

A vertical light streak on a black background, transitioning from a bright yellow center to a dark red outer edge. The streak is slightly blurred and has a grainy texture.

The Trolley





Utilitarianism: Important Concepts

JOHN STUART MILL

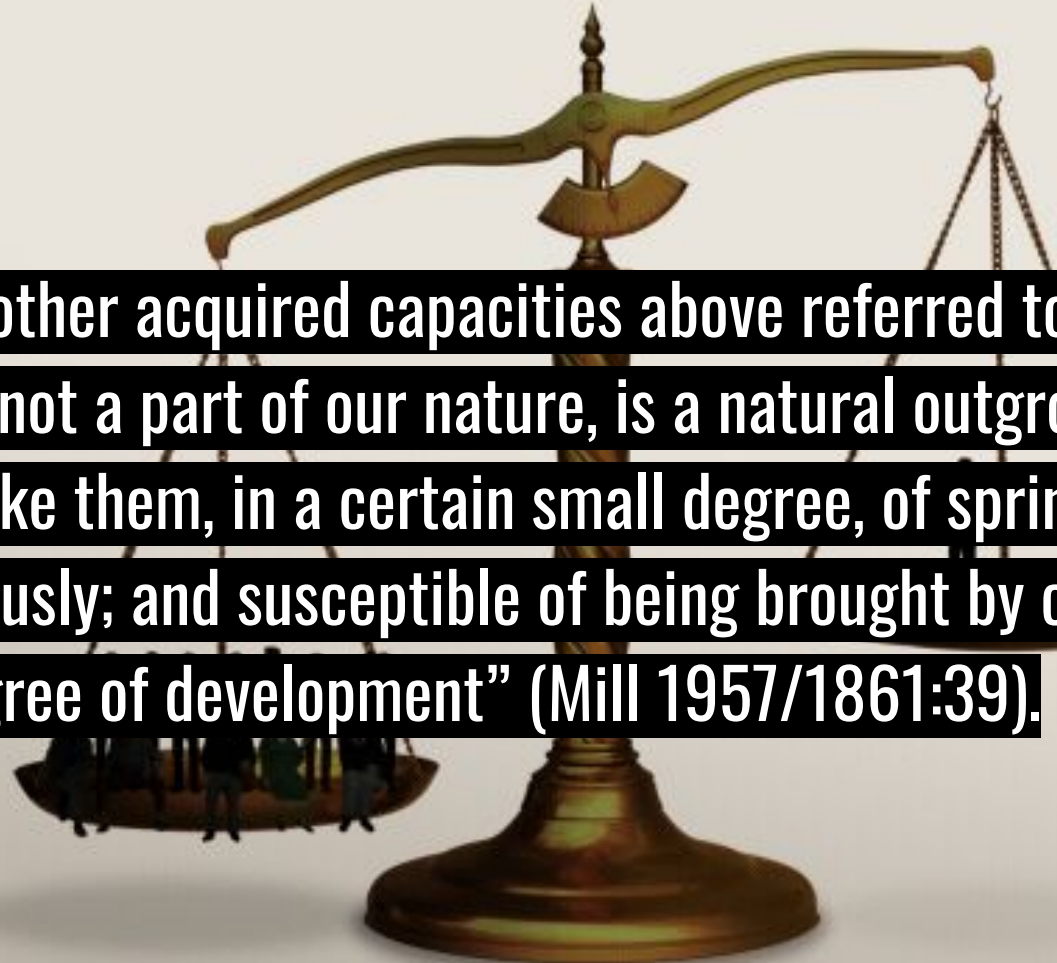
Utilitarianism



Edited by
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Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts



“Like the other acquired capacities above referred to, the moral faculty, if not a part of our nature, is a natural outgrowth from it; capable, like them, in a certain small degree, of springing up spontaneously; and susceptible of being brought by cultivation to a high degree of development” (Mill 1957/1861:39).



Naturalism, in Ethics, identifies some (or all) moral properties with some natural phenomenon.

E.g., the moral property GOOD just is the mental state of pleasure, which is a natural phenomenon, i.e., discoverable through science.





An **intrinsic good** is the type of thing that is good for its own sake, e.g.,

_____, _____, _____.

An **extrinsic good** is the type of thing that is good because of what it brings you, e.g., _____, _____, _____.

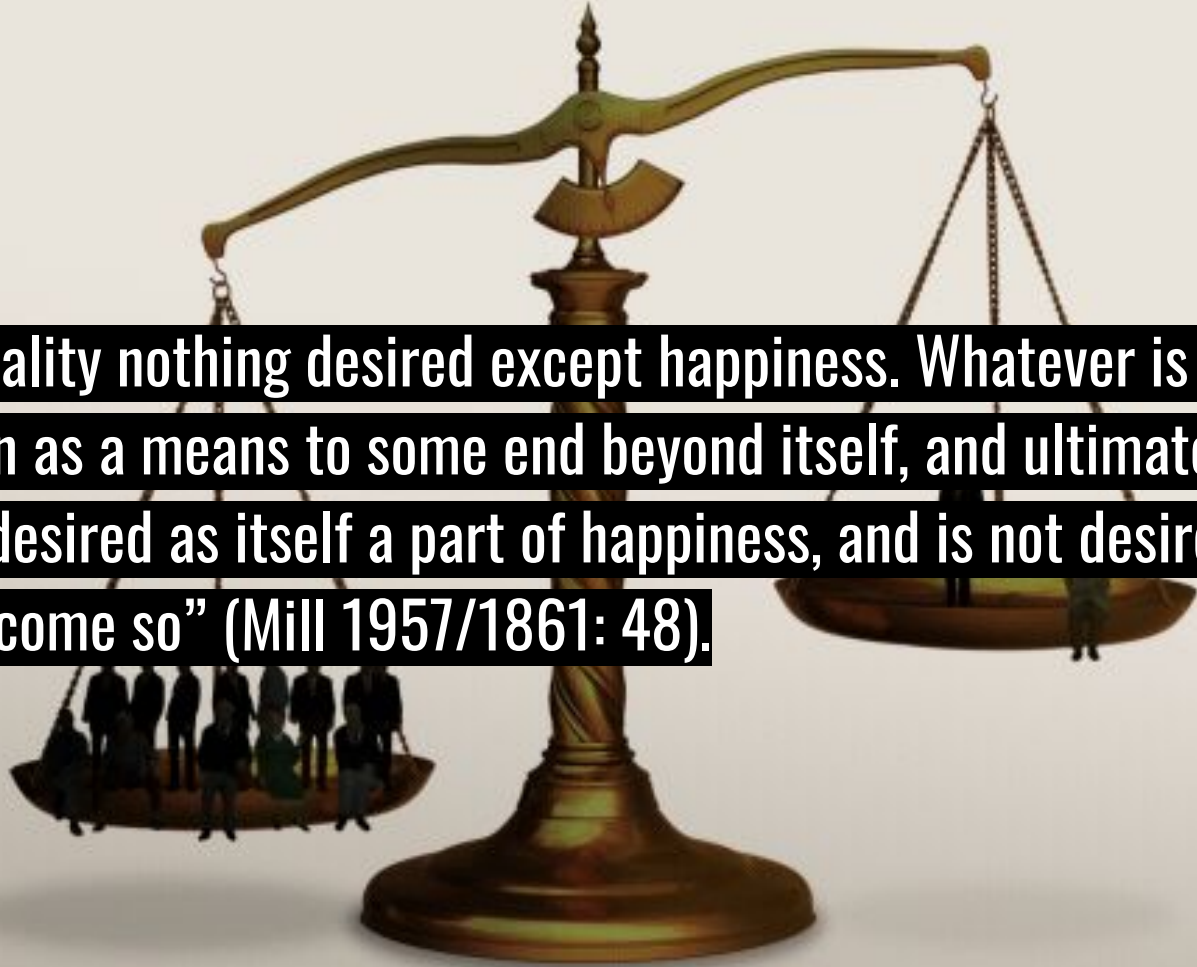
Some goods are both desired for their own sake and desired for their consequences.



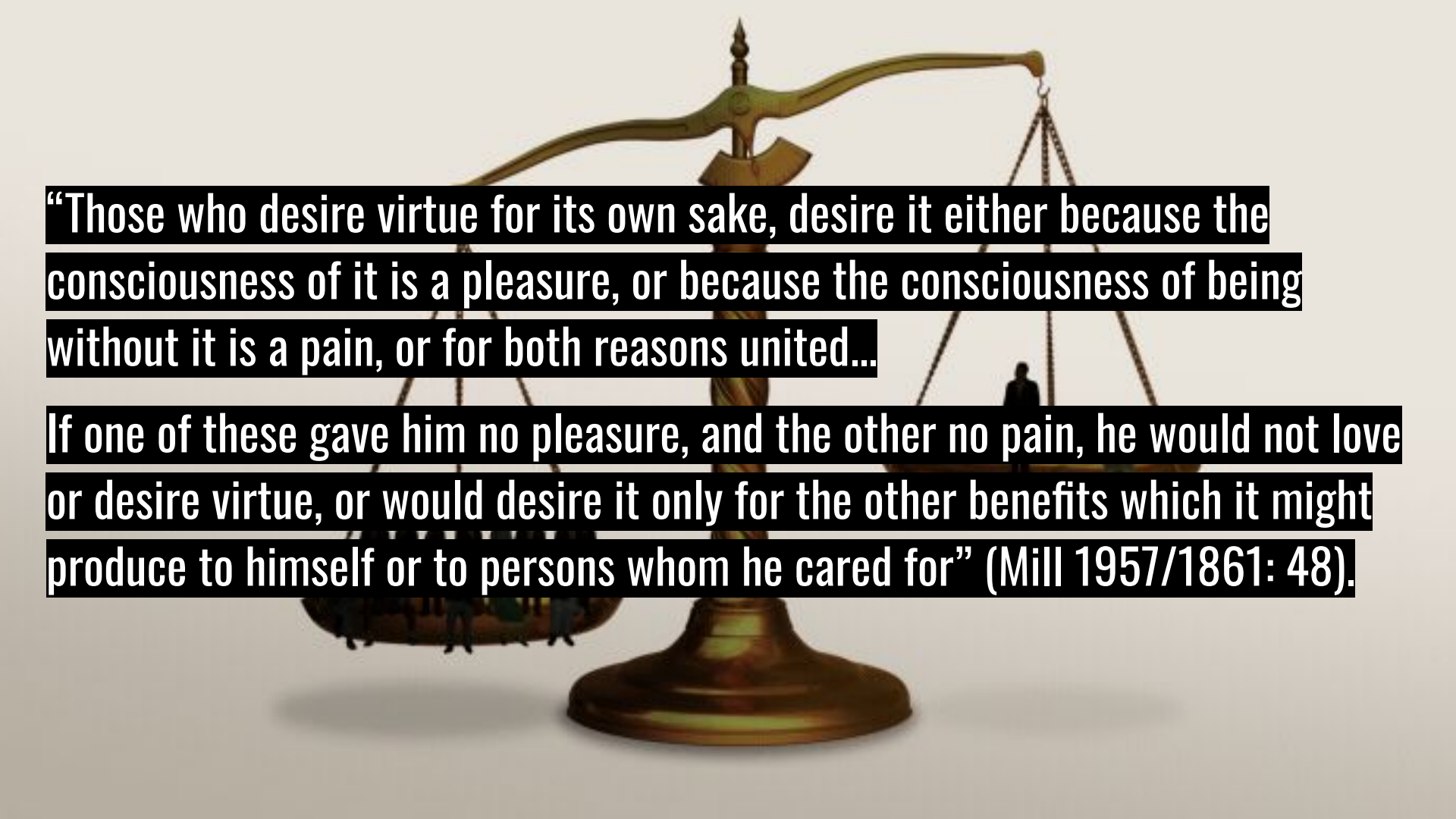
Hedonism is the view that the only thing that is good for its own sake is pleasure/happiness.

Mill considers Hedonism to be an empirical truth, i.e., a fact that can be verified.





“There is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so” (Mill 1957/1861: 48).



“Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united...

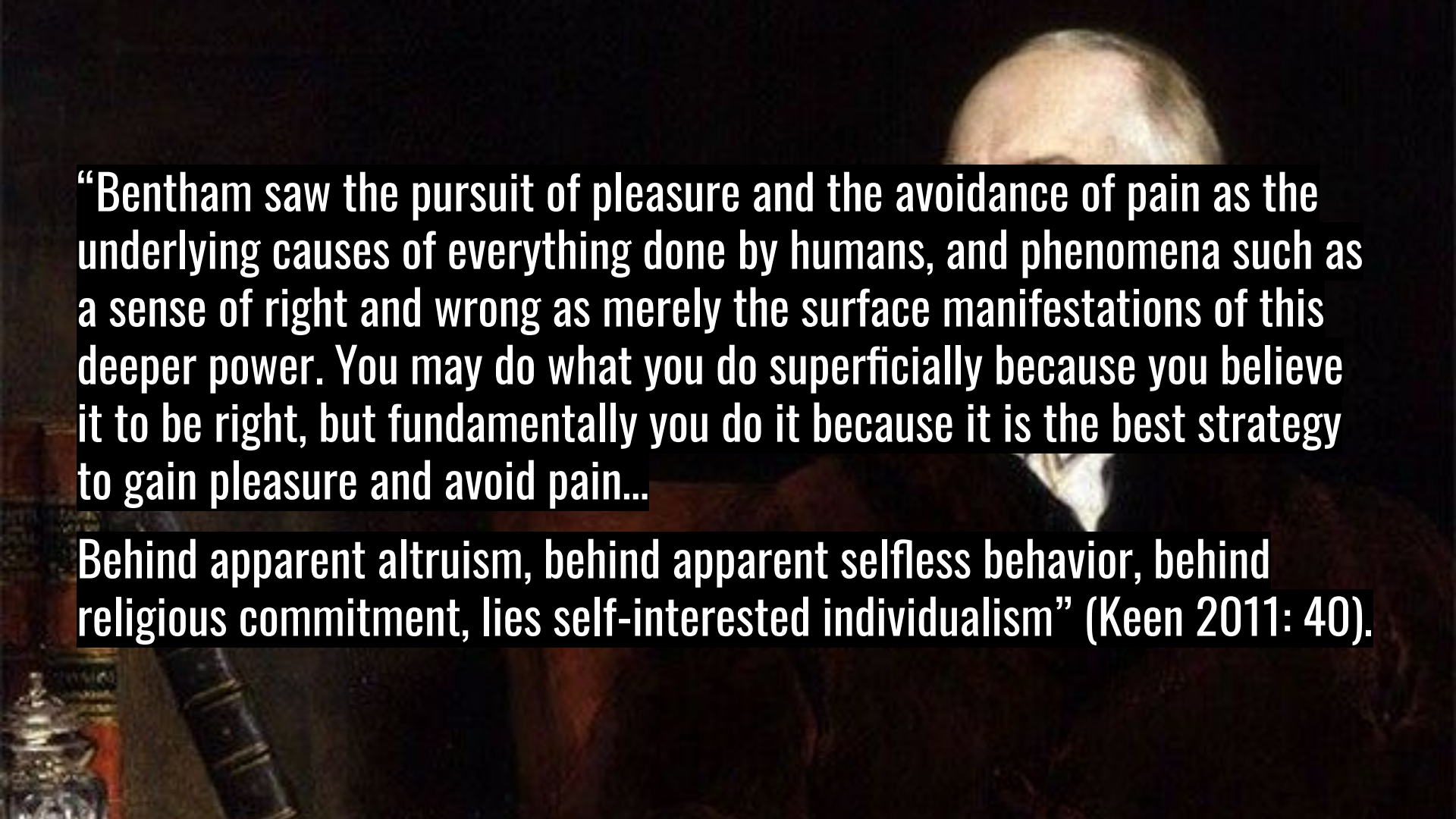
If one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for” (Mill 1957/1861: 48).



Aristotle

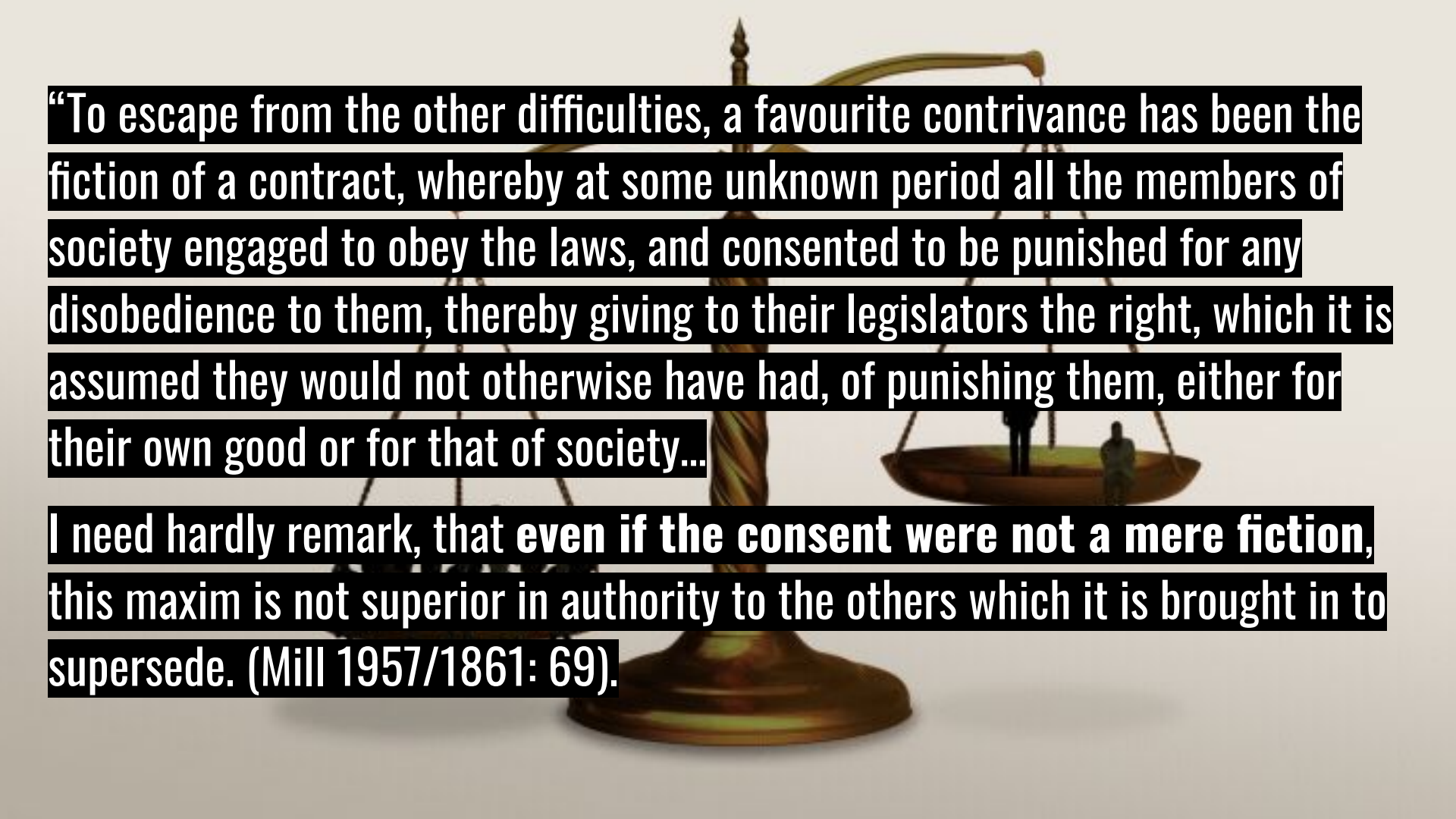
Mill not only critiques Aristotle, but also ethical egoism and social contract theory (and even some of the views of his utilitarian predecessors, like Bentham)...





“Bentham saw the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the underlying causes of everything done by humans, and phenomena such as a sense of right and wrong as merely the surface manifestations of this deeper power. You may do what you do superficially because you believe it to be right, but fundamentally you do it because it is the best strategy to gain pleasure and avoid pain...

Behind apparent altruism, behind apparent selfless behavior, behind religious commitment, lies self-interested individualism” (Keen 2011: 40).



“To escape from the other difficulties, a favourite contrivance has been the fiction of a contract, whereby at some unknown period all the members of society engaged to obey the laws, and consented to be punished for any disobedience to them, thereby giving to their legislators the right, which it is assumed they would not otherwise have had, of punishing them, either for their own good or for that of society...

I need hardly remark, that even if the consent were not a mere fiction, this maxim is not superior in authority to the others which it is brought in to supersede. (Mill 1957/1861: 69).

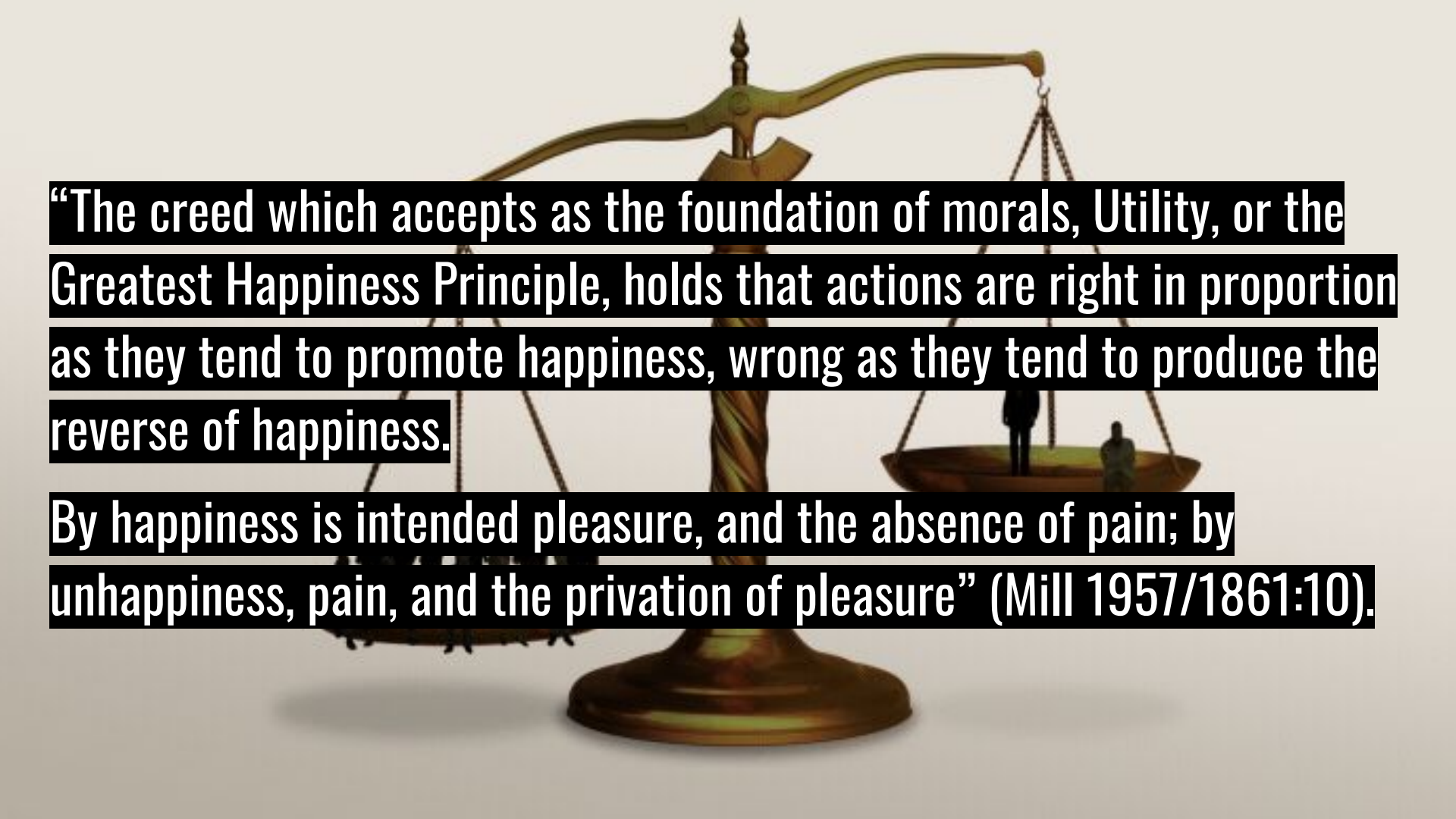
Deontology is the view that an action being right or wrong depends on the principle (or intention) that motivated the action.

Consequentialism is the view that an act is right or wrong depending on the consequences of that action.

The Principle of Utility is derived by combining hedonism and consequentialism.

It is as follows:

An act is morally right if, and only if, it maximizes happiness/pleasure and/or minimizes pain for all persons involved.

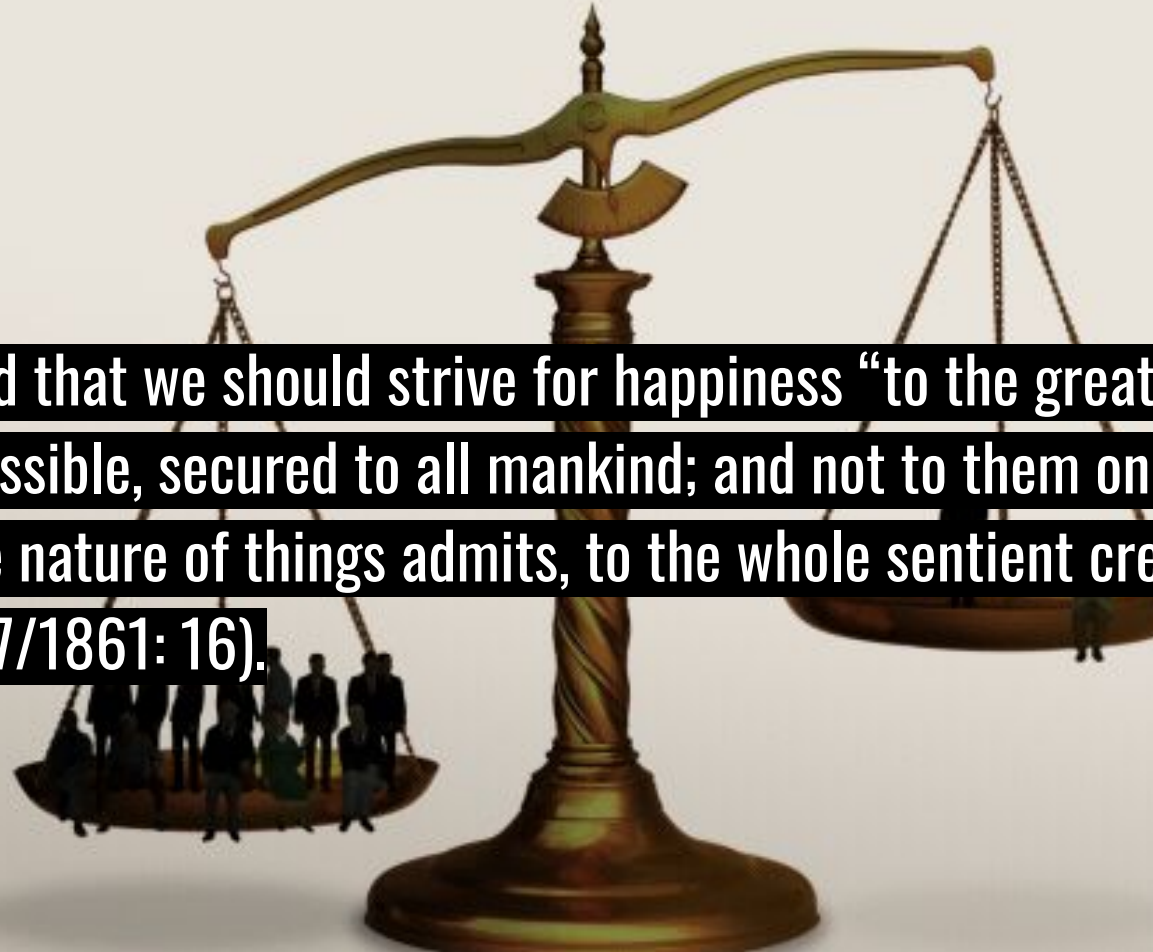


“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure” (Mill 1957/1861:10).

Where as Kant believe that personhood, i.e. moral rights, are assigned to anyone who is a Rational Being, i.e. able to live according to principles, Mill believed that all sentient creatures deserve rights.

Sentience is the capacity to feel pleasure and pain.

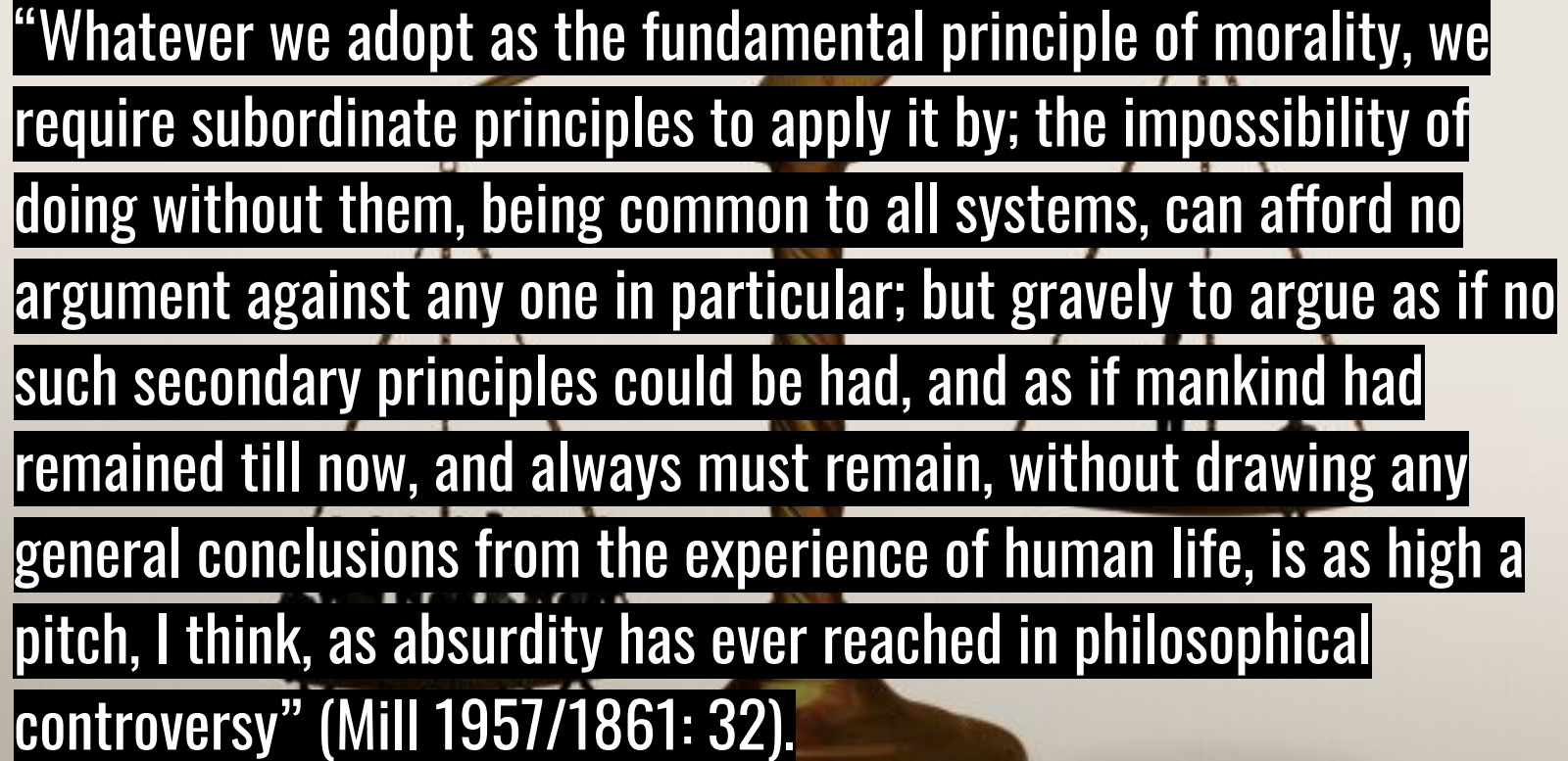
A golden scale of justice is shown against a light background. The scale is tilted, with the left pan being lower and containing a group of approximately ten small, dark silhouettes of people. The right pan is higher and contains a single, larger silhouette of a person. The scale's base is a thick, twisted column. The text is overlaid on the scale, centered horizontally.

He argued that we should strive for happiness “to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation” (Mill 1957/1861: 16).

Mill also endorses **subordinate rules**, or what we might call “common sense morality.”

According to Mill, these are rules that tend to promote happiness. They’ve been learned through the experience of many generations, and so we should internalize them as good rules to follow.

These rules include: Keep your promises, Don’t cheat, Don’t steal, Obey the Law, Don’t kill innocents, etc.

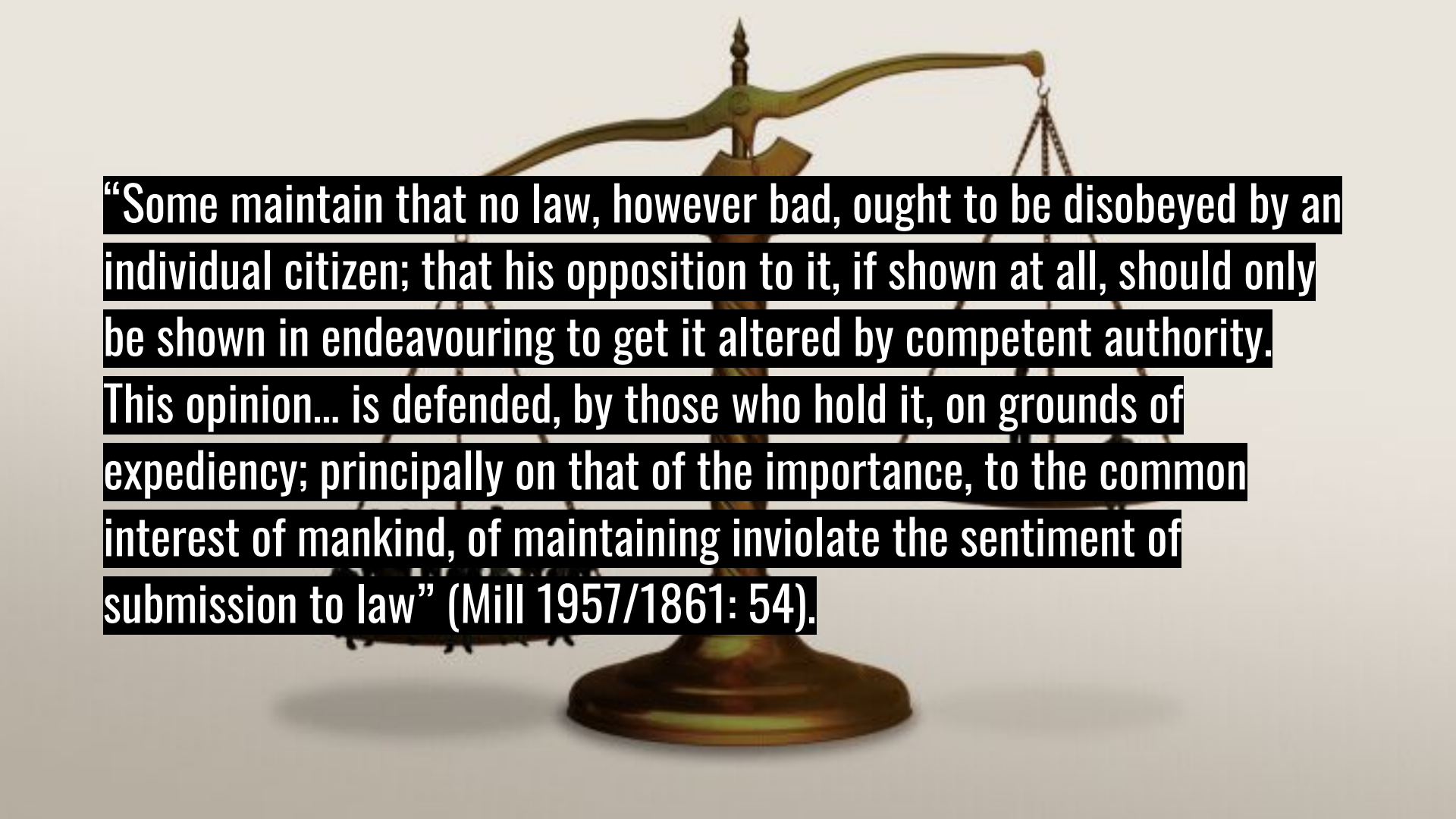
A brass scale of justice is visible in the background, centered behind the text. The scale has a curved beam with a hook at the end and a circular base. The lighting is soft, highlighting the metallic texture of the scale.

“Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by; the impossibility of doing without them, being common to all systems, can afford no argument against any one in particular; but gravely to argue as if no such secondary principles could be had, and as if mankind had remained till now, and always must remain, without drawing any general conclusions from the experience of human life, is as high a pitch, I think, as absurdity has ever reached in philosophical controversy” (Mill 1957/1861: 32).



However, note that if it is clear that breaking a subordinate rule would yield more happiness than keeping it, you should break said subordinate rule.





“Some maintain that no law, however bad, ought to be disobeyed by an individual citizen; that his opposition to it, if shown at all, should only be shown in endeavouring to get it altered by competent authority. This opinion... is defended, by those who hold it, on grounds of expediency; principally on that of the importance, to the common interest of mankind, of maintaining inviolate the sentiment of submission to law” (Mill 1957/1861: 54).

Famous Utilitarians



Malcolm X



Che Guevara



Spock

Problems

**The theory could
easily be
misapplied...**

The consequences of following a consequentialist theory could be negative.

The Near and Dear Argument

Consider your apartment building is on fire. You run in to save your spouse. On the way in, you hear the fireman yell, “Don’t do it! The building will collapse in 60s!” You run in anyway. As you search the building for him/her, you hear your neighbor call out for help. You happen to know that your neighbor is a world-renowned cancer researcher who’s on the verge of a major breakthrough. If this researcher survives the fire, she will likely find a cure for breast cancer and will save millions of lives. Right at that moment, you see your spouse too. Who do you save?

**“Though the application of the standard may be difficult,
it is better than none at all” (Mill 1957/1861: 33).**




The Experience Machine



“Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duperneuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.

Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? ...Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening... Would you plug in?”

-Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (p. 44-45)

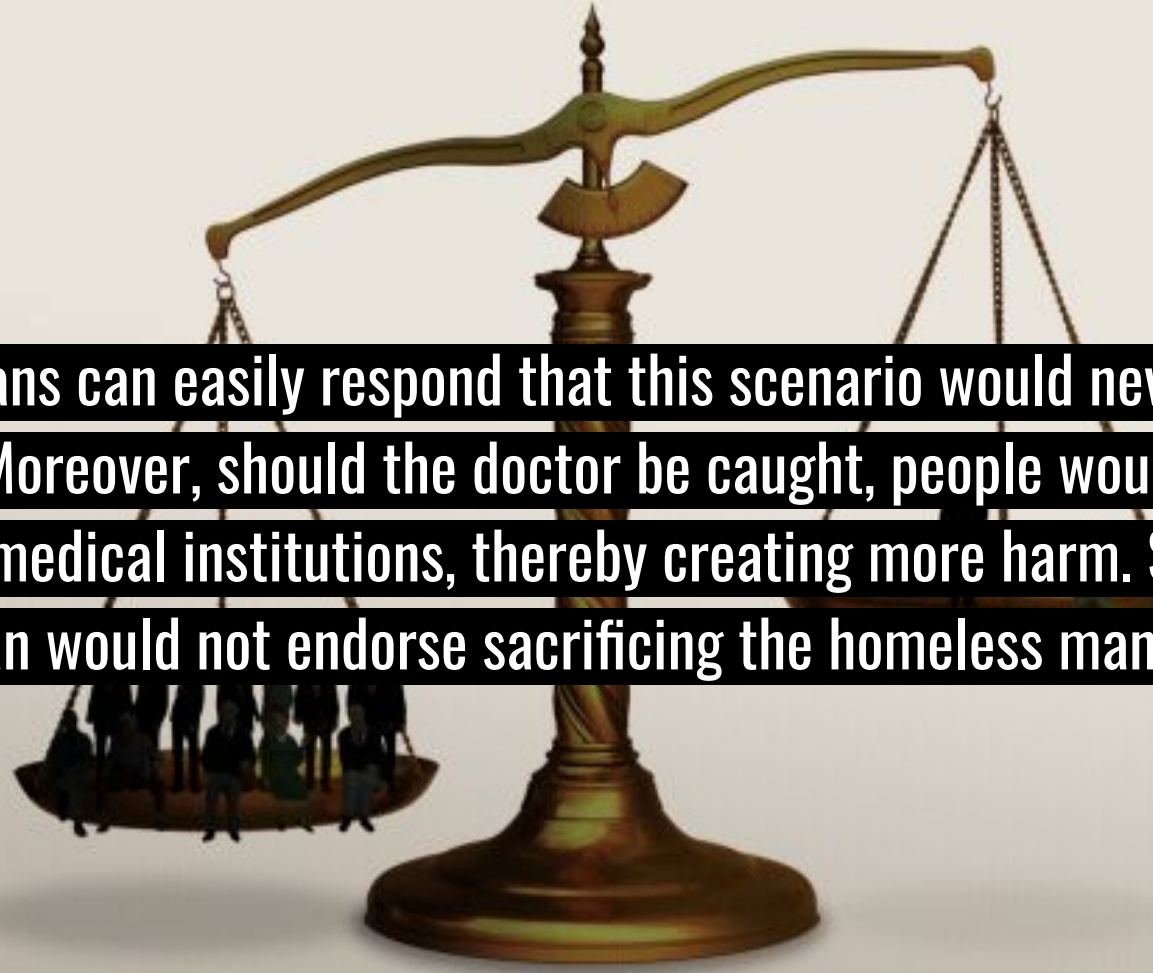
A golden scale of justice is shown against a light background. The scale is tilted to the right, indicating that the right pan is heavier. The left pan is higher and contains a group of approximately ten small human silhouettes. The right pan is lower and contains only one small human silhouette. A large, semi-transparent black text box is overlaid across the center of the image, containing white text.

Utilitarians can easily respond that we have responsibilities to the collective, not just ourselves. So, a utilitarian would not endorse entering the experience machine.

The Organ Harvest

You are a surgeon. You took a shift at a hospital you don't normally work at; you were just doing pro bono work. You see that there are five patients awaiting organ transplants, and you wish you can help them. Just then, the nurse calls you to see a walk-in patient. The man is homeless, has no family or friends, and is complaining of a foot ache. As you are reviewing his files, you notice that he is a perfect match for all 5 patients awaiting a transplant. You could, in theory, give the man a morphine overdose, providing a peaceful and painless death, and transplant his surprisingly healthy organs to the 5 patients, saving their lives. That is 5 lives for the price of one.

What should you do?

A golden scale of justice is shown against a light background. The scale is tilted, with the right pan higher than the left. On the left pan, a group of approximately ten small, dark human figures are standing. On the right pan, a single, larger human figure is standing. The scale's beam is curved, and the pans are suspended by chains. The base of the scale is a solid, rounded golden pedestal.

Utilitarians can easily respond that this scenario would never obtain. Moreover, should the doctor be caught, people would lose trust in medical institutions, thereby creating more harm. So, a utilitarian would not endorse sacrificing the homeless man.

“Thus, the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this; that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret... And thus a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands.”

~Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 490

The open question...

In *Principia Ethics*, G.E. Moore argued for moral non-naturalism, the view that moral properties cannot be studied with the natural sciences.

He used various arguments (such as the naturalistic fallacy argument, which many think was insufficient), but the open question argument is the most often referenced.



The Open Question

If “good” just means “pleasure”,
then we can express it like an identity claim.

Eg,

BACHELOR = UNMARRIED MALE

GOOD = PLEASURE

But it doesn't seem like asking “Is a bachelor an unmarried male?” is
the same as “Is good the same as pleasure?”



Food for thought...

Religious priming decreases the likelihood of one cheating ([Mazar et al. 2008](#)), even if the primes are subliminal ([Randolph-Seng and Nielsen 2007](#)).

It also increases generosity and cooperation ([Shariff and Norenzayan 2007](#), [Ahmed and Salas 2009](#)), as well as increases the likelihood of costly punishment to noncooperators ([McKay et al. 2011](#)).



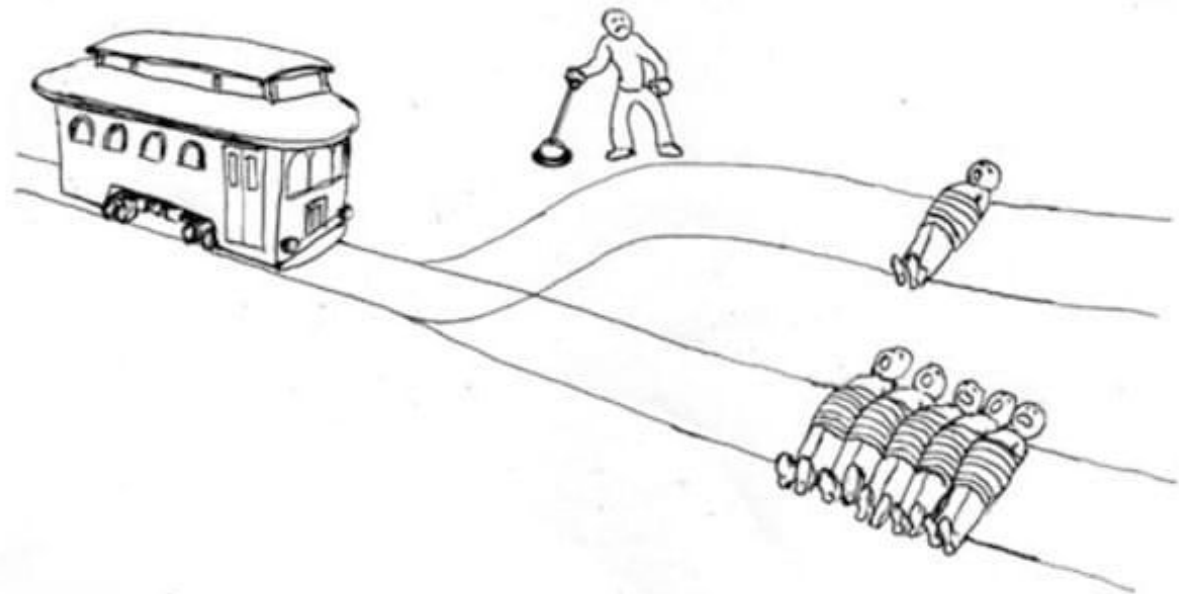


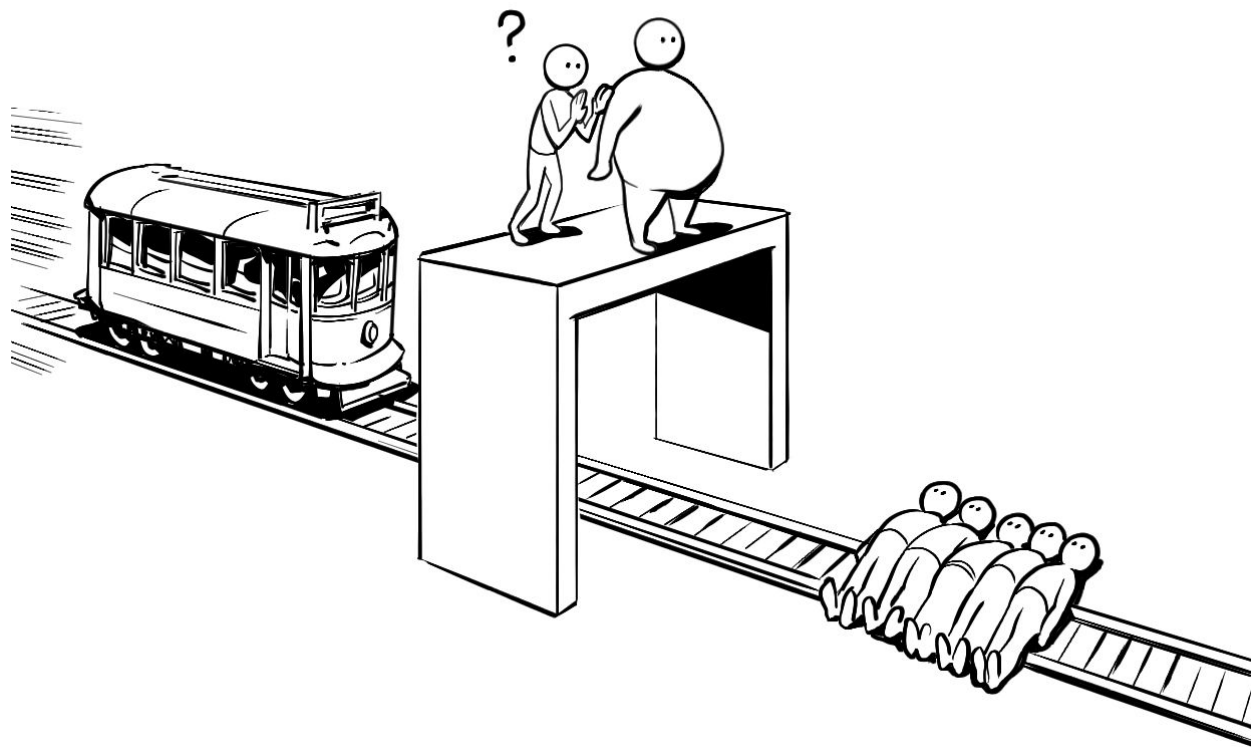
**Would priming for utilitarianism
make people more cooperative?**

**In any case, an argument that
hedonism is a true and that
happiness really is equivalent to the property
of moral goodness is what is needed...**

**The theory is too
demanding...**


“All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow... every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and inconspicuous, in the endeavour, will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself” (Mill 1957/1861:20).







**And yet many ethicists think the theory holds
great promise...**



“The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatised injustice and tyranny.

So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race, and sex. (Mill 1957/1861: 78).

What we want from an ethical theory:

- ❑ Fit in with our moral intuitions**
- ❑ Reflect how we actually form our moral judgments**
- ❑ Resolve our moral debates**
- ❑ Solve the puzzle of human collective action**