HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 1: Introduction: God, Nature and Dao
Section 6: Ethics: types of inquiry: Norm thoery, moral psychology, metaethics

- Three different types of questions we can ask about normativity
- First, moral or normative theory: prescriptive theory of how to answer the question “what should I do?”
- In the West, two classical models of normative theory
    - Consequentialism - to know what to do, look to the future results of your actions
        - Utilitarianism is its main form - we should do what brings about the best result for everyone
    - Deontology – focus on duty: Do what is required by moral laws or rules
        - Retributive: Emphasizes relation of law and punishment
        - You look backwards to past guilt (or desert)
- Second, moral psychology
- Are humans capable of being moral?
    - The Western Christian doctrine of original sin implies the answer is “no”.
    - Humans are inherently sinners unless we are ‘touched by the grace of God’
    - A supernatural force is needed to overcome my natural tendency towards evil
    - Psychological egoism – a secular version: all humans are fundamentally selfish
- Central issue between China and the West: In general, Western theories of moral psychology are more pessimistic than those of Classical Chinese
- Third, metaethics - the metaphysics, epistemology and semantics of ethics
    - What is normative guidance? Is ethics real? Is it knowable? Is it definable?
    - These questions have 3 broad answers: 0, 1 and >1
    - The ‘0’ answer is that ethics does not exist, is an illusion or can’t be known

- The ‘1’ answer is that there is a *single* absolute ethical reality. In epistemology, it is knowable (cognitivism)
- The ‘>1’ answer is that there is more than one valid moraly (relativism or pluralism)