

Final Paper

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## How to Live a Good Life

**Introduction.** The fundamental question regarding our existence is: “How do I live a good life?” The good life not only consists of performing the right actions but of having the right mindset. An even more fundamental component to a good life is that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, should be able to achieve a good life. Kant and Mill lay out ethics that strive to show *how* one should go about living a good life. Individually, both sets of ethics are incomplete, but when combined a “complete” ethics is created.

**Part 1.** Kant’s ethics are comprised in the mind, the origin of action. Kant gives a powerful test in order to determine if a principal, or “maxim,” is worth acting on. This test is stated as follows: “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant, pg 277). Maxims are always in the form of an imperative e.g. “do X,” or “Don’t do Y.” If there is an action a person wants to commit, then this person will look at the maxim underlying this action and put this maxim through Kant’s test to determine if the action is inherently good or bad. For example, say a married person wants to determine if having an affair with a co-worker is good or bad. Using Kant’s test we first find the maxim: Commit adultery. Putting this maxim through Kant’s test we find that the institution of marriage (pledging one’s self solely to another) and the act of adultery are in conflict with one another.

From this process, the correct maxim is shown: Don't commit adultery. Alternatively, committing adultery is inherently wrong. The power of Kant's ethics comes from the fact that everyone has principals, i.e. maxims, which guide their life and Kant's test is a powerful tool that can be used to see if our maxims pass the test. Under "normal" situations, a person's maxims can be followed to the letter without problem, in other words these maxims hold true without exception in 80 to 99% of situations that occur in our daily life.

Problem arises when extreme situations occur. Given that a person has a set of maxims which guide their life, some of these maxims are bound to come in conflict with each other in extreme situations. An example of this is when a person is being attacked. In this situation the maxims "Preserve life" and "Don't hurt others" comes in conflict. This is because if this person does nothing then his life may be taken, but if he defends himself this would most likely involve injuring his attacker (especially if the attacker is determined to take the person's life). Kant gets around this by creating perfect and imperfect duties. However, the very idea of duties goes completely against the basis of Kant's ethics. This is because maxims themselves are imperatives, which means they should *always* be followed according to Kant. However, when two maxims come in direct conflict, a person must follow one and go against the other. Therefore, if the person makes the correct choice of which maxim to follow, the maxim the person goes against must not be a true maxim by definition. Because maxims by definition are things which should always be followed. In this case the correct choice was made by not following it.

Another problem arises when it comes to the number of maxims a person should have. Because there are an infinite number of possible moral situations (each having a right action that must be taken) there are an infinite number of morally right actions possible, each of which

conforms to a maxim. However, Godel's theorem clearly proves that one cannot take a finite set of maxims and from them prove all possible truths, or morally right actions in our case. One would either have to have an infinite number of maxims, to cover all morally good acts, or one would have a finite set of maxims and simply not know what to do in certain situations, because no maxim would clearly apply. In the former case having an infinite number of maxims would defeat the very purpose of having maxims (not to mention the prohibitive time constraints). In the latter case we have a more realistic option of having a finite set of maxims, but this still begs the question: "How many maxims should a person have?"

**Part 2.** Mill's ethics is the ethics of actions and outcomes. The terms good and bad are defined by the consequences an action has on the "general happiness" (Mill, pg 351). Because of this principle, no action can be said to be good or bad in and of itself. Each action must be examined to determine its probable outcome on the general happiness; only by doing this can an action be considered good or bad. For example hurting someone, in a situation where we want a toy from a person, hurting them to obtain the toy would be wrong; but if the person were attacking us then defending ourselves (which will probably hurt them in some way) would be the correct choice. Thus we see that actions, that may be considered bad, may sometimes be the correct actions to take depending on the situation. Conversely actions that may be considered good would be the wrong actions to take depending on the situation.

The one major caveat in Mill's ethics is its inherent reliability on probability. This is because no one knows the future and therefore cannot know if an action will or will not increase the general happiness with 100% certainty. We may have an idea what an outcome will be, but until we actually perform the action there is no way of knowing for certain if it was the correct one. Thus we see the validity of the saying "hind sight is 20/20." Because of this inability to

foresee outcomes, no one can know for certain that they are performing the morally correct actions. Thus the ethics of Mill is reduced to a well educated guessing game at best. Fortunately, as human beings, we are very good at recognizing patterns. Because of this ability, most things that occur in nature (or through other people) are very predictable. This means that if an input, stimulus, or action occurs, the consequences can almost always be figured out ahead of time. In fact for a human beings to have an enjoyable existence they *must* believe that the world around them is ordered and rational, and because of this order and rationality, predictable. Insanity itself may be defined as the repeated performance of an action with an expectation of dissimilar outcomes. Because of this high degree of predictability, the educated guessing game that is Mill's ethics is placed on sound footing. When making a tough decision, virtually all human beings rely on their past experiences to help guide them in making a decision that will result in the best possible outcome.

Because human behavior is so predictable, Mill's ethics provides us with "rules of thumb." These rules give us guidelines to follow. However, these "rules of thumb" are directly at odds with the premise of Mill's ethics. This is because an action is performed or not performed, there is no "in-between" state. The *only* determinate of an action that makes it wrong or right is the actions outcome. Therefore performing an action because it is *usually* the right action, and thereby not bothering to figure out that particular action's outcome, is in complete contradiction to the foundation of Mill's ethics. This poses a problem, of the hundreds, if not thousands, of moral actions people perform on a weekly basis, only a select few of them are analyzed to determine their outcome. This is precisely because if people had to logically figure out the outcomes of every single moral decision they make, before they make it, our civilization would grind to a halt as everyone would be spending most of their day analyzing their moral decisions.

Thus we see that there must be some actions that are usually right and other actions that are usually wrong, but which Mill gives no solid grounding for.

Another problem with Mill's ethics involves the inherent worth of actions. There are a number of actions that are inherently wrong or right in and of themselves. This can be clearly proven through an example. A soldier kills an enemy to protect the freedoms their nation provides for them and their family. Despite the fact that the outcome is the best for the "general happiness," most United States soldiers retain the emotional scars incurred for that action. This is precisely because they know at some level that killing is *always inherently wrong*, and going against that belief is psychologically damaging no matter what the outcome.

**Part 3.** Kant and Mill are both right and wrong. Kant's ethics clearly show that all moral actions are right or wrong in and of themselves. And Mill's ethics shows that an action's outcome should be the deciding factor as whether or not to perform the action. However, Kant is wrong when he says that maxims are imperatives, things which should *always* be followed, although they may take that form. Mill is equally wrong when he says that outcomes are the *only* determining factor for choosing the morally correct action. Instead, having a balance of the two is the way to live a good life. Kant's ethics should be followed in "normal" situations and Mill's ethics should be applied to extreme conditions. Ultimately, a person should have a finite set of maxims which should be followed without question under "normal" situations. With this in mind, there are two situations in which Mill's ethics should be applied.

The first occurs as a result of two maxims coming in direct conflict with one another. Under this situation no maxim based ethics can resolve the situation and instead outcomes need to be analyzed. The second case is when a situation occurs where no maxim clearly applies. This situation also requires that Mill's ethics be applied to determine the correct action to take. By

having this sort of “complete” ethics the question asked earlier can also be answered: “how many maxims should a person have?” The number of maxims a person should have will depend on the types and frequencies of situations the person is in who “has” the maxims. Thus a person living in Africa during wartime will (and should) have different maxims than a person living in the USA during peacetime. Although this answer is nice, it is much too vague. A more precise answer is surprisingly given by Mill’s ethics. If a person finds themselves in situations in which maxims are conflicting often, or where no maxims apply repeatedly, then this shows that the person’s maxims are not adequate to reflect their normal life and more applicable maxims should be added. However, this does not negate the inherent truth found in a maxim that holds up to Mill’s test. An action which is shown to be inherently good or bad will still retain that property whether the action is performed or not. So although maxims will come in conflict or will not clearly apply in certain situations, these occurrences should be minimized as much as possible.

**Conclusion.** The good life is achieved by those who live by Kantian ethics for the majority of their lives and by Mill’s ethics in the more extreme situations. The extreme situations occur when maxim come in conflict or do not clearly apply. Despite the dominance of Kantian ethics, a person’s maxims can and should change throughout their life as dictated by Mill’s ethics.

#### **References** (MLA 2004 Referencing Standards)

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