PHIL 341:

Ethical Theory
-- did you get a message welcoming you to the coursemail reflector? If not, please correct what's needed.
Course data (see syllabus)

- **Readings:** original texts from historical philosophers (in editions also containing recommended explanatory material – though other editions are acceptable)

- **Requirements:** three short papers (argument analyses), midterm and final, class participation.

- **No laptops, smartphones, etc. in class, except as authorized by the disabilities office**

-- don’t use secondary material from the web, as its quality is variable; cf. Wikipedia.
Check first; cf. earlymoderntexts.com?
First assignment

- Read Mill, ch. 1, and start on ch. 2 (at least through his statement of the “Greatest Happiness” principle, p. 55).

- 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.

-- for future reference, as a study aid, I also put up a previous year’s paper and exam assignments (along with samples of A work, plus the TA’s comments)
-- also, some recommended readings (for later)
-- other pages contain information about me and my interests in philosophy, along with photos
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 meant to give you 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.

-- focus is more intellectual; intended in the first instance to give philosophy students basic knowledge of the main figures and positions in the history of ethical theory
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 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?

--- emphasis on the major figures in the subject, figures that philosophy majors ought to know about, rather than the most exciting figures (e.g. Plato, Nietzsche), though these authors also have had an important influence. We have other courses focusing on at least some of these figures.
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 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 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 (along with 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.
- The next slide begins an organization chart of approaches to ethical theory – to be filled in further, as needed to locate Mill’s theory.

-- let’s first locate moral theory (N.B. “moral” and “ethical” used interchangeably) in terms of prior entries on the chart
-- vs. practical ethics:
  -- practical (as in PHIL 140) focuses on particular cases, often cases currently in dispute; less abstract, more accessible for beginners to philosophy
  -- ethical theory emphasizes general principles meant to explain our intuitions on cases we tend to agree about, as well as yielding answers to some disputed cases
-- at a higher level, philosophical ethics divides into meta- and normative ethics:
  -- normative ethics is ethics “proper,” answering what we normally think of as ethical questions, practical or theoretical, about what’s right or wrong, good or bad, etc.
  -- metaethics takes normative ethics as its subject matter and asks other kinds of philosophical questions about it, e.g. whether and how we can have knowledge of it; we’ll see a bit of this, especially in Hume, but as a separate subject it’s primarily a product of twentieth-century philosophy (as in PHIL 640 and at least some versions of 440)
-- philosophical ethics as a body of thought, rather than behavior patterns (so that “Kant’s ethics” doesn’t refer to his moral practices but rather a theory he came up with)
-- ethical theory can be characterized as a branch of philosophical ethics aiming to systematize morality into an organized body of thought
  -- can sometimes be taken to include metaethics, though I’m going to simplify a bit to construct a coherent chart; usual use of the term refers to the more abstract and systematic areas of normative ethics
  -- consists in philosophers’ attempts to account for our ordinary moral beliefs (“intuitions”) with general principles or other standards of behavior (e.g. an ideal of the morally good person)
-- building toward overall map of the area (detailed enough to locate Mill’s view), showing where ethical theory is located, along with the classification of the particular authors we’re reading, plus others I’ll mention for contrast

-- just meant by way of preview, with more terms mentioned than I’d expect you to remember; the crucial terms will come up again later

-- print out the ultimate map to refer to as we do further readings; finding it on the web as part of your first assignment should help you see if you can find your way around my web site
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 or motives) morally good (Aristotle, Hume)
  - **duty [= “ought”] ethics**: focuses on rules or acts and what makes them right (Mill, Kant, Rawls)

- filled in on the following slide

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- ethical theory has its own subdivisions, extending the chart lower
  - virtue ethics: the approach of classical philosophers, recently revived
    - focuses on questions of moral good, applicable to persons or their character and motives
    - links ethics to psychology
    - examples we’re reading: Aristotle, Hume
  - duty ethics: generally the more modern approach, despite Hume (and contemporary versions of virtue ethics)
    - focuses on questions of right or wrong; applicable to acts or rules of conduct
    - links ethics primarily to law
    - examples we’re reading = Mill, Kant, Rawls
Partial organization chart of ethical theories

(Philosophical) Ethics

- Metaethics
- Normative Ethics
  - Practical Ethics
  - Ethical Theory
    - Virtue Ethics
    - Duty Ethics
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

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-- deontological ethics based on Greek word for "ought"

-- often contrasted with teleological ethics (based on the Greek word for "end" or "aim"); but that term crisscrosses the virtue/duty distinction, applying to Aristotle as well as Mill); better term = consequentialism

-- takes rules or principles as determining what acts are right; essentially a more general version of the sort of approach we find in the Ten Commandments and similar religious codes of rules

-- different versions depend on the nature and number of the principles taken as basic:
  -- the categorical imperative: a single principle (though with several formulations) due to Kant; amounts to an unconditional "ought" from which more specific rules may be derived
  -- prima facie duties: a more pluralistic approach due to twentieth-century English philosopher W. D. Ross
  -- contractarianism/contractualism: basic principles of ethics (or sometimes just justice) as derived from group consent
    -- includes historical "social contract" theories, as in Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, plus a more modern approach that takes the contract as merely hypothetical, basing ethics (or for Rawls, political justice) on what people would consent to under certain conditions
    -- recently, the word "contractualism" has been used to distinguish those versions that claim inspiration from Kant (who was influenced by Rousseau) and begin with moral presuppositions rather than attempting to reduce them to nonmoral, following Hobbes
Two kinds of duty ethics (2)

**consequentialist (= result-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

-- note that Mill misclassifies Epicurus as a fellow utilitarian
-- "teleological" (but covers Aristotle too)
-- consequentialist ethics takes right action as explained in terms of good consequences
  -- also focuses on questions about what’s right, but explains right action in terms of a more fundamental concept of nonmoral good = experiences or events that are good for people, etc.
  -- summed up most simply as "the right maximizes the good," though there are more complex versions not involving "maximizing" = creating the most good
  -- in other words, the right act (of all alternatives that are possible for a given agent) is the one that produces the best consequences
  -- different variants, depending on whether the good consequences that matter to an act’s rightness are said to be
    -- consequences that benefit the agent: egoism (Epicurus)
      -- everyone ought to promote his own good
      -- sometimes not thought to be an ethical theory (since it can’t resolve conflicts among individual agents), but rather a competitor to ethics
    -- consequences that benefit anyone, without distinguishing persons: utilitarianism (Bentham and Mill)
      -- often thought of as benefiting everyone, or the majority, but that’s not really implied by the “classical” (Bentham/Mill) version
      -- instead, focuses on the total good, a lump sum whose quantity matters independently of how it’s distributed, i.e. who gets how much

-- basic issue between deontological and consequentialist approaches = rules versus results:
  -- whether a rule may be broken (e.g., it’s whether OK to tell a lie) in circumstances where it’s necessary to improve the situation for all concerned
  -- cf. Kant’s favorite example, making a lying promise to secure a loan that one won’t be able to replay (presumably from someone who wouldn’t really suffer if he lost the money)
Basic organization chart of ethical theories

- (Philosophical) Ethics
  - Metaethics
  - Normative Ethics
    - Practical Ethics
    - Ethical Theory
      - Virtue Ethics
      - Duty Ethics
        - Deontological Ethics
  - Consequentialism
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”).

-- what’s called “classical” utilitarianism (essentially meaning the earliest version, i.e. Bentham, Mill, and others) understands the good in a particular way, as happiness in a sense that’s explainable in terms of pleasure (meaning pleasure minus pain, or balance of pleasure over pain)

  -- “hedonism” comes from the Greek for “pleasure,” but in philosophy it doesn’t mean living a life devoted to sensual indulgence, as it does in common speech; cf. Epicurus’s egoistic view, on which the best way to maximize your own pleasure was to minimize your desires, to avoid the pain of unsatisfied desire

  -- pleasure said to be the only thing that’s good “intrinsically,” or “in itself,” with other things considered good only “instrumentally,” insofar as they promote pleasure, again in the sense of pleasure minus pain; cf. example of taking a medicine to cure an illness, i.e. minimize pain

  -- Bentham’s hedonism was meant to make the rightness of an act something one could calculate mathematically, at least in principle, by summing the pleasure/pain value of its consequences across all persons over time; but there are big problems about whether it’s possible to compare different people’s experiences, or the experiences deriving from different activities

  -- Mill instead, in ch. 2, defends “qualitative” distinctions among pleasures; i.e. he claims that pleasures differ, not just in quantity, but also according to whether the activities they’re associated with are mental (intellectual or spiritual) or merely physical, the former ranked higher than the latter; there are questions about whether this still amounts to hedonism, strictly speaking

-- contrasting view is “pluralistic” utilitarianism (also called “agathistic,” or “ideal” utilitarianism), espoused by twentieth-century philosopher G. E. Moore, who argued that some things were good independently of whether they resulted in pleasure, or any conscious experience

  -- e.g. beauty would be good “in itself” even if there were no one to behold it

  -- knowledge as good in itself, even where it makes you unhappy (e.g. knowledge that your spouse is cheating on you)

  -- personal relations: cf. spouse who dies, etc
-- further distinctions come up in interpreting Mill, e.g. between actual and expected (probabilistic) utilitarianism, act- and rule-, etc.; see Crisp’s Intro (and the endnotes?) for a fairly complete account