

# Exploring ethics essay



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Comparison of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill T. H. Aristotle represents virtue ethics, Kant represents duty ethics, and Mill represents utilitarianism. All three authors conceive of morality as the search for the highest good. They disagree about the definition of the highest good. For Aristotle, it is happiness understood as self-sufficiency (fulfillment of all desires), consisting in activity in conformity with virtue (EN 1. 7), for Kant it is a good will, defined by duty (GMM, ed.

Ellington, p. 7: 393; p. 9: 397), for Mill it is happiness understood as pleasure and absence of pain (Utilitarianism, ch. 2). "unfairly or through ignorance or for an ulterior motive, and not for the sake of performing just acts." EN 6. 12. 1144a13-16, cf. 5. 6. 1134a19-23; 5. 8. 1135b2-6. Kant: 1. "For in the case of what is to be morally good, that it conforms to the moral law is not enough; it must also be done for the sake of the moral law." GMM, p. 3: 390. 2. A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i. e. it is good in itself." GMM, p. 7: 394. 3. "[T]o preserve one's life is a duty; and furthermore, everyone has also an immediate inclination to do so. But on this account the often anxious care taken by most men for it has no intrinsic worth, and the maxim of their action has no moral content. They preserve their lives, to be sure, in accordance with duty, but not from duty.

On the other hand, if adversity and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away the taste for life, if an unfortunate man ... wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it – not from inclination or fear, but from duty – then his maxim indeed has a moral content." GMM, p. 10: 397-398. 4.

“ The second proposition is this: An action done from duty has its moral worth, not in the purpose that is to be attained by it, but in the maxim according to which the action is determined. The moral worth depends, therefore, not on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of volition according to which ... the action has been done. From what has gone before it is clear that the purposes which we may have in our actions, as well as their effects regarded as ends and incentives of the will, cannot give to actions any unconditioned and moral worth. Where, then, can this worth lie if it is not to be found in the will's relation to the expected effect? Nowhere but in the principle of the will, with no regard to the ends that can be brought about through such action. GMM, p. 12-13: 399-400.

Comparison of moral theories: the moral value lies in ... agent • ? rm character • acts from choice • for the sake of the noble • acts w/ knowledge • acts with pleasure • sense desires accord with reason • act from duty action • aim at a median • not intrinsically bad consequences • if foreseeable, they have to be taken into account Aristotle Kant • in accord with duty • no value by itself • no value Mill • indifferent • all the value HOW TWO AUTHORS DIFFER FROM THE THIRD a) Aristotle and Kant as opposed to Mill 1. For Aristotle and Kant, the emphasis lies on disposition of the agent, and little (Aristotle, 5. 8. 1135b17-25) or not at all (Kant, p. 7f. : 394) on effects of an action (the consequences), whereas Mill all that counts are the effects of an act. Aristotle: 1. “[T]he man who does not enjoy performing noble actions is not a good man at all,” EN 1. 8. 1099a17-19. 2. “ Moreover, the factors involved in the arts and in the virtues are not the same. In the arts, excellence lies in the result itself, so that it is sufficient if it is of a certain kind.

But in the case of the virtues, an act is not performed justly or with self-control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it: first of all, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake; and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchangeable character. ” EN 2. 4. 1105a26–34. 3. “[A] courageous man, as we have seen, is characterized by the fact that he endures what is fearful to man and what seems fearful to him, because to do so is noble and to do otherwise is base. EN 2. 8. 1117a17–18. 4. “ It is our contention that people may perform just acts without actually being just men, as in the case of people who do what has been laid down by the laws but do so either invol- Mill: the EN the for 1. “ It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties ..., but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so done if the rule of duty does not condemn them. Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 2. “[U]tilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the actions, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty or the hope of being paid for his trouble; he who betrays the friend that trusts him is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations. ” Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 2. Aristotle and Kant admit that there are actions that must never be performed (“ intrinsically evil acts”), whereas for Mill, no action is always condemnable. Aristotle: “ Not every action nor every emotion admits of a mean. There are some actions and

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emotions whose very names connote baseness, e. g. , spite, shamelessness, envy; and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder. These and similar emotions and actions imply by their very names that they are bad; it is not their excess nor their deficiency which is called bad. It is, therefore, impossible ever to do right in performing them: to perform them is always to do wrong. In cases of this sort, let us say adultery, rightness and wrongness do not depend on committing it with the right woman at the right time and in the right manner, but the mere fact of committing such actions at all is to do wrong. " EN 2. 6. 1107a8-18. Kant: 1. " Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature. " GMM, p. 30: 421. 2. " Act in such a way that you treat humanity ... always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means. " GMM, p. 6: 429. 3. "

Therefore, whoever tells a lie, regardless of how good his intentions may be, must answer for the consequences resulting therefrom ... regardless of how unforeseen those consequences may be. This is because truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract, and the laws of such duties would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the slightest exception to them were admitted. " On a Supposed Right to Lie, 65. is necessarily also the standard of morality, which may accordingly be defined ' the rules and precepts for human conduct. " Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 2. "[F]irst, laws and social arrangements should place the happiness or ... the interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and, secondly, ... education and opinion ... should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness

prescribe. " Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 3. " It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties. Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 4. "[O]n the whole, a doctrine which brings prominently forward the interest that mankind have in the repression and prevention of conduct which violates the moral law is likely to be inferior to no other. " Utilitarianism, ch. 2. Aristotle: 1. "[H]appiness is at once the best, noblest and most pleasant thing. " EN 1. 8. 1099a24-25. 2. "[V]irtue, being concerned with pleasure and pain ..., makes us act in the best way in matters involving pleasure and pain. " EN 2. 3. 1104b27-28. Mill: 1. "[I]t would often be expedient... to tell a lie.

But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental ... we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency is not expedient ... Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions is acknowledged by all moralists ... the principle of utility ... must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates. Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 2. "[R]ules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and ... hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable. " Utilitarianism, ch. 2. c) Aristotle and Mill as opposed to Kant Both Aristotle and Mill found their moral doctrines on the pursuit of happiness (even though both authors have a different understanding of what happiness is), whereas for Kant, the foundation of ethics rests upon the idea of good will. Aristotle: 1. [W]e always choose happiness as an end in itself

and never for the sake of something else. ” EN 1. 7. 1097a33–1097b2. 2.

“[H]appiness is a certain activity of the soul in conformity with perfect virtue.

” EN 1. 13. 1102a5; cf. 1. 7. 1098a16–17; 1. 9. 1099b26; 1. 10. 1100b10. b)

Kant and Mill as opposed to Aristotle Both Kant and Mill conceive of morality as fulfilling one’s duty, as following rules. For Kant, one has to do one’s duty for the sake of duty or the law, for Mill, one has to do the duty of increasing the amount of happiness of the largest number of people.

Aristotle does not understand morality as above all respecting laws, but as becoming virtuous for the sake of nobility. In Kant and even more so in Mill, it seems that morality means to serve especially the interest of the collective, not one’s own fulfillment and character above all. Kant: “ The third proposition ... can be expressed thus: Duty is the necessity of action done out of respect for the law. ” GMM, p. 13: 400. Mill: 1. The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals ‘ utility’ or the ‘ greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. ”

Utilitarianism, ch. 2. 2. “ According to the greatest happiness principle ..., 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. ”

Utilitarianism, ch. 2. Kant: 1. There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will. ... Thus a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness. ” GMM, p. 7: 393.

2. “ While a will may not indeed be the sole and complete good, it must, nevertheless, be the highest good and the condition of all the rest, even of

the desire for happiness. ... [R]eason ... may in many ways restrict, at least in this life, the attainment of the second purpose, viz. , happiness, which is always conditioned.

Indeed happiness can even be reduced to less than nothing, without nature's failing thereby in her purpose. " GMM, p. 7: 393. Mill: 1. " I have dwelt on this point as being part of a perfectly just conception of utility or happiness considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether ... This, being according to the utilitarian opinion the end of human action,