

# Mills utilitarianism essay example

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## Philosophy

Explain Mill's argument in chapter two of Utilitarianism against telling a lie. Is his argument against lying consistent with his claim in chapter four that it is beneficial for people to believe that virtue is good in itself?

Mill's argument in chapter two of Utilitarianism against telling a lie concerns the principle of utility and expediency. Under the principle of utility, there should be the maximization of happiness (satisfaction) for the greatest (most number) of people. Under expediency (that is, suitability to the end in view), an action should offer the most appropriate or pleasurable outcomes. Any expedient actions should bring about the most satisfactory outcome in the promotion of the general interest of all concerned. A person who tells a lie under the practicality and purposefulness of the moment is expected to have weighed the possible courses of actions in order to arrive at the intended outcomes for all concerned parties.

Mill had ascribed only secondary importance to virtue. For him, a virtue is good in itself if it is desired disinterestedly and being desirable only as means to the attainment of human satisfaction. In another instance, Mill claimed that virtues are simply means to an end – not ends in themselves – unlike the pleasurable consequences of a good action. Further, Mill had taken as given that the object of virtue is in the multiplication of happiness. Thus, more virtues mean more happiness.

Concerning Mill's arguments against lying if it is consistent with his claim in chapter four (that is, if it is beneficial for people to believe that virtue is good in itself), a virtue is good in itself. However, Mill did not state that telling a lie is a vice, which is the exact opposite of honesty. Mill had tried to inform his

readers that it is expedient only for a person to tell a lie, which is lesser evil, in the achievement of an end in view (i. e., happiness). A person who expediently tells a lie to a criminal might as well save the life of someone (e. g., family member, friend, etc.). Thus, it is rather better to have a disinterested or an unselfish action (such as in telling a lie) just to save people from any danger or harm. Mill only attempted to point out that it is better to tell a lie than face a greater evil under a bad situation. Nonetheless, it should not be taken at face value that someone who is not a habitual liar should be considered as such. Mill did not ever mention that telling a lie for unselfish consequences is in itself evil because one is not committed to do it as true-blooded liars do. He only wants to make it a point that only under an exceptional case that one has to resort to a ‘negative’ form of virtue in view of the consequent first principles (i. e., production of happiness) .

In chapter four, I believe that Mill had pointed out unambiguously that it is beneficial for people to believe that virtue is good in itself , but that it is expedient to tell a lie. There is nothing in his essay on Utilitarianism that he had presented a contradictory idea on the matter just as in telling a lie. Mill did not advocate or encourage people simply to tell a lie for its own sake. Rather, he insisted that virtues are vehicles (means or secondary principle) in the attainment of happiness (end or first principle). Unlike happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction, for Mill, virtues are under the categories of the first principles of morality, virtues, or goodness. As such, it should be obvious by now that the final test for a person’s virtuous character is the good consequence that result from his/her action – so much so that one tells a lie when it is expedient to do so. Hence, Mill’s argument in chapter two of his

Utilitarianism about telling a lie has never been inconsistent with his claims in chapter four because he simply presented an ‘ exception to rule following or worshipping.”

As one studies in more depth Mill’s analysis of the word utilitarianism and expediency, one will immediately see how it is easy to follow Mill’s line of reasoning. If a person’s good action will result to good consequences (i. e., maximized utility), then, by all intents and purposes, it is deontologically fit to choose a lesser good than a lesser evil, lesser evil than greater evil, or greater good than lesser evil. Hypothetically, excluding all other factors, to tell a lie (which is a lesser evil) to save someone from a lifelong predicament/impediment is a better alternative as long as “ happiness” [] is “ the only thing desirable .

In reiteration, Mill did not contradict himself into equating the relative importance of expediency with the utility principle. Mill prefers more the consequences of an action for utility maximization as against mere rule following / worshipping. Mill had only endorsed act utilitarianism in chapter two where telling a lie is the right action to do as long as it is expedient for a much higher degree . In chapter four, since virtues have subsumed status for being second principles, they are obviously morally right thing to do because they are in accord with the rules of society such that their general observance would produce the most happiness (rule utilitarianism).

In summary, Mill pointed out that the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (principle of utility) is the first principle under which all actions are subordinate to it. Just like when a person who expediently tells a lie, the end-results (maximization of happiness) are what counts as the final

test for any actions. Therefore, there is no inconsistency in Mill's assertion in chapter two about telling a lie and chapter four where it is beneficial for people to believe that virtue is in good itself. While telling a lie cannot be categorized as a virtue, there are always exceptions to rules. If telling a lie will lead to the greatest pleasurable outcomes, why should it not be resorted to? I think it is next to impossible to be honest all the time and expect all consequences to be so. Like the wisest man on earth said a very long time ago: "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (King James Version, Ecclesiastes 7: 20). Thus, expediently telling a lie (that is, in cases where it is suitable for an end in view) might as well possibly produce the best outcomes than mere blind rule following.

## **Works Cited**

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879.

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