Human ethics must be grounded in human nature. Human moral codes are specific to humans as humans. Humans share a common nature, which gives us common values and common traits, both of which we have inherited from our ancestors. There is a “natural law” or basic set of values that humans share with one another. Christian natural law theorists attribute these shared values to a code inscribed on our hearts by the Creator. Alternatively, we can attribute these shared values to a common human nature that has emerged from evolutionary processes. Our ancestors valued things like knowledge, truth, and mutual cooperation; and this proved to be very useful in helping to keep them alive, thereby giving them the opportunity to reproduce and pass those values on to us. Either way—whether we attribute the natural law to a Creator or to evolutionary processes—, humans do share certain values universally.

Human ethics does not apply to non-human species. What is right for a dog is not necessarily right for a man. What is right for man would not necessarily be right for some extra-terrestrial species. Is it wrong for a tiger to kill a man? If a tiger eats a man, has the tiger acted unethically? If a virus kills a man, has the virus acted unethically? Human values are precisely that—human values. These values may be relative in the sense that they do not apply to non-humans, but they are objective and universal in the sense that they are common to humans as humans, natural to humankind, and can be rationally discerned and discussed in a logical and philosophical fashion. The key to discovering an objective code of human conduct, a universally applicable theory of ethics, is to find those particular values that are natural to humans as humans and to lay out a code of conduct that is most conducive to the achievement of our common goals and aspirations.

Humans naturally value their own happiness and comfort. They naturally sympathize with others and feel empathy. They value truth and consistency. These basic sentiments are shared by all humans—they are part of human nature. These basic sentiments/values can be taken as axioms of human ethics. From these basic axioms, we can arrive at general rules. Rape, murder, theft, and
such are not usually conducive to human happiness, even for the person who commits the crime. The criminal who rapes and kills will find that his natural human empathy will cause him to feel guilt and angst as a result of his “bad” conduct. Consequently, these “negative” acts tend to cause unhappiness and discomfort to everyone involved. Thus, human nature is such that it leads us to abhor such things as being “unethical.” We despise such behavior when we see others engaging in it, and we would despise ourselves if we did such things.

If I acquire something through my own toil, I have a natural tendency to regard it as my own. My body is naturally under my own stewardship—I am the proprietor of my body. I naturally see the labor that I undertake as belonging to me. The labor that I perform is an exercise of my body. Whatever I acquire through that labor, I naturally regard as my own and feel no qualms taking possession of it. If someone else comes along and “steals” what I have acquired through my own hard work, then I will be upset and it will cause me some unhappiness and discomfort. Due to my empathetic human nature, I will feel sympathy and compassion for someone else that has something stolen from them. Humans are bound by their very nature to have some sort of concept of self-ownership and property.

What “rights” belong to an individual? It appears from the outset that “rights” is an issue related to property or possession. What rights properly belong to an individual? A person has no right to anything that is not his own. What, then, naturally belongs to an individual? Firstly, an individual is sovereign over his own person. What belongs to him most properly and naturally is his body and his mind. Some libertarian writers have termed this principle “self-ownership” or individual sovereignty. Each man owns himself. His body and mind belong to him and nobody else.¹ You own your self. Nobody else can own you.

From this principle of individual sovereignty or “self-ownership” follows natural property rights. You own yourself and your body. Your labor is an exercise of your body and therefore naturally belongs to you. The natural world, in a state of nature, belongs to no one. Labor is the factor that allows for the appropriation of natural resources as property. If I discover a piece of un-owned land in the woods and clear the ground, cut down some trees, and build a house with the

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¹ Distributist writers, being predominantly Roman Catholic, tend to object to this principle on the ground that God is the ultimate owner of all things. However, this argument is pointless. Even if God is the ultimate owner, possession and immediate control of the person has been handed over to the individual. God is the only other individual with a right to intervene. No human being can justly claim any sort of ownership over another human or impose upon the property right of another individual over himself.
lumber, then I have the natural right to live in that house or sell the house after building it. The house is an extension of my labor and is, therefore, my property. Every man is entitled to the product of his labor.

The rationale behind property is related to scarcity. Certain things just cannot be equally controlled by everyone. Even if sweatshirts are not scarce in general, this particular sweatshirt is scarce. You and I cannot both wear the sweatshirt at the same time. We cannot both possess the shirt and use it differently at the same time. Two individuals cannot control the same plot of land and use it for mutually exclusive purposes. I cannot grow corn on the same piece of ground where you build your house. Thus, property (of some sort) is a necessary institution.

These two principles—self-ownership (individual sovereignty) and a natural right to possess the product of one’s own labor (property)—are the basis of any sound social ethic. Individual sovereignty is the central principle upon which all sound social ethics stand.

It seems to me that the Non-Aggression Principle (NAP) is not a sufficient principle upon which to base law in a libertarian society. Now, I do not reject the Non-Aggression Principle; it is a wholesome and decent idea. It is a necessary principle for a libertarian society—necessary but not sufficient. In order to serve as a sufficient principle upon which to base an anarchist legal system, it must be supplemented by the old school Law of Equal Liberty. Benjamin Tucker advocated a principle of “non-invasion” and identified the “definition of invasion as the infringement of equal liberty.”

Tucker’s libertarianism was based on a version of the Non-Aggression Principle (“non-invasion,” in Tucker’s terminology) fused together with Herbert Spencer’s Law of Equal Liberty. Spencer’s Law of Equal Liberty states: “that every man may claim the fullest liberty to exercise his faculties compatible with the possession of like liberty to every other man.” In other words, the Law of Equal Liberty states that each individual ought to have the right to do whatsoever he pleases insofar as he does not thereby impede others from doing the same, and that his liberty ought to be impeded only if he is exercising his liberty in a way that impedes the equal liberty of others. I propose, then, that the libertarian ought to understand the term “aggression” as indicating “a violation of the Law of Equal Liberty” or as “an infringement upon another person’s equal liberty.” If a person buys up the property around a river and then

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2 Cf. Benjamin Tucker, Individual Liberty
3 Cf. Herbert Spencer, Social Statics

No rights reserved; for there is no such thing as intellectual property.
begins to pollute the river, preventing people downstream from being able to drink clean water from the river, that man is violating their equal liberty to consume clean water, which can be considered an act of aggression. Therefore, upon libertarian/anarchist principles, the people downstream have every right to force that man to stop polluting and demand restitution for the damages done.

A left-libertarian—taking *individual sovereignty*, the *non-aggression principle*, *property*, and the *law of equal liberty* as first principles of ethics—is bound to reach certain conclusions about “the government” or the State. Firstly, the left-libertarian sees that the State is based upon the imposition of arbitrary law. Most laws imposed by the State are in violation of the first principles of sound ethics. Furthermore, the State is funded through “taxation,” which is just a euphemism for theft. Consequently, the group of individuals that call themselves “the government” and go about enforcing arbitrary laws against “victimless crimes” and collecting taxes is unethical.

We have chosen a theory of ethics that is objective and universal. This places us at the polar opposite end of the spectrum from the moral relativists. We say that right vs. wrong is a matter of truth that can be logically discovered through studious investigation. We say that the “natural law” is universal *insofar as it applies equally to all men*. An ethical justification of the State is only possible upon moral relativist grounds, where a different code of conduct is regarded as applicable for bureaucrats, cops, and politicians than applies to ordinary people. We reject that view and hold that the same rules apply to the peasant as to the king; the proper code of conduct for the president is no different from that of any other man.

This is, of course, not a comprehensive and thorough study of left-libertarian ethics, but this general outline is a good starting point that might help guide one in the right direction.