

What's the Right Thing to Do? Part I: In Theory

This week: Two classics—Kant's *Groundwork* and Mill's *Utilitarianism*.
Next week: Putting these theories to work in contemporary debates.

I. Deontological (duty-based) ethics: Kant's *Groundwork*

Kant's goal: A purely rational foundation for morality.

The starting point:

- There is a *universal moral law*, distinct from the empirical laws of nature, that governs the workings of a perfectly good will.
- Humans, possessing imperfectly good wills, are capable of obeying this law, but also capable of violating it. The moral law makes *commands* of us but we don't always follow them.
- A moral action is an action performed from *respect* for the moral law—from *duty*.

The question: Taking for granted the existence of a universal moral law, what can be inferred from the mere fact of its existence about the content of its commands?

Kant's answer: The commands of a universal moral law must take the form of *categorical imperatives*—imperatives that apply *unconditionally* and *necessarily* to all rational beings. The moral force of a categorical imperative does not depend on the contingent circumstances of any particular rational being, and does not depend on any other, more fundamental law.

Kant's most famous sentence (*Groundwork*, 4:421):

**“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this:
act only according to that maxim [guiding principle or rule] through which you can at the same
time will that it become a universal law.”**

Kant's argument: Kant's argument for this claim is notoriously brief and obscure. Roughly, the argument is that all other putative categorical imperatives (e.g. act in accordance with God's will, promote happiness, be kind, etc.) cannot be truly *categorical*. Their moral force rests on *further conditions* outside of themselves (e.g. God's will is good, happiness is good, kindness is good, etc.), so they cannot be expressions of a moral law that holds *necessarily* for *all* rational beings.

A truly *unconditional* command (one that builds in no further conditions at all, but simply *must* have moral force for any will governed by a moral law) cannot rest on assumptions about the nature of the good. It must instead derive from the essential feature of the moral law *qua* law—its *universality*...

...and the only command that can be derived from the *universality* of the moral law alone, with *no other assumptions*, is the command to act in ways that can be universally followed.

The categorical imperative in practice:

Q: Is it wrong to make a false promise to get someone to give you money?

A: Yes—because the practice of making false promises to get someone to give you money, if universally followed, would undermine the conditions for its own success.

The “murderer at the door” problem:

According to Kant, one implication of the categorical imperative is an *absolute prohibition on lying*—lying cannot be willed to be a universal law, because universal lying would undermine the conditions for its own success. This still applies, says Kant, even if a murderer knocks on your door and asks whether his intended victim is in the house.

2. Consequentialist (consequence-based) ethics: Mill's Utilitarianism

As a (classical) *utilitarian*, Mill believes consequences for happiness are at the heart of all ethics. The classical utilitarian hypothesis: **goodness = happiness**.

“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**. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.” (Mill, Ch. 2)

What does Mill mean by pleasure?

Mill's conception of pleasure is a broad one—it includes “pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiment” and “a sense of dignity” (Ch. 2). Moreover, “It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others” (Ch. 2). Trade-offs between types of pleasure, and between pleasure and pain, in the calculation of happiness are to be left to “the feelings and judgment of the experienced”.

Why accept that goodness=happiness?

Mill's argument: “No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.” (Ch. 4)

The demandingness problem

Normally, we take it to be at least *morally permissible* to pursue projects that *don't* aim at maximizing the general happiness. But utilitarianism denies this—it permits only those projects that can be justified as happiness-maximizing from a completely impartial viewpoint. It seems to require we spend all our time either helping to alleviate suffering or making money to give to charities to alleviate suffering.

Ivan's question

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* contains one of the most excoriating critiques of religion ever written, attributed in the novel to Ivan Karamazov. But part of that critique is also applicable to utilitarianism:

“Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?”

One of the most persistent, and most troubling, criticisms of utilitarianism is that it seems to *demand* brutal sacrifices when they are necessary for the maximization of the general happiness.

Next time: How do these grand moral theories apply to real-world moral dilemmas?

Primary reading:

Choose at least one option (coordinate in class):

Kant, Immanuel (1785) *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Section I AND one introduction to Kant.

Mill, John Stuart (1863) *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 2 and 4, AND one introduction to Mill.

Introductions to Kant and Kantian ethics:

Benn, Pier (1998), *Ethics*, Ch. 4; Bennett, Christopher (2010), *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?*, Ch. 5;

Korsgaard, Christine (2012) Introduction to Kant's *Groundwork*, trans. Gregor and Timmermann.

Introductions to Mill and utilitarianism:

Benn, Piers (1998), *Ethics*, Ch. 3; Bennett, Christopher (2010), *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?*, Ch. 4.

For more on ethics, take **Philosophy, Morals and Politics**.