Annotated List of Ethical Theories

The following list is selective, including only what I view as the major theories. Entries in bold face have been especially influential. Recommendations for additions to the list are welcome. Text for the annotations is taken largely from the relevant Wikipedia articles or slightly altered for stylistic reasons; when other sources are used they are noted.

Consequentialism

Consequentialism is the class of normative ethical theories holding that the consequences of one's conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgment about the rightness of that conduct. Thus, from a consequentialist standpoint, a morally right act (or omission) is one that will produce a good outcome, or consequence.

Ethical Altruism

Ethical altruism can be seen as a consequentialist ethic which prescribes that an individual take actions that have the best consequences for everyone except for himself. This was advocated by Auguste Comte, who coined the term "altruism," and whose ethics can be summed up in the phrase: Live for others.

Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is the ethical position that moral agents ought to do what is in their own self-interest. It differs from psychological egoism, which claims that people can only act in their self-interest. Ethical egoism also differs from rational egoism, which holds that it is rational to act in one's self-interest.

Motive Consequentialism

An act can...not be wrong if the decision to act was based on a right motive. A possible inference is that one can not be blamed for mistaken judgements if the motivation was to do good.

Negative Consequentialism

Most consequentialist theories focus on promoting some sort of good consequences. However, one could equally well lay out a consequentialist theory that focuses solely on minimizing bad consequences. [My example: using triage in a hospital to attend first to those with the most serious illnesses]

Rule Consequentialism

Like deontology, rule consequentialism holds that moral behavior involves following certain rules. However, rule consequentialism chooses rules based on the consequences that the selection of those rules have.

State Consequentialism, also known as Mohist Consequentialism

The belief that the moral worth of an action should be based on how much it contributes to the stability of a state.
Utilitarianism
There are several kinds of utilitarianism, but generally it claims that good acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The classical proponents were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Convention and Habit
Proposed by Aristotle, the theory that moral beliefs are primarily influenced by one’s upbringing and class. (Surprisingly Wikipedia does not list this as an ethical theory even though, with the Divine Command Theory, one could argue it is the basis for most moral decisions).

Deontological Ethics (related to Ethical Formalism and Moral Absolutism)
Most frequently associated with Kant, Deontological Ethics or deontology...is the ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on the action's adherence to a rule or rules. It is sometimes described as "duty" or "obligation" or "rule" -based ethics, because rules "bind you to your duty". Deontological ethics is commonly contrasted to consequentialism and pragmatic ethics.

Divine Command Theory
Divine command theory claims that an action is morally good if it is equivalent to being commanded by God. The theory asserts that moral knowledge cannot be had except from God because morality is based on what God commands.

Environmental Ethics
The discipline...that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Ethical Intuitionism
The thesis that our intuitive awareness of value, or intuitive knowledge of evaluative facts, forms the foundation of our ethical knowledge. [Similar to Hume’s theory that moral judgements cannot be determined strictly by reason but require sentiment as a factor]

Evolutionary Ethics
Descriptive Evolutionary Ethics
Descriptive evolutionary ethics consists of biological approaches to ethics (morality) based on the role of evolution in shaping human psychology and behavior. Such approaches may be based in scientific fields such as evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, or ethology with a focus on understanding and explaining observed ethical preferences or choices and their origins.

Normative Evolutionary Ethics
Normative evolutionary ethics aims at defining which acts are right or wrong, and which things are good or bad in an evolutionary context. It is not merely
describing, but it is prescribing goals, values and obligations. For example, eugenics is a form of normative evolutionary ethics, because it defines what is "good" on the basis of genetics and the theory of evolution. Social Darwinism is a more wide-ranging topic. However, to the extent it promotes ethical values and policies based on the theory of evolution, it can also be classified as a normative evolutionary ethics.

Hedonism
The belief that pleasure is the only intrinsic good.

Metaethical Theories (a major component of analytic philosophy; as treated here they refer to the question of whether ethical statements can ever be meaningful)

Cognitivism
Ethical cognitivists hold that ethical sentences do express propositions: that they can be true or false, for example, that Mary is a good person, or that stealing and lying are always wrong.

Emotivism
Emotivism claims that ethical sentences do not express propositions but emotional attitudes. Influenced by the growth of analytic philosophy and logical positivism in the 20th century, the theory was stated vividly by A. J. Ayer in his 1936 book *Language, Truth and Logic*, but its development owes more to C. L. Stevenson.

Ethical Non-Naturalism
According to G. E. Moore, "Goodness is a simple, undefinable, non-natural property." To call goodness "non-natural" does not mean that it is supernatural or divine. It does mean, however, that goodness cannot be reduced to natural properties such as needs, wants or pleasures. Moore also stated that a reduction of ethical properties to a divine command would be the same as stating their naturalness. This would be an example of what he referred to as "the naturalistic fallacy."

Moore claimed that goodness is "indefinable", i.e., it cannot be defined in any other terms. This is the central claim of non-naturalism. Thus, the meaning of sentences containing the word "good" cannot be explained entirely in terms of sentences not containing the word "good." One cannot substitute words referring to pleasure, needs or anything else in place of "good." Ethical Non-Naturalism is related to Non-Cognitivism

Ethical Subjectivism
Claims that (1) Ethical sentences express propositions. (2) Some such propositions are true. (3) Those propositions are about the attitudes of people.

Expressivism
A theory about the meaning of moral language. According to expressivism, sentences that employ moral terms—for example, “It is wrong to torture an innocent human being”—are not descriptive or fact-stating; moral terms such as
“wrong,” “good,” or “just” do not refer to real, in-the-world properties. The primary function of moral sentences, according to expressivism, is not to assert any matter of fact, but rather to express an evaluative attitude toward an object of evaluation. Similar to ethical subjectivism and and emotivism.

Ideal Observer Theory
States that ethical judgments should be interpreted as statements about the judgments that a neutral and fully informed observer would make; "x is good" means "an ideal observer would approve of x".

Non-Cognitivism
Claims that ethical sentences do not express propositions and thus cannot be true or false.... A noncognitivist denies the cognitivist claim that "moral judgments are capable of being objectively true, because they describe some feature of the world."* If moral statements cannot be true, and if one cannot know something that is not true, noncognitivism implies that moral knowledge is impossible. Ethical sentences do not express propositions and thus cannot be true or false. Non-Cognitivism is related to Ethical Non-Naturalism

Projectivism
The origins of projectivism lie with Hume and have been refined by Simon Blackburn. Blackburn's projectivism is a version of meta-ethical anti-realism. Blackburn conveys anti-realism as the view that statements which express moral properties are our construction, and realism as the view that moral properties somehow exist independent of us, the moral agents. A further distinction should be made to understand Blackburn's projectivism: that between cognitivists and non-cognitivists.

As a non-cognitivist, the projectivist holds that ethical judgments are the product of conative, rather than cognitive psychological processes. A conative psychological process or state is something akin to a stance, attitude, or disposition. These conative psychological processes should be contrasted with cognitive ones, which are what we typically think of when we talk about human beings “using their reason” or perhaps being rational (at least in the narrow sense). As highly social creatures whose success as a species has been due to the most part to our ability to communicate and cooperate, projectivism holds that the development of a moral interest has actually been in our prudential interest.

Moral Absolutism (opposed to Consequentialism and similar to Deonological Ethics)

Graded Absolutism
A form of moral absolutism but qualifies that a moral absolute, like "Do not kill," can be greater or lesser than another moral absolute, like "Do not lie".
Moral Nihilism
The view that nothing is intrinsically moral or immoral....Moral nihilists consider morality to be constructed, a complex set of rules and recommendations that may give a psychological, social, or economical advantage to its adherents, but is otherwise without universal or even relative truth in any sense.

Moral Particularism
The view that there are no moral principles and that moral judgement can be found only as one decides particular cases, either real or imagined. Particularism...asserts that there are no overriding principles that are applicable in every case, or that can be abstracted to apply to every case....Moral knowledge should be understood as knowledge of moral rules of thumb, which are not principles, and of particular solutions, which can be used by analogy in new cases. Similar to Act Utilitarianism.

Moral Relativism (see Consequentialism)
Moral Skepticism (related to Moral Nihilism)
Claims that no one has any moral knowledge. Many moral skeptics also make the stronger, modal, claim that moral knowledge is impossible. Moral skepticism is particularly opposed to moral realism: the view that there are knowable, mind-independent moral truths.

Natural Law Theory
Chief proponents were Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Hobbes. Holds that morality is a function of human nature and reason can discover valid moral principles by looking at the nature of humanity in society; the content of positive law cannot be known without some reference to natural law (or something like it).

Objectivism (see Consequentialism–Ethical Egoism)

Pragmatic Ethics
Ethical pragmatists...believe that some (but not all) societies have progressed morally in much the way they have attained progress in science.....They think that norms, principles, and moral criteria are likely to be improved as a result of inquiry. Classical exponents were Peirce, James, and Dewey.

Principlism
Principlism is a system of ethics based on the four moral principles of: 1. Autonomy--free-will or agency, 2. Beneficence--to do good, 3. Nonmaleficence--not to harm, and 4. Justice--social distribution of benefits and burdens. Advocates for principlism argue that from the beginning of recorded history most moral decision-makers descriptively and prescriptively have used these four moral principles; that they are part of or compatible with most intellectual, religious, and cultural beliefs.
Rawlsian Ethics
Developed by John Rawls, dubbed Rawlsianism, it takes as its starting point the argument that "most reasonable principles of justice are those everyone would accept and agree to from a fair position." Rawls employs a number of thought experiments — including the famous veil of ignorance — to determine what constitutes a fair agreement in which "everyone is impartially situated as equals," in order to determine principles of social justice.

Science and Morality
The claim that moral decisions can be established by empirical analysis of human needs. Most famous proponent is Sam Harris.

Social Darwinism (see Evolutionary Ethics–Normative Evolutionary Ethics)

Speciesism
Speciesism involves assigning different values or rights, or special consideration, to individuals solely on the basis of their species membership. The term was coined in 1973 by British psychologist Richard D. Ryder to denote prejudice against non-humans based on morally irrelevant physical differences.

The term is mostly used by animal rights advocates, who argue that species membership has no moral significance, and that it is both irrational and morally wrong to regard sentient beings as objects or property. Philosopher Tom Regan argues that all animals have inherent rights and that we cannot assign them a lesser value because of a perceived lack of rationality, while assigning a higher value to infants and the mentally impaired solely on the grounds of membership of a certain species. Peter Singer's philosophical arguments against speciesism are based on the principle of equal consideration of interests.

Utilitarianism (see Consequentialism)

Value Pluralism
The idea that there are several values which may be equally correct and fundamental, and yet in conflict with each other. In addition, value-pluralism postulates that in many cases such incompatible values may be incommensurable, in the sense that there is no objective ordering of them in terms of importance. Value pluralism is opposed to value monism.

Virtue Ethics
Virtue ethics describes the character of a moral agent as a driving force for ethical behavior, rather than rules (deontology), consequentialism (which derives rightness or wrongness from the outcome of the act itself rather than character), or social context (pragmatic ethics).

The difference between these four approaches to morality tends to lie more in the way
moral dilemmas are approached than in the moral conclusions reached. For example, a consequentialist may argue that lying is wrong because of the negative consequences produced by lying — though a consequentialist may allow that certain foreseeable consequences might make lying acceptable. A deontologist might argue that lying is always wrong, regardless of any potential "good" that might come from lying. A virtue ethicist, however, would focus less on lying in any particular instance and instead consider what a decision to tell a lie or not tell a lie said about one's character and moral behavior. As such, lying would be made in a case-by-case basis that would be based on factors such as personal benefit, group benefit, and intentions (as to whether they are benevolent or malevolent). The most famous proponent of virtue ethics was Aristotle.