

Bridge Notes

For this assignment, you must choose a chapter from the textbook *not* covered in the course. Your task is to write an approximately 500-word comparative account of the moral theory covered in each chapter.

This entails doing two things:

1. **Reconstructing and explaining** the account of morality found in the chapter. How does it ground moral claims? What does it view as (morally) important? What does it say about how we ought to make moral decisions or judgements?
2. **Comparing/contrasting** the moral theory with another moral theory we *have* covered in the course. This means doing one of the following:
 - Identify a *genuine disagreement or friction* between two otherwise similar theories. For instance, how does Akan ethics differ from Confucian ethics, despite both being interested in character? Why do they differ in this way?
 - Identify a *substantive convergence* between otherwise distinct theories. For instance, are there commonalities between Rossian deontology and Daoism, even though they seem quite different on the surface? How and why does that commonality arise?

IMPORTANT: Although these two parts are stated equally, the second part is where most of the work lies, and is where you can demonstrate the greatest insight. The reconstruction is required to make the “bridge” between theories, but the bridge itself is what the assignment is *for*. Plan your word count accordingly: a paper that does a competent reconstruction and then tacks the comparison on at the end will not achieve the purpose of the assignment well.

What Counts as a Substantive Bridge

A *genuine friction* between similar theories is not simply “they disagree about *x*.” It is an account of *why* two theories that share so much structure or motivation nevertheless end up pulling in different directions. The interesting question is what underlying difference is doing the work: what commitment, assumption, or pressure produces the divergence despite the shared territory.

A *substantive convergence* between distinct theories is not simply “they both care about *y*.” It is a claim that the convergence is non-accidental; that there is some deeper shared commitment, structural feature, or argumentative pressure that explains *why* two theories operating from different starting points end up in the same place.

In both cases, the goal is to make a structural claim about the relationship between the theories, not to produce a list of similarities or differences.

Common Mistakes

- The biggest failure is identifying a convergence or friction that is *boring*; that is, where nobody would disagree, and nothing further follows from accepting it. “Kant and Mill both

think morality is important” is a convergence; it is also uninteresting. Ask yourself: *would anyone disagree with what I am saying about the relationship between these theories? Does anything follow from it?* If not, there is nothing at stake, and the bridge isn’t saying anything worthwhile.

- Reproducing the standard contrast the textbook itself draws – the well-rehearsed disagreement that anyone reading the chapter will already see – adds nothing. The point is to use your insight to find something the textbook *doesn’t* say.
- Listing similarities and differences is not bridging. Bridging is making a single structural claim about why the comparison is illuminating, and then defending it.
- A claim of friction or convergence should support some further philosophical observation. If finding the bridge tells us nothing about either theory we didn’t already know, the bridge isn’t substantive.

A Note on Why the Chapters Are Uncovered

The assignment requires chapters *not* covered in the course because the skill being trained is the one that matters most for independent philosophical work: extracting a theory’s structure cleanly enough, from a primary source you haven’t been walked through, to be able to put it into substantive relation with other positions. If *both* the chapters were ones we had discussed in class, you could rely on the shared reconstruction we developed together. The point of this assignment is that you have to do that work yourself, and then use that analysis to draw further conclusions and insights.