

1. What is Ethics?

Ethics provides a set of standards for behavior that helps us decide how we ought to act in a range of situations. In a sense, we can say that ethics is all about making choices, and about providing reasons why we should make these choices.

Ethics is sometimes conflated or confused with other ways of making choices, including religion, law or morality. Many religions promote ethical decision-making but do not always address the full range of ethical choices that we face. Religions may also advocate or prohibit certain behaviors which may not be considered the proper domain of ethics, such as dietary restrictions or sexual behaviors. A good system of law should be ethical, but the law establishes precedent in trying to dictate universal guidelines, and is thus not able to respond to individual contexts. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas, and may be slow to address new problems. Both law and ethics deal with questions of how we should live together with others, but ethics is sometimes also thought to apply to how individuals act even when others are not involved. Finally, many people use the terms morality and ethics interchangeably. Others reserve morality for the state of virtue while seeing ethics as a code that enables morality. Another way to think about the relationship between ethics and morality is to see ethics as providing a rational basis for morality, that is, ethics provides good reasons for why something is moral.

REMEMBER, what is legal isn't always ethical, and what is ethical isn't always legal.

LEGAL ≠ ETHICAL

ETHICAL ≠ LEGAL

However, the law can be used to codify behavior that reflects a system of values; it can also be used to redress wrongs in [therapeutic jurisprudence](#).

2. Ethical Approaches/Theories

Although we will read about and discuss the many systems of ethics, for the purposes of this class and applications to problem solving, it is helpful to keep these normative approaches in mind:

A. The Virtue Approach (aka prima facie values*)

One long-standing ethical principle argues that ethical actions should be consistent with ideal human virtues. Aristotle, for example, argued that ethics should be concerned with the whole of a person's life, not with the individual discrete actions a person may perform in any given situation. A person of good character would be one who has attained certain virtues. This approach is also prominent in non-Western contexts, especially in East Asia, where the tradition of the Chinese sage Confucius (551-479 BCE) emphasizes the importance of acting virtuously (in an appropriate manner) in a variety of situations. Because virtue ethics is concerned with the entirety of a person's life, it takes the process of education and training seriously, and emphasizes the importance of role models to our understanding of how to engage in ethical deliberation.

**including honesty and respect for others.*

B. Consequentialist (aka Utilitarianism) Theories

The Utilitarian Approach

- Classic utilitarian theory carefully considers the treatment of nonhumans and argues for moral concern and regard.

Utilitarianism can be traced back to the school of the Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus of Samos (341-270 BCE), who argued that *the best life is one that produces the least pain and distress*. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), known for championing skepticism generally, wrote that “*no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men.*” This was developed more fully by English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), as written below. Utilitarian theory seeks to maximize societal utility—that is, to create “the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.”

Utilitarianism is one of the most common approaches to making ethical decisions, especially decisions with consequences that concern large groups of people, in part because it instructs us to weigh the different amounts of good and bad that will be produced by our actions. This conforms to our feeling that some good and some bad will necessarily be the result of our action and that the best action will be that which provides the most good or does the least harm, or, to put it another way, produces the greatest balance of good over harm. Ethical environmental action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good and does the least harm for all who are affected—government, corporations, the community, and the environment.

Utilitarianism (or Consequentialism) has gotten something of a bad rap: It is often oversimplified as “the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” However, this approach emphasizes that moral status ought be based on **sentience** -- the ability to experience pleasure and pain. Bentham wrote: “*The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned with redress to the caprice of [a] tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive to the same fate....Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal than an infant of a day or week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is **not**, Can they **reason**? nor Can they **talk**? but, Can they **suffer**?*” (emphasis added) ¹

So, the argument goes, humans and nonhumans are equally entitled to moral concern. But neither classic nor modern utilitarian theory argues that moral concern equals moral respect or that moral concern requires the **equal treatment** of humans and non-humans. What does matter is that suffering counts equally, be it human or nonhuman.

¹ Bentham, J. (1789). An introduction to the principles of morals. London: Athlone, page 311

The Common Good Approach The ancient Greek philosophers Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) promoted the perspective that our actions should contribute to ethical communal life. The most influential modern proponent of this approach was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who argued that the best society should be guided by the “general will” of the people which would then produce what is best for the people as a whole. This approach to ethics underscores the networked aspects of society and emphasizes respect and compassion for others, especially those who are more vulnerable. More recently expressed in a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: *“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way in which its animals are treated. I hold that the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man.”*

C. Kantianism (aka Deontology, sometimes *Universal Ethics*)

The Duty-Based Approach The duty-based approach, sometimes called *deontological ethics*, is most commonly associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a German philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment, whose work was influenced by ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and French philosopher Rene’ Descartes (1596-1650). Man’s intrinsic worth or dignity, Kant believed, derives from man’s ability to be autonomous—a rational agent, capable of making his own decisions, setting his own goals. At the time of Kant’s writings, this approach was seen as having laid the groundwork for universal respect for all men—that is, the notion that “all men are created equal.” His approach, intended to be inclusive and egalitarian, was considered radical during a time when only men of wealth and property had power.

Kant argued that doing what is right is not about the consequences of our actions (something over which we ultimately have no control) but about having the proper intention in performing the action. The ethical action is one taken from duty, that is, it is done precisely because it is our obligation to perform the action. Ethical obligations are the same for all rational creatures (they are universal), and knowledge of what these obligations entail is arrived at by discovering rules of behavior that are not contradicted by reason.

Kant’s famous formula for discovering our ethical duty is known as the “categorical imperative.” It has a number of different versions, but Kant believed they all

amounted to the same imperative. The most basic form of the imperative is: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” So, for example, lying is unethical because we could not universalize a maxim that said “One should always lie.” Such a maxim would render all speech meaningless. We can, however, universalize the maxim, “Always speak truthfully,” without running into a logical contradiction. (Notice the duty-based approach says nothing about how easy or difficult it would be to carry out these maxims, only that it is our duty as rational creatures to do so.) In acting according to a law that we have discovered to be rational according to our own universal reason, we are acting autonomously (in a self-regulating fashion), and thus are bound by duty, a duty we have given ourselves as rational creatures. We thus freely choose (we *will*) to bind ourselves to the moral law. For Kant, choosing to obey the universal moral law is the very nature of acting ethically.

However, Kant’s emphasis on the rational, autonomous being of white men and his silence on the moral status of children, the irrational, or the severely physically or mentally challenged suggests that he did not consider them worthy of human dignity or moral status. In context, Kant was not acting alone but was reflecting part of a worldview that systematically ignored the rights of others or even the thought of rights for others. He wrote during a time when the prevailing worldview was shaped by the [Great Chain of Being](#) ; that worldview reinforced the idea that slaves, women, and children were considered property, not rational persons, and therefore, not worthy of moral status.

The Kantian approach has been criticized because it fails to acknowledge the moral status of (or offer respect for) vulnerable populations—those who cannot speak for themselves. Human dignity, according to this approach, is applicable only to those who can exercise rational, autonomous choices.*

*For a brief explanation of the implications of this hierarchical worldview, you may want to watch a portion of [this video by one of our faculty members](#), starting at minute seven (7) to minute fifteen (15).

D. A moderated approach: John Rawls’ Theory of Justice

John Rawls' theory of justice centers around the idea of "justice as fairness." He

argues that the principles of justice should be chosen behind a "veil of ignorance," where individuals do not know their own abilities, positions in society, etc. This leads to the choosing of principles that are fair to all. The two principles Rawls argues would be chosen are:

- 1) *equal basic liberties for all citizens (freedom of speech, right to vote, etc.); and*
- 2) *allowing only economic and social inequalities that benefit the least advantaged members of society.*

Rawls believes our sense of justice develops from social contracts made over time. He views *justice as fairness in the assigning of rights and duties*, and the *distribution of social and economic advantages across society*. Rawls argues that there are two principles that free and rational people would agree to in an initial position of equality: the liberty principle, giving all citizens equal basic liberties, and the difference principle, which distributes resources to ensure "fair equality of opportunity" and support the least advantaged members of society.

Rawls believes that depriving someone of basic liberties cannot be justified, even if it leads to greater economic prosperity or benefits for the majority. Additionally, inequalities can only be allowed if they benefit the least advantaged, and if positions and offices are open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. Rawls' theory of justice as fairness stresses equality, basic rights, and the protection of the disadvantaged. His theories have been highly influential in modern political philosophy.

E. Existentialism

If you've ever pondered the meaning of existence or questioned your purpose in life, you've engaged in existentialist philosophy. Existentialism is the philosophical belief we are each *responsible for creating purpose or meaning in our own lives*. Our individual purpose and meaning are not given to us by Gods, governments, teachers or other authorities.

Partly as a result of their involvement in the Resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II, the French thinkers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus developed the philosophy of Existentialism, built to some extent on the

writings of Soren Kierkegaard and to a lesser extent on the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. A philosophy which emphasizes the tragic absurdity of the human condition, Existentialism focuses on the individual and the choices that she or he makes. Those choices and actions allow the individual to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless world.

Unlike the Egoistic Approach (Ethical Egoism), the writings of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus focus on social responsibility, partly due to their experience of having been part of the Resistance against Naziism. As Sartre said, "I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant."

Optional (but amusing): [A 9 minute crash video course in Existentialism.](#)

F. The Rights Approach

The Rights approach to ethics is another which derives much of its current force from Kantian duty-based ethics, although it also has a history that dates back at least to the Stoics of Ancient Greece and Rome, and has another influential current which flows from work of the British empiricist philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). This approach stipulates that the best ethical action is that which protects the ethical rights of those who are affected by the action. Such an approach is reflected in aspirational documents such as the [UN Declaration on Human Rights](#), [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), and the proposed UN Declaration on the [Rights of Mother Earth](#).

G. The Fairness or Justice Approach (sometimes called Egalitarianism)

The Law Code of Hammurabi in Ancient Mesopotamia (c. 1750 BCE) held that all free men should be treated alike, just as all slaves should be treated alike. The Fairness or Justice approach was a historical key to doing away with the categories "men" and "slaves," and focusing on fairness for *all* people. The most influential version of this approach today is found in the work of American philosopher John

Rawls (1921-2002), who argued, along Kantian lines, that just ethical principles are those that would be chosen by free and rational people in an initial situation of equality. This hypothetical contract is considered fair or just because it provides a procedure for what counts as a fair action, and does not concern itself with the consequences of those actions. Fairness of starting point is the principle for what is considered just.

H. The Divine Command Approach (sometimes called Religious and cultural values)

As its name suggests, this approach sees what is right as the same as what God commands, and ethical standards are the creation of God's will. Following God's will is seen as the very definition of what is ethical. Because God is seen as omnipotent and possessed of free will, God could change what is now considered ethical, and God is not bound by any standard of right or wrong short of logical contradiction. The Medieval Christian philosopher William of Ockham (1285-1349) was one of the most influential thinkers in this tradition, and his writings served as a guide for Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Jean Calvin (1509-1564). The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), in praising the biblical Patriarch Abraham's willingness to kill his son Isaac at God's command, claimed that truly right action must ultimately go beyond everyday morality to what he called the "teleological suspension of the ethical," again demonstrating the somewhat tenuous relationship between religion and ethics mentioned earlier.

A very different set of ethical standards might be to follow the religious precepts which one's family culture sets up. For example, a family might practice Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucianist principles and members of the family would agree, at the age of adulthood, to follow those practices. Similarly, the ethical system set up by an indigenous cultures (Navajo, Zapotec, Northern Athabaskan, or other cultures) might be taken as an individual's guidelines.

I. The Egoistic Approach (aka Ethical Egoism) (sometimes called Libertarianism)

The ethics of self-interest -- the exact opposite of utilitarianism. Ancient Greek Sophists like Thrasymachus (c. 459-400 BCE), who famously claimed that might

makes right, and early modern thinkers like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) may be considered forerunners of this approach. One of the most influential recent proponents of ethical egoism was the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982), who, in the book *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964), argues that self-interest is a prerequisite to self-respect and to respect for others. There are numerous parallels between ethical egoism and laissez-faire economic theories, in which the pursuit of self-interest is seen as leading to the benefit of society, although the benefit of society is seen only as the fortunate by-product of following individual self-interest, not its goal.

<http://leftycartoons.com/2010/06/29/the-24-types-of-libertarian/>

J. The “Ethics of Care” approach

The ethics of care (EoC) approach challenges traditional moral theories as male centric and problematic to the extent they omit or downplay values and virtues usually culturally associated with women or with roles that are often cast as ‘feminist’. The EoC is basically defined as ‘the right thing is to care about others’; that *relationships define the boundaries of moral status*. It has been cast as a feminist ethical perspective, and states that the primary moral obligation is not to turn away from others in need; it has also been considered an invitation to expand our moral universe beyond humanity. In previous decades, the emphasis has been on the importance of the experiences of women and other marginalized groups, but more recently feminist scholars and philosophers have argued for need for ethics and practices that tie humanity to the Earth, not as separate beings, but as part of the Earth community (the “Gaia hypothesis.”) See “What is a Person?” [See also Ecofeminism, Carol Gilligan, and Nel Noddings.](#)

3. The Challenge of Cultural Relativism

Perhaps you’ve heard the argument that “Different cultures have different moral codes” and this is the key to understanding morality. There are no universal moral truths, they say; the customs of different societies are all that exist. These arguments are based on five claims: **a)** Different societies have different moral codes. **b)** The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society. **c)** There is no objective standard that

can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times. **d)** The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many. **e)** It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

But if one was to accept that, then the entire idea of moral progress would be called into doubt; the notion of social reform would be dismissed. And all the wars fought to establish basic common human rights -- from the US Revolutionary War to the [French Revolution](#) to the American Civil War to WWI and WWII -- would be for naught. To accept cultural relativism as the shifting standard for ethics would be to accept such actions as genocide, slavery, and mass government killings as permissible. In light of the difficult lessons learned from these conflicts, the world came together after World War II, created the United Nations and [UN Declaration of Human Rights](#).

(For a more detailed explanation of these frameworks, go to either [Resources in Ethics folder](#), where you will find a pdf of [James Rachels' The Elements of Philosophy](#).

(New Section added August 2023)

[Ancient Female Greek Philosophers whose work ought to be recognized](#)^{2*}

Aspasia of Miletus

Aspasia was an extraordinary woman who lived in ancient Greece in the 5th

^{2*} Please note that this section is not comprehensive, and a work-in-progress)

century BCE. She was born in Miletus but moved to Athens around 450 BCE. Though not an Athenian citizen, Aspasia became the companion of the renowned leader Pericles. She was a [hetaira](#), providing intellectual and sexual services to wealthy men.

More than just beautiful and charming, Aspasia was a brilliant philosopher, speaker, and teacher. She hosted discussions on rhetoric and philosophy, attracting renowned thinkers like Socrates and Plato. Aspasia even advised Pericles on speeches and politics.

While her writings are lost, ancient sources suggest Aspasia promoted progressive ideas about women's rights, freedom, and education. She believed women deserved greater equality and opportunities. Aspasia challenged norms confining women to domestic roles.

This influential philosopher defied restrictions on women in ancient Athens. Aspasia's visionary thinking on women's roles and education has shaped Western thought for centuries. She was an eloquent, intelligent woman who lived by her own rules.

Resource: [Aspasia of Miletus - World History Encyclopedia](#)

Clea

In her time, Clea had a crucial role in the political and religious affairs of her time, receiving requests from world leaders for advice on various issues. She was a priestess at Delphi, where people sought divine guidance from the oracle.

However, Clea was not only a priestess, but also a philosopher who valued the pursuit of wisdom above all else. She had many philosophical conversations with Plutarch, the most famous intellectual of his time, who was impressed by her knowledge and eloquence. She inspired some of his works, such as [On the Bravery of Women](#) and [On Isis and Osiris](#), where he discussed topics such as death, virtue, and religious history.

Hypatia of Alexandria

Hypatia of Alexandria was a brilliant and influential philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries CE. She was the daughter of Theon, a professor of mathematics and astronomy at the famous Library of Alexandria. She followed her father's footsteps and became a renowned scholar and

teacher of Neoplatonism, a school of philosophy that sought to understand the ultimate reality beyond the physical world.

She wrote commentaries on important mathematical and astronomical works, such as those by Euclid, Diophantus, Apollonius, and Ptolemy. She also invented or improved some scientific instruments, such as the astrolabe and the hydrometer. She was admired by her students and colleagues for her wisdom, eloquence, and virtue. She attracted many followers from different religions and backgrounds, including Christians, Jews, and pagans. She was tragically targeted by Bishop Cyril as a pagan threat, and in 415 CE a Christian mob viciously murdered her. Hypatia's legacy endures as a courageous martyr for science and free thought against religious intolerance.

Resource: [Wise women: 6 ancient female philosophers you should know about \(theconversation.com\)](https://www.theconversation.com/wise-women-6-ancient-female-philosophers-you-should-know-about).

Thecla

Thecla, an influential Greek intellectual, was a radical early Christian feminist; she reportedly was a follower of Paul the Apostle, and was venerated by the Church as a saint. Thecla was a young noble woman from Iconium, a city in Asia Minor, who chose to leave her fiance so she could convert to Christianity and follow Paul. She was not a citizen of Athens, but a metic, a resident alien who had to pay a tax to live there; she was also a hetaira.

She ran a salon where she taught men and women how to speak and think well, and attracted many prominent figures of her time, such as Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, and Euripides. She is said to have influenced some of their works, especially those related to love, women, and politics.

Thecla's commitment to Paul's teachings, particularly her disavowal of marriage and motherhood, was seen as a serious threat to the Roman Empire. She rejected the social norms that confined women to domestic duties and advocated for women's rights, freedom, and equality. She also promoted a liberal education that would cultivate the mind and the soul of both men and women.

Bonus Resource materials:

[Seven Female Philosophers You Should Know About](#)

[Incredible Female Philosophers](#)