

Philosophy 3100: Ethical Theory

Topic I - What is Metaethics?:

I. What is Ethics?

II. What is Metaethics?

a. Evaluative Statements

b. Three Kinds of Question in Metaethics

III. What is Objectivity?

IV. Five Metaethical Theories

a. Moral Realism vs. Anti-Realism

b. Three Kinds of Anti-Realism

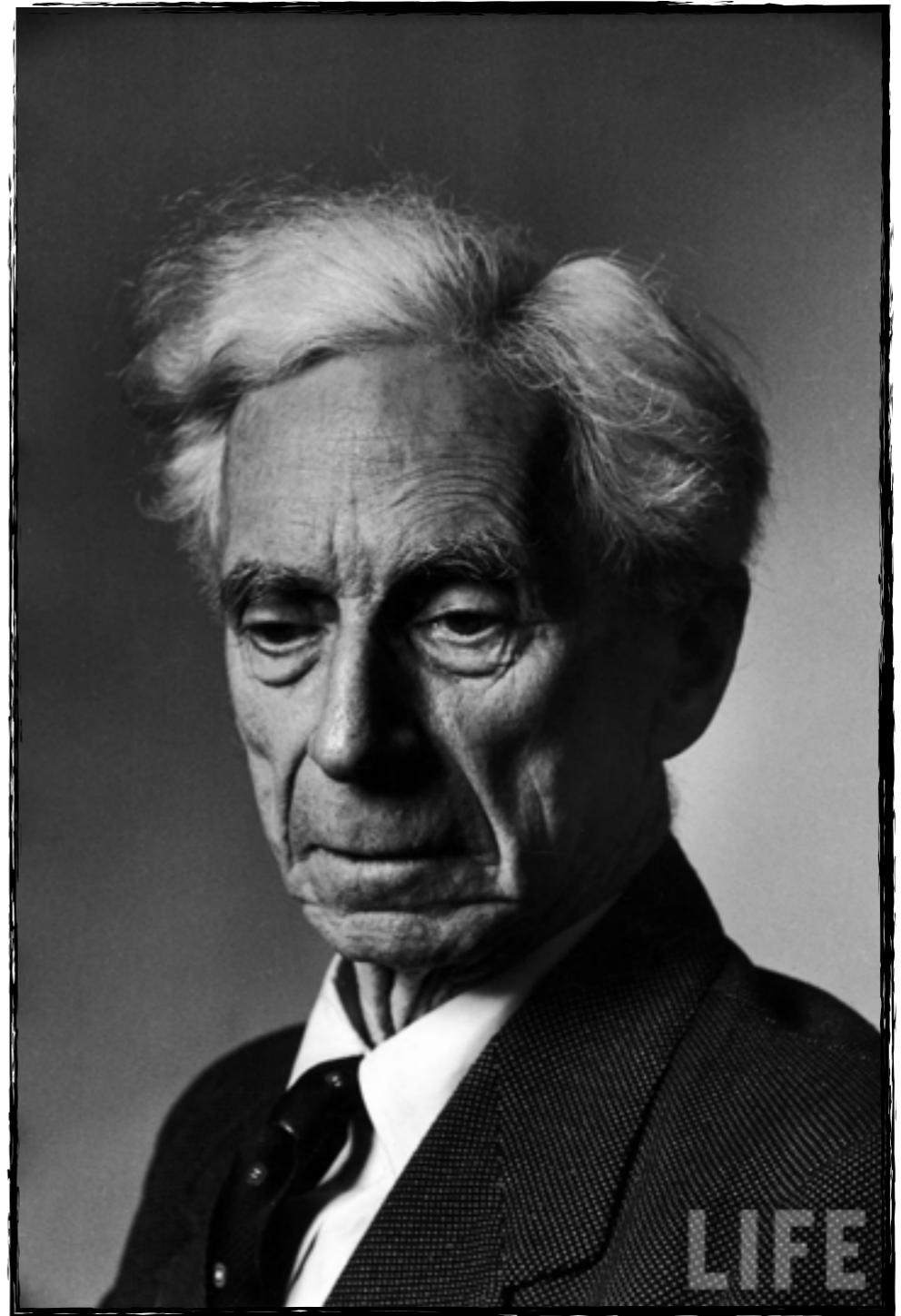
c. Two Kinds of Realism

What is Ethics?

The Three Main Areas of Ethics:

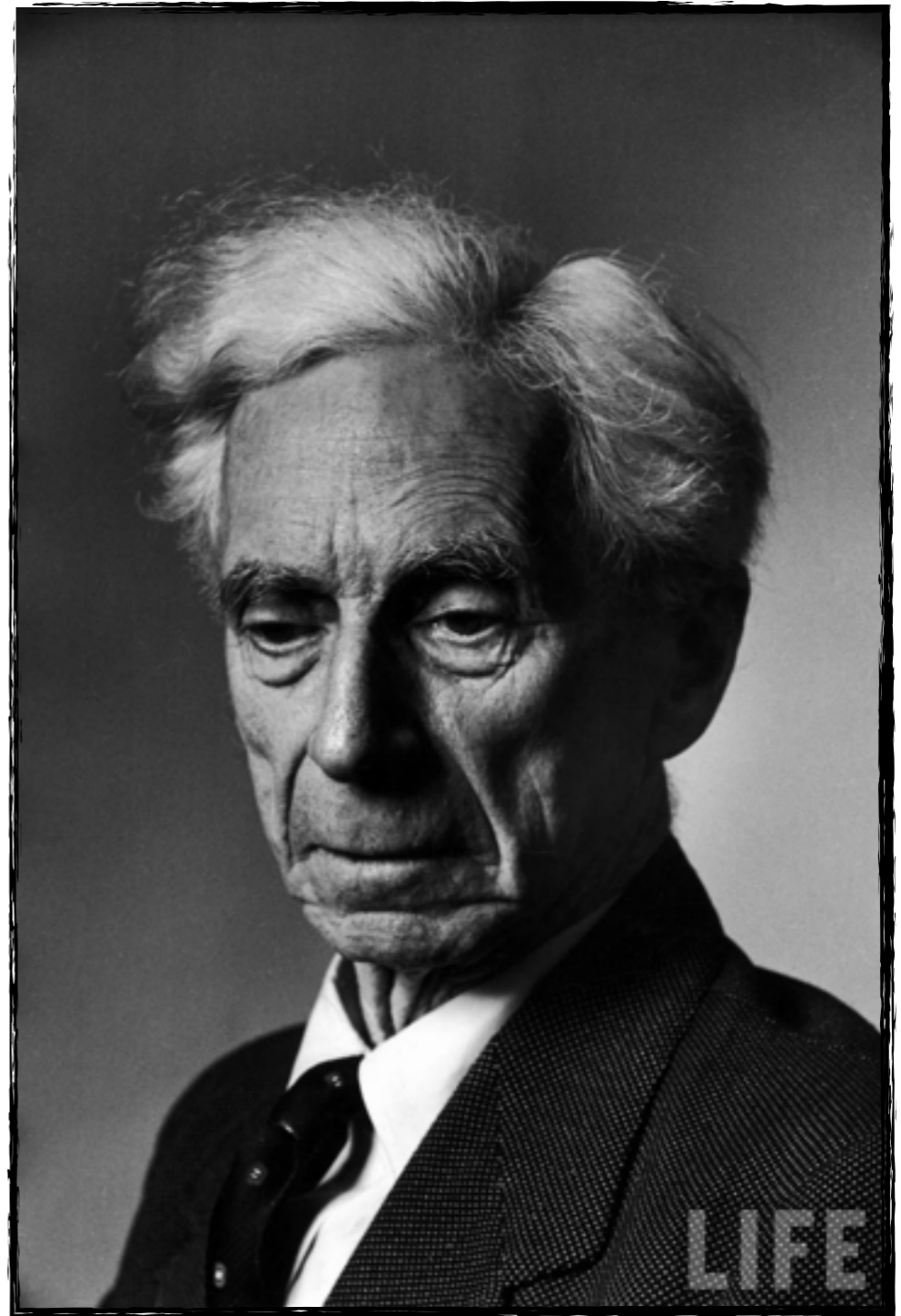
- Metaethics
- Normative Ethics - the attempt to discover the correct moral principles.
- Practical Ethics - the attempt to discover the answers to certain specific moral questions.

“At the age of fourteen I became convinced that the fundamental principle of ethics should be the promotion of human happiness, and at first this appeared to me so self-evident that I supposed it must be the universal opinion.



— Bertrand Russell
“My Religious Reminiscences”

Then I discovered, to my surprise, that it was a view regarded as unorthodox, and called Utilitarianism. I announced, no doubt with a certain pleasure in the long word, that I was a Utilitarian; but the announcement was received with derision.”



— Bertrand Russell
“My Religious Reminiscences”

What is Ethics?

The Three Main Areas of Ethics:

- Metaethics - the attempt to discover
 - (i) the meaning of moral claims
 - (ii) the nature of moral facts (if there are any)
 - (iii) how we can know moral facts.
- Normative Ethics - the attempt to discover the correct moral principles.
- Practical Ethics - the attempt to discover the answers to certain specific moral questions.

our class
is on
these two



What is Metaethics?

An **evaluative statement** (or normative statement) is a statement that inherently makes a positive or negative evaluation of something. (Huemer, p. 1)

This includes *deontic* and *axiological* statements.

Examples of deontic statements:

“What the teenagers did to the cat was **wrong**.”

“We have an **obligation** to take care of our parents when they get older.”

“It’s **morally permissible** not to give any money to charity.”

“If you make a promise, you **ought** to keep it.”

What is Metaethics?

An **evaluative statement** (or normative statement) is a statement that inherently makes a positive or negative evaluation of something. (Huemer, p. 1)

This includes *deontic* and *axiological* statements.

Examples of axiological statements:

“Friendship is good.”

“My life hasn’t been going well lately.”

“Why do bad things happen to nice people?”

“That was the best outcome that we could have hoped for.”

What is Metaethics?

An **evaluative statement** (or normative statement) is a statement that inherently makes a positive or negative evaluation of something. (Huemer, p. 1)

It also includes *aretaic* statements.

Examples of aretaic statements:

“Martin Luther King was a **great man.**”

“Patience is a **virtue.**”

“Sometimes bad things happen to **bad people.**”

“Lebron James is an **amazing basketball player.**”

What is Metaethics?

Three Central Kinds of Question in Metaethics:

Semantic Questions. What do evaluative statements and terms mean?

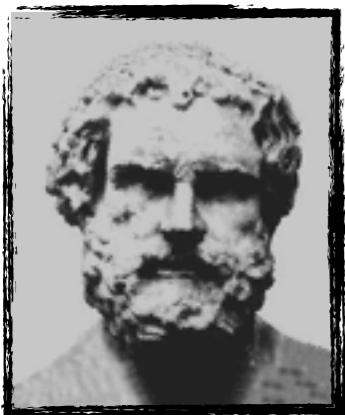
Metaphysical Questions. Are there evaluative properties and facts (in addition to our statements that appear to be talking about them)? If so, what are they like? Are they objective or subjective? Are evaluative properties natural properties, or something else?

Epistemological Questions. If and when some evaluative statement is true, how can we know this?

What is Objectivity?

A property is **subjective** (or attitude-dependent or response-dependent) just in case whether something has it constitutively depends at least in part on the psychological attitude that certain observers have or would have towards that thing.

A property is **objective** (or attitude-independent or response-independent) just in case it is not subjective.



“By convention color, by convention bitter, by convention sweet: in reality atoms and the void.”

— Democritus (460—370 B.C.E.)

Five Metaethical Theories

A **moral fact** exists whenever a thing has a moral property: namely, that fact that that thing has that property.

In metaethics, the main division is between:

Moral Realism: there are objective moral facts.

and

Moral Anti-Realism: there are no objective moral facts.

Five Metaethical Theories

There are three forms of Anti-Realism:

Subjectivism / Constructivism: there are moral facts but they are subjective facts (or response-dependent facts).

Non-Cognitivism: there are no moral facts; but moral statements aren't even trying to state facts; moral statements have some other function.

Nihilism: there are no moral facts; moral statements are trying to state facts; so all such statements are false

These are preliminary, rough, brief definitions; official definitions will appear later.

Five Metaethical Theories

There are two forms of Realism:

Reductionist Realism (Huemer: “Naturalism”): there are objective moral facts, but they are reducible to facts of another kind.

Non-Naturalism (Huemer: “Intuitionism”): there are objective moral facts, and they are irreducible.

These are preliminary, rough, brief definitions; official definitions will appear later.