

The ethical systems of kant and mill assignment

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The ethical systems of Kant and Mill: A comparison and contrast Richard Rental What part does happiness play in determining the morality of an act in a situation? Can a concept that ties morality to the search of happiness truly be rational? What of the opposite? Is it possible to view every situation with objectivity, never taking into account an emotion (like happiness)? The questions above concern themselves with the part of the central tenets of the ethical views of two very important philosophers, respectfully: John Mill and Emmanuel Kant.

The ethical theories that these two philosophers laid out clash with each other in fundamental ways, from how reason was defined, to the role that “happiness” played in determining the ethical choice in a moral dilemma. In the following pages, I will attempt to present and discuss the theories of Kant and Mill, pointing out what I perceive as weakness in said theories, as well as the possible strengths of each system.

Before I go about pitting these two systems against each other, however, it would be best to first give you a (hopefully) sufficient understanding of what composes each respective ethical theory, so that you can better follow the comparison and retinue of the theories later on. First, let us take a look at Kant's system of ethics, which is based on the notion of duty. For Kant, this duty was something that had to be motivated from something that was larger than yourself and your emotion; it had to be drawn from an objective place, and with the right intentions in mind.

Have you ever heard the adage that goes “doing the right thing for the wrong reason”? That would apply perfectly to Kant's theory. The result's of

one's actions mean nothing if the intentions are selfish in nature. To Kant, intention was perhaps even more important than the results of your actions, due to the fact that one can not always have full control over the ends of their intentions (intentions that, in order to be in accordance to good will, must be for the sake of duty itself). Now, where does this duty come from?

As I mentioned previously, Kant was very much in favor of using rationality in lieu of feelings to determine the morality of an act. To help aid in deciding of an ethical choice, Kant devised a system that was absolute in nature: the Categorical Imperative. The categorical imperative is non-relativistic, meaning that it should be followed under ALL circumstances. There are two formulations of the categorical imperative: the first being the formula of Universal Law (which I will discuss first), and the second being humanity as an end in itself. The test contains 3 to 4 steps, depending on the situation at hand.

The first step of the test is to formulate what Kant called the maxim. The maxim would be any particular action that you would take, and it is the subject of the test (the test checks to see whether the maxim that you have proposed is ethical). When you formulate the maxim, it must be stated by itself, with no additional conditional statements attached to it (e. g. , " I will steal from someone" as opposed to " I will steal from someone only if they have wronged me" The next step is to generalize the maxim you proposed, applying it to the whole population.

For the example above, the generalization would go like this: " Everyone will steal from someone". After you make your generalization, you must first

check if the maxim becomes a contradiction. If the maxim proves to be a contradiction, then acting on that maxim would be wrong. For example, you could have a generalized maxim that states “ All pregnant women are going to have an abortion”. This proves to be a contradiction because if every pregnant woman were to get an abortion, then there would eventually be no more women to have abortions.

In shorter words, the generalized maxim must be able to be perpetuated. For the final step, you now have to reverse the maxim you formulated, and imagine living in a world where it is a universal law. If you could not imagine (or would not want) yourself living in a world where your maxim is willed into universal law, then the maxim fails the first formulation of the categorical imperative. The second formulation, which Kant titled “ Humanity As An End In Itself simply states that true morality stems from one’s interactions with people.

In this formulation, Kant states that humanity is an end in itself, and should never be treated as a mean. What Kant meant by this is that humans, being rational creatures, should never be treated as objects to reach an end, but that the way you treat them should be an end in itself. Kant argued that by objectifying another person, or possibly even yourself, you are undermining the human potential of rationality and will. John Mill’s system of ethics, was very much different than that of Kant’s.

Mill’s system, which he based on utilitarianism, placed happiness and morality on the same side of the proverbial coin, rather than on opposing sides. For Mill, the foundation of morality rested upon the level of happiness

(or absence of suffering) that a decision would bring. This is not to say that the happiness of one trumps all else, however. Instead, Mill's theory states that the most ethical choice that can be made is the one that brings the most happiness to the largest amount of people.

This allows Mill's system to check unbridled selfishness, making you take into account the feelings of others. In keeping with the theme of happiness/pleasure, Mill believed that there existed two basic types of pleasure: pleasures of the physical persuasion ("low" pleasures), and pleasures of the intellectual kind ("high pleasures"). According to Mill, there was no amount of low pleasure that could have precedence over any amount of high pleasure, no matter how disproportionate the "distance" between the two seemed.

Another facet of Mill's ethical system was that it was results based. Mill argued placing the emphasis on the intention of one's actions, rather than the results, was wrong due to the fact that it is nearly impossible to know where one's intentions truly lie. So, with Mill's ethical theory, you really have to think about what you do long and hard before you do it, and you are responsible for foreseeing the results of your actions, because it is the results that will ultimately decide your character (thus, society is the judge, and the system is NOT meta-societal).

Now that you have some understanding of what the ethical systems of both Kant and Mill entail, we can put these theories side-by-side and offer up some criticisms. First, by looking at the basics of these theories, one could say that a similarity between the two is that a key factor in deciding the

morality of an action is the societal response to said action (societal meaning those outside of your own being). Cant's system uses the two formulations of the categorical imperative to place importance upon society, while Mill uses the concept of 'the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people'.

In my eyes, this is pretty much where the similarities stop, though. Cant's system is based around pure reason that is devoid of interference from feeling. The categorical imperative offers a reliable, generalized model, regardless of the circumstance. Mill's theory, on the other hand, allows for a bit more flexibility in the decision making process. The "variables" (the amount of pleasure caused and the amount of people involved, as well as the types of pleasures involved) can change with the situation, so there is no right choice. It is relativistic.

Vastly different, too, are the two systems in the attributes of the importance of results and intentions. The whole difference stems from conflicting beliefs on how the "actor" (the one carrying out the action) should focus themselves. Kant argues that the actor can focus only on deriving their action from good intention, due to the unpredictable nature of life; Mill suggests that the only practical way to judge morality is through the results of action (in which the actor would try to use their reason to the best of their ability, in order to foresee an outcome).

In short, the main difference between the two is that for Kant, the intention (good will) is the bastion of morality, while Mill valued the result (utility). In my opinion, these two ethical systems are also very open to critique, both

positive and negative. For Kant, would say that a positive attribute of his system is that it sets forth a general, non-relativistic, definite guide in defining the morality of any action that you can throw at it. The downside to this, however, is the black and white nature of it all.

The absolute nature of the system can seem cold and callous, to some. In Kant's system, lying, even if it is to protect a loved one, is absolutely not permissible. Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative is also ripe for producing contradictions. For example, let your maxim be "I am going to have a glass of water.". Now, the generalized version of this would be "Everyone is going to have water". The generalized version of this is a physical impossibility, because there is no possible way for everyone to have a glass of water.

Skip to the next step of the categorical imperative, however, and you see that the criteria states that the generalized maxim is ethical if you can imagine living in a world where it is true. Well, of course you would want to live in a world where everyone had access to a glass of water. You need water to live! So, is the maxim ethical or not? Does it fall into some unknown category? Another flaw in the Kantian system of ethics is the emphasis on the intention, rather than the result. Just by the nature of the beast, it is impossible to gain a truly unobstructed view into the intentions of another human.

You can try your best to gather these intentions through context, but how accurate could your guess be? How is society supposed to qualify your morality with a metric that cannot itself be qualified? Mill's system of ethics,

too, has it's own peaks, as well as it's pitfalls. For one, it seems that Mill's theory seems very intuitive to follow along with. The concepts of pleasure and suffering are universal and easy to grasp, so deriving a moral decision based from them is, by extension, simple to get a handle on. Connected to this is the flexibility of the system.

Like Aristotle theory of the mean, Mill's system allows for circumstantial flexibility, which is always nice. As previously mentioned, there are pitfalls that can be associated with Mill's theory, though. A problem that one may find with Mill is his insistence that the result is most important. For example, imagine that you are walking down the street, and a car violently turns the corner. In this car is a man that you prevented from stealing an elderly woman's purse, and he is speeding right at you. Somehow, you manage you dodge the car, ensuring your safety.

Since you are safe, and the event did not result in your death, is the man behind the wheel any less ethical, now that his intentions are not being considered? Of course not! You surely know that this man just tried to murder you, but the results are not there. Also, according to Mill, you are fully responsible for the results of your actions, no matter how far after the action the result may materialize. Can this truly be a reasonable hinge to demand? As humans, there is only so much that we can account for before the wheels fall off.

The nearly infinite number of variables associated with our existence make it impossible to map out an accurate result. Another caveat that one may have is that, with Mill, we are letting individuals determine morality through

feeling. While feelings of happiness can indeed be indicative of a moral choice, can these feeling not also be connected to some skewed sense of morality? Also, what if the happiness of the whole does not seem like it outweighs the happiness of the few? If someone gave oh the ultimatum of killing your mother, or setting fire to a nursing home, how would you choose?

All in all, while Mill's ethical theory does have it's shortcomings, I feel as if my personal beliefs are much more in line with his theory of utilitarianism. It takes into account the concepts of pleasure and pain into making a moral decision, which, for better or worse, is an intrinsic part of life, as far as am concerned. I find Cant's largely black and white system far too old and impractical to follow, and I find that it devalues what I feel makes us human: our drive to pursue happiness.