

I. Major ethical perspectives

A. Relativism ([Rachels](#))

1. Three types of relativism
 - a) Descriptive - people and cultures differ over values
 - b) Cultural relativism - what is right in one culture may not be right in another - there are no universal ethical values.
 - c) Subjectivism - Ethical judgements depend entirely upon the individual
2. Strengths - Promotes tolerance, the cultural differences argument (1. Different cultures follow different moral standards, 2. If there was an objective moral standard it would be followed by all cultures, Therefore: No objective moral standard exists)
3. Weaknesses - Can't condemn aberrant practices, Can't explain cultural critics, anthropological argument is wrong (cultures agree on many basic values), relativism self destructs (relativism says no objective values thus we must be tolerant, but tolerance then becomes an objective value)

B. Deontological ethics

1. Immanuel Kant ([review Kant document](#))
2. Non-Consequentialist - Whether or not an action is consistent with duty is all that matters
 - a) The only thing that is good in a unqualified way is a good will
 - b) An act of good will is an act in accordance with duty that is done out of duty (we called this category four) Such acts are morally laudable because they are done for the sake of duty. Acts in accordance with duty motivated by self interest or inclination are not wrong, but neither are they morally laudable (because they are not motivated by a good will).
 - c) Duty = acting in accordance with the law. The law is the categorical imperative
3. The Categorical Imperative (two ways of stating it)
 - a) Only those actions that can be universalized without contradiction are ethical (version 1)
 - b) Always treat people as ends and not simply as means (version 2) - this stems from Kant's distinction between people and things. Persons are autonomous (self ruled) and this means they can rationally choose between different ways to live - they have their own ends, and these ends must be respected (this is the basis for Kant's assertion of human dignity). Things are not autonomous and cannot choose - they have no ends that need be respected and thus can be seen in purely instrumental terms.
4. Strengths
 - a) The assertion of human dignity forms the basis of the modern Western conception of human rights
 - b) Acknowledges the importance of freedom in human affairs
 - c) Accords with the idea of the "golden rule"
 - d) Avoids relativism - is universally applicable
5. Weaknesses
 - a) Too rigid - what about lies to save a life?
 - b) Complexity - not a self evident system
 - c) Focus on intent is odd. Kant argues that someone who gains joy out of doing their duty is not to be praised. But would we rather be wished happy birthday by someone motivated by duty or by the joy they received by doing so?

C. Ethical Egoism ([Rand](#) and [Rachels](#))

1. Ayn Rand (Review Rand's "The Virtue of Selfishness")
2. Basic ideas
 - a) Looking out for others is problematic (charity is degrading, violates privacy, know our own interests perfectly but not so with others)
 - b) The fundamental principle of ethics is self interest.
 - (1) Biological imperative for survival
 - (2) The golden rule and the social contract - we do unto others not for them but to insure our own larger interests
 - c) Ethical egoism is the only philosophy that respects the integrity of individual human life (Rand's argument)
 - (1) A person has only one life - that life is valuable
 - (2) Altruistic systems of ethics require us to sacrifice this value for the sake of others
 - (3) In this sense, the value of our own life is de-valued. Our duty becomes the sacrifice of that which is most valuable. This is illogical and destructive (if nature worked this way evolution would be impossible)
3. Problems
 - a) Any moral system that prioritizes the interests of one group (self) over another (others) arbitrarily is flawed (in the same way racism and sexism are flawed).
 - b) Ethical egoism provides no way to resolve conflicts of interest

D. Utilitarianism

1. [Jeremy Bentham](#) and [JS Mill](#) ([Document](#))
2. Two basic principles lead to a third
 - a) Ethics should be based on consequences
 - b) Human happiness is the ultimate end of human life
 - c) The principle of utility - the ethical course of action is that which results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people
3. Bentham - happiness can be strictly quantified - the calculus of felicity
4. Mill - Some pleasures are superior to others
 - (1) Some pleasures are more valuable than others
 - (2) When weighing the value of two pleasures, the one preferred by the most people who have experienced both is the most valuable
 - (3) This leads to societal improvement because the goal of society can only be achieved by having the great mass of people able to make such judgements. This requires widespread education.
5. Problems for utilitarianism
 - a) It is inherently relativistic. There is no universal right or wrong, simply actions that lead to greater or lesser degrees of happiness in different circumstances. Utilitarianism says nothing about the inherent morality of any action (unlike Kant).
 - b) Condone immoral actions in certain circumstances (killing the slacker to get his kidney to save the genius)
 - c) Utilitarianism does not respect the dignity of the individual - the [Omelas](#) objection (if you use Omelas, explain the context of the story)
 - d) Utilitarianism endorses the breaking of promises if doing so leads to more pleasure overall
 - e) Utilitarianism can be too demanding
6. Some of these problems are solved by rule utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism measures the moral worth of an action by asking whether an action, if universalized, would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number. This circumvents the endorsement of lying, since if everyone lied, the greatest good would not be achieved.

E. Virtue Ethics

1. Aristotle's [Nichomachean Ethics](#)
 - a) Aristotle's key question not "what ought I to do?" but rather "what sort of person ought I to be?"
 - b) Moral worth of actions is thus measured in terms of the impact such actions have on our character
 - c) Aristotle believed the ultimate value was happiness (Eudaimonia) which he defined as well being or flourishing
 - d) "Happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue."
 - e) Happiness is achieved when things excel at their function
 - f) The function of man is reason, thus man is happy when he achieves excellence in reason, for this will lead him to be disposed (inclined) to do the right thing (Note the difference from Kant)

- g) Reason guides the virtuous man to the mean. All virtues are the mean between two vices (rashness, **courage**, cowardice). The mean will not be the same for all people, it is reason that allows us to find the mean for our particular situation
- h) Aristotle's ethics sees the ultimate happiness arising from man acting in harmony. When our propensity to think, desire, feel and act all are in harmony - we are happy. "Want" and "Ought" become the same.

2. Problems

- a) No answers to complex moral issues - abortion or euthanasia, for example
- b) If we are to identify and emulate role models, how do we determine the role models? If society determines, isn't this relativism?
- c) Virtue ethics does not provide guidance for how to behave in specific circumstances.

F. Levinas ([Article from NYT](#), [Beavers article on Levinas](#))

1. Levinas argues reason cannot be the basis of ethics. Reason seeks to understand the other by developing an idea of the other. But the idea is an idea - it is not the other. When we use reason to know the other we attempt to force the other into the bounds of an idea. Levinas calls this totalization and it represents a form of violence against the independence and autonomy of the other. The other must be known not through reason but through sensibility.
2. Ethics = our obligation to the other. Ethics always involves our relations with other persons.
3. Human existence starts as enjoyment of the world. This enjoyment involves incorporating what is not me into myself.
4. The ethical moment for Levinas is when humans encounter the other. The other resists being incorporated into the self - it pushes back. "I am not yours to be enjoyed: I am absolutely other," or to put the claim in Levinas' terms, "thou shalt not kill." (Levinas in Beaver)
5. This "catching off guard" is forced by the face of the other. The face demands "thou shalt not kill"
6. Levinas describes the impact of this moment as substitution. I recognize myself as a social being only when confronted by the demands of the other (I am other to the other). Thus social self-hood depends on the other and our obligations to him. Our social self is thus ontologically dependent on the other and our obligations to her.
7. Levinas contrasts totality - the desire to incorporate the other entirely within the bounds of a concept (American, Woman, Jew) - with Infinity - the inability of the other to be contained within any concept. Levinas argues that efforts to totalize the other is "a central violence to the other that denies the other his/her own autonomy" by trying to incorporate the other into the same (essentially by denying her otherness) (Levinas in Beavers).
8. Key - Recognition of our ethical obligation to the other is what makes us a social self. Thus ethics comes before social selfhood

II. Applied ethics

A. Distributional ethics - What is the ethical way to distribute societies' resources - 2 types of theories:

1. End state theories - Justice of a society measures by examining conditions at a given point in time. [John Rawls A Theory of Justice](#):
 - a) To determine the rules of distributional justice Rawls constructs a thought experiment involving people in "the original position" (man before society) behind a "veil of ignorance" (no one knows what their lot in life will be - rich or poor, smart or dumb, fast or slow, able or disabled, rich or poor)
 - b) From behind this veil, self interest determine 2 basic principles:
 - (1)The principle of liberty: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.
 - (2)The principle of economic distribution: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all.
 - (3)When in conflict principle 1 will always take precedence over principle 2.
 - (4)"Injustice . . . is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all"
2. Process based theories - The justice behind a given distribution determined by examining the process that led to that distribution. Process theories maintain that if the process is just that the outcomes of that process are also just. [Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State and Utopia](#). A given distribution is just if it if everyone is entitled to their holdings based on 3 principles:
 - a) Justice in acquisition - was the holding justly acquired (usually through the application of the owner's labor upon the owners property i.e.: a farmer plants a seed he owns on land he also owns)
 - b) Justice in transfer - was the holding acquired from another who was entitled to it through a voluntary transfer
 - c) No holding is justified except by repeated application of the first two principles.
 - d) When injustice in holding occurs, the government may intervene through the principle of rectification to put the status quo back to a prior state of justice
 - e) On the basis of these principles, taxation is unjust because it fails to meet the standards for justice in transfer (b/c it's not a voluntary transaction.
 - f) Wilt Chamberlain example.

B. Environmental ethics - What ethical obligation do we owe the environment? 2 major categories of theories:

1. Anthropocentric theories ([Baxter](#))
 - a) Only humans have intrinsic value - the non-human world is only instrumentally valuable
 - b) Nature is only valuable insofar as it is useful to man
 - c) Nature/natural states are not normative
 - d) People determine how to treat the environment based on their assessment of trade-offs (pollution v. growth), opportunity cost (what is lost by choosing a given option) and cost benefit analysis.
2. Ecocentric Approaches
 - a) All life has intrinsic value based on the capacity to experience pain/pleasure (Singer)
 - b) Entire ecosystems have intrinsic value
 - (1)Leopold - Everything is interconnected. We should think of the land as "a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils animals and plants." An ecosystem can be healthy or unhealthy and thus actions toward the ecosystem can be right or wrong based on whether they promote health of disorder of ecosystems. "[Odyssey of a carbon atom](#)"
 - (2)[Arne Naess - Deep ecology](#)
 - (a)The Western conceptions of individualism, reductionism and (more recently) consumerism are built on flawed premises and must be re-thought.
 - (b)Biocentric equality - All things in the Biosphere have an equal right to live" and flourish - all are equal in intrinsic worth.
 - (c)Any intrusion into nature to change it requires justification and this justification must be based upon the satisfaction of a vital need, not a desire or want.
 - (d)The flourishing of human and non-human life alike requires a "substantial decrease in human population."
 - (e)Focus on increasing standards of living (the growth paradigm on which the world economy is presently based) must be redirected to an appreciation of the existential quality of life.
 - (3)Baruch Spinoza and the philosophical roots of ecocentric ethics
 - (a)God = infinite substance possessing infinite attributes
 - (b)There can thus be no substance but God, because any other substance would already be included in the definition of God, which is infinite substance.
 - (c)If God is all substance, then all substance is God. Thus God and Nature are the same.
 - (d)Since we are part of Nature, we are part of God, but **no more or less than anything else in the universe**
 - (e)Thus distinctions between subject (self) and object (not self) are utterly meaningless. All that is one.
 - (4)Ecofeminism. Ecofeminists argue that a strong parallel exists between the oppression and subordination of women in families and society and the degradation of nature.
 - (a)subject object relationships in this scheme serve to reinforce hierarchical patterns of interaction between dominant and subordinate categories: Subject-Object, Actor-Acted upon, Man-Woman, Humans-the non human world, the developed world - the developing world
 - (b)Understanding our relationship with the environment (and correcting the problems that have arisen from this relationship) requires a rethinking of the entire conceptual framework (described above in (a)) of western society.