Perspectives on Ethics

CS489 Computer Ethics and Social Issues

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A big caveat

- I have no expertise whatsoever on the branch of philosophy that deals with ethics 🤪

- They say the person who read a few ~~Wikipedia articles~~ books and think he/she knows the subject is the most dangerous…

Do you want (try) to be a good person?

Why?

Ethics

- "a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct." [Wikipedia]

- Broadly speaking, there are three areas of study in ethics

  - Meta-ethics

  - Normative Ethics

  - Applied Ethics

Meta-ethics

- Meta-ethics questions how we think about ethics (hence meta)

    - "Is it okay to buy bread then throw it away when there are people who are starving?": a question of ethics

    - "Is it ever possible to obtain true knowledge of what is good and what is bad?": a question of meta-ethics

Moral Skepticism

- Moral skepticism states that:

  - we cannot justify believing that any moral claims are true, and

  - we never know that any moral claims are true

- This has a long running history, starting with…

Pyrrhonism (BC 4)

- The first serious skepticism in western philosophy. Pyrrho was a contemporary of Alexander the Great.

- Things Pyrrhonism suspects include:

  - Induction: why does it generalise? and how do we know the same pattern will repeat in the future?

  - Munchausen Trilemma: proofs are either 1) circular, 2) regressive (i.e. continues infinitely), or 3) dependent on an axiom (accepted without any proof)

Pyrrhonism (BC 4)

- Pyrrhonism is Epicurean: it pursues ataraxia, the state of mind not disturbed by anything, as it avoids pain and only accepts pleasure (note that the real Epicurean pleasure is one of mind, not the physical pleasure)

- The mind reaches this peaceful state by suspending beliefs about anything that is *not evident.*

- And they argue that moral claims are not evident -> suspend beliefs about them -> moral skepticism…

Normative Ethics

- norm: n. *a standard or pattern, especially in social behaviour, that is typical or expected. a required standard.*

- normative: *adj. relating to, or derived from a standard or norm*

- Normative ethics: the branch of ethics that studies what the expected behaviour should be, how, and why

Virtue as Ethics (Socrates)

- The importance of self-knowledge: knowing oneself means knowing every fact and context that is relevant to one's existence.

  - Someone knowing all consequences of one's action cannot commit a crime: evil actions simply mean that the actor is ignorant.

  - A wise man knows what is right, does what is good, and therefore becomes happy :)
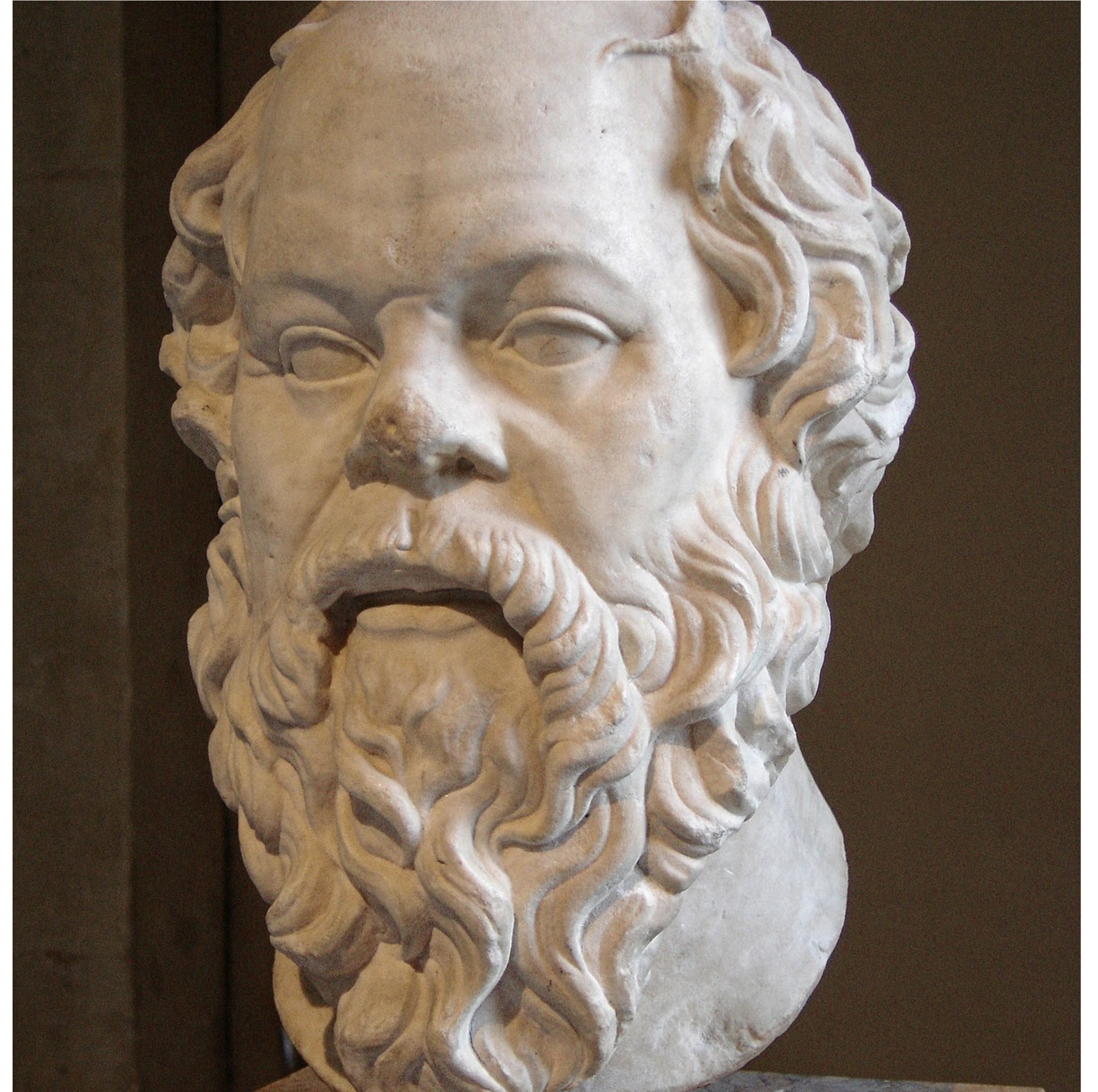
Stoicism (Zeno)

- Aspires to achieve apatheia, the state of mind that is undisturbed by passion

- External things, such has wealth, happiness, and even health, are not good or bad in themselves

- Destructive emotions results from not accepting the nature's way
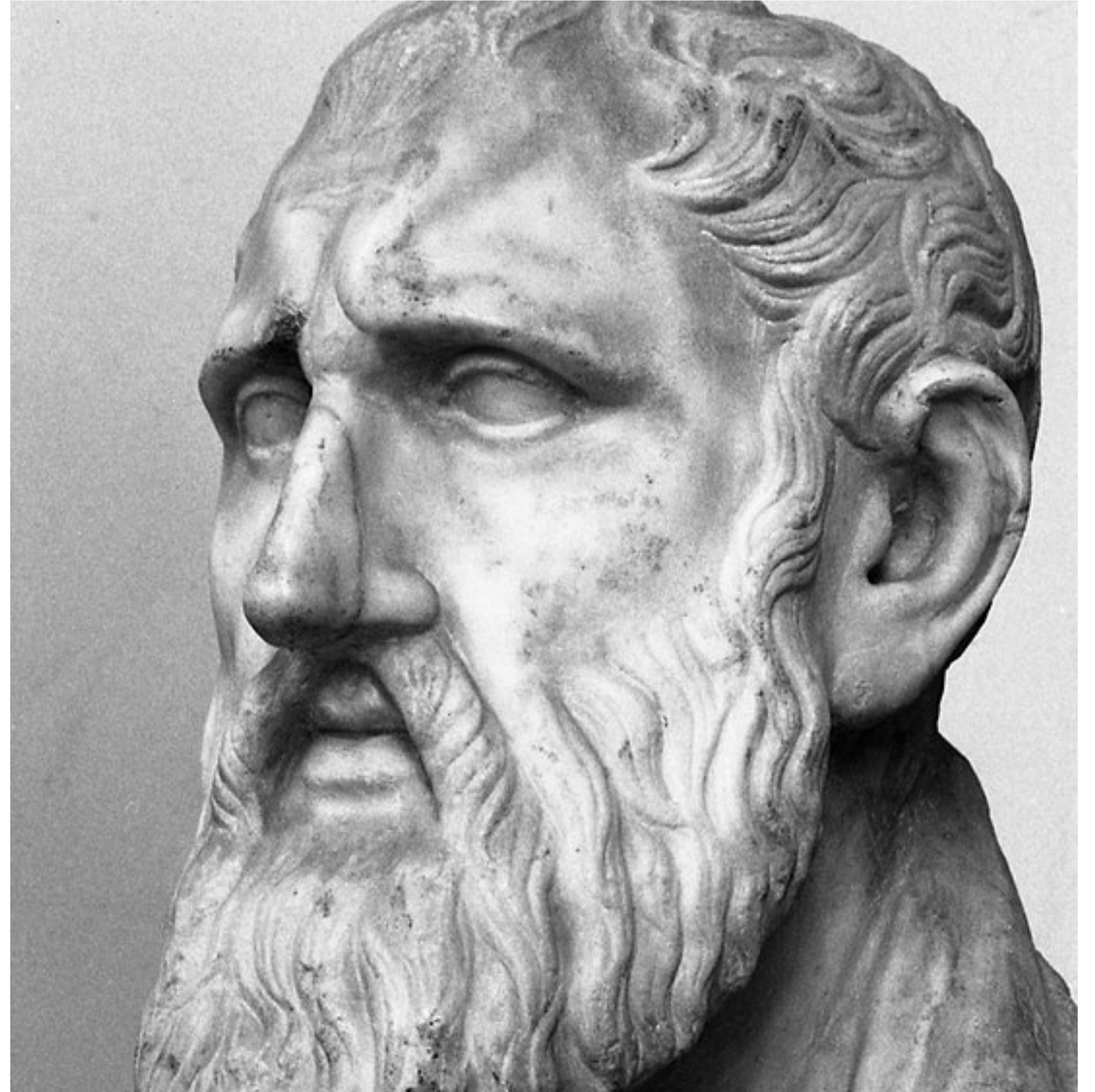
Three Major Views

- There are many, many branches in ethics, but we are going to discuss the major three (taking cue from Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, 1847):

  - Hedonism

  - Consequentialism (utilitarianism)

  - Deontological Ethics

Hedonism

- An individual should act in the way that maximises one's pleasure and minimises one's pain

- Sidgwick argues that pleasure cannot guide one's action because:

  - empirically you cannot compare pleasure and pain on a single dimension

  - "common sense" rules about general pleasure may not apply to everyone and every case

 - there are no scientific study of pleasure and pain

Consequentialism

- Any moral judgement against a particular action should be based on the *consequence* of that action

  - "All's well that ends well" - Shakespeare

  - "The end justifies the means"

- We tend to get the impression of a ruthless Machiavellian from the above, but it is not all gloom.

Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism argues that the morally correct action is the one that maximises the welfare/ happiness in those who are affected by the action

- "The greatest happiness of the greatest number" - Jeremy Bentham
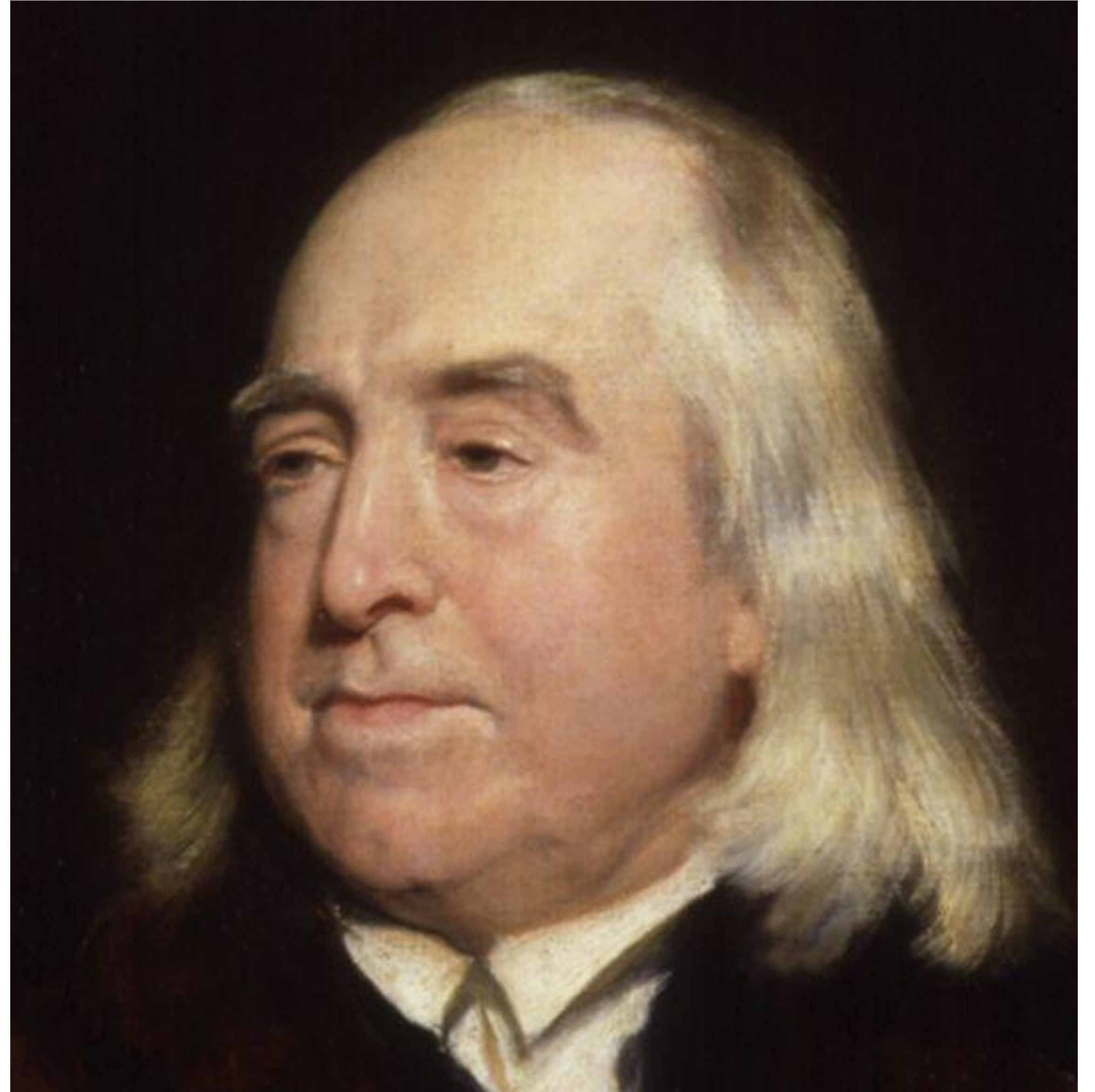
Utility and Hedonism

- Bentham endorses psychological egoism, i.e., the view that all humans are motivated by self interest and selfishness.

- He even introduces calculus of happiness, categorising pleasure into fourteen different types 😨

- But Bentham acknowledges that every human, regardless of gender, class, and race, is one hedonistic being. This provides the basis for the "greatest happiness" principle.

- He was a hard-working reformist, supporting law and prison reform, gender balance, and even animal rights (18C).

Bentham's Legacy

- John Stuart Mill extended Utilitarianism by distinguishing higher/lower pleasure.

- Bentham and his followers had great influence in foundation of University College London, the first university that accepted students regardless of gender and religion.

- Bentham is preserved(!) at University College London.

Deontological Ethics

- Deontology is the study of duty and obligations.

- Deontological ethics considers actions and rules to determine value, rather than the final consequence.

- An action can be good only if the principle behind it is the duty to the moral law.

- Consequence can be measured afterwards: where do we get the moral law?
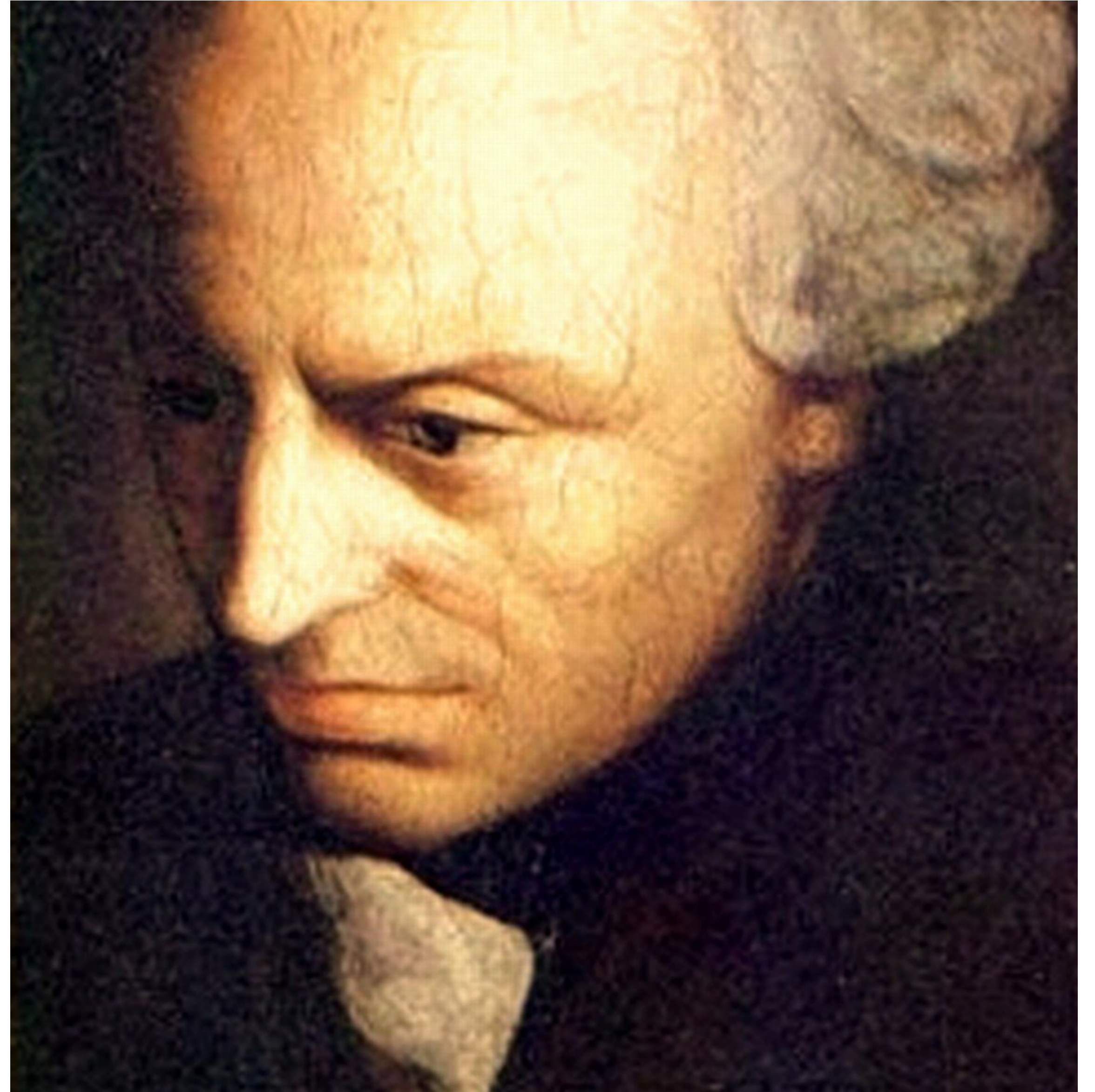
Divine Command Theory

- Some deontologists naturally depend on *religion* as the basis of their guidelines.

- God's command becomes a duty, hence moral obligations arise.

Moral and Rationality

- Kant argues for good will, something that is intrinsically good, without any qualification. Hedonistic causes and utility cannot be intrinsically good: what if one's pleasure comes from another's pain?

- Kant argues that, just as physical laws exist prior to physical being, rational laws (morality) exist prior to rational being. It does not depend on, or change according to, circumstances.

Categorical Imperatives

- Act only according to the maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

- Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

- A rational being must always regard himself as giving laws either as member or as sovereign in a Kingdom of Ends which is rendered possible by the freedom of will.

Criticisms

- Sidgwick criticises deontology of Kant that it focuses too much on formalism: surely sometimes a purpose based on utility can play a role in ethics?

- Hegel similarly points out that Kant tells you not to be contradictory, but does not tell you what to do.

- Nietzsche suspects the very foundation of Katian ethics: that reason is not special and just one of human instincts, and that pure reason does not impose any moral authority.

Theories of Ethics

- We have no unified theory; some of you may think that it is simply impossible to have such a thing.

- Nonetheless, knowing a bit of history and theory gives you building blocks for your own attitude.

- A same event can be interpreted differently, perhaps even using the same viewpoint.

An Example

- While driving to work, Shin feels very hungry. Spotting a McDonald's, he parks the car on the street, goes in, and eats something. He comes out and drives away.

- Is anything wrong?

...

- An Epicurean: one person was hungry, now he is not - nothing is wrong here.

- A Stoic: Shin should have transcended the pain of hunger and simply gone to work without stopping - his mind is weak.

- Consequentialist: in the end, the illegal parking did not obstruct anyone - McDonand's is richer by the price of one burger, Shin is not hungry anymore, so all is good.

- Deontologist: he knowingly parked the car on the street, violating the traffic regulations, a rule is a rule, and a rational man will live by what is agreed upon as a rule, there is nothing intrinsically good about having to fix his hunger immediately, the meat industry is immoral after all…

Every night, several times a night, Uber and Lyft drivers at Reagan National Airport simultaneously turn off their ride share apps for a minute or two to trick the app into thinking there are no drivers available---creating a price surge. When the fare goes high enough, the drivers turn their apps back on and lock into the higher fare.

It's happening in the Uber and Lyft parking lot outside Reagan National airport. The lot fills with 120 to 150 drivers sometimes for hours, waiting for the busy evening rush. And nearly all the drivers have one complaint: "Uber doesn't pay us enough, what the company is doing is defrauding all these people by taking 35-40 percent," one driver told ABC 7.
"They are taking all this money because there's no system of accountability," another unidentified driver said.

ABC7's Sam Sweeney asks: "Do all you guys agree with that?"
"Yes, yes, yes, yes!!!!," the driver says.

Exercise

- This practice is called "surge hacking"

  - Uber/Lyft increases prices when supply cannot match demands (called price surge)

  - Called "hacking", because drivers are deliberately exploiting the given system

- Do you support, or disapprove, the practice? Use a specific ethical viewpoint to back your claim.

- Discuss with those next to you for 5 minutes, see if you can reach an agreement.

- Post to #discussion on Slack, along with your names

What does science say?

- Regardless of metaphysical theories, people (sometimes) act morally, or selflessly.

- Explaining altruism has been one of the long time challenges in evolutionary biology.

- Parents care for their offsprings, without any immediate benefit. Some birds warn others in the group by making a sound, even if it increases the risk of being found out by the predator. Why?

Kin Selection (Hamilton, '64)

- Genetically related individuals cooperate, because survival advantage to one individual also benefits the kin who share some of the genes.

- An important underlying assumption is that individuals should be able to recognise one's kin. Many explanations exist for this.

- Inclusive fitness: evolutionary success is measured not only by offsprings one leaves, but also by offspring equivalents that one supports.

Group/Multi-level Selection (D.S. Wilson & Sober,'94)

- Inclusive Fitness cannot explain some of the social behaviour, such as the advances of human civilisation that far surpasses kinship.

- If a group shares similar traits that give its members advantage, groups can also be the unit of evolutionary selection.

- Multi-Level Selection argues that selection takes place at all levels: genes, cells, organisms, and groups.

Gene-Culture Coevolution

- GC Coevolution is the notion that human evolution is now based on two evolutionary system: one that works with genes, and another that works through culture. It implies cultural group selection.

- An individual is affected both genetically and culturally.

  - A related field would be memetic (Dawkins, '76), which studies "memes" as the discrete replicators

Reconciliation of Ethics and Science

- GC Coevolution and the Dual Inheritance Theory (DIT) suggest that both individual selfishness and group selection is at play for the evolution of a social behaviour

- All elements of philosophical discussion of ethics are also relevant here (caveat: strictly my personal take, do not theorise…)

  - Hedonistic moral as individual selfishness

  - Consequentialism as the basis for kin selection

  - Deontology works with group/cultural selection

Ethics in Modern World

- Both the society itself and our relationships within it are now so much more complicated than the time of Kant.

- Even if you can be sure of some ethical value, the actual "practice" takes place in the real world…

  - …in which every action affects almost everyone else.

Belief vs. Non-belief
(Eco & Martini, '96)

- This is a book of four questions and answers between Catholic cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and the semiologist Umberto Eco.

- The Cardinal asks the final question: "Where do the non-believers find the light of the good?"

  - In other words, he is saying: *"we believers can <u>be good</u> by following the words of God - how do you find your moral compass if you do not have a religion?"*

- The answer from Eco was not only very powerful (to me) but also is (strangely) relevant to our discussion of computer ethics

Eco's Answer

- There are some fundamental concepts that all humans share, regardless of their culture.

  - We are bipeds that walk upright. It is therefore generally uncomfortable for all of us to be upside down. The shared discomfort gives us the sense of "constraints": we all hate being forced not to speak, not to eat, not to sleep, we all hate being confined, hit, and hurt.

- How do we extend the desire to avoid discomfort to the others?

  - Others are an inherent part of us. We all only exist through others: even criminals tend to do bad things in specific occasions, and seek other people's compliments, love, and respect in other times. Non-religious people behave morally because, essentially, they believe that life continues beyond individuals, and want their actions to matter afterwards.

Concluding Thoughts

- An AI agent does not share anything common with us. Can we still extend the same moral standard to AIs? Can AIs be morally responsible?

  - Can (should) the developer of the agent be morally responsible?

- Can social relationships become so vast, complex, and instantaneous, that considering the true utility and consequence of one's own action becomes impossible?

- Face to face interactions are rapidly being replaced with online interactions: does this erode the sense of duty in Kantian ethics in everyday life?