

Suicide and the harm principle

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



The Right to Suicide and Harm Suicide under circumstances of extreme suffering is the morally right action as opposed to the alternative, living in pain. J. S. Mill's Utilitarian ideals provide strong reasoning to support suicide in instances of severe pain, while Kant's moral theory of the categorical imperative provides reasoning against taking one's own life. Mill's principle of utility is the maximization of pleasure and the reduction of pain. Mill regards happiness as the greatest good in life and all actions should be performed as long as they have the tendency to produce pleasure.

Mill also introduces the Harm Principle. The Harm Principle is used to determine whether coercion is justifiable based on the impact of individual actions. Stated, the Harm Principle is "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant" (On Liberty, I, 9). Mill believes that individuals have the right to autonomy in order to produce pleasure for themselves, but the right to autonomy must be controlled to allow equal exercise of this right by all individuals.

To understand the application of Mill's principles, harm must be defined. Harm is damage to another individual against their will. Mill introduces two types of harm: direct and indirect. Direct harm is when an individual performs an action that directly harms another person, such as murder. Indirect harm is when the individual performs an action that causes damage to others through performing an action on one's self. (On Liberty, I, 11) The distinction between indirect and direct harm determines whether the

individual who performed the action resulting in the harm is morally responsible for the harm inflicted.

Mill offers little towards the definition of harm and the distinction between direct and indirect harm. He writes: “ Whenever, in short, there is a definite damage, or a definite risk of damage, either to an individual or to the public, the case is taken out of the province of liberty, and placed in that of morality or law” (On Liberty, IV, 10) Mill states that when individual actions pose a risk of “ definite” damage, the individual is responsible to society for those actions.

Therefore, “ definite” harm is direct harm to others and all other harms are either (1) indirect harm to others or (2) direct harm to oneself and undeserving of legal or moral sanctions. However, the word “ definite” is vague, leaving the definitions of indirect and direct harm unclear. To determine responsibility and appropriate sanctions to punish and deter, Mill employs a central idea of his theory: personal autonomy. Personal autonomy is an individual’s ability to pursue “ their own good in their own way”, one of Mill’s four absolute rights (On Liberty, I, 14).

Each individual has the absolute right to exercise this autonomy, unless their actions impact the autonomy of another person. In cases where autonomous actions result in direct harm to others, either the government is justified in imposing legal sanctions such as jail time, or society is justified in imposing moral sanctions, such as shaming. Therefore, to determine whether direct harm was committed, one looks at whether one individual caused the abridgment of another individual’s absolute rights. Exegesis In this section, a

case will be presented to prompt discussion about the morally validity of suicide.

Mill's reasoning will include a utility calculation and an evaluation of direct and indirect harm. Consider the following case. A young woman named Jane, aged 29, finds out she has the Parkinson's gene. Jane watched her mother die from the disease and does not want to die the way her mother did. When the symptoms begin to set in and worsen, she decides to commit suicide. She knows that she can live many more years with the disease but she knows that her quality of life will be reduced. Jane believes that her quality of life will be so diminished that death is the only option. Is it right for Jane commit suicide?

Mill would invoke the Harm Principle. The act of committing suicide would be a self-regarding act. As the harm is directly imposed on herself, all other consequences of her action are considered indirect as they occur through Jane's self-regarding act. Hence, Jane should suffer no moral or legal sanctions for committing suicide. Furthermore, she has evaluated her options and upon deep consideration, decided that the pain of living with her condition outweighs the pleasure of living with her condition. A utility calculation can be formalized to further justify her decision on utilitarian grounds. Utilitarianism) For Jane: 1. Tendency to cause pleasure: 100 units 2. Tendency to cause pain: 50 units For the aggregate of the other people affected: 3. Tendency to cause pleasure: 10 units 4. Tendency to cause pain: 20 units Hence: Pleasure: 110 units, Pain: 70 units. Perform the action. For Jane, dying would be the ultimate pleasure as it is the end of her suffering. She views suicide as the mean to her ultimate end: happiness. For Jane, the

pain of dying is less than the pain of living. After seeing her mother die from Parkinson's disease, she makes the valid decision to not die the same way.

She recognizes that death is the end of her life and the pain of leaving her family and friends does impact on this decision. Yet, when compared to the suffering she will endure as her Parkinson's progresses, the pleasure derived from these relationships is not enough to compel her to live. For the aggregate of the community, pleasure derived from Jane performing the action of suicide would be the comfort in knowing that (a) her wishes were respected and (b) her suffering is relieved. However, the pain of Jane's suicide outweighs the pleasure as the interests of the aggregate are compromised by her death.

Upon her death, they mourn her loss and her loss deprives them of their relationship to her, along with other interests that she contributed to satisfying in living her life. Compared to the value of Jane's pleasure and pain, the value of the aggregate of all other affected persons is less. Jane is directly impacted by her action, while all the others are indirectly impacted. Mill gives more consideration to direct actions as they are in the sphere of personal responsibility. Harm suffered outside of Jane's sphere of action, or indirect actions, are of lesser value to Jane as she has no moral responsibility for indirect harm.

Furthermore, the indirect harm does not violate anyone's liberty rights and is therefore of lesser value than the direct harm. Therefore, Jane is justified in placing a lower value on the aggregate pain and pleasure of the community compared to her personal pain and pleasure. Hence, the tendency to cause pleasure outweighs the tendency to cause pain and the action should be

performed. When one decides to commit suicide, Mill would argue that the only person directly affected is the individual.

However, Mill writes: “ No person is an entirely isolated being”, showing how an individual’s actions are never completely self-regarding (On Liberty). There will always be affected parties by your actions. While the family and friends of the individual will mourn the death, they are mourning the loss of a life. The loss of life affects the family and friends by harming the interests that they had in the success of the individual as a human life. For example, if the Jane was a mother, her family has a strong interest in maintaining their family structure and growing up with a present mother.

While the harm is indirect, it is significant and “ definite” as the family will be affected for the rest of their lives. With her death, their interests are compromised. The principal interest of all rational humans is happiness and interests serve the purpose of maximizing pleasure and reducing pain (Utilitarianism, II, 2). Pleasure is derived from living a good life and interests are what the individual desires to attain happiness. The pursuit of happiness is done through satisfying the individual interests of a person, hence to deny an individual of these interests would be to deny them of their happiness.

The definitions of direct and indirect harm appear unsatisfactory in determining the morality of an action; however, by evaluating the importance of personal autonomy, a more satisfying conclusion is reached. If interests are the means to the ultimate end of happiness, then the individual who wants to commit suicide is a mean to the ultimate end of her family and friends’ happiness. If the individual satisfies her own happiness by committing suicide, she is performing an action to achieve her ends. Mill

writes that the only justification needed for determining the desirability of an action is whether it is desired. Utilitarianism, IV, 3) As the individual desires to die, it is sufficient evidence that the action will provide happiness to the individual. Whether this action affects the interests of others is of minimal concern, as rational beings are not intended to serve as means to another's happiness. Hence, suicide is justified as long as the individual achieves the ultimate end of happiness despite harming the interests of others. The Objection In this section, an objection from the perspective of Kant will be presented using the four formulations of his categorical imperative.

Immanuel Kant would provide a compelling objection to Mill's justification of suicide. Kant offers four formulations of the categorical imperative, proving suicide as an immoral act by the definition that moral actions meet the formulations of the categorical imperative. First, the Formula of Universal Law, states: "I ought never to conduct myself except so that I could also will that my maxim become a universal law"(Groundwork, Ak4: 401) . The maxim that Jane is acting upon is killing one's self to relieve suffering.

To will this to become a universal law would be to will that all human suffering can be solved through suicide. However, this is a self-defeating maxim as one can not enjoy relief from suffering if one ceases to exist. Second, the Formula of Nature states: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature" (Groundwork, Ak4: 421). By this formulation of the categorical imperative, the justification for committing suicide would be that she believes that suicide should be a universal law of nature.

To say that suicide should be a universal law of nature is again, as mentioned in the above formulation, self-defeating. Also, Jane, as a rational agent, would not will suicide to be a universal law of nature; hence, Kant would conclude that she is not justified in committing suicide. Third, the Formula of Humanity states: "... any rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to the discretionary use of this or that will, but in all its actions, those directed toward itself as well as those directed toward other rational beings, it must at the same time be considered as an end" (Groundwork, Ak: 4: 428).

Simply put, this formulation of the categorical imperative states that all rational beings are considered ends, rather than just means to another's ends. Each individual is an end within themselves and all rational being must regard other rational beings as ends rather than means. In Jane's decision to commit suicide, Kant would say that she is treating her own life as mere means to achieve her end. Kant explicitly writes: " the one who has suicide in mind will ask himself whether his action could subsist together with the idea of humanity as an end in itself" (Groundwork, Ak4: 429).

Kant believes that all rational humans are not mere means to ends, but ends within themselves. If one commits suicide, one acts in a way that regards their humanity as a mere means to their happiness, as they believe that happiness is achieved following their death. Kant would argue that suicide degrades humanity on the whole, treating life as a means to the ultimate end, rather than an end in itself (Groundwork, Ak4: 429-64). Fourth, the Formula of Autonomy states: " Not to choose otherwise than so that the

maxims of one's choice are at the same time comprehended with it in the same volition as universal law" (Groundwork, Ak4: 441).

This formulation of the categorical imperative says that by free will, rational agents dictate laws and by the same free will, rational agents subject themselves to the laws they dictate. Through this formulation, Kant demonstrates the absolute value of reason in rational beings. Through reason, rational beings create the laws through which they live moral lives. Suicide, even in the case of suffering, would not be a law that a rational agent would universally impose upon society for if it were imposed on society, humanity would be degraded.

Kant would also argue that Jane has the perfect duty to preserve her life that this maxim would violate. Her duty relies on the respect for humanity and human life as ends, rather than means. Her violation of the duty through suicide shows a lack of respect for human reason as she is readily able to dispose of her own. Hence, Kant would conclude that the maxim of suicide to relieve suffering is not a valid maxim as it fails to satisfy this formula. Therefore, Kant would argue that suicide to relieve suffering does not satisfy the categorical imperative and is morally wrong.

The Rejoinder In this section, Mill's response to Kant's objection is presented. By recalling the concept of autonomy, Mill refutes Kant's objection to suicide. In response to Kant's claims that suicide violates the four formulations, Mill would argue that based on the supreme principle of personal autonomy, Kant's claims are false. While the maxim of killing one's self to relieve suffering is not one that can be universally applied, the magnitude of suffering is important in considering Jane's decision.

<https://assignbuster.com/suicide-and-the-harm-principle/>

It is far too broad to say that lack of respect for one individual's life will lead to the erosion of respect for all human life (Edwards). Situations of suicide must be evaluated on an individual basis, not on the premise of respect for the entire human race. Realistically, it is unlikely that Jane's suicide will lead to justification of suicide. Occurring every 13.7 minutes in the US, suicide is a major cause of death but society still functions with relative stability and order (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention). Isolated cases do not determine the general state of the world.

By failing to consider the consequences of actions for individuals Kant's reasoning falls short by only drawing large-scale conclusions of the impact of motivations on humanity as a whole. The claim that Jane is treating her humanity as mere means to her end is false. Jane has lived her life as she has desired, deriving pleasure throughout the journey. As she nears the end, her pleasure begins to diminish and is overcome by the pain of her disease. Wanting to die before experiencing overwhelming pain is not a disregard for her life, instead, it is the preservation of the memory of a good life well lived.

By wanting to die before her disease debilitates her, she maximizes the pleasures of life by avoiding pain. Furthermore, suicide does not represent a disregard for human rationality. Jane's suicide is a triumph of human rationality. Because of reason, she is able to justify her decision to commit suicide by using the observation of her mother's death as well as the medical facts that allow her to (1) know that she possess the gene that will give her the disease and (2) recognize the symptoms of Parkinson's while determining how far the disease can progress without compromising her happiness.

Analysis This section will offer an analysis of the arguments of both Kant and Mill in their ability to determine the morality of suicide. While it is important to recognize that Kant's categorical imperative provides good reasoning promoting the preservation of life, the argument falls short in understanding the degree of personal suffering and the toll this suffering takes on an individual. The categorical imperative focuses on motives behind actions, but with an action such as suicide, where the end result is death, motives matter less than consequences.

However, if the maxim under which Jane operates was stated as " Act in a way that promotes happiness and reduces pain", both Kant and Mill may be satisfied. By this maxim, all the formulas stated above are valid and Mill's principle of utility is satisfied. Autonomy lies at the heart of this dilemma and Mill's response to Kant's objections succeed in demonstrating that. Jane has valid reasons to commit suicide and because she is a rational agent, her reason must be respected.

The utility calculation, as well as the concepts of direct and indirect harm, serve as valuable tools in drawing the conclusion that suicide is the morally correct action given Jane's state of affairs. Works Cited Kant. " Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals . " (1785). Mill, J. S. " On Liberty. " (1859). Mill, J. S. " Utilitarianism. " (1861). Prevention, American Foundation for Suicide. Facts and Figures. 2012. 2012 .