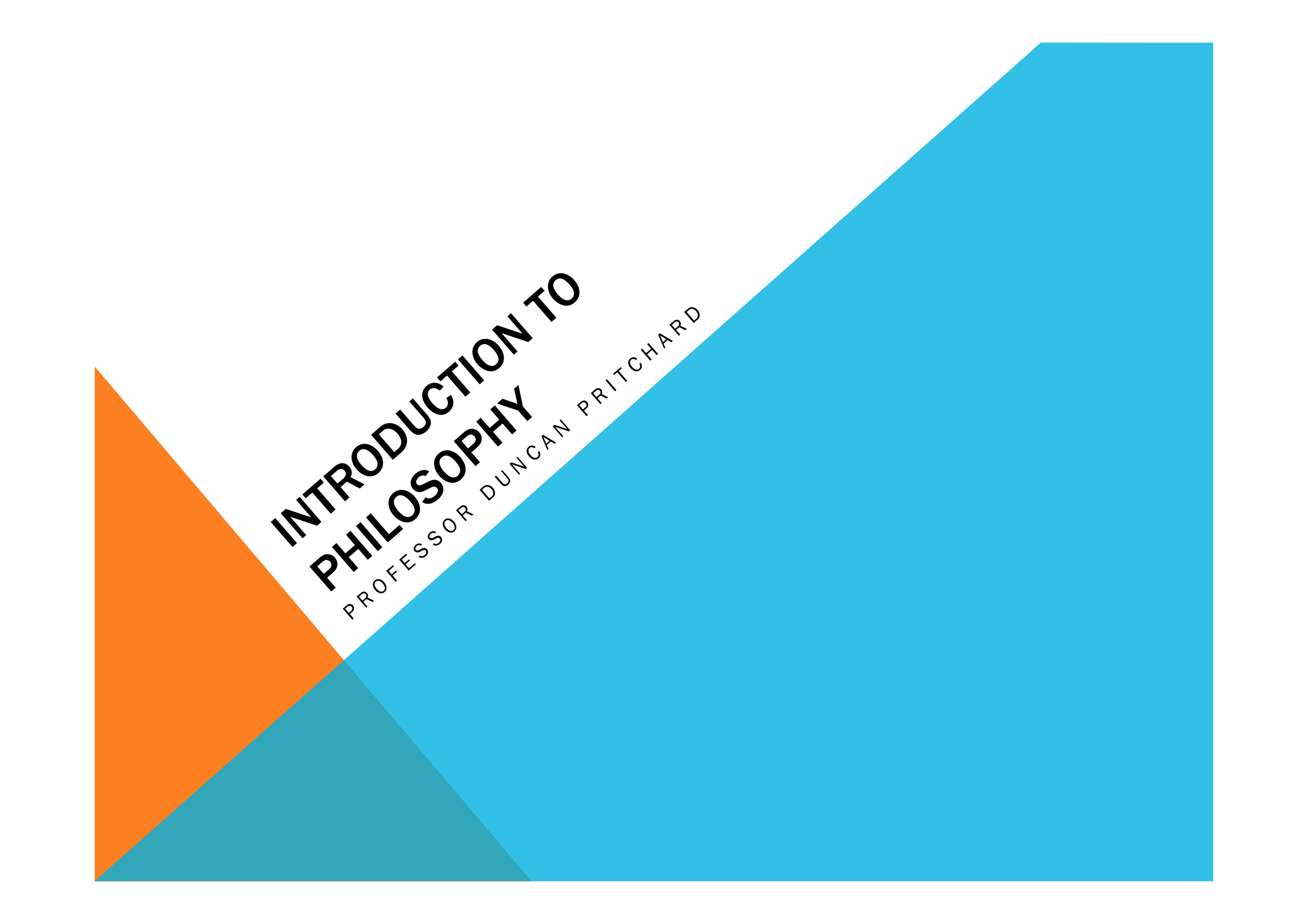




# INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

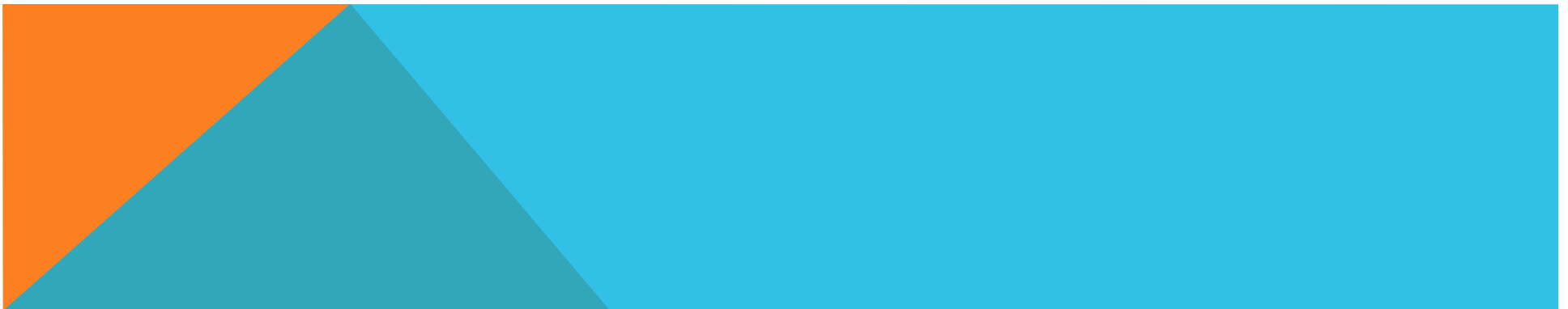
PROFESSOR DUNCAN PRITCHARD

# TOPIC 2

## ETHICAL THEORY

### *Ethics and Morality*

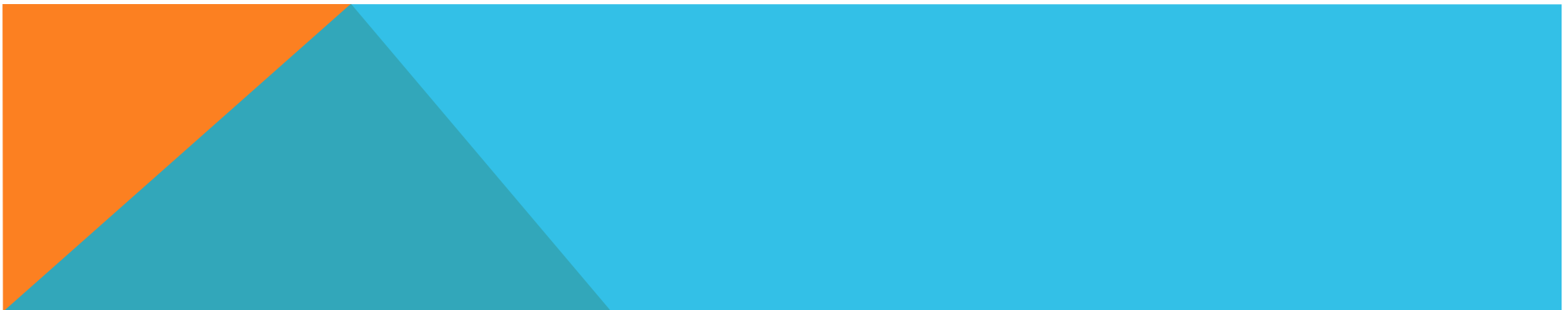
- ❑ These days ethics and morality are used interchangeably, but this was not always so. Ethics concerns the good life, the life of human flourishing. Ethics is concerned with the question of how I ought to live.
- ❑ Note that this is a much broader concern than morality, which specifically concerned with what, from a particular moral point of view, one ought to do.
- ❑ In particular, there may be all sorts of elements of a good life that are not specifically moral, such enjoying beauty, cultivating friendships, achieving important goals, and so on.



# SOME CONCEPTIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

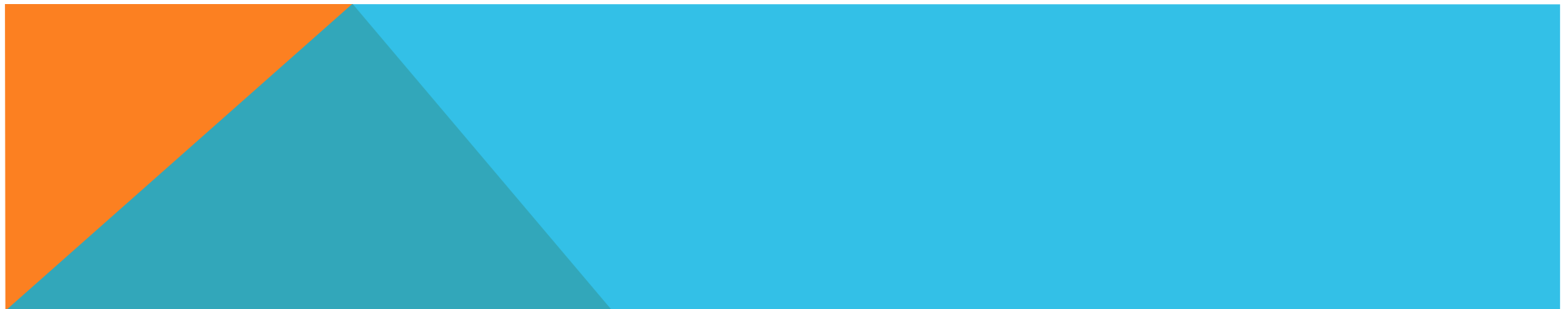
- ❑ *Aristotelianism*: a life of virtuous action and engagement, with wisdom centre-stage.
- ❑ *Stoicism*: a life lived in the light of reason (rather than subject to the passions).
- ❑ *Pyrrhonism*: a life of sustained doubt (effectively, the suppression of reason). (Cf. Buddhism)
- ❑ *Romanticism*: a life devoted to beauty.
- ❑ *Epicureanism*: a life devoted to pleasure (hedonism).
- ❑ *Existentialism*: authentic radical freedom.
- ❑ *Nihilism*: there is no good life.

A key question: which goods are non-instrumentally/intrinsically valuable?



# TWO DISTINCTIONS IN GOODNESS

|                    | Instrumental<br>Goodness | Non-Instrumental<br>(Final) Goodness |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Extrinsic Goodness | Money                    | The First Printing Press             |
| Intrinsic Goodness | ??                       | The Good Will                        |



# ETHICAL THEORY

## *Normative Ethics*

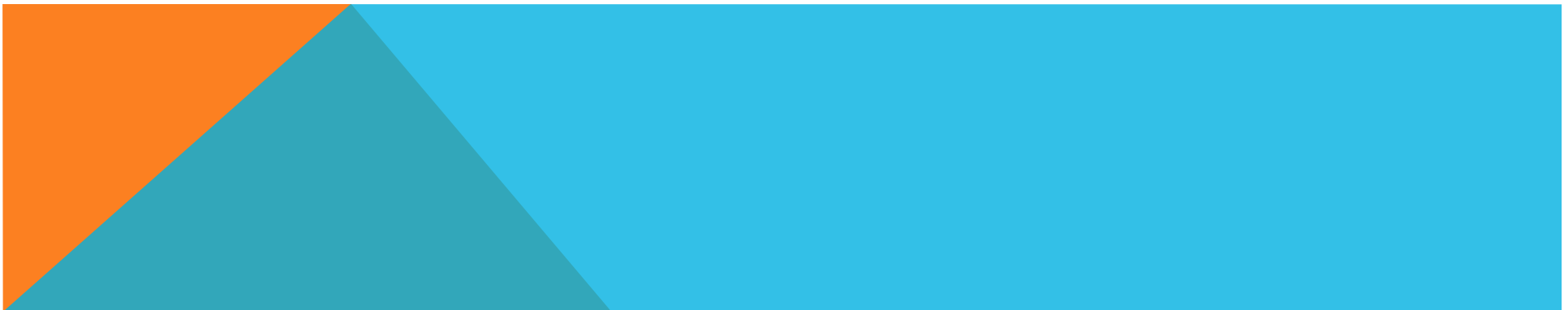
- ❑ This is concerned with particular theories of right and wrong, such as utilitarianism or virtue ethics.

## *Meta-Ethics*

- ❑ This is concerned with the nature of morality itself, rather than (as with normative ethics) the question of what is moral.

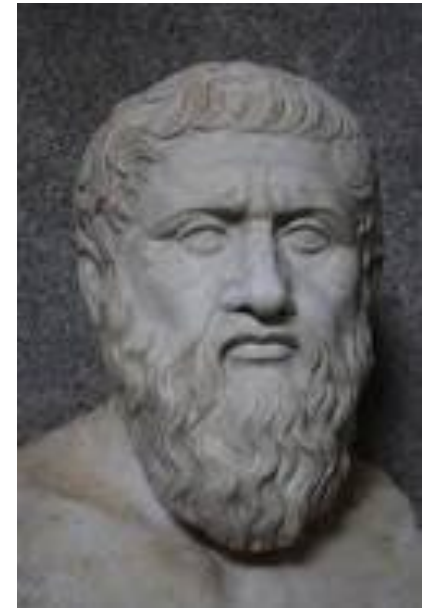
## *Applied Ethics*

- ❑ This is concerned with the application of normative ethical theory to real-world problems, such as euthanasia, warfare, and so on.

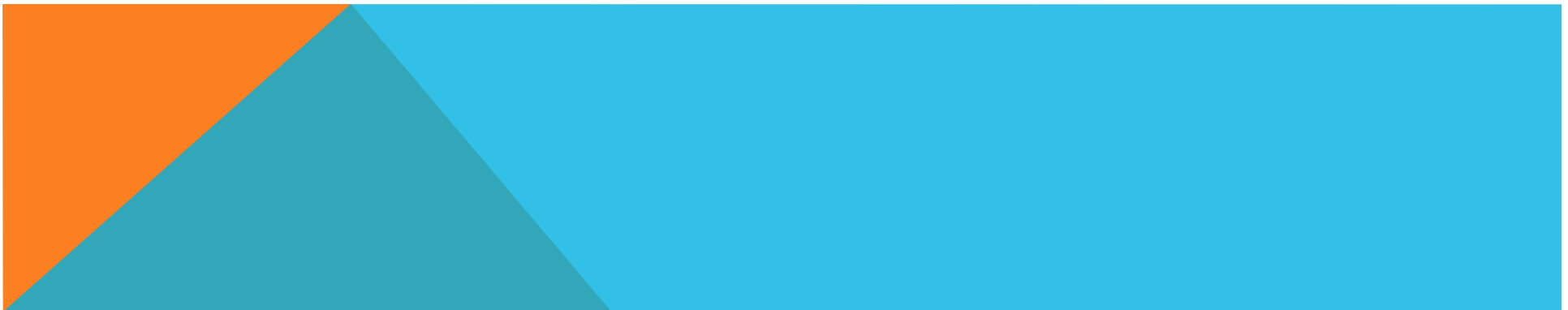


# THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

- ❑ Does God determine what is good? But in that case it seems entirely arbitrary what is good, as it is contingent on God's endorsement.
- ❑ Or does God endorse the good because God recognises that it is good? But in that case, the good is independent of God, and hence there is an inherent limitation on God's power (given that God, being good, is bound to endorse the good).
- ❑ (Compare: suppose that the good act is that which the virtuous person would do. But we can still ask whether the act is good because it is what a virtuous person would do, or whether the virtuous person would do it because it is the good act).

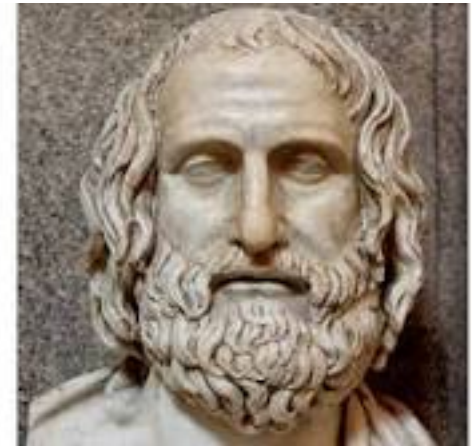


Plato (c. 424-347 BC)

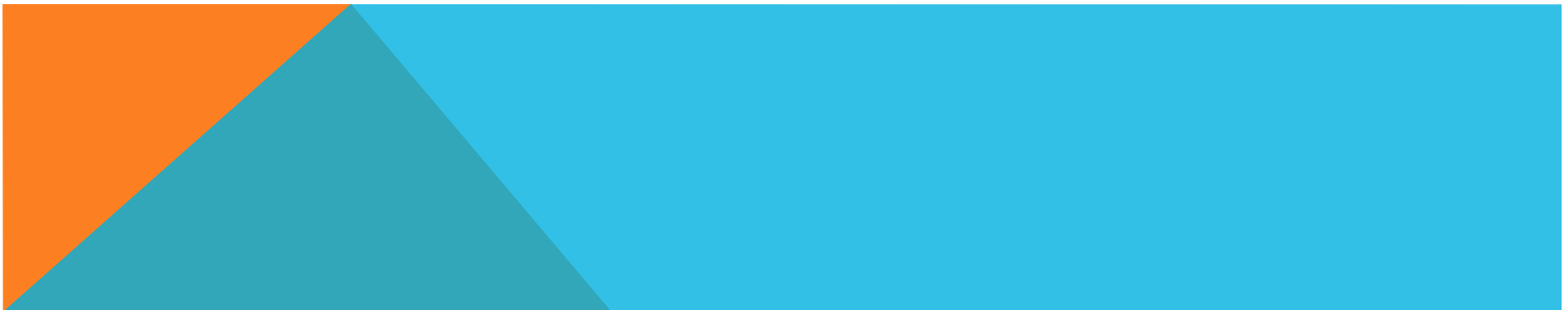


# MORAL RELATIVISM

- ❑ Relativism seems to be appropriate for certain domains of judgement, such as taste and humour. You might think that X is funny while I do not, and yet there is nothing amiss with thinking that we are both right, since humour is, we might say, in the eye of the beholder.
- ❑ Is morality to be understood as relative too? It certainly seems that just as one's humour and one's tastes can be 'conditioned' by entirely contingent factors (e.g., one's upbringing), so can one's moral sensibilities.
- ❑ And yet some acts seem to be obviously morally wrong (i.e., whatever one's background). In addition, there seems to be such a thing as objective moral progress and moral experts, neither of which make sense if moral relativism is true.



Protagoras (c. 490-420 BC)

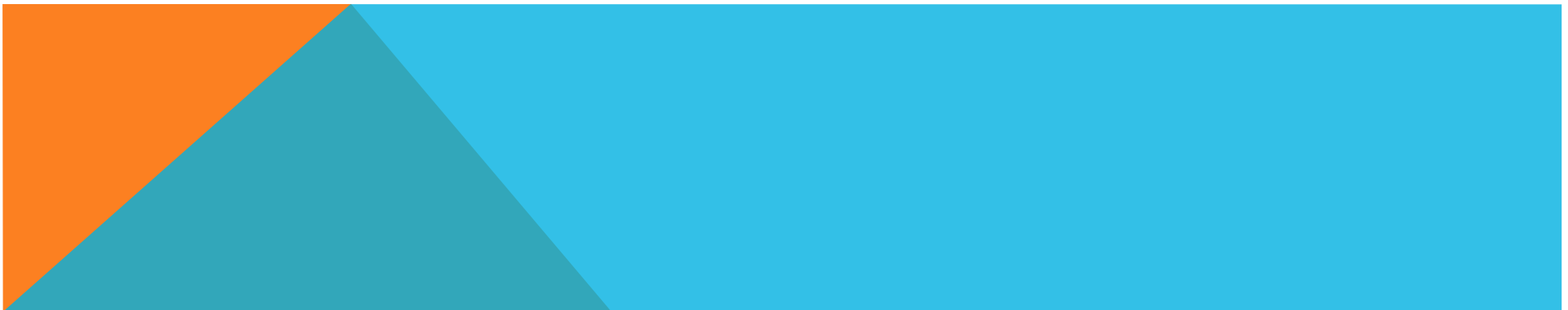


# MORAL SUBJECTIVISM

- ❑ One way of thinking about moral relativism is in terms of *moral subjectivism*. On this view, when I make moral claims I am simply stating my subjective opinion and nothing more (as when I say that I like broccoli).
- ❑ But moral disagreement doesn't seem to be captured by this view. Moral judgements are not like judgements of taste, where we quickly realise that disagreement is pointless. Rather, there seems every point in trying to convince others of one's moral opinions. But that suggests that they aren't purely subjective.



Some Delicious Broccoli

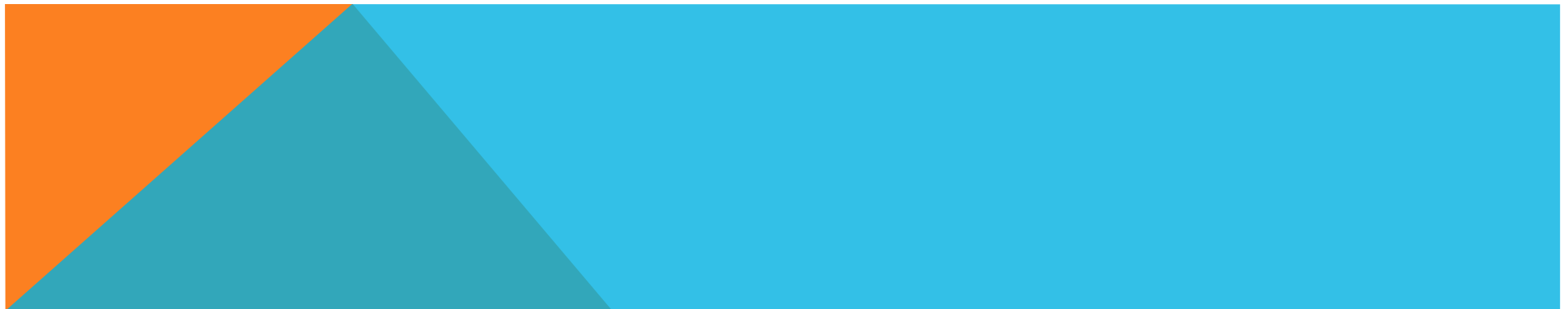


# MORAL OBJECTIVISM?

- ❑ Could moral judgements then be about something objective, in the way that, say, our perceptual judgements are?
- ❑ But morality doesn't seem to be an objective property of the world (like shape), but rather something that we *project* onto an objective world.
- ❑ Even so, perhaps we could identify morality with certain objective properties. So, for example, maybe the wrongness of, say, kicking babies for fun is to be identified with the physical properties in play.



A cute baby—please don't kick!

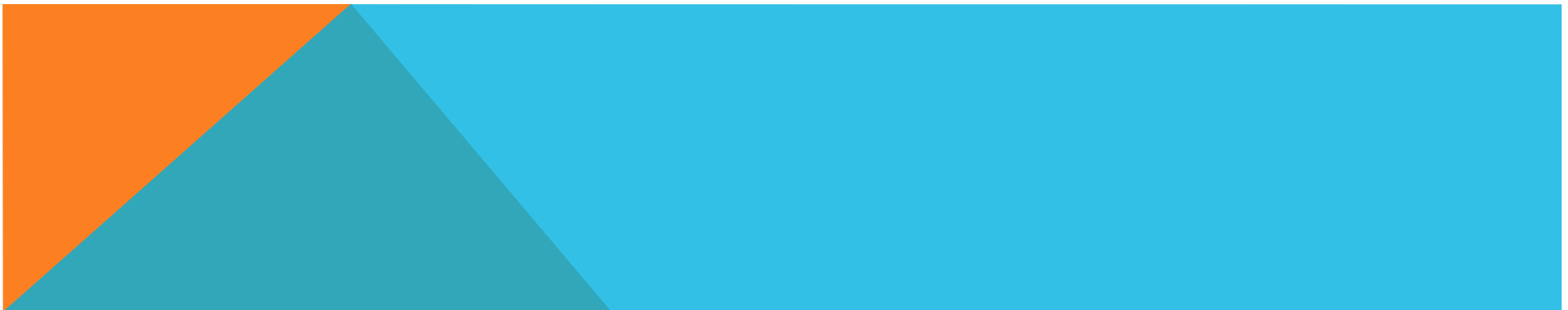


# THE OPEN-QUESTION ARGUMENT

- ❑ A challenge to moral objectivism of this sort comes from G. E. Moore (from his 1903 book, *Principia Ethica*).
- ❑ Moore argued that whatever natural property that we tried to identify with a moral property, it was always intelligible (i.e., an *open question*), when presented with the natural property, to question whether the moral property was also present.
- ❑ For example, one could describe an action in as much detail as one wanted, but it would nonetheless be intelligible to ask whether that action was right or wrong.
- ❑ Moore thought that this showed that morality cannot be identified with a natural property.

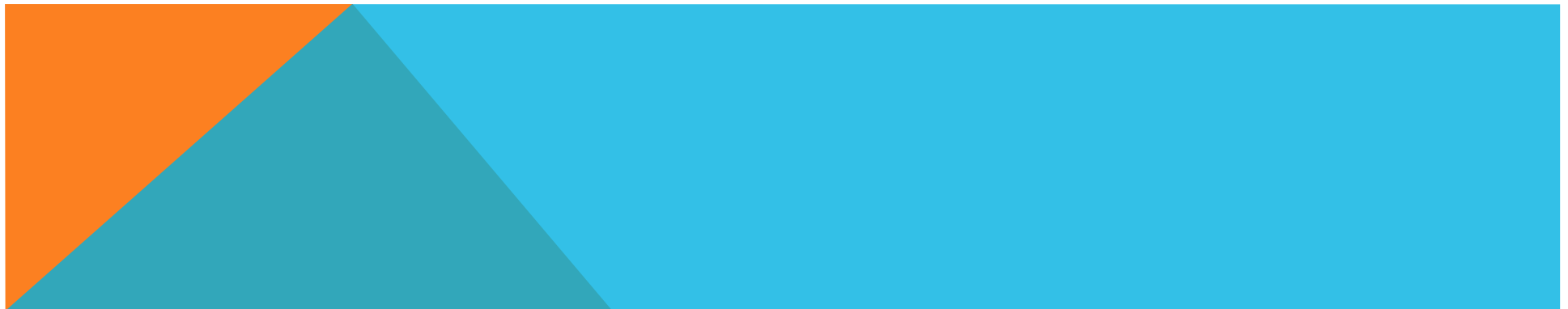


G. E. Moore (1873-1958)



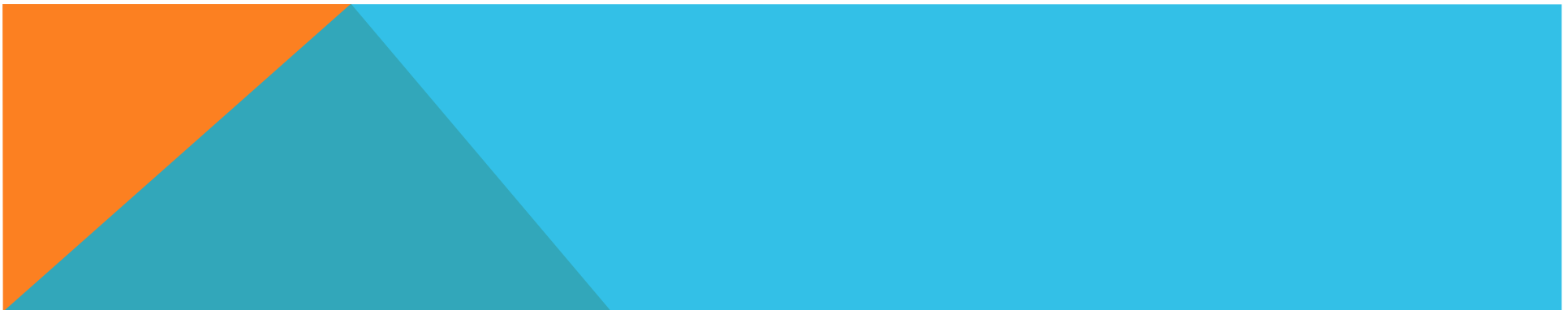
# MORAL MOTIVATION

- ❑ A related issue in this regard concerns how the moral objectivist is meant to explain *moral motivation*. It seems in the nature of moral properties that they incite us to action (even if we don't in fact act as a result).
- ❑ So, for example, in recognising that someone kicking a baby for fun is wrong, we are motivated to try to prevent it occurring, or to admonish the person committing this act.
- ❑ But how would moral objectivism explain this feature of morality? After all, simply noting that certain natural properties obtain doesn't motivate action at all; one needs to in addition care about those natural properties. (That the vase is about to fall off the table doesn't in itself spur me to save it, unless preserving the vase is something that I care about).



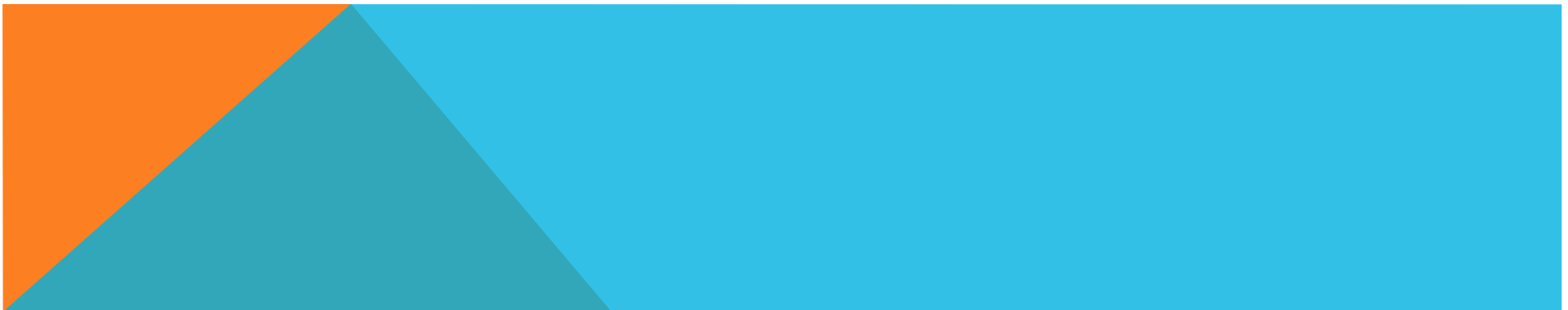
# MORAL EXPRESSIVISM

- ❑ One way of explaining moral motivation is to argue that the role of moral judgements is not to describe objective features of the world, but rather to *express* our desires and feelings.
- ❑ So, for example, to say that murder is wrong is to express one's dislike of murder, and thereby indicate that this is something that one disapproves of. (Compare the performative function of promising, which expresses our intention to keep a promise).
- ❑ If expressivism is right, then moral judgements are very different from, say, perceptual judgements. In particular, they are not even attempting to state objective facts about the world (but are more akin, for example, to statements like 'Shut that door!').



# CONSEQUENTIALISM

- ❑ Consequentialism is a normative ethical theory.
- ❑ It argues that moral rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its consequences.
- ❑ Different kinds of consequentialism focus on different consequences. Some candidates: pleasure, well-being, enlightenment, tranquillity.
- ❑ A key advantage of consequentialism is that by focussing on good outcomes—rather than, say, good motivations—we have a better chance of accurately evaluating which acts are best from a moral point of view.

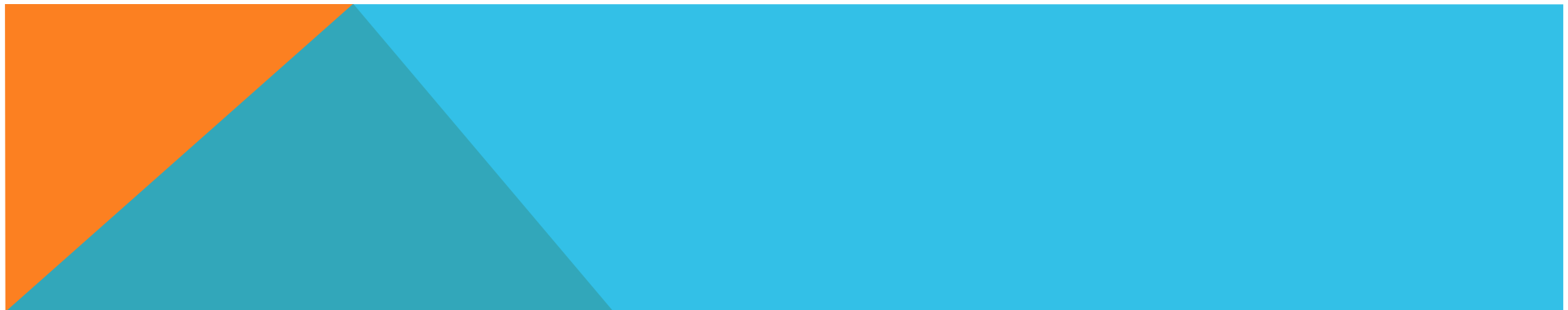


# UTILITARIANISM

- ❑ Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism which focusses on acts which promote consequences that maximize pleasure and minimize pain.
- ❑ One problem with the view is how to determine which pleasures and pains are relevant, as some pleasures are unworthy (e.g., taking pleasure in another's misfortune), while some pains are worthy (e.g., those involved in self-improvement).
- ❑ A second problem is that there seem to be other things that we (rightly) value besides pleasure and the avoidance of pain (such as wisdom, authenticity, understanding, friendship, etc).



J. S. Mill (1806-1873)



# UTILITARIANISM

- ❑ A third problem with utilitarianism is that it seems much too demanding. There are always things that I can do which would promote the greater good, such as giving away all of my belongings to those less fortunate. Am I really morally required to do this?
- ❑ A fourth problem concerns motives. If I act out of bad motives, but the consequences of my actions are nonetheless good, is my act still morally right?



J. S. Mill (1806-1873)

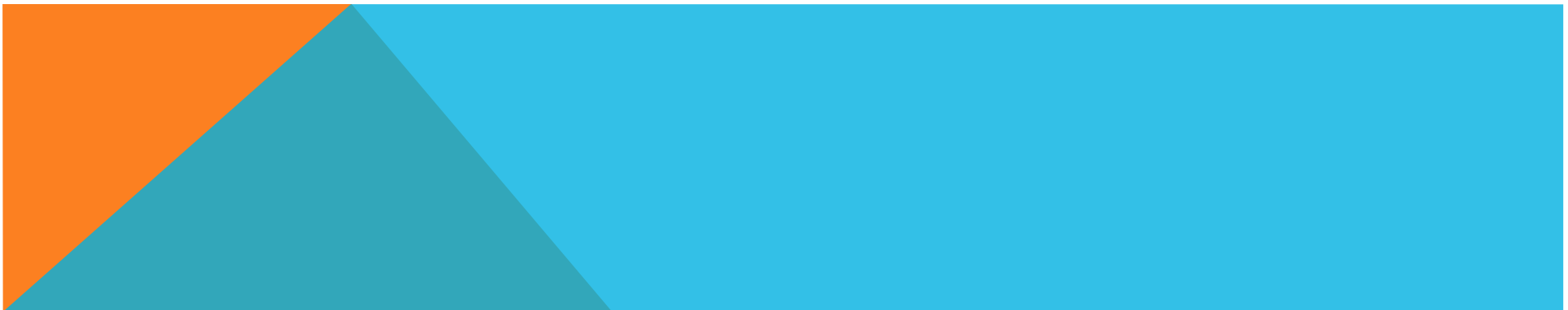


# RULE VERSUS ACT UTILITARIANISM

- ❑ Does utilitarianism entail that we should hang the innocent person if that would prevent a riot?
- ❑ One way that utilitarians have tried to get around this problem is by distinguishing between act and rule utilitarianism.
- ❑ Whereas the former focusses on the happiness produced by each individual act, the latter focusses on which rules of action would tend to promote the most happiness.
- ❑ The point is that while the individual act of hanging the innocent person might promote the most happiness, the general rule of allowing the innocents to be hanged will not.



An Angry Mob

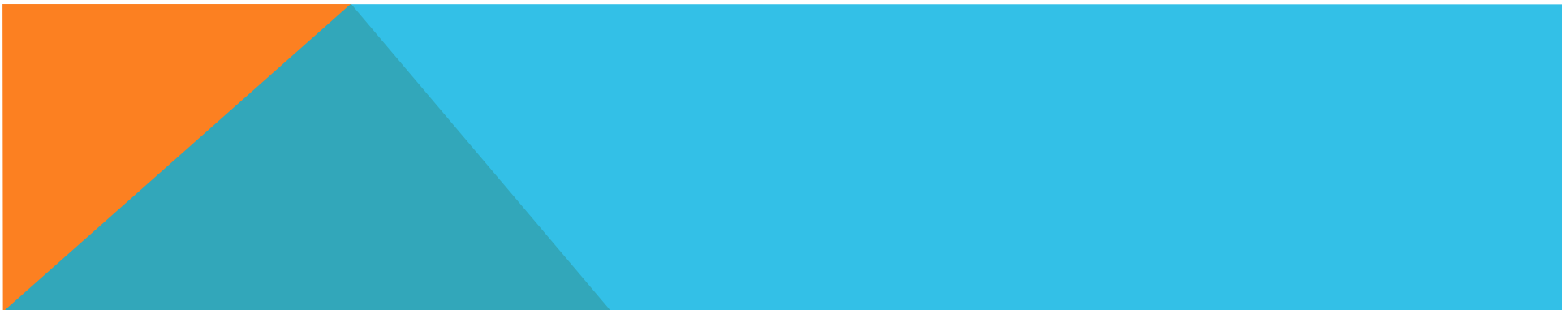


# THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE

- ❑ If the quality of our experiences are all that count, then shouldn't we prefer a life in a vat where 'fake' pleasurable experiences are generated for us?
- ❑ And yet it seems that an authentically lived life, even one that has some pain in it (and far less pleasure than available in the experience machine) is to be preferred.
- ❑ (Consider: even if you are happy to go into the experience machine, is this a life that you would want for your children?)
- ❑ This is the 'experience machine' argument against utilitarianism offered by Robert Nozick (1939-2002) in his book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974).



A Brain in a Vat

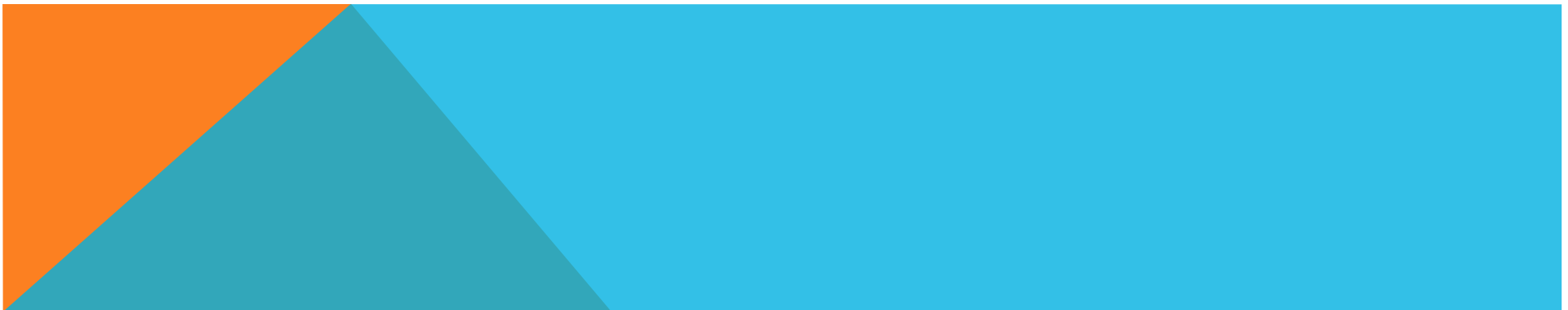


# ONE THOUGHT TOO MANY

- ❑ Imagine that you are a committed utilitarian and your house is on fire. Time is limited to get loved ones out of the burning building, and so you have to make some tough choices. After some reflection of the 'hedonic calculus', you opt to save your partner and one of your children.
- ❑ Isn't there something deeply odd, from a moral point of view, about even thinking these thoughts as opposed to simply acting?
- ❑ This is the 'one thought too many' objection to utilitarianism, which purports to demonstrate that this proposal incorporates an alienated conception of our moral psychology.



Bernard Williams (1929-2003)

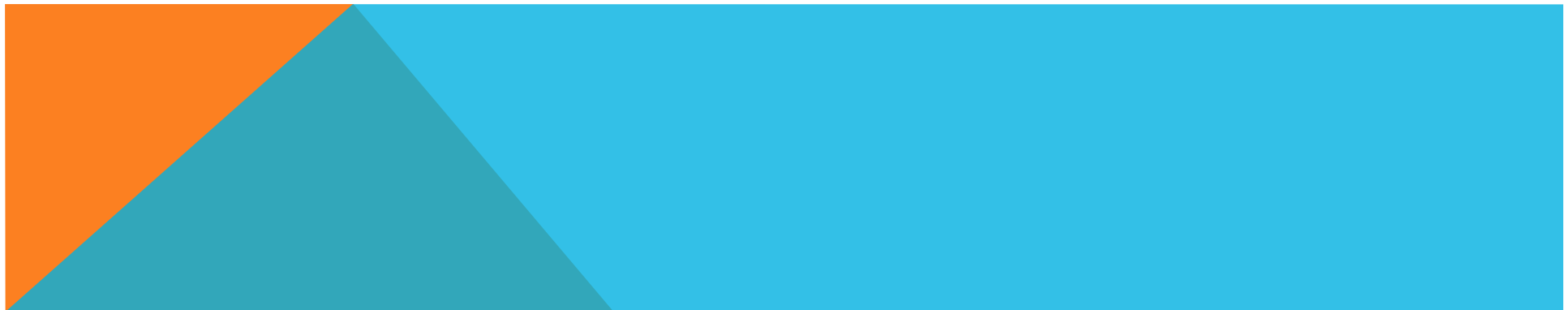


# DEONTOLOGY

- ❑ Perhaps it is not the consequences of our actions that we should be focusing on, but rather on the motives behind the actions.
- ❑ If one acts with a good will—e.g., one fulfills one's duties, and does so because they are one's duties (rather than, say, because one wants to avoid public censure)—then isn't one's action right regardless of the consequences?
- ❑ Remember in this respect that we don't always have much say over whether a good act, in this sense, has good consequences. But it is at least plausible that we (often) have control over our motives.



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

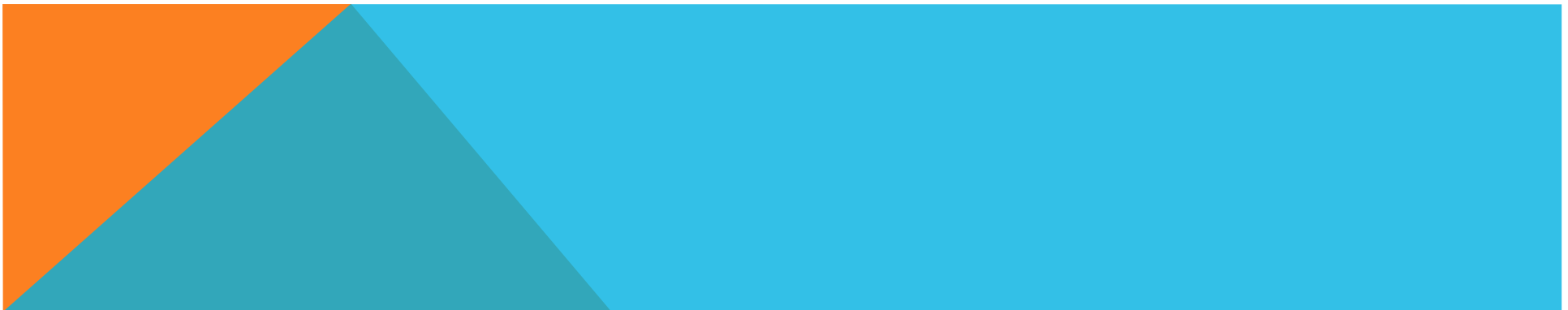


# KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

- ❑ Kant famously argued that the fundamental moral principle is the Categorical Imperative. This states (roughly) that one should act only on the maxim that it should become a universal law.
- ❑ So one should not steal, because if everyone stole this would lead to social breakdown. Stealing is thus immoral, according to the categorical imperative, and hence one has a duty not to steal.
- ❑ But is it never wrong to hang the innocent person (e.g., if the fate of the world depended on it)? Or what about lying? Could one not morally lie to protect someone?



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)



# VIRTUE ETHICS

- ❑ According to *virtue ethics*, when we develop a normative ethical theory we should be focused less on motives and consequences, much less general moral principles, and more on the kinds of distinctive character traits (the virtues) of a good person.
- ❑ According to Aristotle (in his *Nichomachean Ethics*), a virtue lies between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (this is what is known as the golden mean). The virtue of courage, for example, lies between the vice of cowardice (deficiency) and the vice of foolhardiness (excess).



Aristotle (384–322 BC)

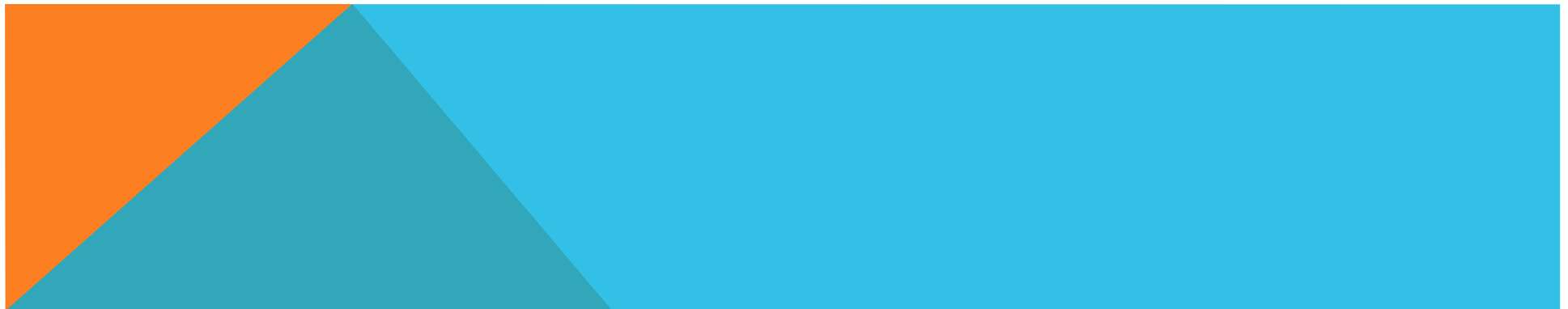


# VIRTUE ETHICS

- ❑ An interesting feature of virtues is that they aren't exclusively moral. Some virtues, for example, are intellectual, like conscientiousness. Indeed, the overarching virtue for Aristotle was practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is at least partly intellectual in character. Other virtues can be manifest in moral and non-moral ways (e.g., courage).
- ❑ This reflects how the life of flourishing, for the ancients, had many different characteristics, and wasn't understood in an exclusively moral fashion.
- ❑ Anscombe was one of the people who resurrected virtue ethics in contemporary ethical debate, in her seminal paper, 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (1958). (She was also the person who coined the term *consequentialism*).



G. E. M. Anscombe (1919-2001)

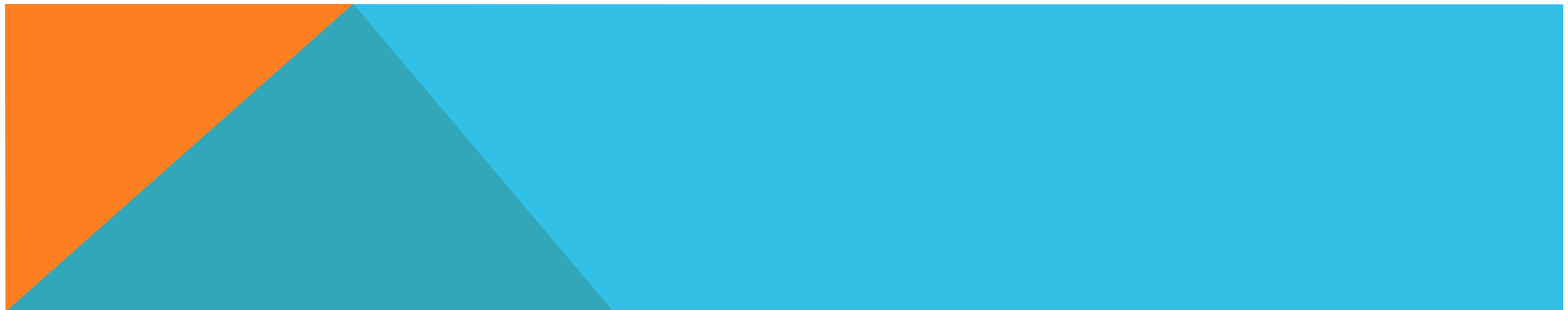


# VIRTUE ETHICS

- ❑ One objection to virtue ethics is that it doesn't offer much by way of practical advice in terms of determining which action is the right one. There is, for example, no straightforward principle to appeal to here, as there is with utilitarianism and deontology.
- ❑ But perhaps this is an advantage of the view. As a number of commentators have observed, such as Jonathan Dancy, moral principles have a tendency to either be false or trivial.
- ❑ Moreover, isn't it characteristic of the good person that she is able to navigate her way through difficult situations in subtle and nuanced ways?



Jonathan Dancy (1946-)

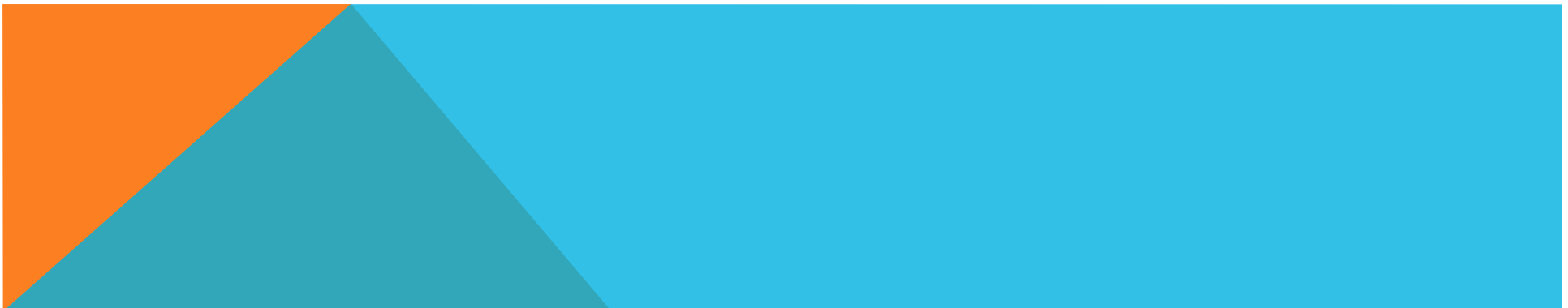


# APPLIED ETHICS

- ❑ Applied ethics involves the application of normative ethical theory to particular domains (e.g., business ethics or bioethics), or to particular ethical problems.
- ❑ We are going to focus on just two such problems: euthanasia and animal rights.



Peter Singer (1946-)

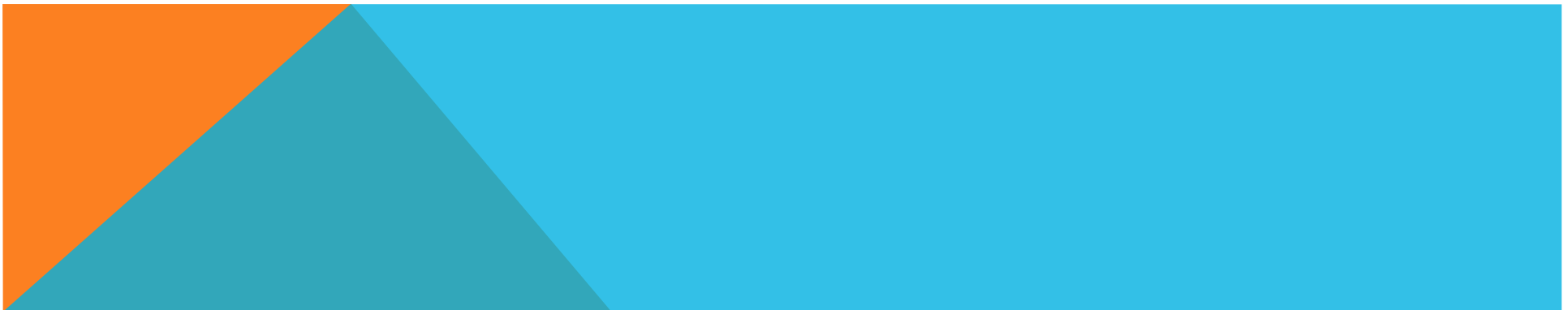


# EUTHANASIA

- ❑ Euthanasia involves bringing about someone's death for their own good. It is this last part that is meant to distinguish it from murder (though note that this doesn't in itself ensure that the two are morally different).
- ❑ We can distinguish between *voluntary*, *involuntary* and *non-voluntary* euthanasia. The first involves explicit consent from the person concerned (e.g., through a living will). The second involves the subject actively not consenting (or at least not being consulted). The third concerns cases where consent is not available (e.g., the person is in a permanent coma).

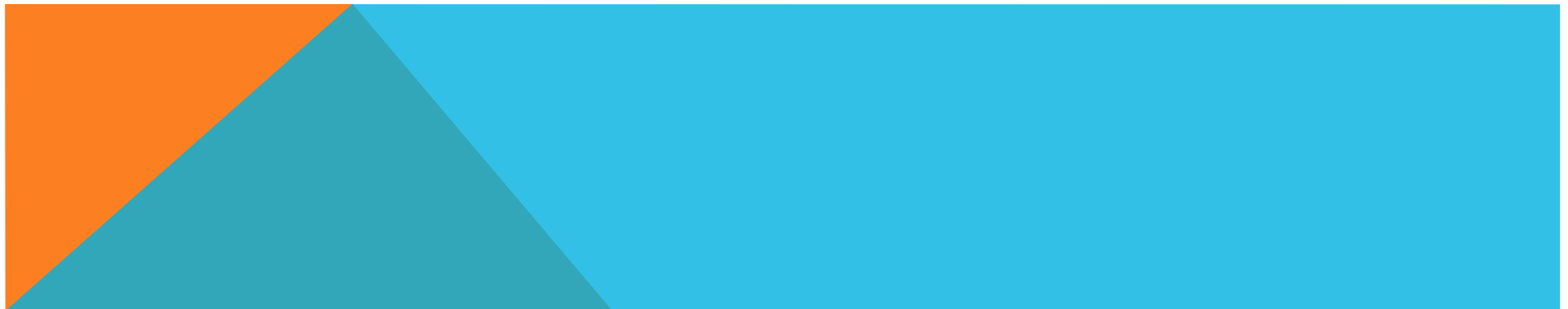


Philippa Foot (1920-2010)



# EUTHANASIA

- ❑ We can also distinguish between *active* and *passive* euthanasia. The former is where one actively brings about the death in question; the latter is where one fails to take available measures to prevent death.
- ❑ Bringing these distinctions into play helps us to recognize different types of euthanasia that might be morally very different. For example, involuntary active euthanasia seems much more akin to murder, and so harder to morally justify, than voluntary passive euthanasia.
- ❑ Other issues that are relevant to the debate about euthanasia include the value of autonomy, the importance of minimizing suffering (both of the person and those around her), religious considerations, the morality of suicide (/assisted suicide), and the practical consequences of allowing euthanasia (e.g., will this mean that some people will be coerced into agreeing to this?).



# ANIMAL RIGHTS

- ❑ What moral obligations do we owe to animals?
- ❑ One answer might be: none at all (on the grounds, perhaps, that we only have moral obligations towards other people).
- ❑ Note that even on this view it may be that we ought to look after animals, and perhaps even be vegetarian, on the grounds that our moral obligations to other people requires it (e.g., if others would find the suffering of animals distressing).

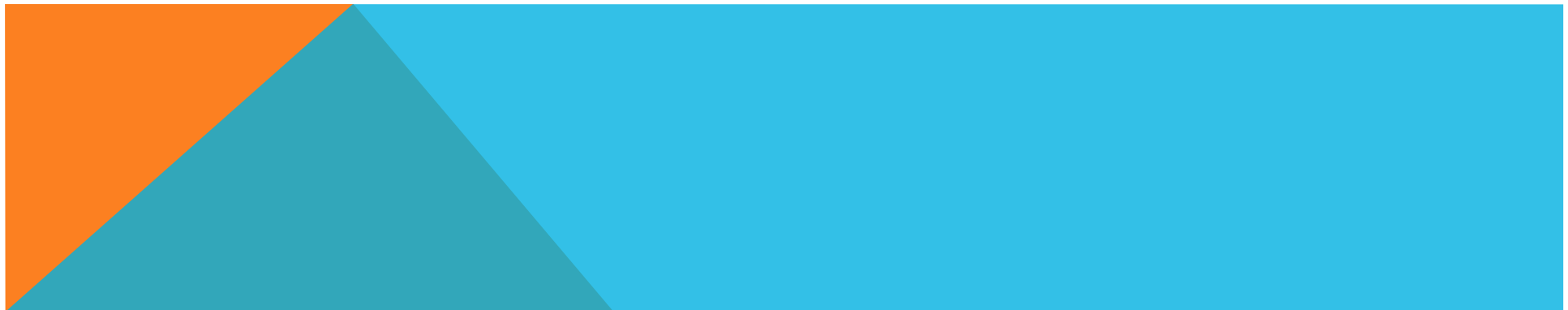


Martha Nussbaum (1947-)



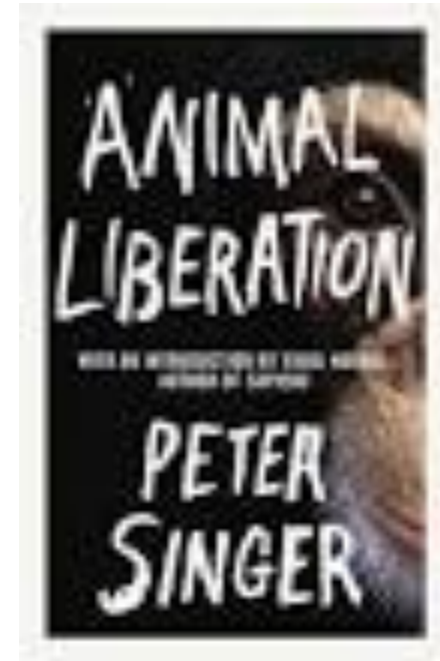
# THE REPLACEABILITY ARGUMENT

- ❑ One argument against the moral case for vegetarianism is known as the *replaceability argument*, due to Leslie Stephen (1832-1904).
- ❑ The idea is that eating meat benefits animals, since otherwise many animals would not exist.
- ❑ For this argument to work, we need to assume (i) that most farmed animals are generally happy, and (ii) that we can balance out the loss of the animals killed with the happiness they have experienced in life (and which they wouldn't have experienced without farming). The latter assumption effectively treats animals as *replaceable*, hence the name of the argument.
- ❑ But is this argument plausible? Could we apply the same considerations to humans, and so trade-off the loss of some humans in terms of the creation of more humans with similar characteristics? (And if not, why not?)

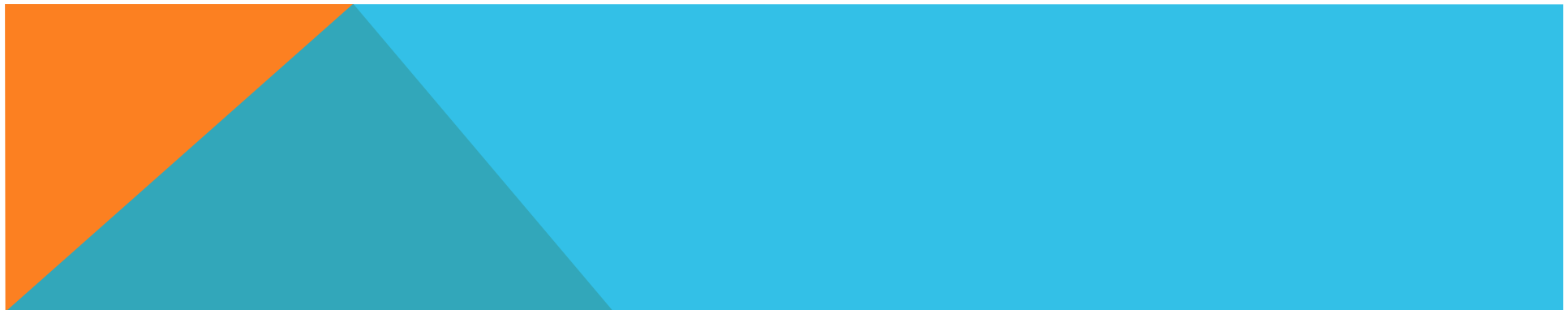


# ANIMAL RIGHTS

- ❑ One consideration in favour of the moral status of animals is that, like us, they suffer pain.
- ❑ So insofar as we think that human pain is morally relevant (which is usually thought to be relatively uncontroversial), then unless we are to be 'species-ist', we should similarly consider animal pain to be morally relevant too.
- ❑ This would have some important implications for how we treat animals, but note that it wouldn't in itself license vegetarianism (thus far, the argument for the moral status of animals is entirely compatible with a painless death).

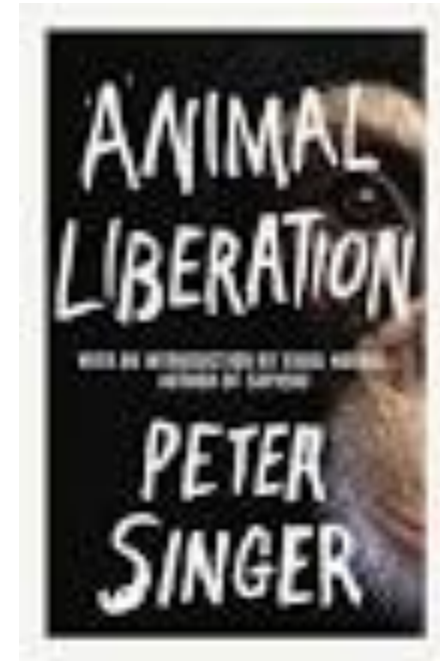


Animal Liberation (1975)

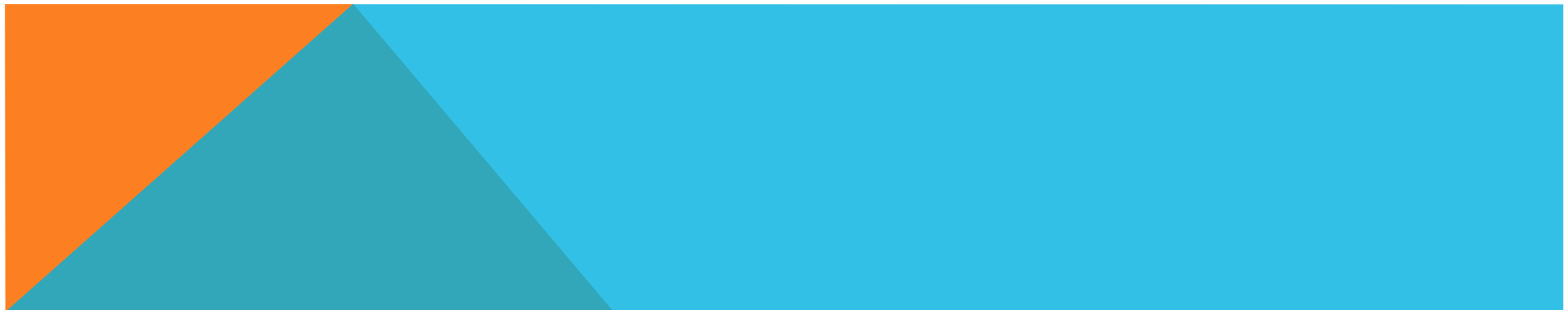


# ANIMAL RIGHTS

- ❑ One person who has developed a stronger version of this argument is Peter Singer. He claims that animals and humans should be afforded *equal* moral consideration. One consequence of this is that we can't morally eat animals any more than we can morally eat other humans.
- ❑ Now one might object that humans are very different to animals in lots of ways (e.g., intelligence). But Singer's point is that we don't think that super-intelligent people can legitimately consume low-intelligent people, so why should this difference between humans and animals mark a moral difference?



Animal Liberation (1975)



# ANIMAL RIGHTS

- ❑ Tom Regan has advanced the even stronger view that animals, like humans, have rights. This is stronger because one can believe that humans and animals have equal moral status without thinking that either have rights. (Utilitarians in particular have been suspicious of rights).
- ❑ Regan's thought is that animals have an inherent value or worth that is independent of whether they happen to feel pain, just as we typically think that humans do. Accordingly, even a painless death of an animal to use as food would be morally wrong (*ceteris paribus* anyway).



Tom Regan (1938-2017)

