

In Conjunction with

CarnegieMellon

History of Ethics

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Robert Cavalier received his BA from New York University and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Duquesne University. In 1987 he joined the staff at Carnegie Mellon's Center for Design of Educational Computing (CDEC), where he became Executive Director in 1991.

While at CDEC, he was also co-principal in the 1989 EDUCOM award winner for Best Humanities Software (published in 1996 by Routledge as *A Right to Die? The Dax Cowart Case*). He also co-authored the CD-ROM *The Issue of Abortion in America* (Routledge, 1998)

Dr. Cavalier was Director of CMU's [Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics and Political Philosophy](#) from 2005-2007. He currently directs the Center's Digital Media Lab which houses [Project PICOLA](#) (Public Informed Citizen Online Assembly), and is also co-Director of [Southwestern Pennsylvania Program for Deliberative Democracy](#).



Co-Editor of *Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy* (St. Martin's/Macmillan, England, 1990), Editor of *The Impact of the Internet on Our Moral Lives* (SUNY, 2003) and other works in ethics as well as articles in educational computing, Dr. Cavalier is internationally recognized for his work in education and interactive multimedia. He was President of the "International Association for Computing and Philosophy" (2001 - 2004) and Chair of the APA Committee on Philosophy and Computers (2000-2003). Dr. Cavalier has given numerous addresses and keynote speeches here and abroad.

In 1996 Cavalier was designated "Syllabus Scholar" by Syllabus Magazine in recognition of his life long work with educational technologies. In 1999 he received an award for "Innovation Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Technology" at the 10th International Conference on

College Teaching and Learning. In 2002 he was recipient of the H&SS [Elliott Dunlap Smith Teaching Award](#) and in 2006 he was awarded a Fulbright Senior Specialist Grant in Education.

Today Dr. Cavalier's interests focus on the field of deliberative democracy. He is a PI in projects involving deliberative polling and other forms of democratic dialogue at the local, regional and national level. He has two books under contract: an anthology entitled *Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice*, SUNY Press (2009) and *Democracy for Beginners* (Steerforth Press, 2008)

Course Description

This web-site is designed to give users a very general "introduction to Ethics." The materials offer both historical and thematic perspectives on the subject. Key representatives of the history of ethics are presented and major ethical theories are analyzed and critiqued.

Part I of the site relies on original sources, excerpts from *Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1989), and excerpts from the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The treatment of 'ethical theories' in Part II is often informed by the approach of Beauchamp and Childress in their *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (5th Ed.) And the introduction to the topics of Applied Ethics owes much to Brendan Minogue's pedagogical use of institutional review boards in his *Bioethics: A Committee Approach*. Of course, for a full appreciation of these authors positions, a reading of their texts is required. I make no claim to fully represent their views.

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY RESOURCES: Relevant online materials from the Internet can be accessed through [Episteme Links](#) as well as the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), the [Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), and the Routledge Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Of special importance for the area of Moral Philosophy is Larry Hinman's [Ethics Updates](#) site.

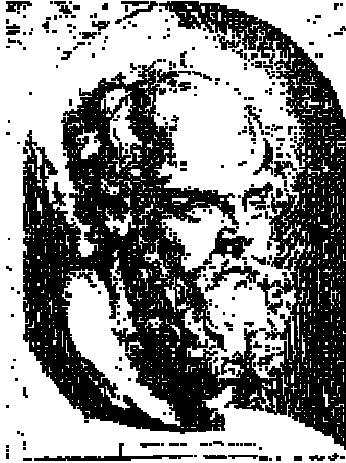
Part I History of Ethics

Introduction to Ethics: Preface

Many of the key problems and concepts of ethics go back to the time of the Greeks and the origins of Western Philosophy.

In the 5th Century BC, the City-State of Athens was the center of the world's intellectual life. And during this century, the "Golden Age of Pericles" came to epitomize the height of Athenian culture and democracy. The plays of Sophocles and Euripides were being written and performed, the Parthenon was being built and Greek citizens enjoyed political freedom.

Into this world came Socrates, who could often be found in the Marketplace (*agora*) -- talking to all who came by.



Socrates (469 - 399 BC)

Socrates was the first philosopher to focus specifically on the area of VALUES (the problems of God, the Good and the Beautiful). He did not claim an interest in "things beneath the earth and in the skies" (i.e., a knowledge of nature).

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Socrates.

Some good examples of Socrates' activity can be found in Plato's dialogue, the [Euthyphro](#). For the purposes of this Preface, the key points involve (1) distinguishing 'philosophy' from the sphere of the natural sciences (roughly, facts from values) and (2) distinguishing 'philosophy' from the sphere of religion.

1. On the distinction between empirical science and philosophy

Soc. And what sort of difference creates enmity and anger? Suppose for example that you and I, my good friend, differ about a number; do differences of this sort make us enemies and set us at variance with one another? Do we not go at once to arithmetic, and put an end to them by a sum?

Euth. True.

Soc. Or suppose that we differ about magnitudes, do we not quickly end the differences by measuring?

Euth. Very true.

Soc. And we end a controversy about heavy and light by resorting to a weighing machine?

Euth. To be sure.

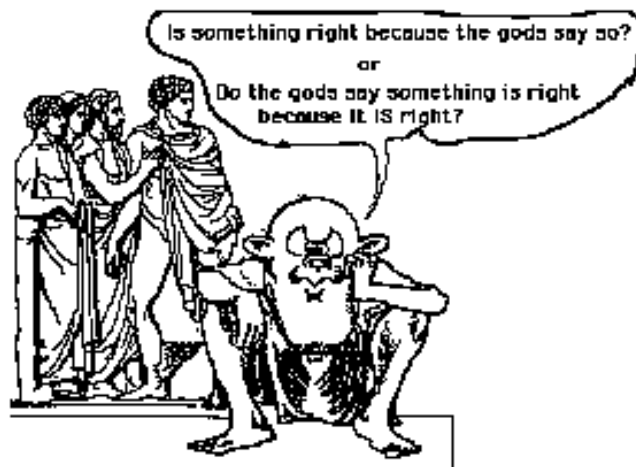
Soc. But what differences are there which cannot be thus decided, and which therefore make us angry and set us at enmity with one another? I dare say the answer does not occur to you at the moment, and therefore I will suggest that these enmities arise when the matters of difference are

the just and unjust, good and evil, honorable and dishonorable. Are not these the points about which men differ, and about which when we are unable satisfactorily to decide our differences, you and I and all of us quarrel, when we do quarrel?

[As Aristotle might say, we should not expect of ethical problems the same kind of rigorous solutions that we should expect of geometric problems...they are of a different kind.]

2. Regarding the relation of religion to ethics:

Euthyphro, a pious young man, has made the difficult decision to take his father to trial because of his father's involvement with the death of a slave. When questioned by Socrates about the appropriateness of this action, Euthyphro claims absolute certainty. He feels his action is "right" because, among other things, "the gods would agree." But, Socrates might counter --



Consequences of I and II:

IF something is right BECAUSE God says so, THEN "the Good" is DEPENDENT upon the will of God.

IF God says something is right because it IS right, THEN "the Good" is INDEPENDENT of the will of God.

Further Consequences

IF SOMETHING IS RIGHT BECAUSE GOD SAYS SO, then God could, logically, will ANYTHING and, because God wills it, IT WOULD BE RIGHT. (This is the position of THEOLOGICAL VOLUNTARISM.)

How would this apply to the stories of Zeus' rape of maidens? How would it apply to the story of Abraham?

Under the first interpretation, 'ethics' dissolves into a form of obedience (to the Will of God). Under the second interpretation, ethics -- as an inquiry into the nature of right and wrong -- can exist as a sphere separate and distinct from the sphere of theology.

These kinds of conversations made many citizens angry -- and when Athens had suffered a political and spiritual decline as the result of a disastrous war with Sparta, people began to look at Socrates as one of the causes of their troubles...In 399 BC he was brought to trial on charges of Impiety and Corruption of the Youth. In the course of his trial (see [the Apology](#)), Socrates expressed an essential belief of philosophers: "**The unexamined life is not worth living...**"

Religion and The Problem of Knowledge

Is religion a matter of Faith or a matter of Knowledge? For many, these are mixed, and 'believers' claim a 'knowledge' of God's existence. In the realm of ethics, for example, the believer KNOWS that Moral Rules come from God.

But there are as many "Divine Commands" as there are "gods" (Zeus, Allah, Yahweh, etc.). Here moral norms appear relative to the particular religion that one adopts. And different religions can have different, even conflicting, moral norms.

Yet a believer might respond that his or her God is the only true God. The other religions are false or misguided, even heretical. Question: How would someone "know" that his or her religion is "true" while others are "false"?

Appeal to Authority

One way of claiming knowledge in this sphere is to refer to the sayings in a religious text like the Bible or the Koran. But to simply point to a book as the ground for a belief is to commit the logical fallacy of Appeal to Authority.

Even in science, something is not right because it is found in a book by a famous chemist or written as a mathematical formula by Einstein -- rather, it is "the things themselves" that determine the truth or falsity of the expert's opinion.

Begging the Question

One might, however, go "inside" a book to find a justification for one's belief. One could argue as follows:

The precepts of the Koran are correct because they are the word of Allah. We know that the Koran is the word of Allah because Mohammed tells us so. We can believe Mohammed because he is Allah's prophet. And we know that Mohammed is Allah's prophet because it is written in the Koran.

[The precepts of the Bible are correct because they are the word of God. We know that the Bible is the word of God because Jesus tells us so. We can believe Jesus because he is

God's prophet. And we know that Jesus is God's prophet because it is written in the Bible.]

An argument "begs the question" when it ASSUMES what it sets out to prove. If we use a text to establish the truth of what is written in the text, we beg the question by a "circular argument."

In essence, this preface seeks to provide one justification for [seeking reasons for ethical behavior](#) and to do so independently of any theological *beliefs*.

Plato's dialogue, the [Crito](#), exemplifies this approach to moral reasoning. [Note: My links to HyperText versions of the Euthyphro, Crito, Apology, and the death scene in the Phaedo all point to [The Last Days of Socrates](#) by Andersen and Freund, Clarke College.]

In the *Crito*, Socrates tried to offer both an explanation for his actions (he wanted to do 'the right thing') and a justification for his actions (in the arguments that he put forth).

Can our reasons for answering 'the Practical Question' (viz., "What ought I do?") be grounded in something 'objective' like Human Nature or are they merely 'subjective opinions'? Kant, in the *Foundations for a Metaphysics of Morals* (1781), argued that the rightness or wrongness of our actions can be ascertained through Human Reason alone. (In doing so, he moved the foundation of morality from 'the sayings of the gods' to the Enlightenment's faith in reason.)

Regardless of one's philosophical opinions about the nature of reasons, we do seem to rely on explanations and justifications in our ordinary discourse about right and wrong, and we do seem to draw distinctions between 'good reasons for doing x' and 'poor reasons for doing x'. An example of the former might be "I would want to be helped if I were in that situation" -- an example of the latter might be "I'm a Scorpio and the Moon was in Jupiter."

John Rawls suggested a way in which these distinctions might lead to a deeper understanding of our moral belief system. A considered moral judgment is a judgment that a person makes under conditions that render errors of judgment less likely (e.g., slavery in the 19th century was unjust). Seeking principles that underlie these beliefs consistently (e.g., it is unjust to take away an innocent person's liberty) is a movement toward reflective equilibrium -- a unified, coherent body of beliefs.

Narrow reflective equilibrium represents a consistent set of moral positions based upon what we now know (it is another form of 'opinion'). Wide reflective equilibrium represents what we would attain if our moral positions not only formed a consistent, integrated body, but also resulted from reflection on all of the possible theories and arguments that could affect our positions one way or the other. The closer we come to this, the more justified our opinions become.

Such a movement towards reflective equilibrium requires an openness to new facts and reasons as well as the use of our imagination to explore other perspectives. It emphasizes the way

information can bear on our moral views and is open to the on-going challenge of human conversation.

Greek Moral Philosophy

At the time of Socrates, Greek culture already had a long history. Through a series of migrations/invasions, early Greek civilization had achieved its first high point during the Mycenaean Period (c. 1,150-1,000 BCE). The epic Battle of Troy (c. 1,200 BCE) was later to be retold by Homer (c. 750 BCE) in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These stories (*mythoi*) were emblematic of the Greek self-understanding as it withstood a series of invasions from Persia during the opening of the Fifth Century. And it was this century that was to witness the Golden Age of Pericles as well as the decline and downfall of Athens. It was also this setting that provided the cultural context for the writings of Plato and Aristotle in the Fourth Century BCE.

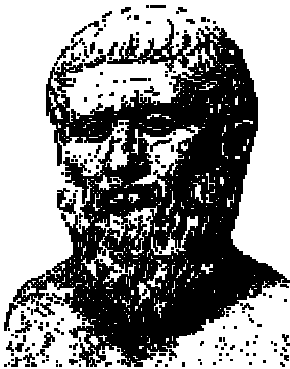


Plato

Aristotle

A number of excellent resources in Greek civilization and philosophy are becoming available on the Web. Of special importance are the [Perseus Project](#) at Tufts (see, especially, [Thomas Martin's Overview of Greek History](#)) and MIT's [Classics Archive](#).

Plato (429-347 BCE)



Plato had long been influenced by his friend Socrates and was deeply disturbed by the death of Socrates under the Athenian democracy. His 'early dialogues' (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Apology*) represent the historical Socrates, while his later dialogues develop a theory that seeks to provide answers to the kinds of questions that Socrates posed (e.g., "What is justice?"). The theory that is represented by the 'Platonic Socrates' is the famous theory of the Forms. Our competing opinions about what justice is come to a stop when we grasp with our minds (through philosophic dialectic) the one, true, abiding nature of Justice Itself -- and it is this Idea or Form of Justice that allows us to say, for example, that "this City is unjust" or that "this man is just." We can imagine that Plato's philosophy developed out of his intuition that he knew that Socrates was a good (and even beautiful) man and that Socrates had been unjustly condemned to death. An approach to Plato's central philosophical concerns might use the following dialogues:

- Justification of the Life of Socrates through a Revaluation of Greek Values: [The Gorgias](#)
- Metaphysical Grounding of all Values: The Theory of the Forms
 - The Path of Love
 - The *Phaedrus*
 - The *Symposium*
 - The Path of Knowledge
 - The *Theaetetus*
 - The *Sophist*
 - The Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave
 - The *Republic*
- Political Implications of the Theory of the Forms:
 - The *Republic* and the *Laws*

In the image of the Divided Line, Plato (combining the Parmenidian belief in Permanence and the Heraclitian sense of Change), divides the whole of Reality into the realms of Being and Becoming. The latter represents the world of changing sensations and opinions; the former the realm of eternal truths (not only of Pythagoras' mathematical formulae, but of the Forms of Values such as Justice, Beauty, and Goodness). In [the Allegory of the Cave](#), Plato represents the human condition as it finds itself situated within the structure of the Divided Line. In this image, humans are prisoners chained and facing a wall upon which mere shadows (opinions) of justice, beauty and goodness appear. It is with great effort that some of the prisoners are able (through, for example, Socratic discourse) to 'turn around' and begin a movement upward. The 'free man' subsequently emerges from the darkness of the cave and gazes (with initial difficulty) upon the brightly lit surroundings and, eventually, upon the Sun itself (as the source of all the light).

While Plato's dialogues represent the 'drama of reason' and seek to instill in the reader an appreciation for philosophical dialectic, many of the most compelling moments come when Plato artistically represents his ideas in the forms of images, metaphors and stories. With respect to the area of ethics, one of his most persuasive stories comes at [the end of the Gorgias](#).

See Arthur Adkins for an interpretation of Plato's [revaluation of Greek values](#).

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Plato.



Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

Aristotle was born in the northern Greek city of Stageira and was sent to Plato's Academy at the age of 17, where he studied under Plato for some 20 years. After Plato's death, Aristotle wandered (even becoming Alexander the Great's tutor at one point) until he founded his own school, the Lyceum. Here he lectured on topics ranging from Logic to Biology to Physics to Ethics.

Aristotle criticized Plato's belief in a separate realm of Forms. He argued, instead, that rational beings can discover the 'essences' of things and that a being's essence is its potential fulfillment (as the essence of an acorn is to become an oak tree). The essence of 'human being' is rationality and, therefore, a life of contemplation (a.k.a. Philosophy) is the best kind of life for true human flourishing. But in order to have this kind of life, a degree of leisure must be possible -- and to guarantee this, to assure that we are not always hunting or fighting, a good State (polis) must be in existence. Hence, for Aristotle, the creation of a good politician and a good political order are of the highest practical importance. It is in this context that he writes his works on 'ethics' and attempts to describe the nature of good character and the way in which humans who possess 'practical wisdom' determine right and wrong courses of action.

The Nicomachean Ethics

All humans seek happiness ("well being"), but in different ways.

True happiness is tied to the purpose or end (telos) of human life.

The essence of human beings (that which separates and distinguishes them as a species) is Reason.

Reason employed in achieving happiness (human telos) leads to moral and intellectual virtues:

-- Moral virtues (e.g., moderation, courage, magnanimity)

-- Intellectual virtues (e.g., 'science,' art, practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom)

In one sense, we can view Aristotle's 'ethics' as cataloging what he took to be the best features of a 'well bred Athenian gentleman' -- a person liberal and generous in spirit, embodying such 'cardinal virtues' as justice, courage, and moderation and knowing how to employ those virtues appropriately in particular circumstances (practical wisdom). Such a person is both worthy and capable of good friendships and certainly worthy and capable of good citizenship. Furthermore, if such a person also has the inclination, good fortune, and leisure to reflect upon the very nature and place of these virtues in the context of human well being, such a person would be cultivating aspects of the intellectual virtues. Indeed, such a person might be, like Aristotle, a philosopher writing about ethics. [Excerpts from the Nicomachean Ethics](#)

See Alfonso Gomez-Lobo's commentary on [Aristotle's conception of the right](#). See, also, Martha Nussbaum's recent essay on [Aristotelian Rationality](#).

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Aristotle.

Hellenistic and Roman Ethics

By the middle of the Fourth Century, Alexander the Great had led post-City-State Greek armies on a conquest of the Ancient World. Yet after the deaths of Plato and Aristotle, and after the conquests of Alexander, the Greek world receded in importance while the Roman world emerged to gain domination over all the Mediterranean. During this "Hellenistic and Roman" period, Plato's Academy underwent changes in style and focus (eventually turning into a school of Sceptics). Certain philosophies of life took prominence at this time and two of them, Epicurianism and Stoicism, left lasting marks on the Western Tradition. For both schools, "ethics" focused on achieving "well-being" or "happiness" and both saw that the character of one's existence depended on a proper attitude toward the world as a whole.

Epicureanism taught that all humans by nature seek a pleasant life and that the best way to the pleasant life is through a life of moderate satisfaction.

In the realm of human desires, there are three kinds:

- Natural (e.g, seeking food, drink, shelter, medicine, friendship and 'happy memories')

- Natural but not necessary (e.g., love/*eros* -- as distinguished from intercourse/*aphrodisia*)
- Empty (caused by society, infected by the falsity of the evaluative beliefs that ground them and bound to be self-defeating e.g., religious superstitions, love stories, conversations glorifying wealth and power)

Epicurean Ethics involves the therapeutic process of achieving *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance and anxiety) in the soul and freedom from bodily pain. This freedom from disturbance is achieved through argument and sayings aimed at correcting/treating the pupil's false view of things.

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Epicureanism.

Stoicism taught that "the world is independent of our will" and consequently that a life detached from the natural events of life will be calmer and less troubled than a life bound up with false desires for worldly things.

The Stoics introduced the idea that divine logos/Reason is everywhere and that we all (men, women, slaves) partake of it. This led to the first formulation of the Brotherhood of Man. Stoics also recognized that this divine logos was the source for a 'natural law' that guides our understanding of self and world.

A Stoic ideal might be seen in the life of a virtuous Socrates who recognizes a responsibility to participate in the world around him (the *polis* and brotherhood of man) and who also recognizes that 'the world is independent of his will.' The consequences of this for practical living: clarification of what is important and within our reach; avoidance of false fears and empty desires. This is the way to attain the tranquility that accompanies the virtuous/happy life. (Note how [Cicero](#) states the link between virtue and happiness -- "Moral goodness is the only good: from which it follows that happiness depends on moral goodness and nothing else whatever" *Discussions at Tusculum*)

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Stoicism. See also the Ecole Initiative's section on [Stoicism](#).

For a sustained reflection on the contributions of these philosophies, see Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

Early Christian Ethics

The Hellenistic and Roman periods saw a convergence of three great cultures: Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian. The Greek translation of the Hebrew *biblion* ("bible" or papyrus) around 332 BCE both gathered the stories of Abraham and his people (in much the same way that Homer gathered the stories of Agamemnon and the battle of Troy) and interpreted those stories through the translation of key terms. In a section from Isaiah, for example, a word referring to "a young maiden" who would give birth to a savior of the nation was translated as *parthenos* ("girl," "maiden," or "virgin"). Thus began the prophecy that the Savior would be born through a virgin.

from an "immaculate conception" (properly interpreted as "free from Original Sin"). For many, this prophecy was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in 4 BCE. And with the birth of Jesus and death of the *christos* (Anointed One, Savior), a new religion with values largely unfamiliar to the traditional pagan world came into being.

The reception of this faith, however, was already set into motion by the Orphic and Platonic separation of the soul from the body and the Stoic conception of a universal Logos. And whether one interprets this whole story from the perspective of the historical Jesus or the Christ of Faith, the evolution of the early Church up to the flourishing of the Medieval University Schools stands as an important moment in the history of ethics.



Augustine of Hippo

Thomas Aquinas

An excellent resource in Early Church History can be found at the [Ecole Initiative](#) site.

St. Augustine (354 - 430 AD)

Many internet resources for Augustine can be found at the [Augustine site](#). These resources include a [series of essays](#) by James O'Donnell. One of those essays has [a brief biographical note](#) on "Augustine the African."



- Inherits Platonism and 'Christianizes' Plato
- The Divided Line becomes the dichotomy between the world of natural desires and the realm of divine order
- Adds the concepts of sin, free will, and a personal God
- This world becomes the 'testing ground' for future reward and punishment

See Thomas Losoncy on [Augustine's notion of Moral Evil](#). See also excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Augustine, as well as excerpts from Augustine's [City of God](#).

St. Thomas Aquinas

In the 13th Century, Aristotle's works were 'rediscovered' in the West and translated into Latin. These translations of 'The Philosopher' (as Aquinas called him) became an integral part of some of Aquinas' most important writings. (See the [Jacques Maritain site](#) at the University of Notre Dame for an overview of [Thomas Aquinas' life and work](#).)



"The ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect...Hence...the blessed see the essence of God." (*Summa Theologica*)

- Translates Aristotle into the Christian Worldview
- Adds the 'spiritual virtues' of Faith, Love, and Hope
- Distinguishes between 'Eternal Law,' 'Natural Law,' 'Human Law' and 'Divine Law'
- Natural Law prescribes the fundamental precepts of morality and is grasped through reason and conscience

In the works of Aquinas, Natural Law Philosophy receives one of its highest expressions. It is a 'law' situated within God's *Eternal Law* in that "the whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason. Wherefore the very Idea of the government of things in God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law. And since the Divine Reason's conception of things is not subject to time but is eternal...it is that therefore this kind of law must be called eternal."

That part of Eternal Law that pertains to the behavior of human beings is the proper domain of *Natural Law*. Vernon Bourke, quoting from Aquinas, describes it thus:

'Good is to be done and promoted and evil to be avoided' (ST I-II, 94, 2). Since this rule does not specify what is good, it cannot be further analyzed to find more specific moral rules. It is a principle formally governing practical reasoning and in this sense Thomas calls it the first precept of natural law. To determine what are the proximate natural goods for man, Aquinas suggests that reason naturally apprehends as goods those objects that satisfy man's basic inclinations. On the lowest level are those physical goods that all beings incline to, such as self-preservation. Second are biological goods that men tend towards, as do all living things: the procreation and care of offspring, for instance. In the third and highest place he puts those values that satisfy man as a rational being: the knowledge of truth about God and the advantage of living in the society of other humans.

Human Law involves those civil laws that govern communities. These civil laws may indeed vary from town to town as long as they don't violate the precepts of Natural Law.

Finally, *Divine Law* pertains to God's special plans for humanity and is revealed through, for example, sacred scripture.

Examples of these 'laws' could be (1) the law of gravity as governing the motion of physical objects, (2) prohibition of artificial birth control as violating our natural tendency toward procreation, (3) laws regulating the traffic in a particular city and disobedience with regard to laws that seek to destroy religious faith (through, for example, the banning of Mass), (4) knowledge, through God's Grace, of our supernatural rewards (as revealed in the New Testament).

See Vernon Bourke for a discussion of Aquinas' [basic ethical theory](#). See also excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Aquinas. For an example of how Aquinas appropriates Aristotelian moral philosophy, see his discussion of "virtue as a mean" in [Summa Theologica](#).

Modern Moral Philosophy

Broadly speaking, the Medieval Mind gradually gave way to the Modern Period through a series of cultural and political changes that involved both the Renaissance (c 14th-16th centuries) and the Reformation (marked by the 1517 posting of Luther's '95 Theses'). The former involved the expansion of trade and the rise of money-based economies, the invention of printing, Copernicus' challenge to Ptolemaic astronomy, and Galileo's confrontation with Aristotelian 'physics.' The New Sciences, with their empirical methods and mathematical tools, set about to provide a new grid by which to measure the universe. The Protestant Reformation, begun with an attack against 'indulgences' and a belief in power of simple faith, ended in schism and political dissent from the once 'universal' (*catholos*) Church.

In this historical context, Thomas Hobbes' political and moral writings represent the first truly 'modern' view of ethics.

Thomas Hobbes

David Hume

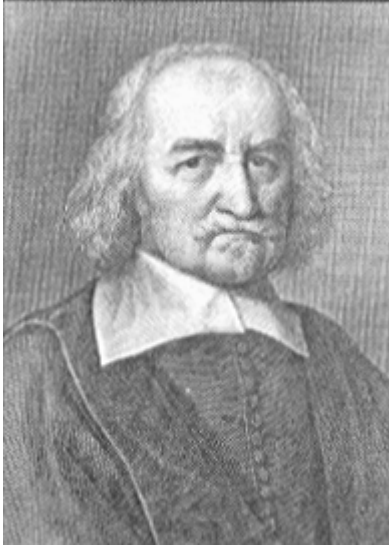
Immanuel Kant

Bentham and Mill

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679)

Hobbes's life span of 90 some years brought him into contact with many of the great people and historical events of the 17th Century. Educated at Oxford, he became known in the political circles of both England and the Continent. In Italy he met Galileo and in England he was a friend of Bacon, Lord Chancellor. His enthusiasm for the New Science and his concern with the horrible effects of religious and civil war, led him to formulate a unique approach to both ethics and the "science of politics."



Links the 'laws of motion' to the actions of man

'Knowing' and 'willing' are merely the appearances of subtle motions

What 'moves us' are desires and aversions and the force behind these is self-preservation

Self-interest prescribes that we avoid the 'bestly, brutal, and short' state of nature and seek a peaceful co-existence

'Peace' is achieved when we transfer our collective strength to a sovereign authority (a Leviathan)

The social contract with the Leviathan forms the source of right and wrong (through the will of the Leviathan)

More information on Hobbes is available from the [ILTWeb-site](#) (do not try to download the text-only version of the Leviathan because the file contains the full 700 page book). The [Introduction](#) and the chapter discussing the [State of Nature](#) are on-line.

See also Lary May's [comments on Hobbes](#).

The following student essay by Keith Crabtree (S'94) is a example of good class work:

Thomas Hobbes was the first great figure in modern moral philosophy. His main grounding in philosophy was on the basis of materialism, believing that everything that happens is a result of the physical world and that the soul, as previous philosophers discussed it, does not exist. One must then consider what Hobbes' outlook was on the topic of values. Hobbes' contention was that the concept of good and evil are related to human desire and aversion. In other words, what an individual desires he perceives to be good and what that individual harbors an aversion to must be bad. This philosophy of values, Hobbes explained, is due to an attitude of self preservation and protection.

In 1651 Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, his famous work that detailed his physicalist outlook and his concept of the value of a social contract for a peaceful society. Hobbes explained that if individuals within a society continually lived by their own self interests, they would continue to hurt each other and be stuck in a "state of war." If the members of a society were made to live within certain bounds which made it impossible for them to harm each other, the members of that society would be in a "state of peace."

The only way to achieve this peaceful society, Hobbes explained, was for all members of a society to unconditionally transfer all of their ability and will to defend themselves to a sovereign power under a form of social contract. With this social contract established, the sovereign power would accept the responsibility for mediating all disputes concerning the society, both internal and external. Should any member of the society violate an agreement with another member of that society, that individual would be guilty of violating their unconditional agreement to support the social contract, which would then render them unjust and subject to punishment.

Conversely, if the Leviathan, or sovereign power, violated its own responsibility to protect the members of the society in its charge, that society could then find itself another sovereign to rule it.

David Hume (1711 - 1776)

David Hume is most often cited as a radical empiricist whose reflections on the nature of knowledge led him to a skeptical stance in regard to our knowledge of the external world and, most famously, the Law of Causality (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748). In matters of religion, he offered devastating criticisms of the Argument from Design and said reason was incapable of moving from the facts of the world to the existence of God (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779). But when it came to the sphere of ethics, this Scottish philosopher displayed a remarkable sympathy with those who spoke with common sense of our basic ideas of right and wrong, virtue and vice (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 1751). Hume rejects Hobbes' moral psychology and reminds us of the everyday way in which we approve or disapprove of those who exhibit virtuous or vicious lives. He views his appeal to "uniform experience and observation" as scientific in the manner of Bacon and Newton.

[Criticizes a Mechanistic Egoism](#)

Posits a 'Principle of Humanity' as the Source of Morality

Moral Sentiment 'informs us' of Good and Evil

See Hume's example of [Personal Merit](#).

See David Norton's discussion of [Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*](#). See also excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Hume.

More information on Hume can be found on the [Hume Archive Page](#).

Kant's Ethics



Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) stands as a milestone in the history of Western philosophy. Epitomizing the Enlightenment's faith in reason, he also demonstrated both the scope and limits of reason in his famous *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In this work Kant sought to answer the skepticism of empiricists like Hume and admonish the excesses of rationalists like Leibniz and Wolff. The Law of Causality, for example, is justified because we contribute universality and necessity to the sequential representations that constitute experience and the possibility of knowledge. But reason, unaided by experience, cannot attain knowledge of that which is beyond the possibility of knowledge -- like the existence of a God unconditioned by space and time.

Yet Kant saw that when reason turned 'practical' (toward action), it was capable of achieving insight into the nature of human freedom and the regulative usefulness of ideas such as the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. Kant explored this in his equally famous *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

Kant's writings on ethics should be seen in the context of his larger projects, though he was apparently quite adept at discussing many aspects of moral philosophy in the courses he taught in his Prussian town of Königsberg. Thematically, Kant's ethical theory represents the classical formulation of deontological ethics. For deontologists, right action consists solely in the conformity of an action to a justified rule or principle. For Kant, this becomes equivalent to the rational and autonomous conformity of one's will to maxims that abide by the Categorical Imperative (aka Moral Law).

In the [Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals](#) (1785), Kant tries to demonstrate how his position provides a philosophical foundation for what is already commonly understood by 'morality' and 'moral action.' Three concepts will be analyzed: The Good Will, The Notion of Duty and the Nature of Imperatives (both Hypothetical and Categorical).

The Good Will

A "Good Will" is the only thing that is "good without qualification." Other "goods," such as intelligence and health, can be qualified. The Good Will is good by virtue of the fact that it is "the will to follow the Moral Law."

The Notion of Duty

There is a **DISTINCTION** between the "I want" (self-interest) and the "I ought" (ethics). Moral actions are not 'spontaneous' actions. That is, if I see someone in need of help, I may be inclined to 'look the other way' and attend to my own busy day, but I would recognize that I should assist in some way. For example, an elderly woman falls and is bleeding badly ... I may be on my way to work, but I recognize that I should at least seek assistance and call 911.

Considering only those actions that are seemingly good (as opposed to actions that we ordinarily recognize as wrong), there is a **DISTINCTION** that can still be made within Duty itself: Actions **IN** mere **ACCORDANCE** (conformity) **WITH** duty and actions done **FROM A SENSE OF** duty.

The Nature of Imperatives

Imperatives are commands. Of commands, there are those that command hypothetically and those that command categorically.

Hypothetical Imperatives have the general form: IF YOU WANT 'A,' THEN YOU OUGHT TO DO 'B.' For example, If you want to be an Olympic swimmer, you ought to go swimming every day. The 'ought' in these hypothetical imperatives is **CONDITIONED** by our desires & wants -- our 'goals.' Thus, if you don't want to be an Olympic swimmer, then you don't have to go swimming every day. Ultimately, our goals are grounded in **SELF-INTEREST**.

A Categorical Imperative has the general form: DO 'A' (i.e., it is **UNCONDITIONED**). For Kant, there is only one imperative that commands us unconditionally and that is the Moral Law: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

This single categorical imperative, however, has three formulations (the first two of which are): *First Formulation*: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to secure through your will a universal law of nature" *Second Formulation*: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only"

The examples that Kant offers as a way to demonstrate the use of these formulations in actual situations follows the categories of duties that were used at his time. These breakdown into four Kinds of Duties: Duties Toward Oneself (Perfect: Self-Preservation, Imperfect: Self-Cultivation) and Duties Toward Others (Perfect: Strict Obligation, Imperfect: Beneficence).

Following these kinds of duties, Kant's examples are (1) Suicide, (2) Promise-breaking, (3) Squandering Talents, (4) Helping Others.

See Christine Korsgaard's commentary on [Kant's formulations of the Categorical Imperative](#).

Critique of Kant's Theory

Some feel that Kant's categorical imperative transgresses the distinction between Universal Principles (e.g., "Don't Lie") and Absolute Principles (e.g., "Never Lie"). And, indeed, Kant seemed to follow the latter in his comment on a famous case analysis: [The Murderer at the Inn](#).

What is needed is a way to resolve conflicts of duties (see Ross's analysis of prima facie duties).

The British Utilitarians

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

It is helpful to see Bentham's moral philosophy in the context of his political philosophy, his attempt to find a rational approach to law and legislative action. He argued against "natural law" theory and thought that the classical theories of Plato and Aristotle as well as notions such as Kant's Categorical Imperative were too outdated, confusing and/or controversial to be of much help with society's ills and a program of social reform. He adopted what he took to be a simple and 'scientific' approach to the problems of law and morality and grounded his approach in the "Principle of Utility."

The Principle of Utility



1. Recognizes the fundamental role of Pain and Pleasure in human life.
2. Approves or disapproves of an action on the basis of the amount of pain or pleasure brought about ("consequences").
3. Equates the good with the pleasurable and evil with pain.
4. Asserts that pleasure and pain are capable of "quantification" -- and hence of measure.

[The Utilitarian Calculus](#)

As with the emerging theory of capitalism in 18th and 19th Century England, we could speak of "pleasures" as "PLUSES" and "pains" as "MINUSES." Thus the utilitarian would calculate which actions bring about more pluses over minuses (or the least amount of minuses, etc.).

In measuring pleasure and pain, Bentham introduces the following criteria:

Its INTENSITY, DURATION, CERTAINTY (or UNCERTAINTY), and its NEARNESS (or FARNNESS). He also includes its "fecundity" (more or less of the same will follow) and its "purity" (its pleasure won't be followed by pain & vice versa).

In considering actions that affect numbers of people, we must also account for their EXTENT.

As a social reformer, Bentham applied this principle to the laws of England -- for example, those areas of the law concerning crime and punishment. An analysis of theft reveals that it not only causes harm to the victim, but, if left unpunished, it endangers the very status of private property and the stability of society. In seeing this, the legislator should devise a punishment that is useful in deterring theft. But in matters of "private morality" such as sexual preference and private behavior, Bentham felt that it was not at all useful to involve the legislature.

Bentham also thought that the principle of utility could apply to our treatment of animals. The question is not whether they can talk or reason, but whether they can suffer. As such, that suffering should be taken into account in our treatment of them. Here we can see a moral ground for laws that aim at the "prevention of cruelty to animals" (and such cruelty was often witnessed in Bentham's day).

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)



"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

For Mill, it is not the quantity of pleasure, but the quality of happiness. Bentham's calculus is unreasonable -- qualities cannot be quantified (there is a distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures). Mill's utilitarianism culminates in "The Greatest Happiness Principle."

Excerpts from Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861):

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred

enjoyment a superiority in quality so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it; but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong that nothing which conflicts with it could be otherwise than momentarily an object of desire to them. Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness -- that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior -- confounds the two very different ideas of happiness and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

See John Lachs comments on [Mill's utilitarianism](#). JS Mill also believed that the "pursuit of happiness" required a political and cultural environment wherein freedom of expression and choice of lifestyle was unimpeded as long as no immediate harm to others was involved. See excerpts from [On Liberty](#).

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Soren Kierkegaard and Frederick Nietzsche stand as two great thinkers prefiguring, among other things, the advent of 'existentialism' in the 20th Century Philosophy. Temperamentally and philosophically opposed (Kierkegaard being deeply religious; Nietzsche deeply suspicious of religion), the two figures nevertheless speak passionately of the individuals' potential to relate inwardly and forcefully to the source of their values. Their writings can be, in Richard Rorty's sense, 'edifying' -- provocative 'redescriptions' of life that may or may not leave their mark on a particular reader.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

"All the beauty and sublimity we have bestowed upon real and imaginary things, I will reclaim as the property and product of man: as his fairest apology: Man as poet, as thinker, as God, as love, as power: with what regal liberality he has lavished gifts upon things so as to impoverish himself and make himself feel wretched! His most unselfish act hitherto has been to admire and worship and to know how to conceal from himself that it was he who created what he admired." (Section I, *Will to Power*)

I. [History of an Error](#)

II. [The Madman](#)

III. [The Greatest Stress](#)

From the Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*

"...Perhaps the depth of this antimoral propensity is best inferred from the careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the whole book -- Christianity as the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected.... Behind this mode of thought and valuation... I never failed to sense a hostility to life -- a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself.... Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life. Hatred of "the world," condemnations of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a beyond invented the better to slander this life, at bottom a craving for the nothing, for the end, for respite, for "the sabbath of sabbaths" -- all this always struck me, no less than the unconditional will of Christianity to recognize only moral values, as the most dangerous and uncanny form of all possible forms of a "will to decline" -- at the very least a sign of abysmal sickness, weariness, discouragement, exhaustion, and the impoverishment of life. For, confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality), life must continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life is something essentially amoral -- and eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal No, life must then be felt to be unworthy of desire and altogether worthless...."

See Richard Schacht's commentary on Nietzsche's notion of [the social nature of morality](#).

20th Century Analytic Moral Philosophy

Twentieth Century Anglo-American Ethics can be characterized by the following works:

First, there is the initial setting represented by G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) and Sir David Ross's *The Right and the Good* (1930). Then, from the early thirties to the mid-forties, the "effect" of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, through the Vienna Circle, made itself conspicuous in the emotive theories of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1935) and Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (1944). A movement away from these theories occurred in Toulmin's *Reason in Ethics* (1948) and R.M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) with Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View* (1957), ushering in a new era in ethical reasoning. The sixties saw a wealth of articles devoted to further scrutiny of the issues already before it and Philippa Foot's *Theories of Ethics* (1967) best represents this period. Finally, the 1971 publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* brings analytic ethics into the context for its contemporary level of discussion.

(1) G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903)

The position of utilitarianism is exemplified by Moore's *Principia Ethica*, though in this case the significance of the "naturalistic fallacy" has been added. Three main concerns present themselves in this work: the description of the "naturalistic fallacy," the principle of utilitarianism and a doctrine of moral intuition arising from the former two issues.

The naturalistic fallacy is the fallacy of identifying goodness with some natural property as, for instance, when one identifies the good with the pleasurable. From this, arguments containing factual notions of pleasure in the premises could logically entail conclusions containing ethical judgments. Moore argues that in fact no description of natural properties ever logically commits one to an ethical judgment. Ethical questions remain "open questions;" i.e., to the naturalistic's statement "X is pleasurable" one can always ask, "but is it good?"

A consequence of this for Moore is "that 'good' is a simple notion, just as 'yellow' is a simple notion." "Good" is not to be defined in terms of anything outside itself, but this does not make it impossible to grasp, any more than the color yellow. From this it follows that we can speak about the good and, indeed, say a great deal about it.

Moore sees in the principle of utility the articulation of a manner in which one can reason ethically. It is here ethics has its relation to conduct. When raising the practical question "What ought I to do?" one must always base their decision on whether the action will be the cause of the good or bring about good effect. From this it follows "that 'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result,' and is thus identical with 'useful.'"

The final determination of the useful (i.e., the good) was for Moore a kind of intuition. One "sees" the intrinsic value of morally practical actions.

See Stephen Darwall on [the unanalyzability of the concept of goodness](#).

(2) **Sir David Ross, *The Right and the Good* (1930)**

Ross's book arose primarily in response to the kind of utilitarianism espoused by *Principia Ethica*, that which says that "right means productive of the highest good." For Ross, what makes a right act right is not the principle of utility but an overriding moral duty that might sometimes conflict with Moore's "ideal utilitarianism" which says, "in effect, that the only morally significant relation in which my neighbors stand to me is that of being possible beneficiaries by my action." In the situation of a promisee and promiser, for instance, it might be harmless or even beneficial to break a promise, but this would not necessarily make it right to do so. We have certain duties that are not based upon the consequences of their adaptation, but on the rightness of their adaptation. Now these duties are, we could say, Kantian in nature, i.e., universal and deontic. Ross calls such general principles *prima facie* duties in light of the fact that, "all things being equal" i.e., no other opposing circumstances present, we ought to follow the principle. For example, all things being equal, we ought to keep promises.

But moral situations often exhibit a complexity which involves a conflict of *prima facie* duties. On this account Ross tells us that our actual duty will be that which is right for the particular situation. For instance, while keeping promises is a *prima facie* duty, there may arise a particular situation in which it is outweighed by another *prima facie* duty. Ross uses the example of breaking a trivial promise of meeting a friend in order to prevent a serious accident. He writes in this connection:

"... besides the duty of fulfilling promises I have and recognize a duty of relieving distress, and that when I think it right to do the latter at the cost of not doing the former, it is not because I think I shall produce more good thereby but because I think it the duty which is in the circumstances more of a duty."

In this case the latter duty is our actual duty, though both *prima facie* duties maintain their deontic nature. Ross gives us a position that overcomes the emphasis on "utility" in Moore's ethics. It is a position that emphasizes the notion of duty to do the right thing.

We can see from the above that the trends in the initial setting represent the classical debates between the utilitarians and the Kantians. Moore favors a notion of action based upon the consequences of bringing more good than evil into the world, Ross a notion of action based upon the morally good person's fulfillment of his sense of duty in light of what is ethically right. But those who espoused the radical dichotomy between facts and values sought to present an ethical theory most in accord with such a disjunction.

(3) **A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1935)**

The thesis, simply put, is the following: There are only two kinds of statements, the analytic (which express the necessary truths of logic and mathematics) and the synthetic (which express "matters of fact"). Regarding the latter, we must hold them to the

verificationist principle of meaning which states that any genuine proposition must at least be capable of being reduced to observation statements which depict some possible empirical situation. If propositions fail to conform to such criteria, they fail to conform to conditions under which a sentence can be literally significant. Such propositions are therefore not really propositions at all, but rather meaningless pseudo-propositions. Now, since the propositions of ethics fail to reduce to statements capable of empirical verification, they fall under the category of pseudo-propositions and are not literally significant.

What is left, by way of a positive analysis, is the belief that ethical expressions are merely emotive in nature, adding nothing to actual situations in the world. For instance, in saying "stealing money is wrong" I have merely expressed my feelings which might have been equally expressed without the ethical term viz., "Stealing money!"

Thus ethics is either the expression of the speaker's emotion or a phenomenon of the descriptive sciences of sociology and psychology. In neither case can one attempt to speak about ethics in any manner approaching a normative discipline, i.e., one cannot meaningfully speak about ethics.

(4) **C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (1944)**

Stevenson sought to present, in a more systematic fashion, the nuances and consequences of the emotive theory. Basing his view on the distinction between facts and values, he attempted to unfold this distinction in ethics into a distinction between beliefs and attitudes. The former relate to the sphere of facts, the latter to the psychological states of approval or disapproval. "Moral judgments are concerned with recommending something for approval or disapproval; and this involves something more than a disinterested description."

The richness of Stevenson's analysis lies in his constant investigations into the kind of "interplay" that occurs between beliefs and attitudes and the attempt to disclose the subtle relationships that occur between the two spheres. (For instance, the manner in which two people in ethical disagreement come to see the situation in the same way and, in adjusting their beliefs, they come to an agreement in attitude also.)

Be this as it may, the fundamental distinction between the spheres of belief and attitude remains and the latter can never, in principle, be reducible to a "disinterested description." The ultimate ground of our ethical existence is the emotive expression of our attitudes which are neither true nor false but simply beyond the sphere of facts.

With Stevenson, the distinction between facts and values receives its expression here in the distinction between beliefs and attitudes.

The next stage in Anglo-American thought will involve a critique of this positivistic position. From hence onward the views of ethics will change direction, overcoming the fact/value distinction and attempting to restore ethics to "its own language."

(5) **Stephen Toulmin, *Reason in Ethics* (1948)**

Hailed as another *Principia Ethica*, Toulmin's book brought to ethics the decisive attacks against the positivistic schools. He essentially undercut the emotive theory by undercutting the distinction between facts and values upon which it was based. This was accomplished through a questioning of the status of "factual statements."

Most relevant for our considerations is his attempt to give ethics its own kind of reasoning, to say of ethics, if you will, that it is a language game with its own rules for intelligibility. "We must expect that every mode of reasoning, every type of sentence. . . will have its own logical criteria, to be discovered by examining its own, particular uses."

The text attempts to show that ethics is not reducible to an objective (value as property), subjective (emotive) or imperative ground, though it contains elements of each. Rather, ethics has its own scope, and eo ipso its own reasoning, determined by the activities and forms of life that give rise to an "ethical existence." And the criteria for ethical existence is the harmoniousness of the society. From this one can make inferences regarding the kind of action to be performed. The central accomplishment, however, is the attempt to ground ethics in its own sphere of reason.

(6) **R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (1952)**

One of the best known works to explore ethical reasoning is Hare's *The Language of Morals* which attempts, in classic analytical procedures, to uncover the meaning of our ethical expressions. The language of morals is essentially prescriptive in nature, yielding universalizable imperatives in particular circumstance. I am prescribing, for myself and others, the command of, for example, not telling a lie. Such a prescription demands my acting in accordance with it. The very language of morals involves a commitment to conduct and our reasoning vis a vis the ethical situation refers to the principle of universality. Taken together, both moments yield the sense of the ethical sphere.

What is of particular interest here is the attempt to think about ethics from within the sphere of ethics and not to bring in wider metaphysical or epistemological considerations. Reasoning about ethics has become, in analytic philosophy, an investigation into ethical reasoning. This is seen most clearly in the next exemplar.

(7) **Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (1957)**

Baier's position is essentially an investigation into the conditions that make up something like a "moral point of view." Once this view has been described, the problem is just one of adopting it or rejecting it, i.e., acting from within or outside the moral point of view, and the task of the practical thinker is to show one that moral reasons are overriding reasons in cases in which a conflict with self interest arise.

What is important for our purposes is Baier's heavy reliance upon a Hobbsian world view in which a rational person would have to assert that a moral society is to be desired over a state of nature. "The very *raison d'etre* of a morality is to yield reasons which overrule the reasons of self interest in cases where everyone's following self-interest would be harmful to everyone." This re-introduces the social element (already contained in Toulmin) into ethical theory and sets the stage for Rawls' society based description of ethics.

A survey of the past three theories shows an overcoming of the fact/value distinction and a movement towards discussing ethics and ethical theory on its own terms. What is significant here is the gradual re-emergence of social theory and the interconnection between society and ethics. The analytic ethics of the sixties consisted mostly of a re-working of the various points of view so far expressed. We shall take as our example of this era the articles gathered together by Philippa Foot.

(8) ***Theories of Ethics*, ed. Philippa Foot (1967)**

Since the vehicle for analytical philosophy is the well known "article," it is not surprising to see certain eras in Anglo-American thought best expressed in a cluster of essays centering upon a single theme. Such is the case with ethics in the sixties. We have, in Philippa Foot's collection, an essential re-working of the issues put forth since the turn of the century, a close scrutiny which will act as a clearing ground for the new movement in the seventies.

Writers like John Searle use a theory like J.L. Austin's "performative utterance" to show that in certain circumstances, when we say something we have essentially done it. This applies particularly to promise making. Once again this indicates a willingness to discuss ethical issues from within ethics and to attempt an understanding of the moral point of view (in this case, of what it means to enter into the "promising game"). The general shift that has taken place in moral philosophy is a movement towards understanding what ethics is, meaning by ethics not first order terms like "right" and "good," but rather the analysis of second order notions making up the very sense of the "moral institution." "The current endeavor is not to promote certain moral goals or principles, or to clarify only such words as 'right' and 'ought' but rather to grasp the nature of morality itself, as compared with law, religion or science."

This attempt to understand the institution of morality is an important factor in the contemporary interest in John Rawls, whose treatise on justice has strongly influenced recent moral philosophy.

(9) **John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)**

The work is not, strictly speaking, a work on ethics but rather a particular species of ethics, namely, justice. Nevertheless, the broad view and expansiveness of *A Theory of Justice* provides many moments of ethical reflection with issues ranging from

intuitionism and utilitarianism to the ethics of Kant and Aristotle. As such, it contains the central issues of ethics from within its own interest.

The theory of justice revolves around the adaptation of two fundamental principles of justice which would, in turn, guarantee a just and morally acceptable society:

First Principle -- Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle -- Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

- to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and
- attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity

For a discussion of these two principles of justice and [Rawls's contract theory](#), see James Sterba's commentary.

A key problem for Rawls is to show how such principles would be universally adopted, and here the work borders on general ethical issues. He introduces a theoretical "veil of ignorance" in which all the "players" in the social game would be placed in a situation which is called the "original position." Having only a general knowledge about the facts of "life and society," each player is to make a "rationally prudential choice" concerning the kind of social institution they would enter into contract with. By denying the players any specific information about themselves it forces them to adopt a generalized point of view that bears a strong resemblance to the moral point of view. "Moral conclusions can be reached without abandoning the prudential standpoint and positing a moral outlook merely by pursuing one's own prudential reasoning under certain procedural bargaining and knowledge constraints." And with this view of "rational choice within a veil of ignorance" we have brought to a close our analysis of Rawls and the background context for contemporary discussions.

Part II Concepts and Problems

Meta-ethics, Normative Ethics, and Applied Ethics

Metaethics talks about the nature of ethics and moral reasoning. Discussions about whether ethics is relative and whether we always act from self-interest are examples of meta-ethical discussions. In fact, drawing the conceptual distinction between Metaethics, Normative Ethics, and Applied Ethics is itself a "metaethical analysis."

Normative ethics is interested in determining the content of our moral behavior. Normative ethical theories seek to provide action-guides; procedures for answering the Practical Question

("What ought I to do?"). The moral theories of Kant and Bentham are examples of normative theories that seek to provide guidelines for determining a specific course of moral action. Think of the Categorical Imperative in the case of the former and the Principle of Utility in the case of the latter.

Applied Ethics attempts to deal with specific realms of human action and to craft criteria for discussing issues that might arise within those realms. The contemporary field of Applied Ethics arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, it is a thriving part of the field of ethics. Numerous books and web-sites are devoted to topics such as Business Ethics, Computer Ethics, and Engineering Ethics. (See the [Bioethics Center](#) for an example of activities in the area of Medical Ethics).

This section will explore various concepts and problems concerned with meta- and normative ethical theories. The analysis of normative ethical theories will utilize Beauchamp and Childress's approach to this topic.

Ethical Relativism

Distinctions within Relativism

There is a distinction between "morals" and "mores" -- the latter can be defined as "harmless customs" (e.g., "tea at 4"); the former as "treatment of others" (e.g., "the practice of Apartheid"). In discussing Relativism, we are concerned only with "moral practices."

The Problem of Relativism: What one society considers Right, another Society considers Wrong. Therefore, RIGHT AND WRONG are RELATIVE to a PARTICULAR SOCIETY. Here we need to be aware of two things:

- (1) Confusing "harmless conventions" (The British drive on the left side of the road) with "harmful practices" (Clitorectomy is customary among the Somali).
- (2) Even if "moralities" may differ from society to society, it need not follow that Morality Itself is relative -- for there is a further distinction between CULTURAL ("descriptive") RELATIVISM and NORMATIVE ("Ethical") RELATIVISM.

Cultural ("descriptive") Relativism:

The descriptive relativist simply notes certain sociological FACTS:

- (a) Factual Claims: "x is considered right in Society y at time t" and "x is considered wrong in Society z at time t."
- (b) Empirical Conclusion: Moralities are relative [Note that the claims of Cultural Relativism are either true or false.]

Normative (ethical) Relativism

The normative relativist goes BEYOND any sociological facts.

- (a) Normative Claim: "What is considered right in Society x at time t IS right for that Society."
- (b) Theoretical (metaethical) Claim: Morality Itself is Relative.

Note that ethical relativism does not logically follow from any truths uncovered by descriptive relativism. Note also that the ethical relativist has a hard time explaining how radical moral change can occur *within* a certain society (as with slavery or women's suffrage in the United States).

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Moral Relativism.

Ethical Egoism

Psychological and Ethical Egoism

As a metaethical theory of motivation, *psychological egoism* asserts the descriptive claim that all of our actions can be reduced to self-interest: "Whenever people do something, it is only because they think something desirable for themselves will result from it." The claim is descriptive and thus open to counterexamples, and it is broad, stating a reductionistic thesis regarding all of our actions. (Contrast psychological egoism with the psychological state of sympathy, where 'the weal and woe of the other becomes the motive for our action'.)

It is interesting to note that while egoism rests on the principles of human psychology, a number of studies in the [psychology of moral development](#) seem to suggest that 'egoism' is in fact only a first stage in actual moral development.

Ethical egoism is a normative theory that states that our actions ought to be done from the perspective of self-interest. One of the problems with this position is that it might not be in one's self-interest to have everyone act from the perspective of self-interest. This 'state of nature' would not be desirable (in Hobbes' terms, life would be "bestly, brutal, and short") and so it might ultimately be in one's self-interest to enter into a contract with others that would place restraints upon self-interested actions.

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on Egoism.

Utilitarian Theories

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that places the locus of right and wrong solely on the outcomes (consequences) of choosing one action/policy over other actions/policies. As such, it moves beyond the scope of one's own interests and takes into account the interests of others.

Bentham's Principle of Utility: (1) Recognizes the fundamental role of pain and pleasure in human life, (2) approves or disapproves of an action on the basis of the amount of pain or pleasure brought about i.e, consequences, (3) equates good with pleasure and evil with pain, and (4) asserts that pleasure and pain are capable of quantification (and hence 'measure').

In measuring pleasure and pain, Bentham introduces the following criteria: INTENSITY, DURATION, CERTAINTY (or UNCERTAINTY), and its NEARNESS (or FARNNESS). He also includes its "fecundity" (will more of the same follow?) and its "purity" (its pleasure won't be followed by pain & vice versa). In considering actions that affect numbers of people, we must also account for its EXTENT.

John Stuart Mill adjusted the more hedonistic tendencies in Bentham's philosophy by emphasizing (1) It is not the quantity of pleasure, but the quality of happiness that is central to utilitarianism, (2) the calculus is unreasonable -- qualities cannot be quantified (there is a distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures), and (3) utilitarianism refers to "the Greatest Happiness Principle" -- it seeks to promote the capability of achieving happiness (higher pleasures) for the most amount of people (this is its "extent").

Act and Rule Utilitarianism

We can apply the principle of utility to either PARTICULAR ACTIONS or GENERAL RULES. The former is called "act-utilitarianism" and the latter is called "rule-utilitarianism."

Act-utilitarianism -- The principle of utility is applied directly to each alternative act in a situation of choice. The right act is then defined as the one which brings about the best results (or the least amount of bad results).

- Criticisms of this view point to the difficulty of attaining a full knowledge and certainly of the consequences of our actions.
- It is possible to justify immoral acts using AU: Suppose you could end a regional war by torturing children whose fathers are enemy soliders, thus revealing the hide outs of the fathers.

Rule-utilitarianism -- The principle of utility is used to determine the validity of rules of conduct (moral principles). A rule like promise-keeping is established by looking at the consequences of a world in which people broke promises at will and a world in which promises were binding. Right and wrong are then defined as following or breaking those rules.

- Some criticisms of this position point out that if the Rules take into account more and more exceptions, RU collapses into AU.
- More general criticisms of this view argue that it is possible to generate "unjust rules" according to the principle of utility. For example, slavery in Greece might be right if it led to an overall achievement of cultivated happiness at the expense of some mistreated individuals.

See Beauchamp and Childress's [treatment of utilitarianism](#)

Deontological Theories

Acting from Duty

Deontological normative ethical theories place the locus of right and wrong in autonomous adherence to moral laws or duties.

Monistic deontology -- Kant's Categorical Imperative ("Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law") provides the source of right action. Its first formulation states "Act as if the maxim of your action were to secure through your will a universal law of nature;" its second formulation states "Always act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, as an end in itself, never as a means only." Actions that conform to these imperatives (i.e., right actions) and are, furthermore, done from a sense of duty, are the epitome of morally praiseworthy actions.

Critics of Kant's approach claim that his Categorical Imperative does not contain within it a way to resolve conflicts of duties. "Lying is wrong" can be interpreted as "Never lie" and thus Universal Principles can 'harden' into Absolute Principles.

Pluralistic deontology -- For the 20th Century philosopher W. D. Ross, there are a number of duties that reflection reveals -- and these form a group of prima facie obligations. The phrase "prima facie" ('all things being equal') refers to the fact that these duties do not bind us absolutely, but rather that they generally hold -- absent any further considerations. Two key duties are nonmaleficence (don't harm others) and beneficence (help others). Other prima facie duties include 'don't lie,' 'don't kill,' 'keep promises,' etc.

When conflicts occur between duties, our actual duty becomes that which "intuitive judgment" discerns as the right thing to do (e.g., lying to save the life of an innocent person). Critics are cautious about referring to 'intuition' as the criterion for determining our actual course of action. Stephen Toulmin (*Reason in Ethics*, 1950) suggested that we "weigh up, as well as we can, the risks involved in ignoring either, and choose 'the lesser of two evils'." Thus, while the principles may be deontic in nature, a resolution of conflicts of principles could appeal to probable consequences.

See excerpts from the [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) article on "Universalism."

Virtue Ethics

(For the most recent description of Virtue Ethics in Beauchamp and Childress, see Chapter Two of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th Ed)

Historical Perspective

There is a long tradition in ethics that places great importance on the "kind of person one is." We not only want those around us to "tell the truth" (for example, according to the Categorical Imperative), but also *to be honest*. Both Aristotle (*arete*) and Aquinas (*virtu*) emphasized this aspect of ethics by highlighting the role of what we would today call *character* in their discussions of ethics (and the classic virtues of courage, justice, and moderation). David Hume also gave virtue and personal merit a key role in his ethical theory. The recent revival of interest in virtue ethics can be traced back to Philippa Foot. She writes that a person's "virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions" (*Virtue and Vices*, 1977, 5).

The Moral Concept of Virtue

We should distinguish the virtues found in a particular society or culture (e.g., chastity) from those virtues that can be supported by moral reasoning (e.g., honesty). "A virtue is a trait of character that is socially valued, and a moral virtue is a trait that is morally valued...Moral reasons must support a claim...of moral virtue" (B&C, 27).

By emphasizing the priority of character in discussions of ethics, virtue theorists can say: "...rather than using rules and government regulations to protect subjects in research, some claim that the most reliable protection is the presence of an 'informed, conscientious, compassionate, responsible researcher'" (Beecher, quoted in B&C, 28-29). The underlying view here is that "character is more important than conformity to rules and that virtues should be inculcated and cultivated over time through educational interactions, role models," etc. (B&C, 29)

A practical consequence of this view is that the education of, for example medical doctors, should include the cultivation of virtues such as compassion, discernment, trustworthiness, integrity, conscientiousness as well as benevolence (desire to help) and nonmalevolence (desire to avoid harm).

Critical Evaluation of "Virtue Ethics"

Often times we encounter "morality between strangers" (as when one enters an Emergency Room after a car accident). At these times, it's not the person's character, but his/her need to follow rules and procedures that seem to come to the forefront ("Virtue is not enough"). Furthermore, persons of 'good character' can certainly formulate 'bad policy' or make a 'poor choice' -- and we need to evaluate those policies and choices according to moral principles.

Constructive Evaluation of "Virtue Ethics"

Yet "...ethical theory is more complete if the virtues are included...motives deserve to be at center stage in a way that some leading traditional theories have inadequately appreciated" ... "To look at acts without also looking at the moral appropriateness and desirability of feelings, attitudes, forms of sympathy, and the like is to miss a large area of the moral picture" (B&C, 4th Ed., 69)

Liberal Rights and Communitarian Theories

Today we often find moral problems framed by perspectives derived from political philosophy. Issues like euthanasia, stem cell research and abortion as well as distributive justice concerns such as social security and medicare, are likely to be seen along the liberal/conservative divide. Traditional moral theories need to take these frameworks into consideration.

Will Kymlicka's *Introduction to Political Philosophy* (2nd Ed) provides analyses of the philosophical ideas behind the "ideological debates" that now envelop many topics in moral philosophy. Of particular value is his discussion of liberal equality, libertarianism, and communitarianism.

Liberal equality is often associated with the work on John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*. It argues that we should rationally affirm two fundamental principles of justice designed to protect our political liberties and social opportunities. It can be directly contrasted with the libertarian ideas found in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Nozick challenges Rawls's approach to social inequalities and argues for a minimalist state. But both authors (and their followers) conceive of individuals as 'Socratic' in nature, capable of reasoning about their life plan and questioning, in principle, the world around them. In this sense, they are both 'liberals' in the tradition of John Stuart Mill's essay, "On Liberty." "For liberals, the question about the good life requires us to make a judgment about what sort of a person we wish to be" (Kymlicka p. 213). Thus liberals will emphasize the role of choice and freedom from government interference in private matters.

For communitarians, on the other hand, individuals are not atomistic, 'unencumbered selves' -- individuals are situated within a community, embedded in the received wisdom of our human culture. Communal values are 'authoritative horizons' wherein we take our orientation toward life (Macintyre). The "self is not prior to, but rather constituted by, its ends -- we cannot distinguish 'me' from 'my ends' [and] our selves are at least partly constituted by ends that we do not choose, but rather *discover* by virtue of our being embedded in some shared social context" (Sandel, quoted by Kymlicka p. 211). Since self-determination does not occur in a vacuum, the government needs to support a social environment that is conducive to the development of what is best in all of us. For those communitarians who are 'social conservatives,' this will often take the form of a promotion 'family values' that can, for example, discourage changes in the institution of marriage.

Broadly speaking, these two positions account for the divide between 'liberals' and 'social conservatives' in dealing with matters such as abortion and euthanasia. In these situations, liberals tend to become 'pro-choice' and social conservatives tend to become 'pro-life.'

As is to be expected in a modern, pluralistic democracy, many of these issues are addressed in the political realm and through the political process (including the courts). But the kinds of 'cases' that arise within these areas should also be addressed within the framework of applied ethics as a way to get clearer about the nature of the problem and its potential for resolution. Indeed, we often see analyses found in applied ethics, such as the concept of a 'person in the morally significant sense' or the distinction between 'killing' and 'allowing to die,' embedded in the political debate itself.

Ethics of Care

In the 1970s and 80s feminist writers began to question the assumptions behind many of the traditional ethical theories. Carol Gilligan's work in moral psychology (*A Different Voice*, 1982) challenged "justice-based" approaches to moral discussion: "...men *tend* to embrace an ethic of rights using quasi-legal terminology and impartial principles ... women *tend* to affirm an ethic of care that centers on responsiveness in an interconnected network of needs, care, and prevention of harm. Taking care of others is the core notion." (B&C, 371)

Annette Baier's philosophical account ("What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory" 1985) of an ethics of care "does not recommend that we discard categories of obligation, but that we make room for an ethic of love and trust, including an account of human bonding and friendship." (B&C, 371)

In both of these accounts, there is a specific criticism of "Traditional Liberal Theory" and its emphasis on impartiality and universality:

The impartiality and the 'standpoint of detached fairness' advocated by liberal theories of justice, overlook, for example, the moral role of attachment to those close to us. Speaking from the perspective of medical ethics, "The care perspective is especially meaningful for roles such as parent, friend, physician, and nurse, in which contextual response, attentiveness to subtle clues, and the deepening of special relationships are likely to be more momentous morally than impartial treatment" (B&C, 372)

In articulating the challenge to "universal principles," Beauchamp and Childress write:

"We can produce rough generalizations about how caring physicians and nurses respond to patients, for example, but these generalizations will not be subtle enough to give helpful guidance for the next patient. Each situation calls for a set of responses outside any generalization...." (B&C, 373)

Proponents of an Ethics of Care emphasize the roles of Mutual Interdependence and Emotional Response that play an important part in our moral lives: "...many human relationships involve persons who are vulnerable, dependent, ill, and frail ... [and] the desirable moral response is attached attentiveness to needs, not detached respect for rights" (B&C, 373) and "The person who acts from rule-governed obligations without appropriately aligned feelings such as worry when a friend suffers seems to have a moral deficiency. In addition...insight into the needs of others and considerate alertness to their circumstances often come from the emotions more than reason." (B&C, 4th Ed. 89) Thus the emotions seem to have a 'cognitive role,' allowing us to grasp a situation that may not be immediately available to one arguing solely from a 'justice perspective.'

Critical Evaluation of the Care Ethic

The example of a nurse who personally wants to help a patient die, but who will not do so as it violates professional duty, shows that "...the ethics of care must confront situations in which bona fide requirements of impartiality conflict with acting partially from care." (B&C, 4th Ed. 90)

Some feminists actually interpret the 'care ethic' as culturally determined by the male hierarchy. For example, a terminally ill grand mother may request to be allowed to die because she doesn't want to be 'a bother' to her family. Here someone like Susan Sherwin "sees a need to examine the social context of care as well as to establish limits to the ethics of care. Both enterprises would involve appeals to justice..." (B&C, 375)

Constructive Evaluation of the Care Ethic

Sensitivity and emotional response to particular situations (like family discussions with physicians) provide important guides to morally acceptable actions. A care ethic also seems to favor adopting procedures from Conflict Resolution and Dispute Mediation as alternative ways to approach an apparent ethical conflict.

Case-Based Moral Reasoning (informed by Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 4th edition)

Case-Based Reasoning argues that "...moral belief and knowledge evolve incrementally through reflection on cases, without essential recourse to a top-down theory." In this belief, case-based moral reasoning is analogous to case law ("Social ethics develops from a social consensus... this consensus is then extended to new cases by analogy to past cases..." (95)

Certain *paradigm cases* like Quinlan and the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment become *sources of authority* for new *judgments*. "Just as case law (legal rules) develops incrementally from legal decisions in cases, so the moral law (moral rules) develops incrementally" (96)

Critical Evaluation of Casuistry

"*Interpretation* of cases is essential for moral judgment and *principles and theories* typically play a legitimate role in the interpretation" (97) Furthermore, principles can be held *prior* to judging cases and then selected and weighed in the particular circumstances.

"Casuists have no clear *methodological resources* to prevent a *biased development of cases*...Without some stable framework of general norms, there is no control on judgment and no way to prevent prejudiced or poorly formulated social conventions" (97)

Constructive Evaluation of Casuistry

Despite criticisms, we must note the importance of analogical reasoning, paradigm cases, and practical judgment as an avenue to moral knowledge. (99) Furthermore, ethical generalizations are often best learned, accommodated, and implemented by using cases, case discussion and case methods. (99) Finally, sensitivity to context and individual differences is often essential for a discerning use of principles. (100)

Overview of Jonsen and Toulmin's [Abuse of Casuistry](#).

Part III Applied Ethics

The Field of Applied Ethics

The current field of Applied Ethics arose during the 1960s and 1970s. It appeared, in part, by means of an unexpected confluence of advances in medical technology and a growing patients' rights movement. For example, cases arose in which it was no longer clear whether keeping a terminally ill patient alive through medical devices was really preserving the person's life or prolonging the person's death. People of good will had sincere disagreements over what ought to be done, and ethical guidance was sought. With the establishment of the [Hastings Center](#) (1969) and Georgetown's [Kennedy Institute of Ethics](#) (1971), the turn in applied ethics began as professional philosophers sought to address these concrete issues. But as these philosophers soon discovered, applied ethics involves more than the straightforward application of ethical theory. If meta-ethics is a reflection upon the scope and limits of ethics itself (e.g., analyses of ethical relativism) and if normative ethics seeks general theories that provide substantial action guides (like the anthologized versions of Kant's Categorical Imperative or Bentham's Principle of Utility), applied ethics focuses on domain-specific areas like medicine, business, and engineering. Ethical analyses in these domains require a level of detail not immediately available to the general theorist.