Where to Start

Most of the topics covered in these pages are also represented in the companion volume to this book, *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press). That book provides selections of original work by other philosophers. I chose the pieces there with an eye to the introductory student, so most of the material should be fairly accessible to those just beginning their philosophical studies. If you want a relatively short collection that ranges over the main issues discussed here, plus a lot of coverage of specific moral problems, such as abortion, the death penalty, and animal rights, then that might be a good place to start.*

An excellent source for the entire range of philosophical issues, not just those in ethics, is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a free online resource containing articles written by experts in the field: http://plato.stanford.edu/. The articles are usually pitched to those with little prior knowledge of the topic under discussion.

There are a number of other texts designed to introduce students to the field of moral philosophy. Among the better ones are the following: James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (several editions); Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2nd edition, 2012); and Julia Driver, *Ethics: The Fundamentals* (Blackwell, 2006). Of these, the Rachels and Rachels book is best suited for those with

---

* All sources that appear in boldface in this section are included in *The Ethical Life.*
no philosophy background. The books by Driver and the Timmons are a bit more advanced.


**Hedonism**

Epicurus’s works are available in many editions. A reliable and well-priced version is *The Epicurus Reader*, edited by L. Gerson and B. Inwood (Hackett, 1994). His *Letter to Menoeceus*, included in that collection, summarizes the main doctrines of his philosophy. W. D. Ross’s two-worlds objection to hedonism can be found in *The Right and the Good* (Oxford University Press, 1930), chapter 5. Robert Nozick’s experience machine discussion can be found in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45. John Stuart Mill’s version of hedonism is presented in chapters 2 and 4 of *Utilitarianism* (many publishers). Jeremy Bentham’s version of hedonism can be found in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781), available from many publishers. Perhaps the most sophisticated contemporary defense of hedonism is offered by Fred Feldman in his very clearly written *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford University Press, 2006). A defense of the view that informed and autonomous happiness is the key to a good life is given by L. W. Sumner in his *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1995). His book also provides a nice overview of the issues surrounding the nature of the good life.

A very accessible, engaging work for introductory students is Joel Kupperman’s *Six Myths about the Good Life* (Hackett, 2006), which covers hedonism, the desire theory, and other options not discussed here. Those who want more in the way of short selections from classic texts in this area might consult *The Good Life*, edited by Charles Guignon (Hackett, 1999). On hedonism and happiness more generally, see Nicholas White’s historical survey *A Brief History of Happiness* (Blackwell, 2006), and Steven Cahn

**Getting What You Want**

Very few philosophers have defended the view that satisfaction of our actual desires, based as they often are on ignorance, prejudice, and faulty reasoning, serve as the key to a good life. Contemporary philosophers who come close are Mark Murphy, “The Simple Desire-Fulfillment Theory,” *Nous* 33 (1999): 247–72, and Simon Keller’s accessible and enjoyable “Welfare and the Achievement of Goals,” *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004): 27–41. Chris Heathwood’s “Faring Well and Getting What You Want” is a very accessible defense of the idea that desire-satisfaction is the key to a good life for human beings.


A lovely critical discussion of the desire view, with lots of examples meant to damage it and to provide indirect support for the author’s own more Aristotelian view, can be found in Richard Kraut’s *What Is Good and Why?* (Harvard University Press, 2007), chapter 2. Another excellent critical discussion, though less accessible, is Connie Rosati’s “Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good,” *Ethics* 105 (1995): 296–325. An absolutely delightful book, chock full of real-life stories and interesting examples, is Jean Kazez’s *The Weight of Things* (Blackwell, 2006). She defends an objective view about well-being in chapters 5 and 6.

**Morality and Religion**

*Plato’s Euthyphro* is available in many translations. At about eleven pages, it’s an enjoyable introduction to Plato’s early work. Perhaps your best bet is to get it packaged with four other Platonic dialogues in an excellent, inexpensive translation by G. M. A. Grube and John Cooper, *Five Dialogues* (Hackett, 2001).
Defenses of the divine command theory tend to be fairly complex and difficult. A pretty accessible version is by the late Philip Quinn, in his article on the theory in Hugh LaFollette’s (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (2000). Robert Adams is another notable defender of the theory. His work is not easy for the beginner, but “A New Divine Command Theory,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979): 66–79, might not be a bad place to start. A more accessible version of this paper is given in an anthology that I have edited, which ranges across most areas of ethics: *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2011).

Though it focuses on many other issues as well, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford University Press, 2004), written by William Lane Craig (the Christian) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (the atheist), also contains some common lines of defense and criticism surrounding the divine command theory. It is written in a very lively style. Accessible assessments of the divine command theory can be found in most of the introductory books mentioned in the “Where to Start” section at the beginning of Suggestions for Further Reading. A critical discussion of the divine command theory that is quite easy to read can be found in Erik Weilenberg’s *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2. Kai Nielsen’s *Ethics without God* (Prometheus, 1990) is a clear treatment of a number of issues regarding religion and morality, written from the perspective of someone who thinks that ethics is self-standing and has no need of religious input.

**Natural Law**

The attempt to base morality on human nature can be traced in the West all the way to Aristotle. His *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially books I and II, are the place to start. A fine and helpful translation is offered by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999, 2nd ed.). Medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas, whose work continues to exercise the largest influence on Roman Catholic moral theology, is the essential source for thinking about developments of natural law over the past 700 years. Aquinas isn’t that approachable; you could dip a toe into the water by having a look at Question 94 of the Prima Secundae of his *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa* runs to five volumes and over a thousand pages, but this discussion can be found in almost every shorter collection of Aquinas’s works. A good book for beginners is *Aquinas: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1999), edited by Ralph McInerny.
Important contemporary natural lawyers include John Finnis, whose *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980) did much to revive this ethical tradition within secular academic circles. A good scholarly history can be found in Knud Haakonssen’s *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). *Philippa Foot’s Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001) is a delightfully written book by a very important moral philosopher.

**Psychological Egoism**

Though it is nowadays the subject of some debate among scholars, it seems that Thomas Hobbes committed himself to psychological egoism in several passages of his masterpiece, *Leviathan*. This work is available from many publishers; if you have an ear for seventeenth-century English, you will love Hobbes’s vigorous style. Joseph Butler, an eighteenth-century bishop, produced criticisms of psychological egoism that many still regard as decisive. See his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, the relevant portions of which are presented in *Five Sermons* (Hackett, 1983), edited by Stephen Darwall. David Hume, a master stylist himself, also criticized psychological egoism in appendix 2 of his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, available from many publishers.


**Ethical Egoism**

What I have called “The Best Argument for Ethical Egoism” can be pieced together from claims made by *Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan*. The claim that we have reason to do only what will serve self-interest is defended by David Gauthier in his important (but difficult) book *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 2. A crystal-clear
historical survey of this thesis about reasons is given in Robert Shaver’s *Rational Egoism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Ayn Rand has defended ethical egoism in many of her books. An accessible and short version of her influential views can be found in her article “The Ethics of Emergencies,” reprinted in her collection *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Penguin, 1963).


**Consequentialism**

John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism* is the place to start. It is short and elegant; many editions are available. Perhaps the greatest utilitarian treatise ever written is Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1907; available from many publishers). Sidgwick’s writing style does not endear him to the reader, however—especially the introductory reader. R. M. Hare’s writing style, by contrast, is clean and elegant; his sophisticated defense of utilitarianism can be found in his *Moral Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 1981).


There are several good collections of articles and book excerpts on the subject of consequentialism. The contents usually reflect work being
Suggestions for Further Reading

done by and for fellow philosophers, so the going isn’t always easy. Perhaps the one that contains the greatest bang for the buck for the introductory student is Jonathan Glover’s *Utilitarianism and Its Critics* (Prentice Hall, 1990). Samuel Scheffler’s *Consequentialism and Its Critics* (Oxford University Press, 1988) contains many fine articles, but the going is sometimes quite difficult. Stephen Darwall does a nice job collecting classic readings and important contemporary ones in his *Consequentialism* (Blackwell, 2002).

**Kantian Ethics**

Kant’s writing is not at all easy to work through. The most accessible (or rather, least inaccessible) of his works is also the shortest: *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. It comes in at a bit under sixty pages; parts 1 and 2 (there are three parts in all) can occasionally be read with pleasure and ready comprehension. The best translation is offered by Mary Gregor, with an excellent introduction by Christine Korsgaard (Cambridge University Press, 1998). The translations of Lewis White Beck and H. G. Paton are also good. Paul Guyer’s *Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Reader’s Guide* (Continuum, 2007) is a helpful book to have by one’s side when reading this classic text. For the intrepid reader who wants more Kant than this, try his *Metaphysics of Morals*, also translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996).


**Social Contract Theory**

*Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan* is the place to start. For those with only a relatively short amount of time on their hands, go directly to chapters
and then keep reading as time permits. John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (both available in many editions) are also important classics in this tradition. Locke’s short book was especially influential in the thinking of the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

The Hobbesian approach to morality is given an important and sophisticated update by David Gauthier, in his *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford University Press, 1986). Gregory Kavka’s *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1986) is wonderful both as commentary and as good, clear-headed philosophy.

John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971; rev. ed. 1999) was recognized as a masterpiece upon its publication. A shorter presentation of his central ideas can be found in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001, 2nd ed.). Rawls’s theory is, as its title suggests, a theory of justice rather than a theory about the whole of morality. Still, its influence in ethics, as well as in social and political philosophy, would be difficult to overstate.

T. M. Scanlon’s very important ethical theory, which he terms “contractualism,” is a contemporary offshoot of the social contract theory. He presents it in his book *What We Owe to Others* (Harvard University Press, 1998). It’s long and rarely an easy go for the beginner; those who want a briefer introduction to his thinking are advised to have a look at his paper “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” included in a collection edited by Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 103–28.

A nice collection of excerpts and essays from social contract theorists is offered by Stephen Darwall, ed., *Contractarianism/Contractualism* (Blackwell, 2002).

**Ethical Pluralism**

A nice collection of articles, some in defense of absolutism and others critical of it, can be found in Joram Haber, ed., *Absolutism and Its Critics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). An unusual introduction to ethics, one that contains a number of pieces that focus on the Doctrine of Double Effect and the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing, is *Ethics: Problems and Principles* (Wadsworth, 1992), edited by John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza.
A very interesting piece that renewed interest in the DDE and DDA is Philippa Foot’s “Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect,” *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5–15. Foot introduced the now-famous trolley problem to the philosophy literature, as well as numerous other examples that have stimulated philosophical discussion for the past several decades. See also Judith Jarvis Thomson’s articles “The Trolley Problem” and “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem,” both reprinted in her marvelous collection *Rights, Restitution, and Risk* (Harvard University Press, 1986). Thomson introduces a number of important variations on Foot’s example and argues for anticonsequentialist principles meant to explain why it is only sometimes, and not always, permitted to minimize harm.

Stephen Darwall’s collection *Deontology* (Blackwell, 2002) contains a number of important papers that explore the idea that certain kinds of actions are intrinsically right or wrong, and discuss the question of whether there are any absolute moral rules.


**Virtue Ethics**

Study of virtue ethics must begin with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Many good translations are available. In addition to the one by Terence Irwin, mentioned in the “Natural Law” section, the one undertaken by our old friend W. D. Ross, the preeminent Aristotle scholar of his day, is also excellent. It has been updated by J. O. Urmson and J. L. Ackrill (Oxford University Press, 1998). Christopher Rowe has also provided a fine translation, aided by Sarah Broadie’s substantial and illuminating notes, in their edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
Suggestions for Further Reading

The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (Blackwell, 2006), edited by Richard Kraut, is highly recommended. It includes instructive articles on many important aspects of Aristotle’s ethical thought by a who’s who of leading scholars.

The best short overview of virtue ethics that I have read is by Julia Annas’s contribution to David Copp’s The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Two excellent collections on virtue ethics are Stephen Darwall, ed., Virtue Ethics (Blackwell, 2002), and Michael Slote and Roger Crisp, eds., Virtue Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1997).


The Ethics of Feminism

A good place to start is Hilde Lindemann’s An Invitation to Feminist Ethics (McGraw-Hill, 2006), written with nonphilosophers and beginning students in mind. Its first chapter provides a nice, brief overview of feminist ethics, while chapter 4 offers a succinct review of feminist criticisms of utilitarianism, Kantianism, and contractarianism. But the entire book is worth a read.

Those with an interest in the ethics of care should start with Carol Gilligan’s fascinating In a Different Voice (Harvard University Press, 1982) and proceed to Nel Noddings Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (University of California Press, 1984). Two recent studies by important philosophers are Michael Slote’s The Ethics of Care and Empathy (Routledge, 2007) and Virginia Held’s The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global (Oxford University Press, 2007). Those who want a much briefer, but still substantial treatment of the subject, would do well to have a look at Held’s “The Ethics of Care,” in The Oxford
Suggestions for Further Reading

Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2007), edited by David Copp.


For a taste of the many moral issues that receive fresh light when seen from a feminist perspective, you might try Feminist Philosophies (Prentice Hall, 1992), edited by Janet Kourany, James Sterba, and Rosemary Tong. Cheshire Calhoun’s collection, Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers (Oxford University Press, 2004) includes essays by a roster of outstanding philosophers writing on issues in and around feminist philosophy.

The Status of Morality

Most of the work done in metaethics is not that accessible for beginning students. I have written a very elementary introduction to metaethics, titled Whatever Happened to Good and Evil? (Oxford University Press, 2004), designed for those with no prior philosophy knowledge. Robert Audi’s Moral Value and Human Diversity (Oxford University Press, 2007) is also pitched to an introductory audience. For a more advanced treatment, Alexander Miller’s An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics (Polity, 2nd edition, 2012) is a valuable resource. A historically informed survey of views on the topic is given by Stephen Darwall in his Philosophical Ethics (Westview, 1997).

The early chapters of Book III of David Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature have set the terms of the debate in metaethics for the past two and a half centuries. Hume’s work has inspired important contemporary philosophers such as Gilbert Harman, whose own engagingly written introduction to ethics, The Nature of Morality (Oxford University Press, 1977), contains (in its first two chapters) the most influential version of the Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality, discussed in chapter 21. Harman is also the most prominent contemporary moral relativist. His paper “Moral Relativism Defended,” Philosophical Review 85 (1975): 3–22, is worth seeking out. It and four other interesting essays in defense of relativism are included in his Explaining Value (Oxford University Press, 2000).

Expressivism entered the scene in the 1930s with chapter 6 of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*. This is well worth a read, as Ayer pulls no punches and is a lovely writer. Simon Blackburn's work is the most accessible among contemporary expressivists, though written with fellow philosophers in mind. His *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1993) contains many important papers. But a better place to start would be his introduction to philosophy, *Think* (Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 8, which is more accessible and written with his characteristic elegance.


For a defense of ethical objectivism that is as clear as philosophical writing gets, see David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). Brink is a moral naturalist whose book offers detailed coverage of most of the major issues in metaethics. Brink defends a version of moral naturalism; for another defense of ethical objectivity that rejects naturalism, see David Enoch's delightfully forthright, provocative *Taking Morality Seriously* (Oxford University Press 2011).

For a wide-ranging collection containing many classic and contemporary writings on the subject, along with a dozen substantial introductory essays designed with the student reader in mind, see Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds., *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2006).