Fundamentals of Ethics:
Notes from the Maples
Don Beith

"Ethos anthropos daimon."
Character is destiny.
-Herakleitos

The word ethics comes from the Greek *ethos*, a very rich word signifying moral character, the way of life of a person or group, the defining essence of different human beings, and a specific cultural worldview. Ethics addresses the ultimate values of our existence. Thinking about ethics involves reflecting upon the core values of what makes human beings unique, and what it means to live a good life. Ethics is also concerned with normative frameworks that are used to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of actions, to make judgments about a person's character, to assess the moral state of a situation, policy or institution, or to reflect upon tensions between different duties and pragmatic considerations that arise in life. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that concerns not only theories, but the human practices necessary to live a good life. Ethics thus shares a kinship with every other science, art and human endeavour. There are many rich and exciting subfields in ethics--many toward which your essay can make an impactful contribution!

Ethical Theories:

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the view that actions or events are morally relevant if they increase or diminish the overall happiness of human beings. Based on the principle of utility, or what works to make us happier, this is a *consequentialist* position. Consequentialism measures ethical value according to the intended or actual outcomes of situations, rather than the principles or ideas that could justify the actions themselves. In short, the ends can justify the means, and sometimes the good of the group (summum bonum) outweighs the good of the individual. This is an efficient, cost-benefit way of approaching situations. Some thinkers criticize utilitarianism for being too abstract, or for the fact that consequences are not always predictable, or for having too general a concept of happiness--but we nevertheless find consequentialist reasoning at every level of our existence, from budgeting to evaluating the fairness of economic and political policies.

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/

Duty Ethics- Immanuel Kant

Against the idea that our desires for satisfaction or calculating the beneficial outcomes of situations should drive our practical life--*deontology* or duty ethics provides an alternative framework. Principles matter. We can't always control the outcome of our actions, but we can be sure about the *reasons* for which we act. In fact, if we take a step back from our own personal desires, we can recognize ourselves as rational agents, members of a universal community of persons capable of doing things on behalf of humanity, goodness, and truth. Becoming rationally self-aware shows us that we can, and indeed should, hold ourselves to absolute, unconditional standards. These invariable principles, like honesty, integrity, respect, care, dignity and courage are absolutely valuable principles in and of themselves, regardless of the consequences. Ethical life involves duties, and a purity of convictions. Can you think of examples of situations or roles in society where this ethical approach is valuable?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/duty_1.shtml

Virtue Ethics - Plato, Aristotle, Stoics

Ethical goodness can be seen in terms of a whole human lifespan, and this is fundamentally how our ancient Greek ancestors looked at ethical life, instead of looking ethical actions as solitary or isolated events (like consequentialism that measures what is good by the consequences of actions, or deontology which locates moral value in the principles behind individual acts). What is ethically important is not this or that individual action [(whether its consequences (utilitarianism) or principles (Kant)], but the *state* of character or habit from which an action is undertaken. What gives an action its moral quality is not what we are doing, but *how* we are doing it. Here, as in consequentialism, the outcome of an action matters, but in a deeper way--where we think of action as creating conditions to let human beings flourish as individuals and in communities. The ultimate value in virtue ethics is that living beings flourish and that humans attain political, scientific and artistic *excellence*. This perspective of becoming good over a lifetime rests on the foundations of *virtuous* habits like courage, self-possession, magnanimity, friendliness, justice and modesty. Virtues are not absolute principles, but balanced interactions with situations--what Aristotle calls a "mean" between two extremes. This way of thinking emphasizes the practical nature of human existence.

You could read the first two Books of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. You might pick up a copy of MacIntyre's After Virtue or listen to David Brooks talk about the centrality of virtue in our identity and happiness:

https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_should_you_live_for_your_resume_or_your_eulogy

Or, you could watch Abe Schoener's video about wine-making:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXNG1pRv178

Existentialist Ethics

Like virtue ethics, existentialism prioritizes the import of our lived experiences. But unlike virtue ethics which upholds the view that we can find normative value in our nature (whether earthly, rational or divine), existentialism rejects the idea that we have a pre-established, abiding essence or identity. We are not defined by our being--rather we define it. We are free. Ethics is never simply a matter of rational calculation--as in the previously mentioned theories, because in those cases there is an obvious normative standard or moral absolute that commands our obedience. For the existentialist, the true moral moment arises when our theories conflict, when there is no rational or neutral way to decide which obligations to follow, or choose what matters most. Responsibility truly happens when we alone take responsibility for choosing between conflicting duties or moral values. Thus, while the existentialist denies the existence of ultimate or eternal ethical values--she does not live in a moral vacuum. Rather, the responsibility for her values, reasons and decisions rests uniquely with her. Existentialists thus emphasize the moral primacy of creativity, vocation, passion, sexuality and sharing the project of freedom.

You might read Sartre's "Existentialism as a Humanism", Chapter 2 of de Beauvoir's The Ethics of Ambiguity or John Russon's Human Experience.

Feminist Ethics

There are many approaches to feminism, and we might foray into them by recognizing a critical point: the central ethical theories (discussed above) all presuppose the standpoint of a capable, able-bodied agent who is fully capable of acting in a world that is open to her. This presumption overlooks the various things we depend upon to be free and ethical decision makers, including our bodies, the nurturing and teaching of others, safe and respectful social spaces, fair socioeconomic and vocational opportunities, legal protection and so many other relationships that go into making us healthy and free. Feminism thus seeks to understand these key privileges that we so often overlook, and works critically to understand structures of oppression. Sometimes called care ethics, feminist ethics works to morally value the often concealed emotional labor we, and other people, put into sustaining the human world.

You might learn a bit about feminism historically by reading some figures from its three waves: from the egalitarian wave led by Mary Wollstonecraft (A Vindication of the Rights of Women) to second-wave view that there is a fundamental difference between sex and gender, with pioneering figures like de Beauvoir and Steinem, to the third wave that views gender as a social construct and structure of power relations (see Judith Butler, bell hooks and Michel Foucault for examples).

http://www.iep.utm.edu/care-eth/#SSH1ciii

Resources to explore further ethical topics:

Environmental Ethics

   https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/

Ethics and Science

   You could read Thomas Kuhn's pivotal The Structure of Scientific Revolutions as well as RC Lewontin's Biology as Ideology. From here, you could read Bruno Latour or Donna Haraway.

Biomedical Ethics

   There are several sites online that consider case-studies and offer overviews of the four basic principles of clinical ethics: Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-Malfeasance and Justice.

http://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/site/cases.html

Business Ethics

   A helpful overview of the ethical principles of business relationships: https://www.universalclass.com/articles/business/a-look-at-business-ethics.htm

Marxism

You can learn about Marx's basic criticism of capitalism as spiritually and ethically alienating here, or in his 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts: http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/250j2703.htm