



# Ethics and Society

POLI 27

# Tavani - Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories

- ▶ **Moral absolutism:** there are specific “right” answers to moral questions
- ▶ **Moral relativism:** there are no “right” answers to moral questions
- ▶ **Ethical objectivism:** even if there is no “right” answer, there are a lot of wrong answers that we can all agree on
  - ▶ We can agree about a lot of the big picture questions, even if reasonable people still disagree about details

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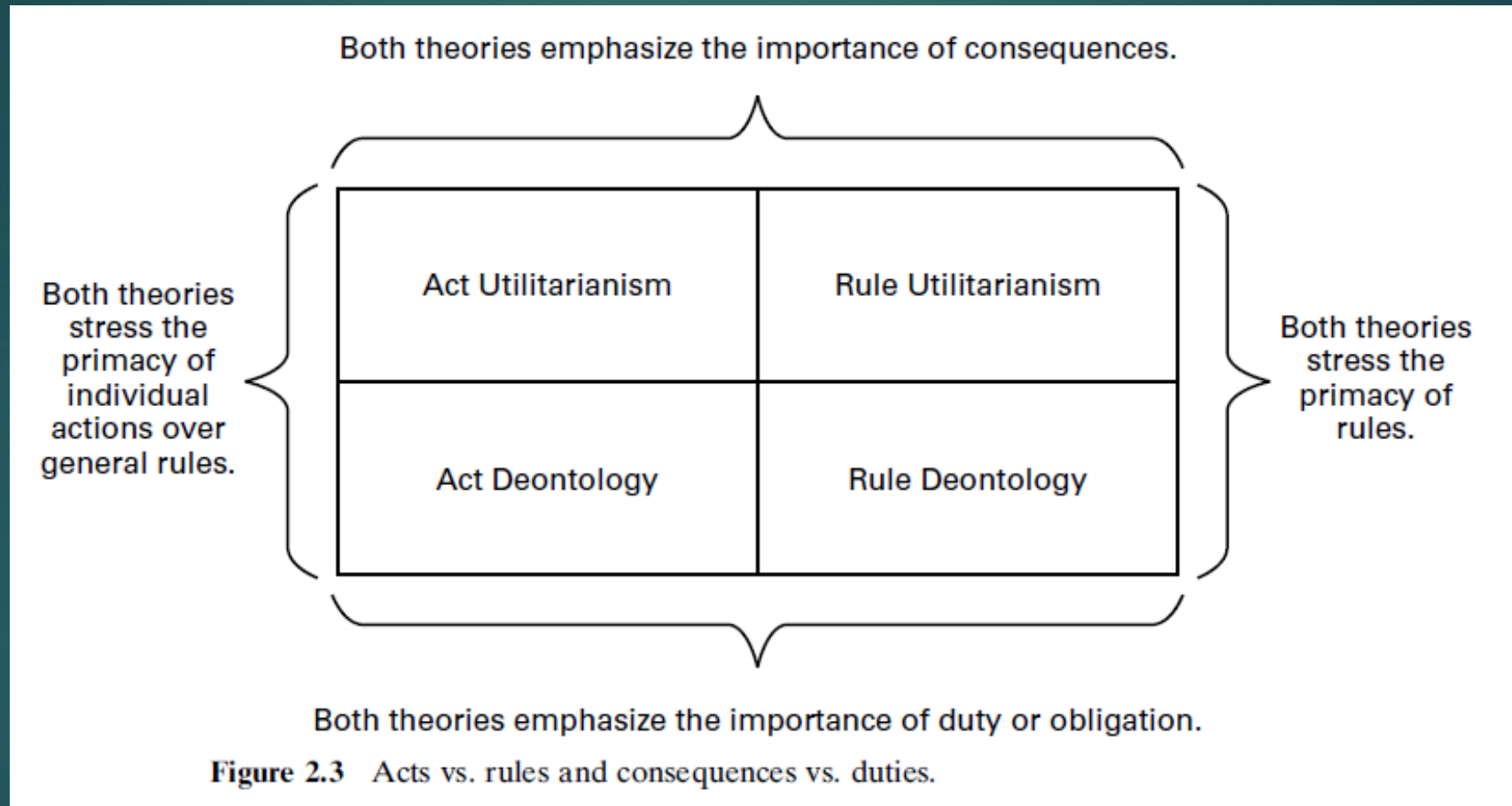
- ▶ **Consequences:** “The primary goal of a moral system is to produce desirable consequences or outcomes for its members.”
  - ▶ Core intuition: best results for most
- ▶ **Duty:** “Morality must ultimately be grounded in the concept of duty or obligations we have to one another.”
  - ▶ Core intuition: respect human agency, keep obligations
- ▶ **Contract:** “A moral system comes into being by virtue of certain contractual arrangements between individuals.” Rights-based variant: “All humans have certain moral and natural rights.”
  - ▶ Core intuition: what would reasonable people agree to?
- ▶ **Virtue (character):** “What matters is that people develop good habits and good character (ignores consequences).”
  - ▶ Core intuition: good character is more important for conduct than abstract rules

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**TABLE 2.3 Four Types of Ethical Theory**

Type of Theory	Advantages	Disadvantages
Consequence-based (utilitarian)	Stresses promotion of happiness and utility	Ignores concerns of justice for the minority population
Duty-based (deontology)	Stresses the role of duty and respect for persons	Underestimates the importance of happiness and social utility
Contract-based (rights)	Provides a motivation for morality	Offers only a minimal morality
Character-based (virtue)	Stresses character development and moral education	Depends on homogeneous community standards for morality

# Tavani - Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories



# John Rawls - Selections on Reflective Equilibrium

It seems desirable at this point, in order to prevent misunderstanding, to discuss briefly the nature of moral theory. I shall do this by explaining in more detail the concept of a considered judgment in reflective equilibrium and the reasons for introducing it.<sup>24</sup>

Now one may think of moral theory at first (and I stress the provisional nature of this view) as the attempt to describe our moral capacity; or, in the present case, one may regard a theory of justice as describing our sense of justice. By such a description is not meant simply a list of the judgments on institutions and actions that we are prepared to render, accompanied with supporting reasons when these are offered. Rather, what is required is a formulation of a set of principles which, when conjoined to our beliefs and knowledge of the circumstances, would lead us to make these judgments with their supporting reasons were we to apply these principles conscientiously and intelligently. A conception of justice characterizes our moral sensibility when the everyday judgments we do make are in accordance with its principles. These principles can serve as part of the premises of an argument which arrives at the matching judgments. We do not understand our sense of justice until we know in some systematic way covering a wide range of cases what these principles are.



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So far, though, I have not said anything about considered judgments. Now, as already suggested, they enter as those judgments in which our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion. Thus in deciding which of our judgments to take into account we may reasonably select some and exclude others. For example, we can discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or the other can be left aside. All these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests. Considered judgments are simply those rendered under conditions favorable to the exercise of the sense of justice, and therefore in circumstances where the more common excuses and explanations for making a mistake do not obtain. The person making the judgment is presumed, then, to have the ability, the opportunity, and the desire to reach a correct decision (or at least, not the desire not to). Moreover, the criteria that identify these judgments are not arbitrary. They are, in fact, similar to those that single out considered judgments of any kind. And once we regard the sense of justice as a mental capacity, as involving the exercise of thought, the relevant judgments are those given under conditions favorable for deliberation and judgment in general.



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# John Rawls - Selections on Reflective Equilibrium

I now turn to the notion of reflective equilibrium. The need for this idea arises as follows. According to the provisional aim of moral philosophy, one might say that justice as fairness is the hypothesis that the principles which would be chosen in the original position are identical with those that match our considered judgments and so these principles describe our sense of justice. But this interpretation is clearly oversimplified. In describing our sense of justice an allowance must be made for the likelihood that considered judgments are no doubt subject to certain irregularities and distortions despite the fact that they are rendered under favorable circumstances. When a person is presented with an intuitively appealing account of his sense of justice (one, say, which embodies various reasonable and natural presumptions), he may well revise his judgments to conform to its principles even though the theory does not fit

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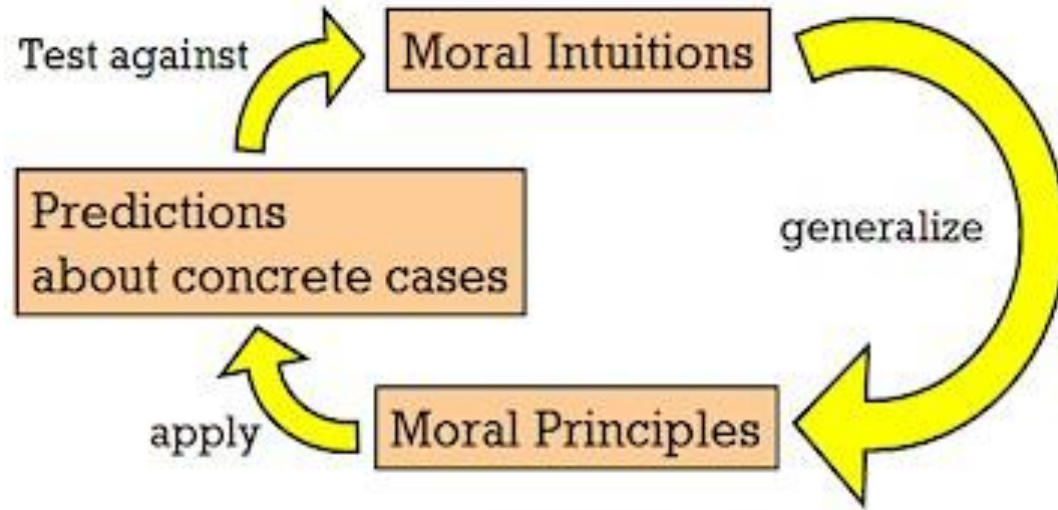
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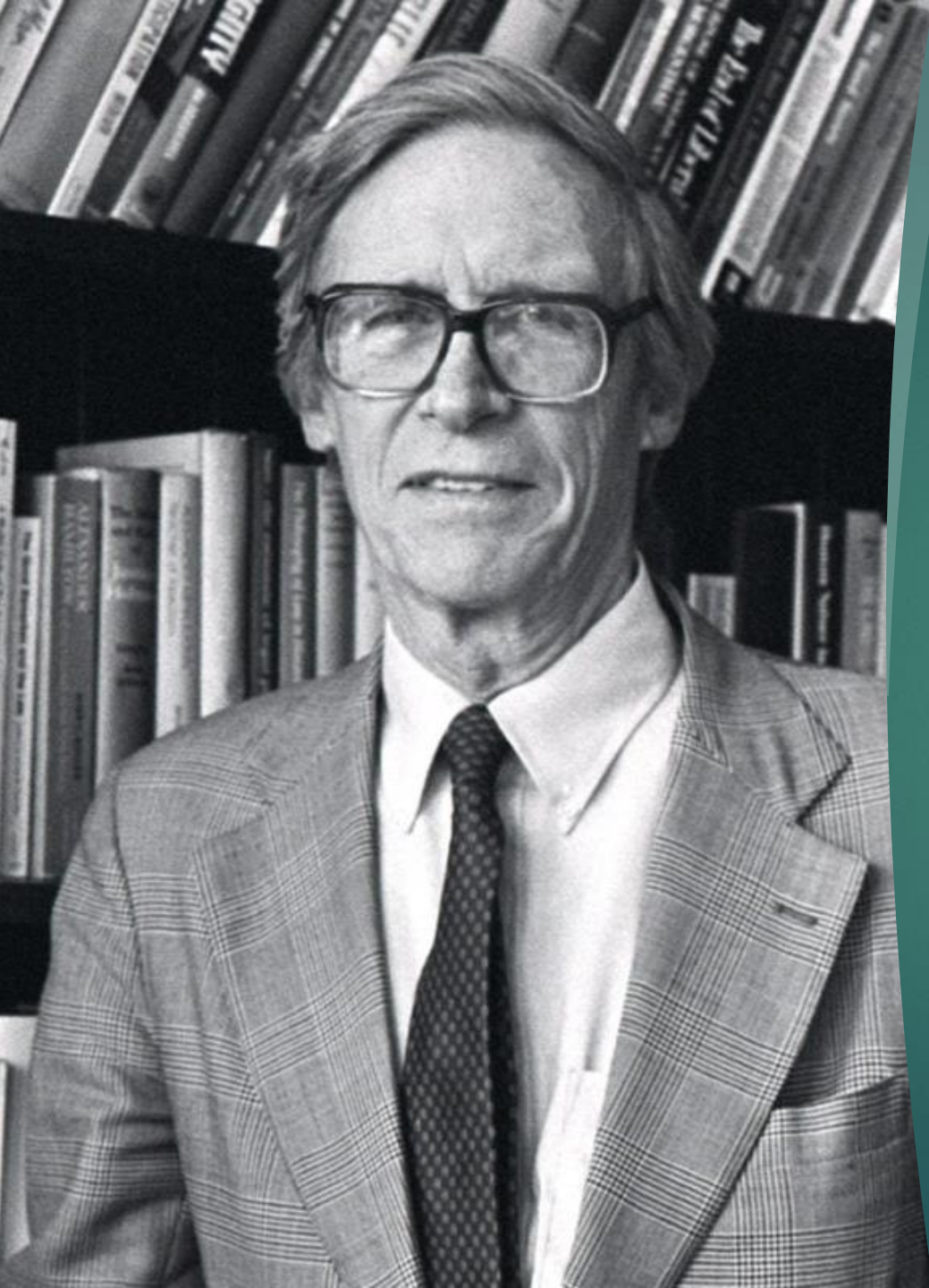
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# Reflective Equilibrium



## John Rawls - Selections on Reflective Equilibrium

- ▶ Rawls argues that human beings have a "**sense of justice**" which is both a source of moral judgment and moral motivation.
- ▶ In Rawls's theory, we begin with "**considered judgments**" that arise from the sense of justice.
- ▶ If our judgments conflict in some way, we proceed by adjusting our various beliefs until they are in "**reflective equilibrium**", which is to say that they are stable, not in conflict, and provide consistent practical guidance.
- ▶ Rawls argues that a set of moral beliefs in **ideal reflective equilibrium** describes or characterizes the underlying principles of the human sense of justice.

# John Rawls - Selections on Reflective Equilibrium

- ▶ “For Rawls, how justified one is in one’s political convictions depends on how close one is to achieving reflective equilibrium. In reflective equilibrium all of one’s beliefs, on all levels of generality, cohere perfectly with one another.”
- ▶ “Thus, in reflective equilibrium one’s specific political judgments (e.g., “religious intolerance is unjust”) support one’s more general political convictions (e.g., “all citizens have certain basic rights”) which support one’s very abstract beliefs about the political world (e.g., “all citizens are free and equal”). “
- ▶ “Viewed from the opposite direction, in reflective equilibrium one’s abstract beliefs explain one’s more general convictions, which in turn explain one’s specific judgments. Were one to attain reflective equilibrium, the justification of each belief would follow from all beliefs relating in these networks of mutual support and explanation.”

(Source: [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: John Rawls](#))

# John Rawls - Selections on Reflective Equilibrium

- ▶ “Though perfect reflective equilibrium is unattainable, one can use the method of reflective equilibrium to get closer to it and so increase the justifiability of one’s beliefs. In carrying through this method, one begins with one’s considered moral judgments: those made consistently and without hesitation when one is under good conditions for thinking (e.g., “slavery is wrong,” “all citizens are political equals”).“
- ▶ “One treats these considered judgments as provisional fixed points, and then starts the process of bringing one’s beliefs into relations of mutual support and explanation as described above. Doing this inevitably brings out conflicts where, for example, a specific judgment clashes with a more general conviction, or where an abstract principle cannot accommodate a particular kind of case. One proceeds by revising these beliefs as necessary, striving always to increase the coherence of the whole.”

(Source: [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: John Rawls](#))

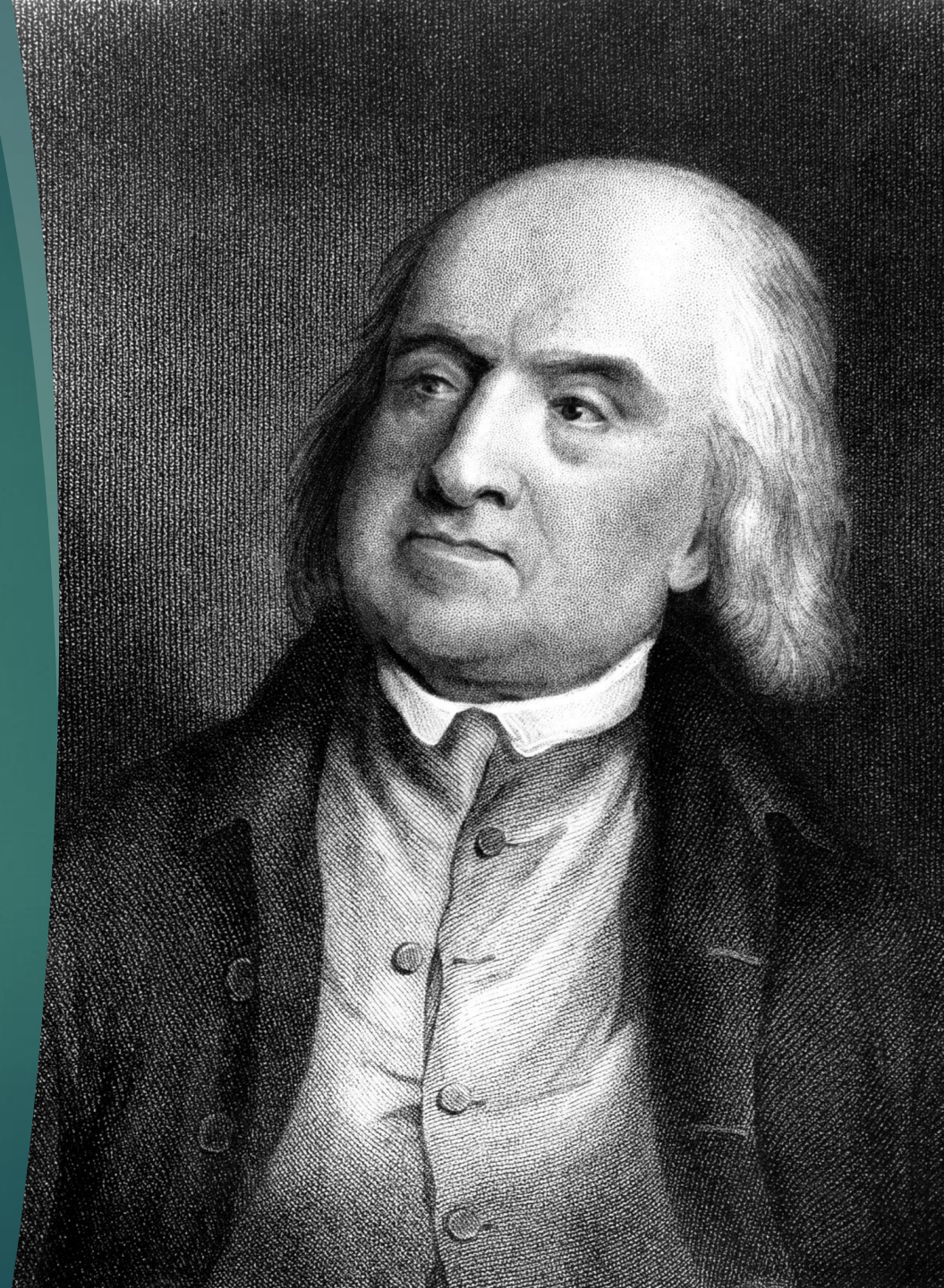
# Reading for Wednesday 8/4

- ▶ Jeremy Bentham - An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (selections)
- ▶ Adam Smith - The Theory of Moral Sentiments (selections)
- ▶ Onora O'Neill on Immanuel Kant's Ethics
- ▶ Robert Böhm, Isabel Thielmann and Benjamin E. Hilbig - The Brighter the Light, The Deeper the Shadow



# Jeremy Bentham - An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (selections)

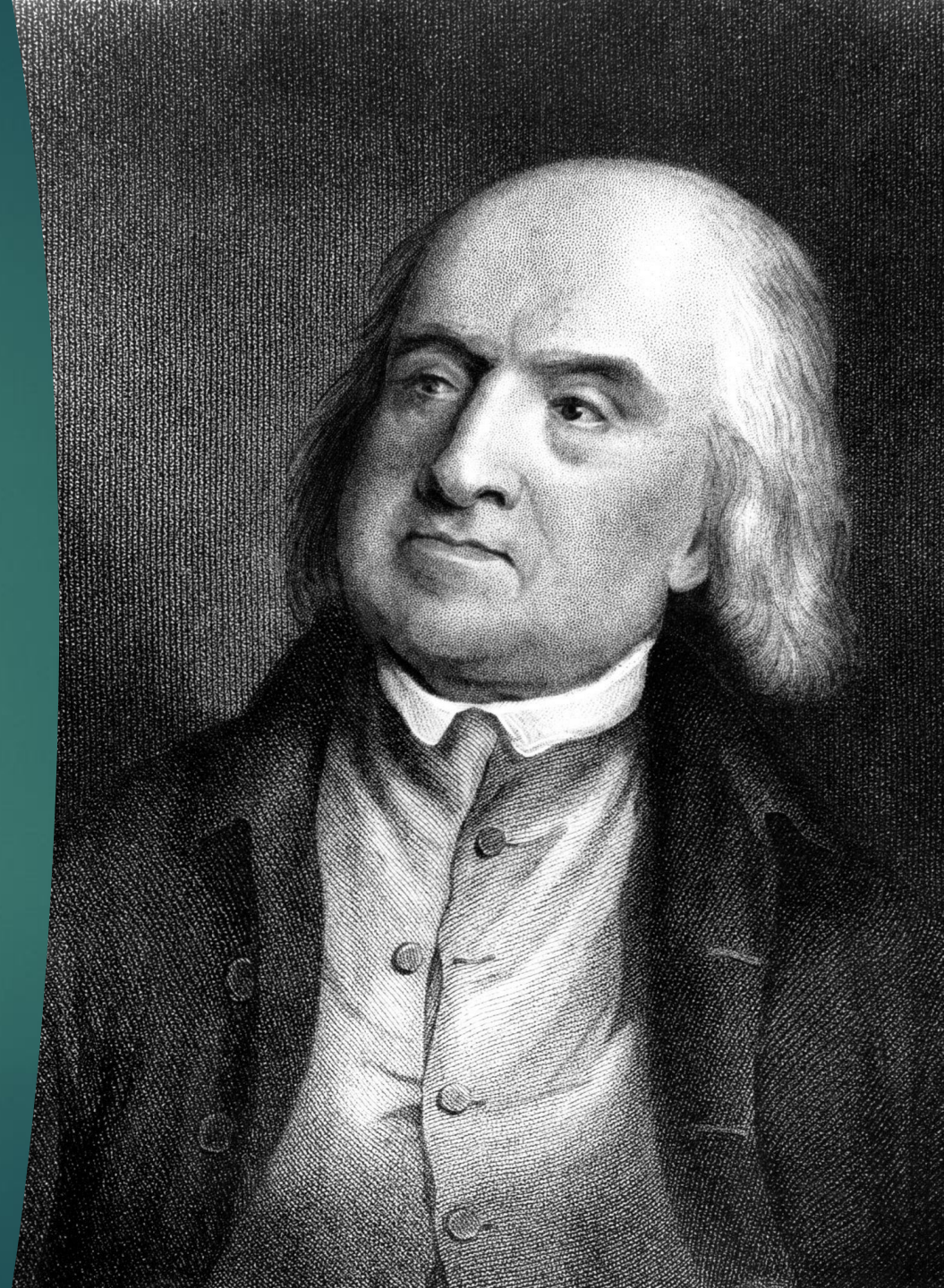
- ▶ “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of...pain and pleasure.”
- ▶ **Principle of Utility** – The principle “which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency which it appears to have to **augment or diminish the happiness** of the party whose interest is in question.”
- ▶ “The community is a **fictitious body**...the interest of the community is...the sum of the interests of the several members...” [alternative views?]





# Jeremy Bentham - An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (selections)

- ▶ An action is **good** when “the **tendency** it has to augment the happiness of the community is **greater** than any it has to diminish it.”
- ▶ Except by reference to the principle of utility, words like “ought,” “right,” and “wrong” have no meaning, and to use them would be **subjective** (6).
  - ▶ Experiment: can we measure how much we like something? Pizza?





# Adam Smith - The Theory of Moral Sentiments (selections)

- ▶ People take into account **the reactions of those around them** when they make moral decisions, but we do this by means of an “impartial spectator”
  - ▶ We tend to seek approval and avoid disapproval from this hypothetical spectator.
- ▶ Moral intuitions are prior to general rules
  - ▶ General rules are “loose and inaccurate”



# Adam Smith - The Theory of Moral Sentiments (selections)

- ▶ “What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue? All government is but an **imperfect remedy** for the deficiency of these.”
- ▶ Prudence: sacrificing current pleasure for a greater degree of future pleasure.





# Adam Smith - The Theory of Moral Sentiments (selections)

It is thus that the general rules of morality are formed. They are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve or disapprove of. We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions, because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed by finding from experience that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of.





# Onora O'Neill on Immanuel Kant's Ethics

- ▶ The Categorical Imperative (Formula of the End in Itself) – “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity...**never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.**”
- ▶ Act as though the maxim (principle) of your action applied to everyone.
  - ▶ Example: should you share your food with hungry people?
- ▶ Never use others as “mere means” to an end.



# Böhm, Thielmann and Hilbig - The Brighter the Light, The Deeper the Shadow

- ▶ Prior research emphasizing the positive aspects of in-group morality (e.g. cooperation, fairness and altruism) fails to account for “the dramatic negative consequences of (opposing) moral convictions for human interactions.”
- ▶ “the presence of a morally opposing out-group is a **central criterion of ingroup identification**” (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013)
- ▶ “introducing morality into intergroup conflict has the destructive potential to **override the human aversion of doing harm to others**”
- ▶ “members of morality-based out-groups are **easily dehumanized**”



# Böhm, Thielmann and Hilbig - The Brighter the Light, The Deeper the Shadow

- ▶ “the immoral behaviors of the in-group toward morality-based out-groups...are reframed such that the **mistreatment of (alleged) moral opponents becomes psychologically more acceptable.**”
- ▶ As soon as several individuals with shared moral convictions form opposing groups, the moral foundation [becomes] **a basis for long-term intergroup conflict and violence**, which aims at **actively harming out-group members** rather than at restoring cooperative social interactions.
- ▶ This inherent link might even have co-evolved as suggested by the theory of **parochial altruism** (e.g., Choi & Bowles, 2007).