

PHIL 341:

Ethical Theory

Student data (on cards)

- **Contact info**: name, address, phone number, university ID, etc.
- **Background**: especially data on satisfaction of the prerequisite (two prior courses in philosophy). Please give names or indicate subject matter of courses, and note any that were not taken here. They do have to be courses in a philosophy department.
- **Make sure the university directory has your correct email address (the one where you read your email regularly) so you'll get my "coursemail."**

Course data (see syllabus)

- **Readings**: original texts from historical philosophers (in editions also containing recommended explanatory material – though other editions are acceptable)
- **Requirements**: midterm and final (explanations of key concepts), one short (c. four-page) paper, class participation.
- **No laptops, smartphones, etc.** in class, except as authorized by the disabilities office

First assignment

- **Read Mill, chs. 1-2 (at least through his statement of the “Greatest Happiness” principle, p. 55, for Tuesday).**
- **Print out the chart of basic approaches to ethical theory from my website (which I use instead of Canvas).**
 - **Go to my website address on the syllabus and click on “courses” in the menu at the bottom. The course page contains a link to the syllabus, which links to the schedule. Note the list of items in the center of the page with information about general policies, etc.**
 - **Click on “course materials,” then on the link for this course.**

Expectations

- **Also on my website is a handout about the sort of work expected at this level, as opposed to less demanding 100- and 200-level courses.**
- **Note that readings from historical philosophers take special effort to unravel and interpret, sometimes with problems of translation or archaic language.**
- **Slides from lectures will be posted on the web at the end of each week, but you can't rely on "distance learning" without penalty.**
- **Grades may be adjusted upward at the end of the term, but this is limited to those who've been seriously involved in the course. (Be sure to remind me to pass around the attendance sheet!)**

Subject matter: *Ethical Theory*

- **Some of you may have enrolled in this course just because it was one way of fulfilling a requirement in some other subject, or because of general interest in ethics, and that's OK.**
- **But be aware that our subject or matter is more theoretical (less practical) than lower-level courses in ethics. Think about whether this is the right course for you before your schedule is set.**
 - **An ethical theory isn't necessarily a guide to moral decision-making in hard cases. Instead, in the first instance, it attempts to organize and explain common ethical opinions.**
 - **A *theory* is a systematic body of thought, starting with very general principles or standards: rules or personal ideals that are supposed to provide justification for particular moral judgments – but sometimes only in retrospect, when fuller information is available.**

Sample questions

- **Rather than debating controversial cases like abortion and euthanasia, as in PHIL 140, this course examines different ways historical philosophers have tried to explain cases on which we generally agree, such as truth-telling.**
 - **What's exactly would be wrong, e.g., with making a lying promise in order to get a loan you need to support your family but know that you can't pay back within the time allotted?**
 - **Aren't there cases in which it's OK to lie? What if your lie wouldn't seriously injure anyone, since the amount is relatively small, and the lender is a large corporation?**
- **In general, how should we resolve a conflict between different moral precepts, e.g. "Don't lie" and "Take care of your family"? Is there some rational principle or ideal we can appeal to?**

Contrasting views

- We'll first contrast attempts by *Mill and Kant* to formulate ultimate principles of right action: the Principle of Utility vs. the Categorical Imperative.
- Then we'll jump back to *Aristotle* to examine an older approach that's reemerged recently, explaining morality in terms of a personal ideal of virtue: a type of character or character trait that on Aristotle's account involves rational control over our feelings.
- We'll contrast this with *Hume's* much later view of virtue as based, not on reason, but rather on the passions or emotions that give rise to moral sentiments via sympathy.
- Finally, we'll look at *Rawls* for a contemporary "social contract" theory meant to provide principles of justice that could be sustained by our moral sentiments.

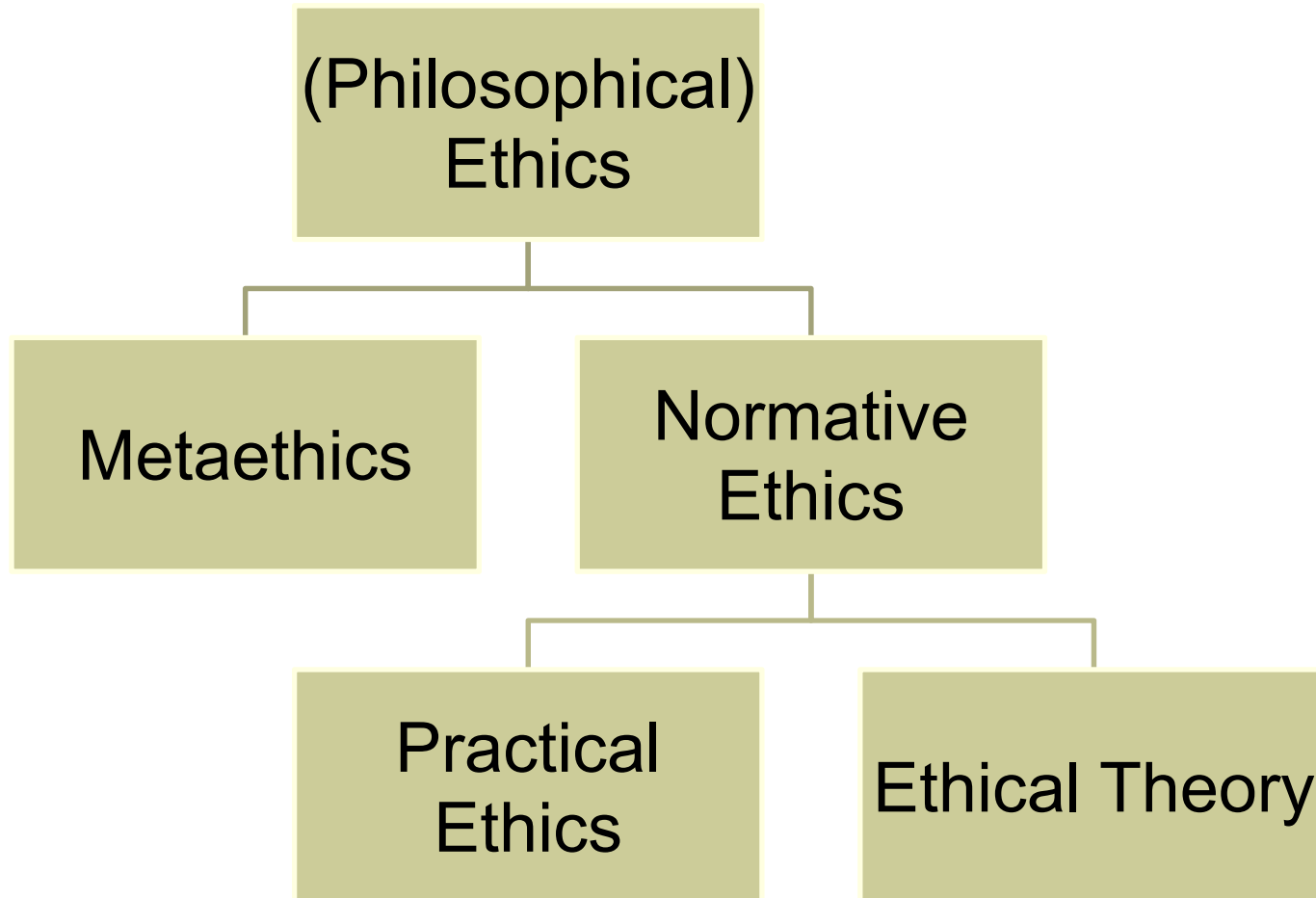
Two approaches to (philosophical) ethics

- Our general subject, ethical theory can be viewed as a subdivision (besides practical ethics) of
 - normative ethics, which directly studies questions about what's right or wrong, good or bad, etc.,

as opposed to

- metaethics, which raises more general philosophical questions about what normative ethics amounts to, e.g. what ethical terms mean, the nature and objectivity of moral judgments.
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- The next slide begins an organization chart of approaches to ethical theory – to be filled in further, as needed to locate Mill's theory.

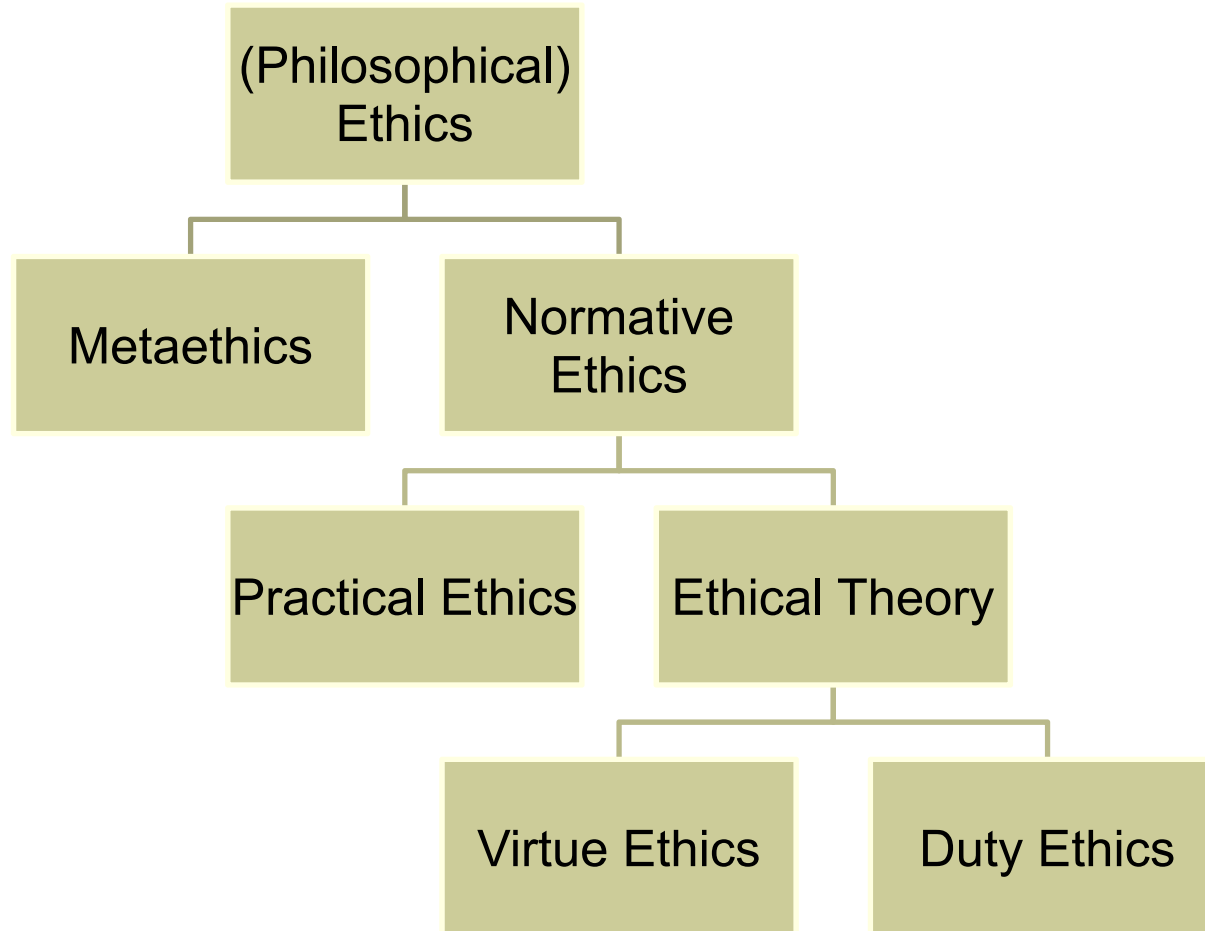
Locating ethical theory



Two approaches to ethical theory

- **Ethical theory in turn divides into two main types or approaches:**
 - **virtue ethics**: begins by considering what makes a person (or his/her character, character traits, or motives) morally good (Aristotle, Hume)
 - **duty ethics**: focuses on rules or acts and what makes them right (Mill, Kant, Rawls)
- **filled in on the following slide**

Partial organization chart of ethical theories



Two kinds of duty ethics (1)

■ deontological (= rule-based):

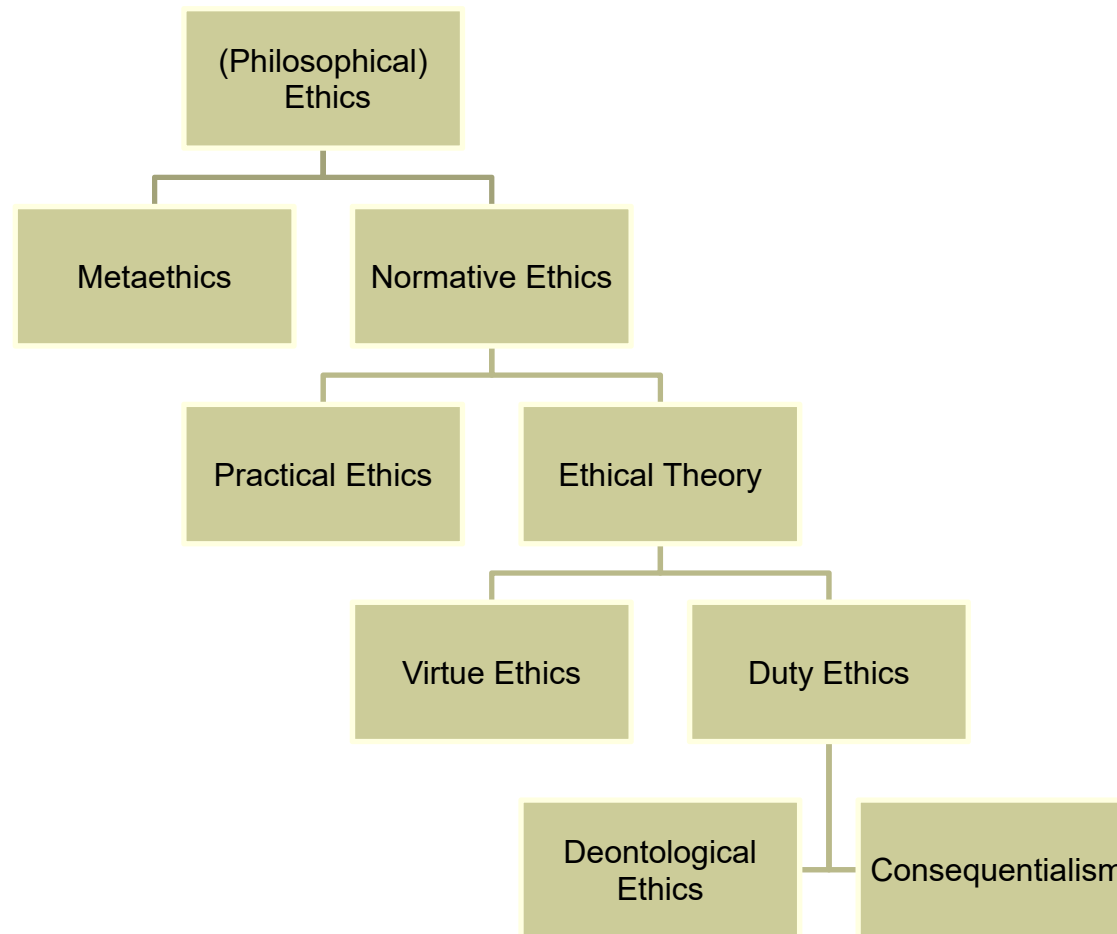
- *basic* concept = right (or wrong; duty, ought, etc.), a term applicable to acts and spelled out by rules, e.g. the Ten Commandments, or elements of common-sense morality
- But philosophers organize rules into general theories:
 - Kantianism (“the categorical imperative” as a single principle from which other rules may be derived): Kant
 - [prima facie duties (“intuitionism”; multiple underived principles capable of conflict): W. D. Ross]
 - social contract theory: multiple principles based on group consent (historical or hypothetical): Rawls on justice

Two kinds of duty ethics (2)

- **consequentialist (= results-based):**

- basic concept = (*nonmoral*) good, applied to an experience or state of affairs, thought of as the end (= purpose, goal) of action
- right act = act that has the best consequences (“maximizes the good”), on the simplest version
- depending on *whose* good is in question, divides into:
 - **[ethical] egoism** (the good of the agent): Epicurus
 - **utilitarianism** (everyone's good): Bentham, Mill

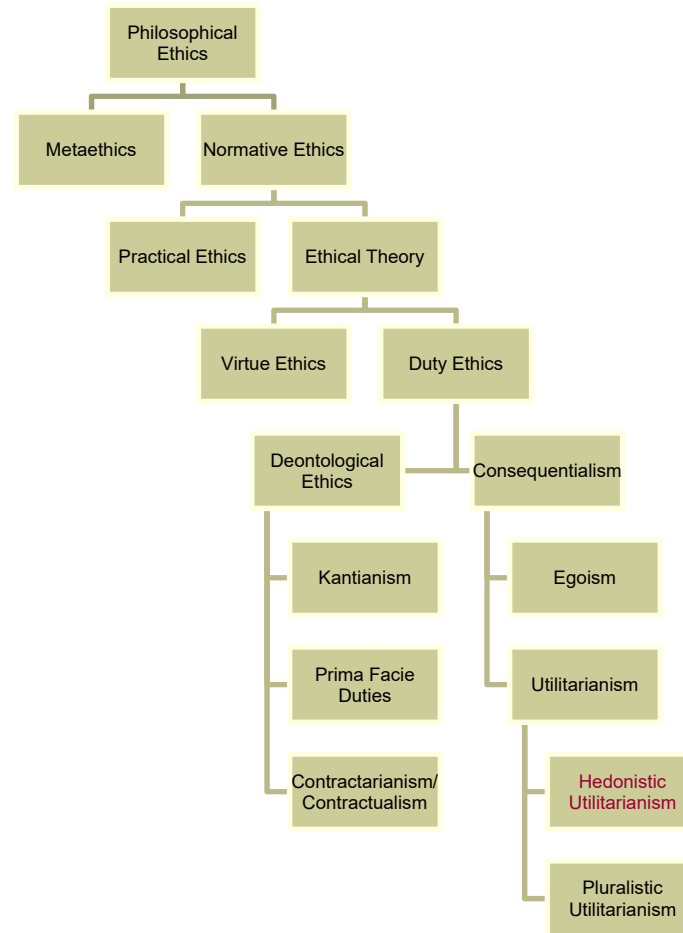
Basic organization chart of ethical theories



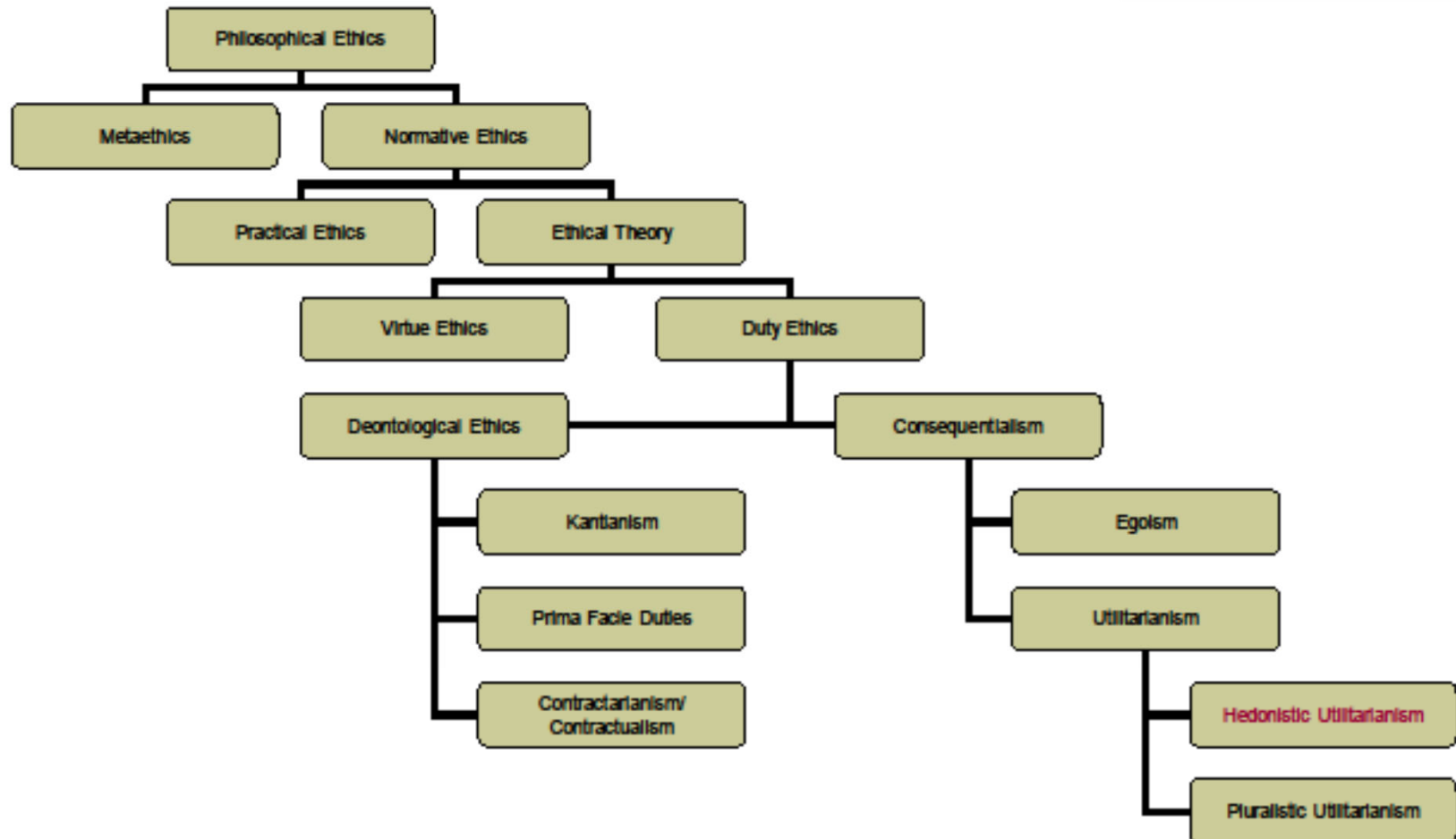
Two forms of utilitarianism

- **Some main variants of utilitarianism (distinguished in the 20th century) depend on how the good is interpreted:**
 - **hedonism**: happiness (= pleasure, absence of pain) as the only thing that's intrinsically (vs. instrumentally) good: “classical” utilitarians Bentham and Mill (cf. Epicurus's egoistic version).
 - **pluralism**: other things besides pleasure also count as intrinsically good, e.g. beauty, knowledge, personal relationships: G. E. Moore
- **Now we have a full enough chart to locate the first theory we'll be reading about: Mill's utilitarianism, also called “classical” or hedonistic utilitarianism (though Mill himself just calls it – or even just the hedonistic aspect of it – “utilitarianism”).**

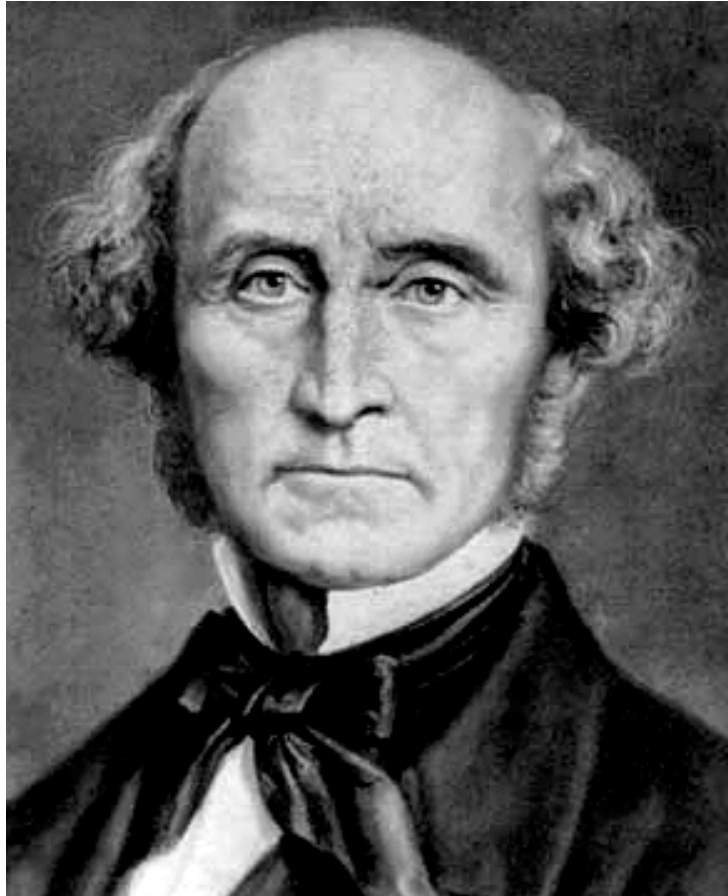
Locating Mill's theory



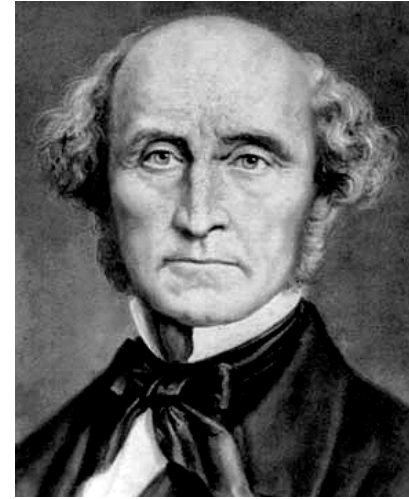
Locating Mill's theory



Anticipating Mill

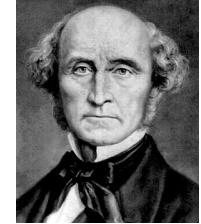


MILL



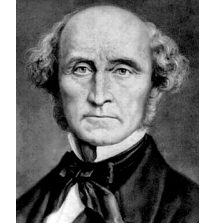
The principle of utility determines the rightness of acts (or rules of action?) by their tendency to promote the total happiness.

Mill's principle of utility



- “[A]ctions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness,” with happiness understood roughly as “pleasure and the absence of pain” (p. 55).
- Its simplest interpretation takes “tend” as referring to *actual* consequences of specific acts, but it may sometimes be applied to general rules or types of act.
- Mill identifies the principle with Bentham’s “Greatest Happiness Principle,” understood as referring to *total* happiness (vs. the number of people made happy) and extending to all sentient beings.
 - But unlike Bentham, Mill doesn’t take happiness just as a mathematical sum of pleasures minus pains, differing only on quantitative measures like intensity and duration.
 - Pleasures of distinctively human faculties are also said to be superior in *quality* to pleasures of the sort we share with animals – as determined by those who have experienced (and are still capable of experiencing) both sorts of pleasure.

Responses to misunderstandings



□ of hedonism:

- pleasure an aim worthy of swine (pp. 55ff.). Higher, distinctively human, pleasures outweigh mere bodily pleasures shared with swine.
- happiness an inappropriate aim (pp. 59ff.). The aim isn't ecstasy but just to minimize pain and achieve a comfortable mix of pleasures. Total happiness, not just one's own, is the standard of right action (vs. motive of the virtuous agent).

□ of utilitarianism (“proper”):

- leaves no room for beauty, ornament, amusement (p. 54). popular misconception
- a “godless” doctrine (p. 68). Spells out what a benevolent God would want.
- undercuts “principled” adherence to rules (pp. 68ff.): Rule-breaking is almost always forbidden because of harmful side-effects. Established rules sum up the general tendencies of acts to promote utility, so we should limit direct appeal to the principle of utility to cases where the rules conflict.