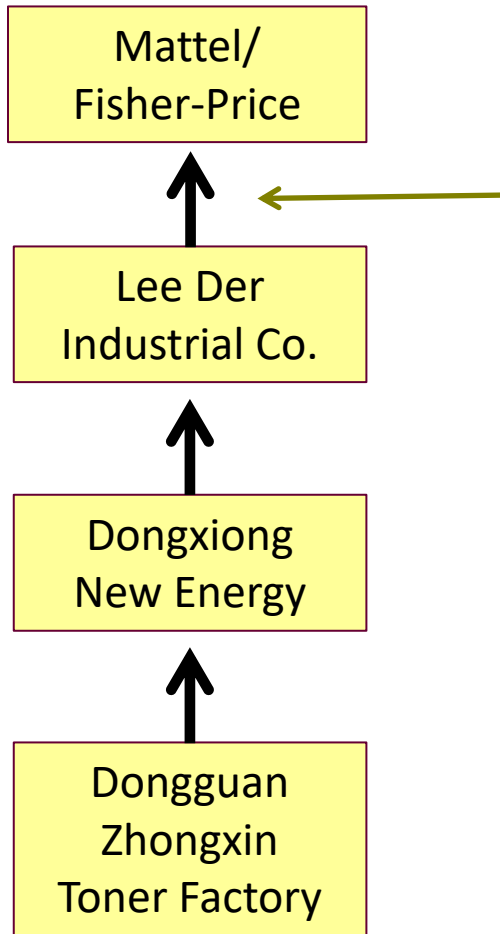
Aug 13, 2007 7:59 AM CDT

Mattel in China



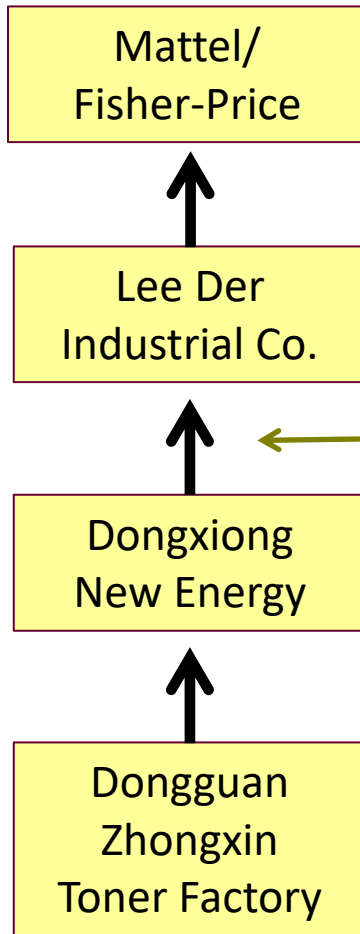
- *The **contract** called for lead testing.*
- *Zhang skipped the testing, because he had total **trust** in his guanxi partner Liang.*

Mattel in China



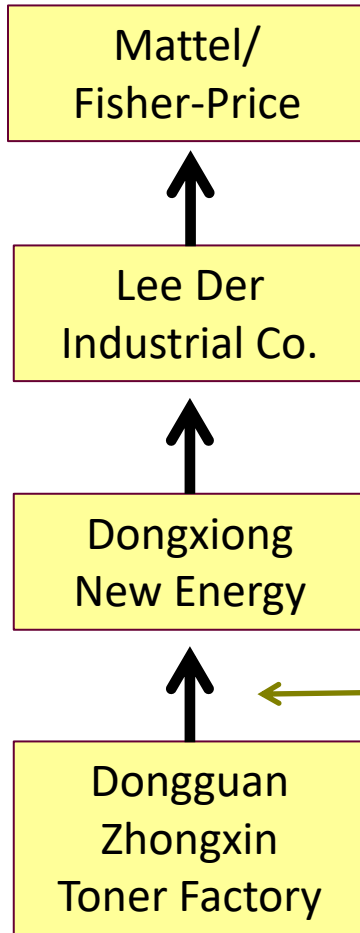
- *The **contract** called for lead testing.*
- *Zhang skipped the testing, because he had total **trust** in his guanxi partner Liang.*
- *Mattel's purchaser failed to build a **relationship** with Zhang.*
- *In the West, a provision need not be observed unless it is **part of the contract**.*
- *In a relationship-based culture, a provision need not be observed unless it is **part of the relationship**.*

Mattel in China



- *The second link in the supply chain was **sound**: guanxi.*
- *Zhang's **trust** in Liang was culturally appropriate.*

Mattel in China



- *The chain **broke** again at the third link.*
- *Liang sourced in the trendy Western style **without a relationship**.*
- *Without the usual cultural safeguards, he was vulnerable to being **hoodwinked**.*

Universal ethics?

- **Ethics** has an **ontological** basis.
 - *It follows from one's concept of what a **human being is**.*
 - *Western concept: a human is an **autonomous, rational individual**.*
 - One can, in principle, **exist** independently of others.
 - Ethics must preserve **autonomy** and **equality**, since autonomous individuals are inherently equal.
 - *Relationship-based concept: a human is essentially **part of a larger group**.*
 - One can, in principle, **exist** only in relatedness to others.
 - Ethics must ensure **care** and **respect** for those who are part of the relationship.

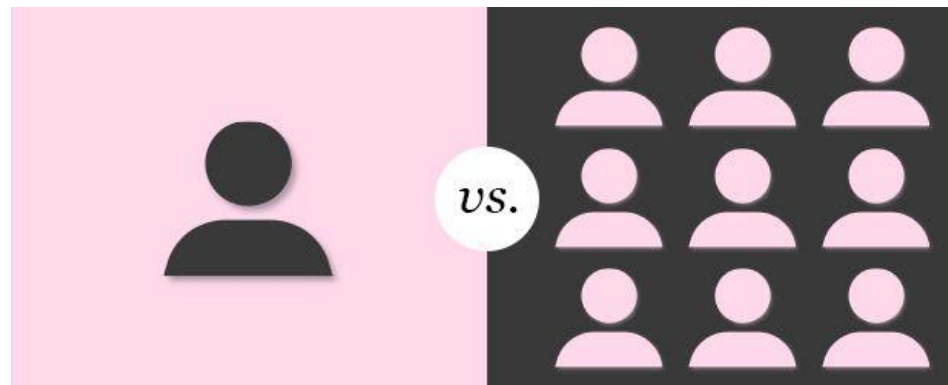
Universal ethics?

- Suppose I am swimming in a lake.
 - *If I determine it contains **salt water**, science tells me that certain properties follow from this.*
 - *If I determine it contains **fresh water**, science tells me that certain other properties follow.*
- I don't deny that science is **universal** on this basis.
 - *Or that science is "**relative to**" where I am.*



Universal ethics?

- It is similar with **ethics**.
 - *If I determine that my society is **individualist**, ethics tells me that certain obligations follow from this.*
 - *If I determined that my society is **collectivist**, ethics tells me that certain other obligations follow.*
- I don't deny that ethics is **universal** on this basis.
 - *Or that ethics is "**relative to**" where I am.*



Cross-cultural ethics

- So, what norms do I follow if I am in (or dealing with) **another culture**?
 - *Humans have been **trading** with other cultures since the earliest days of the species.*
 - *Cultures have long developed **norms** for cross-cultural interactions.*

Cross-cultural ethics

- So, what norms do I follow if I am in (or dealing with) **another culture**?
 - *Humans have been **trading** with other cultures since the earliest days of the species.*
 - *Cultures have long developed **norms** for cross-cultural interactions.*
- Our culture has a principle that applies:
 - *When in another culture, I must be able to believe rationally that my actions, **if generalized**, would not undermine the cultural system that allows them to achieve their purpose.*

Cross-cultural ethics

- So, what norms do I follow if I am in (or dealing with) **another culture**?
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- Our culture has a principle that applies:
 - *When in another culture, I must be able to believe rationally that my actions, **if generalized**, would not undermine the cultural system that allows them to achieve their purpose.*
 - **Sound familiar?**

The End

Thank you for your attention and participation.