

# Ethics from immanuel kant and john stuart mill



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Immanuel Kant (22 April 1724 – 12 February 1804) was an 18th-century German philosopher from the Prussian city of Königsberg. Kant was the last influential philosopher of modern Europe in the classic sequence of the theory of knowledge during the Enlightenment beginning with thinkers John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume.[1] A philosopher who lived a life of stringent discipline & routine. He took a passionate interest in American and French revolution.

Kant has various writings to his credit which include:

General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens (1755): in which he writes about the solar system

Critique of Pure Reason (1781): is about his philosophical work in natural sciences & mathematics.

Critique of Judgement (1790): wherein he analyzes aesthetics & biology.

The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785): endeavours to show the foundations of genuine morality.

The Critique of Practical Reason (1788): investigates implications of immorality for religion.

Kant's main concern is nature & morality (starry heavens above and moral law within). He says that genuine morality i. e., a morality which is objectively and universally binding requires an a priori foundation. He adds that the universal basis of morality in man must lie in his rational nature,

since this alone is the same in everyone. Thus a moral principle must be such that a man can 'will' that all men including him should act upon it.

Kant uses the test of consistency as the core of fundamental moral law which he calls - categorical imperative: those actions are right which conform to principles one can consistently will to be principles for all men, and those actions are wrong which are based upon maxims that a rational creature could not will that all men should follow.

Through the categorical imperative we can distinguish between right & wrong actions. Kant emphasizes that it is not only the test but it is also the unconditional directive for behavior. It is binding upon everyone because each rational man acknowledges his obligation to follow reason. Thus categorical imperative is the only basis for determining our duties. He stresses that reason prescribes duty, and the moral law holds whether or not men actually follow it.

In order to have an in-depth understanding of Kant's philosophy we need to see how he built up his argument. Initially Kant carries out a critical analysis of the commonly accepted 'good' things like health, wealth and friendship. He adds that the mentioned things are not good under all circumstances, but only in so far as they are conjoined with something that is unqualified good - a good will. GOOD WILL represents the effort of a rational being to do what he ought to do, rather than to act from inclination or self-interest. Thus a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness. Kant elaborates that good will is not good because it achieves good results. Even if it fails to attain the ends it seeks, it would be

good in itself and have a higher worth than the superficial things gained by immoral actions. Kant mentions that reason is a very inefficient instrument for the achievement of happiness. He concludes that reason is not intended to produce happiness, but to produce a good will.

Kant further explains the relation between good will & duty highlighting that a good will is one which acts for the sake of duty. Indeed, human actions have moral worth only if they are performed from duty. He further says that even action in accordance with duty is not enough; only respect for duty, makes an action moral. Kant further differentiates praiseworthy behavior from moral action, he says that altruistic or selfless actions that result from feelings of sociability deserve praise and encouragement but they cannot be classified as possessing moral value. Moral worth of character which is highest of all is not brought out from inclination but from duty.

Kant then puts forward his first ethical proposition wherein he states that “ an act must be done from duty in order to have moral worth”. Taking this forward the second ethical proposition says that “ an act from duty derives its moral value not from the results it produces but from the principle by which it is determined”. Taking the first two propositions Kant defines duty as “ the morally right action is one done solely out of reverence for the law and its unique and unconditioned worth is derived from this source”. Third proposition which is a consequence of the first two expresses “ duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law” . For Kant the supreme principle or law of morality which the good man must follow is the Categorical Imperative. Rational beings as far they act rationally will always be guided by

ethical principles or maxims which can be adopted by everyone else without generating any contradiction.

Kant further distinguishes between categorical imperative and hypothetical imperative. Kant says that categorical imperative is an unconditional directive that prescribes actions to be done because of the moral worth of the maxim and not for the sake of some consequence that may result. On the other hand hypothetical imperative is a conditional directive which advises what ought to be done if a desired goal is to be achieved for example, "One ought to tell the truth as a manner of principle" is a categorical imperative, whereas "if you want to avoid punishment, you ought to tell the truth" is a hypothetical imperative".

Kant's first explicit formulation of categorical imperative requires an individual to obey a maxim which can, without contradiction, be willed to be a rule for everyone. This means that the essence of morality lies in acting on the basis of an impersonal principle which is valid for everyone, including oneself. Kant conceives the categorical imperative to be a two-fold test. It requires first, that maxims for moral action be universalized without logical contradiction and second, that they be universal directives for action which do not bring the will into disharmony with itself by requiring it to will one thing for itself and another thing for others. In one of Kant's formulation of categorical imperative he talks of social implications, he emphasizes that it requires us to treat every human being as an end in himself and never as merely a means to an end. In brief, we should respect all human beings impartially and avoid exploiting anyone. Ends that are ends only because they are desired give us hypothetical imperatives; but if there is an end in

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itself, the imperative to seek it is independent of desire and is therefore a categorical imperative. Kant shows the basic identity of the first and second formulations of the categorical imperative. Those actions which, on the first formulation, cannot be universalized without contradiction, example committing suicide or refusing to help the needy, will be seen on the second formulation to be inconsistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself.

Having brought to light with logical rigor the implicit pre-suppositions of the common man's awareness of duty and shown it to be a universal categorical imperative, Kant gives eloquent praise to "pure moral philosophy" and a word of caution to those moralists who would allow reason to be corrupted by empirical considerations.

## References:

[1] Crane Brinton. "Enlightenment", Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Vol. 2, p. 519. Macmillan, 1967.

[2] [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

[3] E. Albert, T. Denise, S. Peterfreund - Great Traditions in Ethics, 4th Edition, 1980.

## 2. John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill was the intellectual heir of the utilitarian movement in England. Mill dedicated himself to clarifying the teachings of his father, James Mill, and those of Jeremy Bentham, who championed the utilitarian doctrine. John Mill was nurtured and mentored to be an original thinker.

Mill's major works include:

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System of Logic (1843): which is his philosophical contribution wherein he defends the inductive method of logic, showing that general laws or universal principles must be derived from empirical facts.

Principles of Political Economy (1848): wherein he relates the application of Utilitarian principles to Economics.

Essays on Liberty (1859) and Considerations on Representative Government (1861): are classical statements of his social and political philosophy.

Essay Utilitarianism (1861): is his only explicit contribution to ethics.

Autobiography and Three Essays on Religion: both of which works were published after his death.

John Stuart Mill did not attempt to originate an ethical theory, but rather to defend the ethical theory to which he was born. He modified and went beyond the utilitarian doctrine as it was propounded by his father and Jeremy Bentham. Bentham based his utilitarian philosophy on the principle that the " object of morality is the promotion of the greatest happiness of the maximum number of members in the society". He proceeded on the premise that the happiness of any individual consists in a favorable balance of pleasures over pains. Consequently, those actions which tend to increase pleasure are called " good" and those actions which tend to increase pain are called ' bad'. For Bentham " The public good ought to be the subject of the legislator: General utility ought to be the foundation of his reasoning's. To know the true good of the community is what constitutes the science of legislation; the art consists in finding the means to realize that good. To

implement this social and political ideal, he constructed a “hedonistic calculus” by means of which pleasures and pains could be measured. In this way, good and bad acts and, consequently, good and bad legislation, can be evaluated in terms of such factors as intensity, duration, extent, certainty, propinquity, fecundity & purity. 2

Mill restates the Bentham doctrine. In his restatement, he goes beyond Bentham’s contention that the essential differences among pleasures and pains are quantitative, maintaining that they are also subject to significant qualitative differentiation.

Mill accepts in principle Bentham’s doctrine regarding the basic role of pleasure and pain in morality viz.

Individual psychological hedonism: according to which the sole motive of an action is an individual’s desire for happiness that is for a balance of pleasure over pain. This is primarily a descriptive doctrine since it gives an account of the actual motive of the behaviour.

Universal ethical hedonism: according to which the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” ought to be the individual’s goal and standard of conduct. This is a normative theory in that it stipulates what ought to be done. In it is a principle by which actions are evaluated in terms of their consequences irrespective of the nature of the motive.

However there are gaps between Individual psychological hedonism and Universal ethical hedonism:



If each individual is motivated solely by the desire of his own happiness, there is no reason to assume that his actions will at the same time always promote the interests of the society

The descriptive fact that men do desire their own happiness, does not imply the normative principle that men ought to act in accordance with this desire.

In order to fill the gaps and harmonize individual psychological hedonism and universal ethical hedonism Mill takes recourse to the concept of Sanctions - the inducement to action which gives binding force to moral rules.

In Mill's system of ethics, sanctions are rooted in the hedonistic motive, i. e., moral rules are acknowledged and obeyed by virtue of anticipated pleasures or pains There are both " external" and " internal" sanctions. External sanctions are forces of reward and punishment in the universe about us which control men's actions through their fear of pain and propensity for pleasure. But Mill cautions that presence of such external sanctions is not to be taken as true sense of moral obligation. Thus ultimate moral sanction must come from within. The force of an internal action derives from the feeling of pleasure which is experienced when a moral law is obeyed and the feeling of pain which accompanies a violation of it. Thus the greatest happiness principle can be sanctioned from within. Moreover by means of this doctrine of internal sanctions, Mill is enabled to reconcile the psychological theory that everyone desires his own happiness with the moral theory that one ought to act as to serve public good.

Looking at Mill's work in detail we see that Mill defends the utilitarian doctrine by identifying misrepresentations and clarification of the principle.

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He opposes those who fail to associate utility with pleasure and pain. Mill then states concisely the doctrine of utility. He says that Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness (pleasure and absence of pain), wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness or unhappiness (pain and deprivation of pleasure). He further states that pleasures vary in kind and degree and some kinds of pleasure are more desirable & more valuable than others. Thus quantity & quality both need to be considered when estimating pleasure. Mill relates that superiority of one kind of pleasure over another is determined by those who have experienced both kinds. Further says that among those who have experienced both prefer the pleasure of higher faculties. Mill further discounts the judgment of those who abandon higher pleasures for lower ones by explaining that they are incapable either inherently or by lack of opportunity of enjoying the higher kind. The only judges are those who have tested the spectrum of pleasures (lower & higher pleasures). Mill relates the greatest happiness principle to include the difference between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of pleasure. Mill puts forward the realistic description of happiness and a suggestion for the social means of achieving it. This is a clarification to the objections to the utilitarian doctrine.

Another objection Mill discounts is the claim that Utilitarian morality is incompatible with acts of personal sacrifice which are so sacred in Christian culture. Thus he concludes that each individual's happiness is equal to that of any other. The greatest happiness principle is not essential as a motive for conduct but is essential as the rule by which conduct is judged and sanctioned. Herein moral evaluation is directed to actions and to the manner

in which they affect the general happiness. Having removed the major misconceptions about the principle of utility Mill proposes to investigate its ultimate sanction. Mill states that it is our feeling for humanity which provides the ultimate sanction of the principle of utility and this Mill calls the internal sanction. Regardless of whether this inner feeling or internal sanction for mankind is inborn or acquired, Mill argues that it can be a powerful force and a sound basis for utilitarian morality.

Mill's moving description of the origin and nature of the feeling for humanity may serve as a fitting conclusion to his exposition of the greatest happiness principle.

## **References:**

[1] E. Albert, T. Denise, S. Peterfreund – Great Traditions in Ethics, 4th Edition 1980.

[2] [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

## **(3) Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics highlights or stresses on the basic virtues of moral character the main concept being of 'virtue', practical wisdom and eudaimonia. The founders of virtue ethics are Plato and Aristotle, though roots can be traced back to Greek Philosophy and the Chinese dominant approach<sup>1</sup>.

Virtue ethics refers to a collection of normative ethical philosophy that place an emphasis on 'being' rather than 'doing'. In other words in virtue ethics morality stems from the identity or character of the individual rather than being a reflection of the actions (or consequences thereof) of the individual.

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There are various debates on virtue ethics however the link that connects all is that “ Morality comes as a result of intrinsic virtues” 2

## **VIRTUE: PLATO’S IDEA**

Plato followed the Socratic dictum “ Virtue is Knowledge”. Plato’s thesis was that “ life of reason is the happiest & best. This means that knowledge produces a harmonious man in the sense that when reason governs desires & passions, a well balanced organized personality results. Such a person is “ a rational man” who is the ‘ virtuous man’ and the “ happy man”. For Plato a morally virtuous man is one who is in Rational, Emotional and Biological balance . In Platonic terms a virtuous man is one who is wise, temperate, courageous and just. In a virtuous man desires or passions function harmoniously under the governance of reason.

Such a man sets his own inner life & is his own master and is at peace with himself. Plato’s answer to what is a ‘ Good Life’ is that a life of reasoning is the best life. He has written in the Republic “ It is better to be unborn than untaught: for ignorance is the root of misfortune.” 3

For Plato:

A man of knowledge is the virtuous man

Life of reason(knowledge ) is the best life

Ultimate knowledge on which moral virtue is based is the knowledge of the Good.

By achievement of justice , temperance and wisdom the whole soul becomes perfect and noble

## **VIRTUE: ARISTOTLE'S IDEA**

Aristotle's theory is that everyone wants to live ' the good life', the happy life. The term used for happiness is Eudaimonia. By happiness Aristotle seems to mean ' well being' the fulfillment of our distinctive functions.

Aristotle says that Eudaimonia is the highest good because it is sought for its own sake and nothing else that is justice is sought because it leads to good life. According to Aristotle the best way to achieve happiness (Eudaimonia) was to inculcate and exhibit those qualities that are most productive to live in a society. He states that extremes of character are not good. For Aristotle Virtue lies in the " Golden Mean" that is the right balance between the two extremes. He has called each of the extremes ' Vice' and the mean ' Virtue'4.

Exceptions to the Rule:

Not everything has a means

No means for murder or theft

Thus following Aristotle's thought every person should develop his own character by inculcating habit of virtue. Thereafter good actions will become a habit e. g. a good person will take good decisions. This goodness shall then ripple to the society & coming generations from their elders since virtue is taught by example rather than set of rules. The virtues identified by Aristotle are of 2 types:

### Moral Virtues:

The habitual choice of actions in accordance with rational principles.

### Intellectual Virtues:

The contemplation of theoretical truths and the discovery of rational principles which ought to control everyday actions.

The first set of virtues is developed by habits the second by training and education. According to Aristotle we are not born with virtues that are we are inherently good or bad, we learn by inculcating habits & having role models of virtuous people. 4

Thus according to Aristotle

A life of reason is the best and most pleasant and this life is also the happiest one.

Happiness thus depends on actualization of one's rationality.

A virtuous man lives according to reason thus realizing his distinct potentiality.