

Thoughts on Morality: Mill's Utilitarianism and Kant's Ethics of the Will

The ethical theories of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill form the groundwork for modern discourse on morality. On one side, Kant argues that a moral action is one in which the will operates in accordance with a maxim that has the potential to be universalized. When judging moral action, the intention of the actor matters most. In contrast, Mill defines moral action as that which contributes both short term and long term to the maximization of the general happiness of the system. Determining the ethical validity of an action requires measuring its effect, either positive or negative, on overall happiness. This essay attempts to compare the ethical theories of Kant and Mill through dissection and practical application. I start by examining each theory individually and weighing their strengths and weaknesses. I then apply the theories to the moral dilemma presented in the film "Gone Baby Gone." I conclude with the argument that Kant's ethics of the will is more appropriate given the situation because it prevents the subjectivization of right and wrong and forces us to evaluate our actions as part of a larger moral system.

Kant's theory on morality originates from the interaction between reason, duty and the will. According to Kant, morality is autonomously based on reason and lacks any empirical elements. Moral action cannot come into contact with inclination, desire, or sympathy, and must stem solely from a rational idea of what is universally right and wrong. The actor must extract any subjective emotion from the decision, cross-check it with its potential as a rational universal maxim, then act according to this maxim. Reason discerns which maxims have such potential and, since Kant considers reason to be universal in form, the moral

maxims created by reason are applicable to all rational beings.

Kant's idea of duty is born from the obligation, as a rational being, to follow such maxims. The will acts as the catalyst to follow in accordance with the universal rules put in place by reason, and is independent of any other outside forces. However, for a maxim to be truly universal and applicable to all, it must be specific to a certain situation. For example, instead of creating a universal rule stating that it is moral to save a person who is drowning, it is more practical to create a maxim stating that it is moral to save a person who is drowning if you can swim. Since the will is governed by reason in all rational (human) beings, and since the will is antecedent to the action, it is the intention of the actor that is most significant during moral judgment.

There are many objections to Kant's take on morality. Judging an action to be immoral because it's based on sympathy, pity or other empirical elements is arguably unreasonable. Isn't human emotion a key aspect of morality in the first place? In addition, Kant's argument that intention, or will, is the only considerable factor when judging moral action removes consequence from the table. If the reckless driving of a paramedic, whose intention is to save lives, indirectly causes a fatal traffic accident, can the paramedic's actions still be considered moral? Finally, cross-checking action with a universal maxim is impracticable and unsustainable in the real world. Decisions, whether moral or immoral, are rarely made using Kant's reasoning process, as it would require time that most people don't have. This problem of practicality also appears in Mill's utilitarian ethics, and will provide vital means for comparison.

Mill's utilitarianism is relatively straightforward. His theory focuses on the

consequences of action, defining morality as the contribution, both short term and long term, to the maximization of the general happiness of the system. While Kant states that morality only applies to rational beings, Mill argues that it should be extended to all *sentient* beings. Therefore, torturing a cat is immoral even though the cat may not be rational. Mill takes care to differentiate between utilitarianism and expediency, arguing that expediency is most often based solely on satisfying the immediate needs of the individual, while utilitarianism attempts to address the present and future happiness of the entire population. Since happiness is a product of action, Mill judges moral worth through consequence. If the action ends up positively affecting the general happiness, then it can be deemed moral. If the action fails in this regard, or causes a decrease in happiness, then it is considered immoral. Measuring happiness requires acknowledging that pleasure and pain are scaled. One who is satisfied by basic pleasures is less evolved and less happy than one who requires deeper meaning to be happy, even though he/she may not acquire it. A pig's pleasure, though complete, rates much lower than Socrates' pleasure.

Judging morality using a general happiness differential may appear to pardon arguably immoral actions like a white lie. However, a utilitarian viewpoint requires broadening one's outlook on happiness. Mill argues that lying is usually unacceptable because it weakens the overall trustworthiness of human discourse. Since all interactions depend on an element of trust, lying causes overall harm to the general happiness. Unless telling a lie would do more good than harm, as in the case of Kant's "man at the door with a knife," lying should be avoided.

Other objections to Mill's utilitarianism hold more water. First, utilitarianism prevents

us from acknowledging the difference between someone who consciously acts in a moral way and someone who unintentionally causes the benefits of moral action. Second, utilitarianism arguably allows for the sacrifice of human rights to satisfy general happiness. This is most easily seen through a scapegoat, who may be unjustly accused, imprisoned, or executed to please the masses. This flaw presents a deeper question: is Mill's utilitarian pleasure *true* happiness when human rights are subjected, ignored, or denied? Finally, attempting to measure happiness to secure a moral judgment is virtually impossible. Trying to predict the amount of future, general happiness that an action will cause is simply unrealistic. Just like Kant's ethics of the will, utilitarianism suffers from impracticality.

The ethical problem presented by the movie "Gone Baby Gone" allows for a deeper exploration of the contrast between Kant's ethics of the will and Mill's utilitarianism. In the movie, a drug-addict mother routinely neglects her daughter. Though she loves her child, she habitually prioritizes her needs over the girl's safety. Her brother-in-law notices the horrible parenting and decides to kidnap the child. He brings her to an elderly couple who have the resources, time, and sensibility to be better parents. The girl will now grow up in a beautiful house, attend an excellent school, and receive the attention a child deserves. Is it morally acceptable to kidnap a child if it means a better life for the kid?

Kant would argue no. If this reasoning was transformed into a universal maxim, and everyone was allowed to decide whether a parent is adequate enough to keep his/her child, the social and familial structure would fall apart. Such a maxim is unreasonable, and hence, immoral. However, he would concede that based on the brother-in-law's intention, being to provide his niece with a better life, he should not be punished for his actions.

In contrast, Mill would argue yes. If kidnapping the child meant an overall increase in present and future happiness, then doing so would be morally acceptable. This measurement would have to take into account the action's effect on the happiness of the birth mother, the elderly couple, and of the child, both today and ten years from now. However, similar to his argument concerning lying, Mill would acknowledge that the kidnapping would be detrimental to the general happiness by destroying trust that exists within the most basic of relationships, that between a mother and her child. Nevertheless, he would argue that an increase of happiness outweighs the negative effects and would therefore support the kidnapping.

Personally, when looking at this specific moral dilemma, I support Kant's argument. Although the kidnapping might have given the girl an easier childhood, if everyone had the right to separate children from their parents based on their interpretations of bad parenting, our entire social and familial framework would fall apart. Child protection services are in place to provide means of safely removing children from abusive parents through morally acceptable means. The brother-in-law should have used this institution instead of taking action based on his subjective moral viewpoint.

In conclusion, Kant's ethics of the will and Mill's utilitarianism provide two distinct approaches to defining, judging, and implementing morality. Kant argues that a moral action is made by removing all subjective emotion and cross-checking it with a potential universal law. In judging morality, the will, or the intention of the actor is most important. In contrast, Mill states that a moral action contributes immediately and in the future to the maximization of the general happiness of the system, and should be judged according to the

outcome. However happiness, as Kant argues, is a subjective emotion and has no place in moral thought. While both theories agree that morality is universal, the utilitarian idea of universality is broader, including all *sentient* beings, not only rational ones. After dissecting each theory individually and applying them both to a specific moral dilemma, it is clear that they approach morality from two completely opposite angles. This contrast, though stark, provides today's philosophers with a framework to construct new ethical ideas.