Absolute: Never permissibly broken; violating an absolute moral rule is always wrong.

Act consequentialism: The normative ethical theory that says that an act is morally right just because it produces the best actual or expected results.

Act utilitarianism: The version of act consequentialism that says that only well-being is intrinsically valuable, and so says that an act is morally right just because it maximizes overall well-being.

Ad hominem attack: An attempt to undermine the position of an opponent by criticizing his motives or character.

Agnostics: Those who suspend judgment on the question of whether God exists.

Altruism: The direct care and concern to improve the well-being of someone other than yourself.

Ambiguous: Having two or more meanings.

Amoralists: Those who do not care about living up to the moral views they sincerely hold.

Argument: Any chain of thought in which premises are enlisted in support of a particular conclusion.

Atheism: The belief that God does not exist.

Autonomy: The capacity to determine for yourself the principles that you will live by. It can also refer to your ability to live according to your own plan of life.

Begging the question: Arguing on the basis of a reason that will appeal only to people who already accept the argument’s conclusion.

Categorical imperative: A command of reason that requires a person’s obedience regardless of whether such obedience gets him anything he wants.

Categorical reason: A reason to do something that applies to a person regardless of her desires.
Circular reasoning: Defending some belief by a set of other beliefs whose justification ultimately traces back to the original claim in question.

Conceptual truth: A true claim that can be known just by understanding it. Such a claim is true just by virtue of the concepts it contains—that's why understanding it enables one to know it. An example: bachelors are unmarried men.

Consent, tacit: See tacit consent.

Consequentialism: A family of normative ethical theories that share the idea that the morality of actions, policies, motives, or rules depends on their producing the best actual or expected results. See also: act consequentialism, rule consequentialism, act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism.

Continent: Doing the right thing while suppressing desires that tempt one away from doing one's duty.

Contractarianism: See social contract theory.

Cultural relativism: The view that an act is morally right just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.

Decision procedure: Any method designed to guide us in successfully deliberating about what to do.

Deist: One who believes that God exists, created the universe, and then refrained from becoming involved in human affairs.

Desire satisfaction theory: A theory of human well-being that claims that the satisfaction of your actual or informed desires is necessary and sufficient to improve your welfare.

Divine Command Theory: The view that an act is morally required just because it is commanded by God, and immoral just because God forbids it.

Doctrine of Doing and Allowing (DDA): The view that it is always morally worse to do harm than to allow that same harm to occur.

Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE): The view that if your goal is worthwhile, you are sometimes permitted to act in ways that foreseeably cause certain harms, though you must never intend to cause those harms.

Dogmatism: The trait of being closed-minded and unreasonably confident of the truth of one's views.

Empirical truth: A true claim that can be known only by means of evidence gained through the senses. Understanding what such a claim says is not enough to know whether it is true—you have to check the claim “against the world” to test it. An example: the Empire State Building is 1,453 feet tall.

Error theory: The metaethical view that there are no moral features in this world; no moral judgments are true; our sincere moral judgments try, and always fail, to describe the moral features of things; and there is no moral knowledge.

Ethical egoism: The normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right just because they maximize self-interest.
Ethical monism: The view that there is only one moral rule that is absolute and fundamental.

Ethical objectivism: The view that there is at least one objective moral standard.

Ethical particularism: The view that there are neither any absolute nor any prima facie moral rules. According to ethical particularism, no feature of the world is always morally relevant, and none is always morally decisive.

Ethical pluralism: The view that there are at least two, and possibly more, fundamental moral rules.

Ethical relativism: The view that correct moral standards are relative to individual or cultural commitments. Ethical relativism can take two forms: cultural relativism or ethical subjectivism.

Ethical subjectivism: The view that an act is morally right just because (a) I approve of it, or (b) my commitments allow it. An action is wrong just because (a) I disapprove of it, or (b) my commitments forbid it.

Eudaimonia: The state of living well; happiness, or flourishing.

Evaluative beliefs: Beliefs that evaluate something, and so assess it as good or bad, virtuous or vicious, and so on.

Exemplar, moral: See moral exemplar.

Exemplary punishment: Punishment designed to make an example of the one who is punished.

Expressivism: The version of moral nihilism that denies that there are any moral features in this world; claims that there is nothing for moral judgments to be true of; and analyzes moral judgments as expressions of emotions, orders, or commitments, none of which are the sorts of things that can be true or false.

Fact-value distinction: The view that there is a sharp difference between facts and values; value claims are not factual, and so cannot be true.

Feminist ethics: A family of theories that emphasize the moral equality of women, and the importance of attending to women's experience in the development of moral ideas and ideals.

Fidelity: Being faithful to one's word; keeping one's promises.

Fitness: The level of an organism's ability to survive and reproduce.

Free-rider problem: A situation in which people are able to obtain a share of some common good without contributing to it. In such situations, it appears to be rational (if your withholding can go unnoticed) to refrain from contributing, thus enjoying the good at no expense to yourself. The problem is that if enough people act rationally, then there will not be enough resources to produce the relevant good, thus harming everyone.

Fundamental: A moral rule is fundamental just in case its justification does not depend on any more general or more basic moral rule.

Golden rule: The normative ethical principle that says that your treatment of others is morally acceptable if and only if you would be willing to be treated in exactly the same way.
Good will: The ability to reliably determine what your duty is, and a steady commitment to do your duty for its own sake.

Hedonism: The view that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable, and pain (or unhappiness) is the only thing that is intrinsically bad.

Hypothetical imperative: A command of reason that requires a person to take the needed means to getting what she wants.

Iconoclasts: People whose views differ radically from the conventional wisdom of their society.

Ideal observers: Those (probably imaginary) people who are fully informed, perfectly rational, and otherwise perfectly suited to determine the content of morality.

Imperative, categorical: See categorical imperative.

Imperative, hypothetical: See hypothetical imperative.

Individual relativism: See ethical subjectivism.

Infinite regress: An unending series of claims, each of which justifies a previous one and requires justification by a subsequent one. Because the chain never ends, none of the claims within it is ultimately justified.

Innate: Congenital. Innate traits are inborn traits, as opposed to traits that are acquired after birth.

Instrumental goods: Those things whose value consists in the fact that they help to bring about other good things. Examples include vaccinations, mothballs, and money.

Intrinsic values: Those things that are good in and of themselves, considered entirely apart from any good results they may cause. It is controversial which things are intrinsically valuable, but happiness, desire satisfaction, virtue, and knowledge are frequently mentioned candidates.

Lex talionis: The law of retaliation, the principle that says that a wrongdoer deserves to be treated just as he treated his victim.

Logical validity: The feature of an argument that indicates that its premises logically support its conclusion. Specifically, an argument is logically valid just because its conclusion must be true if its premises were all true. Another way to put this: logically valid arguments are those in which it is impossible for all premises to be true while the conclusion is false.

Maxim: A principle of action that you give to yourself. It contains your intended action and the reason you are doing it.

Metaethics: The area of ethical theory that asks about the status of normative ethical claims. It asks, for instance, about whether such claims can be true and, if so, whether personal, cultural, or divine opinion makes them true (or none of the above). It also considers issues about how to gain moral knowledge (if we can), and whether moral requirements give us reasons to obey them.

Metaphysics: The branch of philosophy that discusses the nature of reality, what exists, and what does not exist.

Monism, ethical: See ethical monism.
**Moral agent**: One who can guide his or her behavior by means of moral reasoning, and so someone who is fit for praise or blame.

**Moral community**: The set of those beings whose interests are intrinsically important. Membership signifies that you are owed respect, that you have moral rights, that others owe you moral duties for your own sake.

**Moral exemplar**: Someone of outstanding moral character; someone who can serve as a proper moral role model.

**Moral luck**: A case in which the morality of an action or a decision depends on factors outside of our control.

**Moral naturalism**: The view that moral features are natural (i.e., not supernatural) features, whose existence can be confirmed by means of the natural sciences.

**Moral nihilism**: The form of moral skepticism that says that the world contains no moral features, and so there is nothing for moral claims to be true of. Its two major forms are the *error theory* and *expressivism*.

**Moral skepticism**: The view that there are no objective moral standards. Moral skepticism is also sometimes taken to refer to the view that we can have no moral knowledge.

**Moral worth**: The praiseworthy feature of an action that fulfills one's moral duty.

**Natural law theory**: The normative ethical view that says that actions are right if and only if they are natural, and wrong if and only if they are unnatural; people are good to the extent that they fulfill their true nature, bad insofar as they do not.

**Nonmaleficence**: Not harming others.

**Norm**: A standard of evaluation. Norms tell us how we should or ought to behave. They represent a measure that we are to live up to.

**Normative ethics**: The area of ethical theory focused on identifying which kinds of actions are right and wrong, examining the plausibility of various moral rules, and determining which character traits qualify as virtues and which as vices.

**Normative features**: Those features that tell us how things *ought* to be, or how we *should* behave. They rely on norms to do this.

**Objective moral duties**: Those moral requirements that apply to people regardless of their opinions about such duties, and independently of whether fulfilling such duties will satisfy any of their desires.

**Objective theory of well-being**: There are many such theories, all sharing a common feature—they claim that certain things are good for people whether or not they believe them to be and whether or not such things satisfy a person's actual or informed desires.

**Occam's razor**: The instruction never to multiply entities beyond necessity. In the context of selecting from among competing theories, it tells us to choose that theory that can explain as much as any other, while making the fewest assumptions.

**Omniscient**: All-knowing.

**Optimific**: Producing the best possible results.
Optimific social rule: A rule whose general acceptance within a society would yield better results than any other such rule.

Paternalism: The policy of treating mature people as if they were children. More specifically, it is a policy of limiting someone's liberty, against his will, for his own good.

Pluralism, ethical: See ethical pluralism.

Premise: Any reason that is used within an argument to support a conclusion.

Prima facie duty: A permanent, excellent but nonabsolute reason to do (or refrain from) a certain type of action.

Principle of humanity: Kant's thesis that one must always treat a human being (oneself included) as an end, and never as a mere means.

Principle of universalizability: Kant's thesis that an act is morally acceptable if, and only if, its maxim is universalizable.

Principle of utility: The ultimate utilitarian moral standard, which says that an action is morally right if and only if it does more to improve overall well-being than any other action you could have performed in the circumstances.

Prisoner's dilemma: A situation in which everyone involved would be better off by reducing his or her pursuit of self-interest.

Proceduralism: The view that says that we must follow a certain procedure in order to determine which actions are morally right, or which moral claims are true.

Psychological egoism: The view that all human actions are motivated by self-interest, and that altruism is impossible.

Punishment, exemplary: See exemplary punishment.

Punishment, vicarious: See vicarious punishment.

Relativism, cultural: See cultural relativism.

Relativism, individual: See ethical subjectivism.

Rule consequentialism: The normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right just because they would be required by an optimific social rule.

Rule utilitarianism: The version of rule consequentialism that says that well-being is the only thing of intrinsic value.

Self-evident: A claim is self-evident just in case (1) it is true and (2) adequately understanding it is enough to make you justified in believing it. The best candidates for self-evident claims are conceptual truths.

Self-regarding actions: Actions that affect only oneself.

Slippery slope argument: A utilitarian line of reasoning that advises against certain social innovations by predicting that allowing them will have very bad results whose badness will go unnoticed in the future.

Social contract theory: A view in political philosophy that says that governmental power is legitimate if and only if it would be accepted by free, equal, and rational people intent on selecting principles of cooperative living. Also, a view in normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right if and only if they are permitted by rules that free, equal, and rational people would agree to live by, on the condition that others obey these rules as well.
Soundness: A special feature of some arguments. Sound arguments are ones that (1) are logically valid, and (2) contain only true premises. This guarantees the truth of their conclusions.

Standard of rightness: A rule that gives conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for determining whether actions (or other things) are morally right.

State of nature: A situation in which there is no central authority with the exclusive power to enforce its will on others.

Strictly conscientious action: Action motivated by the thought or the desire to do one's duty for its own sake, rather than from any ulterior motive.

Supererogation: Praiseworthy actions that are above and beyond the call of duty.

Tacit consent: Agreement that is expressed through silence or inaction.

Theist: One who believes that God exists.

Universalizability: The feature of a maxim that indicates that every rational person can consistently act on it. Here is the three-part test for a maxim's universalizability: (1) carefully frame the maxim; (2) imagine a world in which everyone shares and acts on that maxim; (3) determine whether the goal within the maxim can be achieved in such a world. If so, the maxim is universalizable. If not, it isn't.

Validity: See logical validity.

Value theory: The area of ethics concerned with identifying what is valuable in its own right, and explaining the nature of well-being.

Veil of ignorance: An imaginary device that removes all knowledge of one's social, economic, and religious positions; one's personality traits; and other distinguishing features. It is designed to ensure that the important choices of social contractors are made fairly.

Vicarious punishment: The deliberate punishment of innocent victims, designed to deter third parties.

Vicious: Possessed of many vices. The opposite of virtuous.

Virtue ethics: A normative ethical theory that says that an action is morally right just because it would be done by a virtuous person acting in character.