The Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism can be traced back to the school of the Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus of Samos (341-270 BCE), who argued that the best life is one that produces the least pain and distress. The 18th Century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) applied a similar standard to individual actions, and created a system in which actions could be described as good or bad depending upon the amount and degree of pleasure and/or pain they would produce. Bentham's student, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) modified this system by making its standard for the good the more subjective concept of "happiness," as opposed to the more materialist idea of "pleasure."

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

Ethical Egoism

One variation of the utilitarian approach is known as ethical egoism, or the ethics of self-interest. In this approach, an individual often uses utilitarian calculation to produce the greatest amount of good for him or herself. Ancient Greek Sophists like Thrasymacus (c. 459-400 BCE), who famously claimed that might makes right, and early modern thinkers like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) may be considered forerunners of this approach. One of the most influential recent proponents of ethical egoism was the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982), who, in the book *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964), argues that self-interest is a prerequisite to self-respect and to respect for others. There are numerous parallels between ethical egoism and laissez-faire economic theories, in which the pursuit of self-interest is seen as leading to the benefit of society, although the benefit of society is seen only as the fortunate byproduct of following individual self-interest, not its goal.

The Common Good Approach

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) promoted the perspective that our actions should contribute to ethical communal life. The most influential modern proponent of this approach was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who argued that the best society should be guided by the "general will" of the people which would then produce what is best for the people as a whole. This approach to ethics underscores the networked aspects of society and emphasizes respect and compassion for others, especially those who are more vulnerable.

The Rights Approach

The Rights approach to ethics is an approach which derives much of its current force from Kantian duty-based ethics, although it also has a history that dates back at least to the Stoics of Ancient Greece and Rome, and has another influential current which flows from work of the British empiricist philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). This approach stipulates that the best ethical action is that which protects the ethical rights of those who are affected by the action. It emphasizes the belief that all humans have a right to dignity. This is based on a formulation of Kant's categorical imperative that says: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means to an end." The list of ethical rights is debated; many now argue that animals and other non-humans such as robots also have rights.

The Fairness or Justice Approach

The Law Code of Hammurabi in Ancient Mesopotamia (c. 1750 BCE) held that all free men should be treated alike, just as all slaves should be treated alike. The most influential version of this approach today is found in the work of American philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002), who argued, along Kantian lines, that just ethical principles are those that would be chosen by free and rational people in an initial situation of equality. This hypothetical contract is considered fair or just because it provides a procedure for what counts as a fair action, and does not concern itself with the consequences of those actions. Fairness of starting point is the principle for what is considered just.

The Duty-Based Approach

The duty-based approach, sometimes called deontological ethics, is most commonly associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), although it had important precursors, often explicitly religious, thinking of people like Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who emphasized the importance of the personal will and intention (and of the omnipotent God who sees this interior mental state) to ethical decision making. Kant argued that doing what is right is not about the consequences of our actions (something over which we ultimately have no control) but about having the proper intention in performing the action. The ethical action is one taken from duty, that is, it is done precisely because it is our obligation to perform the action. Ethical obligations are the same for all rational creatures (they are universal), and knowledge of what these obligations entail is arrived at by discovering rules of behavior that are not contradicted by reason.

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

The Autonomy Approach

Autonomy is an individual's capacity for self-determination or self-governance. Beyond that, it is a much-contested concept that comes up in a number of different arenas. For example, there is the folk concept of autonomy, which usually operates as an inchoate desire for freedom in some area of one's life, and which may or may not be connected with the agent's idea of the moral good. This folk concept of autonomy blurs the distinctions that philosophers draw among personal autonomy, moral autonomy, and political autonomy. Moral autonomy, usually traced back to Kant, is the capacity to deliberate and to give oneself the moral law, rather than merely heeding the injunctions of others. Personal autonomy is the capacity to decide for oneself and pursue a course of action in one's life, often regardless of any particular moral content. Political autonomy is the property of having one's decisions respected, honored, and heeded within a political context.

Another distinction that can be made is between autonomy as a bare capacity to make decisions and of autonomy as an ideal. When autonomy functions as an ideal, agents who do not meet certain criteria in having reached a decision are deemed non-autonomous with respect to that decision. This can function both locally, in terms of particular actions, and globally, in terms of agents as a whole. For instance, children, agents with cognitive disabilities of a certain kind, or members of oppressed groups have been deemed non-autonomous because of their inability to fulfill certain criteria of autonomous agency, due to individual or social constraints.

There is debate over whether autonomy needs to be representative of a kind of "authentic" or "true" self. This debate is often connected to whether the autonomy theorist believes that an "authentic" or "true" self exists. In fact, conceptions of autonomy are often connected to conceptions of the nature of the self and its constitution. Theorists who hold a socially constituted view of the self will have a different idea of autonomy (sometimes even denying its existence altogether) than theorists who think that there can be some sort of core "true" self, or that selves as agents can be considered in abstraction from relational and social commitments and contexts.

Finally, autonomy has been criticized as being a bad ideal, for promoting a pernicious model of human individuality that overlooks the importance of social relationships and dependency. Responses to these criticisms have come in various forms, but for the most part philosophers of autonomy have striven to express the compatibility of the social aspects of human action within their conceptions of self-determination, arguing that there need not necessarily be an antagonism between social and relational ties, and our ability to decide our own course of action.

The Virtue Approach

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

The Divine Command Approach

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

Divine Commands of the Ten Commandments
1. You must not have any other god but me.
2. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.
3. You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother
6. You must not murder.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.
10. You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

The Feminist Approach

Feminist Ethics is an attempt to revise, reformulate, or rethink traditional ethics to the extent it depreciates or devalues women's moral experience. Among others, feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar faults traditional ethics for letting women down in five related ways. First, it shows less concern for women's as opposed to men's issues and interests. Second, traditional ethics views as trivial the moral issues that arise in the so-called private world, the realm in which women do housework and take care of children, the infirm, and the elderly. Third, it implies that, in general, women are not as morally mature or deep as men. Fourth, traditional ethics overrates culturally masculine traits like "independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death," while it underrates culturally feminine traits like "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life." Fifth, and finally, it favors "male" ways of moral reasoning that emphasize rules, rights, universality, and impartiality over "female" ways of moral reasoning that emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality