

Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill: On Happiness and Utilitarianism

Jared Ronning

Of the many controversies in philosophy of ethics, there exist few so distinguished as the rivalry between the theories of the two great philosophers, Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Kant is often considered the central figure in deontology ethics. Deontology ethics places a special focus on duty and right action. It differs from both virtue ethics and consequentialism—deontology theory's main rival theory (Alexander). Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory that originated with Jeremy Bentham. John Stuart Mill is a famous proponent of utilitarianism, and posits as its underlying feature the principle of utility: "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill 7). Mill defines happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, and unhappiness, the lack of pleasure. Neither Mill nor Kant escape the problems posed to moral rationalism, but Kant's categorical and practical imperatives are useful, though not complete, and Mill's approach offers practical measures of justice, particularly for governments, despite utilitarianism's shortcomings.

Kant and Mill can be understood more fully with their historical context in mind. Kant wrote before Mill and much of what Mill wrote directly addressed Kant's arguments. The founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, was a contemporary of Kant, so Kant did have the chance to address utilitarianism but not Mill's formulation of it (Cahn 99). Kant was born in Konigsberg, Prussia (Germany) in 1724 and died in 1804. Mill was born in London in 1806 and died in 1873. Kant was a central figure in the Enlightenment period and made contributions in virtually all areas of philosophy as well as some in science (Rohlf). Mill was one of the most influential philosophers of the 1800s. His main contributions cover moral philosophy, political philosophy, and epistemology (Wilson). Kant wrote before the time of Darwin, so natural selection and evolution never entered into his framework. Mill was a contemporary of Darwin but did not draw much of importance from him (Wilson).

The principle of utility is fairly clear-cut; however, Kant's system is somewhat more complicated. He esteems the good will above all else. Kant states that "it is impossible to think of anything at all in the

world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will” (Kant 15). The unique purity of the will is accounted for by Kant since, unlike other attributes, the good will is good in itself, objectively and universally. According to Kant, it is the supreme feature of morality through which all others must submit to. Talents such as courage, decisiveness, and patience are only good in so far as they are exercised through a good will. Moreover, what is desirable for all is not necessarily good, for these desires can easily be turned towards evil without the presence of a good will (Kant 17).

Kant differs from the ancient philosophers in that he does not esteem characteristics such as self-control and introspection as inherently good, though they may be conducive to goodness. He argues that they may easily be evil without the presence of a good will. The prudence of an evil person makes him all the more dangerous. A good will is inherently good, not because of its effects or abilities. Even if a good will lacked the ability to perform its goals, that would do nothing to diminish its worth. Even if it achieved nothing, and all that was left was the good will, “then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself” (Kant 17). So the will is the only pure object in the world and according to Kant

Power, riches, honor, even health, and the entire well-being and contentment with one’s condition, under the name of happiness, inspire confidence and thereby quite often overconfidence as well, unless a good will is present to correct and make general purposive their influence on the mind. (Kant 15)

According to Kant, even happiness and well-being are not good in and of themselves. A good will is itself the condition of one’s worthiness to be happy. Happiness, in Kant’s eyes, is thus not an intrinsic right. Only those who are good deserve to be happy (Kant 17). However, Kant also says that one’s happiness is indirectly a duty for humans, for the lack of it makes staying on the path of duty precarious. In the “Critique of Pure Reason”, Kant argues that happiness and morality are linked. Everyone who is worthy by his conduct may hope for happiness. What Kant deems “the ideal of the highest good” (Cahn 113) is a world in which the happiness of beings is proportionate to their

morality. Happiness is not the supreme good, for it can only be approved of when supplied to those of moral conduct, but those who are good deserve happiness. The best possible world would fulfill this principle.

Mill does not see happiness as something to be earned. The principle of utility is applicable to all. It's indifferent to the moral worth of the agent. The principle of utility requires the net-happiness of creatures (humans and animals) and is thus altruistic in nature. It thus requires that humans be prepared to sacrifice their own good for the good of others (Mill 16). Moreover, a utilitarian society would be organized with happiness as its foremost goal. Mill says that humans are naturally inclined towards social sentiments which drive humans to be in unity with their fellow creatures. He calls this social state both natural and necessary for civilization. The relationship of master and slave he deems unnatural, given the desires for unity in humans. He thus says that society must be strictly egalitarian, that all people should be treated as equals and consider the interests of all citizens (Mill 31). Mill supports this argument by positing that humans do not regard their fellow creatures as competitors for happiness who they wish to thwart. Instead, they are inclined towards harmony with their fellow beings and do not wish their interests to conflict (Mill 34).

Utilitarianism differs from hedonism in that it does not maintain an individualistic requirement of happiness, but the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Mill 12). The two components of a satisfied life to Mill are tranquility and excitement, and both may be used to reconcile people with a lack of pleasure or presence of pain (Mill 15). Living nobly may not always make a man happy, but it will make others happy and benefit the world at large. Moreover, the nobility in others will make that man happy in an ideal utilitarian world. According to Mill, "the ultimate end... is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality" (Mill 12)—to all of sentient beings, not just to the individual. Mill's ideal world is one in which happiness is prevalent to the greatest possible extent, whereas Kant values happiness only insofar as it is connected with moral worthiness.

One distinct feature of utilitarianism is that it takes only consequence and not intent as the arbiter of the moral worth of an action. Mill states that motive has nothing to do with the value of an action, though he says it may speak of the person's moral character. The worth of the action is determined solely by consequence, not by what motivated the action, whether it was greed or concern for others. This contrasts sharply with the Kantian admiration of the good will and emphasis on intent. For Kant, consequence changes nothing so long as the will is pure. While positive consequences are intrinsically desirable, the will of the individual is what determines his moral integrity and the moral worth of his actions. If a person possesses a good will, yet accomplishes nothing in life, he is still acting more morally than the person who accomplishes much for others but out of self-interest, not duty. Kant is concerned with distinguishing actions done from duty and actions done out of self-interest. He notes that many actions that conform to duty are not done from duty but out of self-benefit. One example that Kant presents is that of a shopkeeper who does not take advantage of inexperienced customers (Kant 25). It is his duty to not overcharge the customer but it's also advantageous for him to keep a general price for everyone. If he is acting only out of the self-interest he acquires, he is not acting out of duty even though his actions conform to duty. Kant also says that self-preservation is a duty (Kant 27). Most take great care in preserving their life, but they are not doing so out of duty even though they are conforming to duty. However, the man who comes to find life disagreeable and finds within him the capacity for suicide yet carries on living is acting out of duty. Actions done from inclination and not duty lack moral content. Even generosity done from mere inclination is amoral. Unlike Mill, Kant takes into account the motivations behind an action instead of its consequences to determine its worth.

Kant and Mill differ in their answer to the problem of what rational grounds may be provided in support of normative systems themselves. Mill does not claim to be able to outright prove utilitarianism and claims that first principles in both epistemology and ethics are the foundations of all beliefs and cannot be penetrated by proof, for all proof is built on them (Mill 35). Whatever problems this may raise apply to all non-sentimentalist theories of ethics, not just Mill's. Upon framing the limits of human reason to first principles in ethics, Mill crafts a certain kind of proof that

he believes to rest in the confines of human rationality. Mill is an empiricist, and his ethics preserve his epistemology. He says that which is visible can only be proved by sight; that which is audible can only be proved by being heard. Along these lines, he states that to prove something is desirable it can be shown that people desire it (Mill 35). The only proof that happiness is desirable is that each person desires it. Following this proof, Mill argues it can be said that happiness is a good and the net-happiness an aggregate good to everyone. Happiness is an end of conduct and consequently an end of morality (Mill 36). Mill does not look for any further proof because he believes this is all that this case may admit or require. Mill also asserts that every desire and end is connected to happiness. For example, virtue is desired only in relation to how far virtuous acts are associated with pleasure and absence of pain (Mill 41).

Kant is much more concerned with rational justification of the principles of morality and appeals in part to nature for his groundwork. Kant sees nature as having an end. He perceives purpose in the anatomy of humans in performing functions. Kant argues that preservation, welfare, or happiness are not the end of nature since humans are governed by reason, and reason is not the best guide towards these goals. Instinct, rather, would endow humans with the best means towards happiness and well-being. Rationality is not necessary for happiness; thus, nature must have some higher purpose. Kant speaks of “another and far worthier purpose of one’s existence, to which therefore, and not to happiness, reason is properly destined” (Kant 21). Reason must have a purpose, and its purpose is not pleasure. Rather, Kant says, the true function of reason is to produce a good will, which is not a means to other ends but an end in itself. It is not the sole good in life but it is the highest and the condition for all others. Kant says that all nature is governed by laws and only a rational being has the ability to act in accordance with these laws. Kant seems to be using laws in the normative sense as he likens them to principles. So the laws of nature are not merely descriptive accounts of how nature behaves but impose normative duties on humans in Kant’s view.

Kant’s appeal to rationality is a segue to his most famous principle of ethics—the categorical imperative—which Kant believes to be purely rational and objective. Kant says

All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills. The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end. (Kant 57)

There is one end that all rational beings have, which is happiness, but the imperative towards happiness is hypothetical; it is not absolute and only a means to other purposes. There is no principle which may guide with necessity what may make someone happy. However, Kant presents a single categorical imperative which binds all humans: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant 71). For example, if someone is stressed with the choice of borrowing money without being able to repay it, while he knows that this would be consistent with his own well-being, it would be contrary to duty since he would not wish the maxim by which he acts to be universal (Kant 73). For humans to act rationally, they cannot make exceptions for their duties. If they allow themselves to act in a specific way, they must expect others to be allowed to act in the same way also. Kant says that all rational beings exist as ends in themselves and therefore cannot be used as means. This is what he sees the concept of personhood as being about. Humans are not subjective ends, but objective because their existence is an end in itself (Kant 85). This leads to Kant’s formulation of the practical imperative which states that humanity must be used as an end, never as a means (Kant 87). The practical imperative is in direct conflict with utilitarianism since the principle of utility allows for the use of all means, including humans, to justify the end of happiness.

Kant’s and Mill’s theories have faced many counter-arguments and obstacles. One major difficulty that consequentialism and utilitarianism are met with is their extreme requirement of equality; that each individual should be given equal concern to others in regards to the fulfillment of happiness. For example, that friends and family deserve equal treatment to strangers, since each are human beings and not deserving of any more or less happiness than the other. The argument has some appeal since neither person is intrinsically more worthy of happiness than the other; however,

human inclination strongly rebels against the implications of such thought. If a father is faced with the choice of saving either his son from drowning or a stranger's child, even if the chances of saving the other's is greater, he has the right to try to save his own son, and no doubt any parent would. Yet, the principle of utility would require that he save the stranger's child who has the better chance and so the chances of increasing pleasure and reducing pain would be more likely. In this regard, many would find utilitarianism far too demanding. Deontology ethics, on the other hand, admits consent to take into account special concern for family, friends and personal interests.

Mill's account of the rational basis of utilitarianism and morality is also questionable. Mill states that all he has given is a psychological proof and that no other proof is required (Mill 39). His argument can be summarized as thus: Premise 1: humans desire nothing other than happiness or that which is connected to happiness. Premise 2: happiness is the sole end of human conduct. Conclusion: happiness is the sole criterion of morality (Mill 39). His premises are entirely descriptive, which fits well with his empirical epistemology. However, descriptive approaches to normative systems are inherently problematic. Any attempt to connect a posteriori grounds to normative claims confronts a serious obstacle, which was first formulated by David Hume as the is/ought problem. According to Hume, the world of experience cannot provide moral norms because the former is entirely descriptive and the latter prescriptive (Cohon). Mill needs to do more to ground the principle of utility than merely provide a descriptive account of what humans desire if he wants to escape the is/ought problem. Merely because something is the case does not imply facts about what is best, or right, or moral. Making normative judgments off of descriptive accounts is overstepping one's legitimate bounds.

At first it appears Kant might escape Hume's challenge. However, though subtle, Kant falls into the same error. Kant's rational account of morality rests on assumptions that nature has dictated actual moral principles on humanity. However, laws of nature are not necessarily normative laws. They're descriptive accounts of the world. Kant assumes there is some higher purpose to our rationality, solely because instinct would be the better tool for creatures whose end is happiness. Kant was

writing before Darwin, so it could not be expected that he would take the survival advantage of rationality into account, but Kant was also writing at the time of Hume and even credits Hume for 'awakening him from his dogmatic slumbers' (Rohlf), so it's surprising that Kant does not recognize this Humean problem inherent in his own philosophy.

Both moral theories provide useful practical implications for the world. Utilitarianism could be especially useful to governments and leaders since governments are meant to treat their citizens equally and without bias. Governments partially escape the before mentioned problem of Mill's requirement of impartiality to individuals. Insofar as their respective jurisdictions apply, governments and states are generally not meant to give partial treatment to individuals, so the principle of utility is more valid and useful for governing systems than individual persons. Moreover, pleasure and the absence of pain is a central, if not the central, obligation of governing agencies. However, adhering too strictly to the principle of utility might lead rulers to deprive certain groups of their happiness in order to benefit the aggregate whole. This would violate individual rights, steal from what people have earned, and oppress minority groups.

The categorical imperative is also useful. It's an easy and compelling method of evaluating one's actions. It provides a means of self-evaluation and does have a rationally appealing aspect to it since one cannot be expected to create exceptions for oneself in a moral system. For example, if someone was debating whether to pay his taxes since others do not, if he applied the principle of utility to his problem, he might consider that not paying his taxes would make no dent in the treasury, yet he would gain substantial pleasure with his extra supply of cash. He would conclude that it is justifiable to cheat on his taxes. On the other hand, if he applied the categorical imperative, he would no doubt pay his taxes since he would not wish a world in which everyone acted from the maxim that paying taxes is not necessary just because others don't do it.

Kantian ethics and utilitarianism are both compelling and hugely important theories in philosophy. They stand in stark opposition to each other but both are valuable and useful in their own ways. Individuals and governing agents would do well to heed their insights. Both Kant and Mill require a

strict set of principles that are useful in their own right, yet cannot be expected to hold universally. That their theories admit of exceptions does not require they be discarded in favor of some more unifying theory. Rather, it is doubtful that a single supreme theory of ethics could even exist or endure over time. Certain moral principles prevail in certain conditions but fail in other regards. Kant's and Mill's failure to provide complete and objective principles of ethics does not require that they be discarded in search of a more universal theory. Instead, the valuable insights that they did have should be considered for what they're worth and utilized by any individual or agency concerned with right moral action and values.

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