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:** three short papers (or possibly quizzes), midterm and final, class participation.

- No laptops, smartphones, etc. in class, except as authorized by the disabilities office
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.
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!)
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.
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”? Or 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 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.
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.
Locating ethical theory

(Philosophical) Ethics

Metaethics
Normative Ethics

Practical Ethics
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 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
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
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
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 “utilitarianism”).
Locating Mill’s theory

Philosophical Ethics
  - Metaethics
  - Normative Ethics
    - Practical Ethics
    - Ethical Theory
      - Virtue Ethics
      - Duty Ethics
        - Deontological Ethics
          - Kantianism
          - Prima Facie Duties
          - Contractarianism/Contractualism
        - Consequentialism
          - Egoism
          - Utilitarianism
            - Hedonistic Utilitarianism
            - Pluralistic Utilitarianism