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Note from the Author

In my initial draft, I described the Utilitarian stance incorrectly, confusing morals with motives. I should have also examined the pros and cons (in terms of happiness) of both choices by considering some of Bentham's categories. Because of the incorrect assessment and the missing parts, I came to the wrong conclusion for a true Utilitarian.

I was also too brief in dissecting the Kantian stance. I did not explain the categorical imperative nor did I describe how or why it would apply to the different scenarios in this case.

Thus, I did some work refreshing myself on both philosophies and expanded each section. What I discovered in the process was something unexpected, which I will leave for you to read in this new version of the paper. I will admit that I was expecting opposing solutions regarding this topic, assuming that a decision made by one viewpoint would counter the other. Instead, this research has, yet again, opened my eyes to the benefits of philosophy. For this I am most grateful.

-Alexandro Pacheco

A Lifelong Moral Case Study

By Alexandro Pacheco

The general consensus on morals and ethics for the majority of Utilitarian and Kantian viewpoints is that the underlying drive is a person's desire to do and be good. According to John Stuart Mill, morals should be confined to the actions regarding the motives of such an action (Mill 4). That is, moral philosophy concerns how to determine what our duty is but does not concern itself with what our morals should be. On the contrary, Immanuel Kant, just 80 years later, would give examples to show that acting out of duty is moral and not simple inclination (Kant 5-6). Kant's distinction of determining the worth of morals in order to decipher duty is key to the Kantian way of philosophical thought which clearly separates it from the Utilitarian perspective. Thus, the debate of which path to take when deciding on a moral or ethical dilemma – whether out of duty or with regard to the potential consequences involved – continues in philosophical circles to this day and is the basis of this paper.

The Lifelong Lie

A boy is molested from the age of 7-10 by an uncle-in-law during several summers the child spends at the farm house of his aunt and her husband. The boy, at the time and forevermore, promises his uncle to keep the encounters a secret because “they would get in trouble” and “doing so would make what they were doing a bad thing.” The secret is never revealed, the aunt eventually has three kids she raises with her husband who over time succumbs to severe bipolar and schizophrenic disorders. Meanwhile, the boy keeps that secret his entire life; a major consequence is the boy learns to keep secrets, frequently choosing to do wrong things on the sly. 30 years on, the uncle finally passes and the boy, now a man in his 40s, realizes that the

original secret may be the cause of so many relationships issues he has had throughout his life. While he has been open about the incidents to all his partners, he nevertheless has lived a life filled with secrets and explored his own habitual form of lying and cheating throughout his 20s and 30s. While working closely with a therapist on his childhood trauma, he regularly contemplates finally opening up and saying something to his family. Is it too late? Would at this point doing so be less about duty (given the perpetrator is dead) and more about consequence, given family members might be worst off having to deal with a 30-year old “sin” that had never before been confronted?

In examining the decision not to say something, the implications of the consequences of saying something vs the duty of saying something at this point in the story, after the perpetrator (the uncle-in-law) has passed on, one can look at both Utilitarian and Kantian views to debate the morality of this decision. Does the duty still exist and, if so, is the duty more important than the consequence of saying something? While a Utilitarian might find this behavior morally worthy, does the pain and destruction it would bring to the family outweigh the freedom it would bring to the victim? Meanwhile, would the Kantian argue that keeping the secret any further is immoral, because the duty to tell the truth outweighs the consequence that truth would bring, if consideration was taken regarding the age upon which the child was forced to make his promise? These are the dilemmas to be discussed.

Utilitarian Stance

“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” (Mill 1). These words open John Stuart Mill’s

iconoclastic paper, Utilitarianism, and embody the full strength of this philosophical thought.

Furthermore, Mill wrote, “It is the business of ethics to tell us what our duties are, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty (4). Mill writes not only that motives are various but that what matters is that one ends up doing what is right regardless of the motives. The choice in this scenario is between opening up, in an attempt to move beyond a lifelong secret, or not saying something in order to spare a family from pain, sorry or regret after the perpetrator has passed away. On the surface, Utilitarianism according to Jeremy Bentham would argue that the consequence of saying something, even though it might “cleanse” the man from the burden of holding on to such a secret all his life, would be bad for the entire family because of the pain it would bring.

Mill would consider levels of happiness when deciding what to do. In doing so here, we must carefully examine the pros and cons (in terms of happiness) of both choices. To say something would cause great pain for the family, specifically his parents and his now-widowed aunt, is only to discuss the initial pain. There might also be severe resentment for not saying anything sooner. Might this pain outweigh the potential peace (which we can express as a form of long-term happiness) that would clearly be the true motive for the man? It is impossible to know, yet this man’s dilemma remains unsolved if no action is done. Another possibility out of this scenario, however, could be that the family works (individually or as a unit) to find their own peace with this truth.

In An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, Bentham writes, “On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to (one’s) throne” (1). The effects in the man’s motives are very important here and it is

important to recognize that in finally opening up he may be setting the family up for something greater than any of them could have imagined or ever expected. “A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures; or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains” (Bentham V. 2). Bentham makes a clear point with the later portion of this impressive statement: Utility is not only the total sum of pleasure but, especially in this case, the diminishing of pain. Certainly, the family would feel pain from the shock of the truth but in the end, it could be what binds them stronger and certainly what would best set this man free. Here is how we begin to truly see the Utilitarian perspective at play. At the end of the day, it seems, saying something might in fact outweigh keeping the secret, which frankly changes nothing for anyone’s lives and forces the man to continue to handle his lie on his own.

There is then the question of the lie and whether this basic “wrong” outweighs any part of its undoing. The Utilitarian belief on lying is that the act is always bad because it lowers the bar from which human existence should attempt strive to always raise (Mill 5). As humans we should be learning from each other, and we do, and thus we pass on those lessons. Unfortunately, this child was not only molested but he also learned the invaluable lesson of lying. However, that is not the last of what Mill has to say about lying. “Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact would save an individual from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial” (Mill 5). The unfortunate discrepancy here lies in the false promise, claimed by the uncle years ago, that saying something would only bring bad things to them both. There is simply no way a boy of eight years old should be held liable for

such an atrocious act and yet he took on the lie as an equal partner and in turn created an evil of the truth. Here is where this boy was hurt the most and what he will likely find the hardest to face when learning, as an adult, to forgive himself for something that quite honestly was never his fault.

At this point in the story, with the perpetrator dead, who would win if even the victim? The perpetrator can no longer be charged so would the act of opening up simply cause pain to more people and slight healing to the victim, healing which could be gained in other ways like therapy or through good will, for example? Bentham of course would say that the lie must end, and Mill would agree because the motive given by the man to keep the secret or free himself should not be the point. Yes, perhaps learning to heal on his own, at this point, is the action the man would still take for the sake of the entire family still left standing, but the Utilitarian view would not stand by this decision.

Kantian Stance

80 years after Bentham and Mill, Emmanuel Kant philosophized further on how to decide between doing, or not doing, something by arguing that “good will” is the only thing that is “good without qualification” (Kant 1.1). Kant believed that while other talents of the mind aside from good will (i.e. intelligence, judgement, etc.) can be classified as “good,” the problem with them is that they can *become* bad if used in the wrong way. By “qualification,” Kant meant prerequisites. He believed that if they could be qualified, and come with condition, they could not be *purely* good. Kant also believed that happiness was not mankind’s only purpose because, he argued, mankind holds the power to reason. Instinct, Kant said, was nature’s true way for a creature to find what it truly seeks for satisfaction, aka happiness (1.3) Unfortunately, reason

seems to get in the way because it gives humans the ability to be practical, allowing weak insight to get in the way.

Kant feels that all this thinking gets in the way of quickly achieving true satisfaction (1.3). However, he also states that acting with good will is not determined necessarily by the intended outcome such a “maxim” (general rule of conduct) follows but instead by the moral worth of that maxim (1.5). The key to Kant is not intention but motive. In our case study here, guilt and fear certainly seem to get in the way a lot. Kantian philosophers, thus, would find the decision to not say anything, even after all these years, morally wrong. If the maxim is to continue to keep quiet, the man is not acting on motive but intention (to avoid pain to his family, or shame to himself or the deceased perpetrator). Kantians would argue that it is the duty of the victim to speak up, despite the length of time it has taken or the fact that no responsible party can be charged at this point.

Kant builds a theory towards what he calls his categorical imperative, from which any final decision would be based. The categorical imperative, which he summarizes as a universal law “the conception of which must determine the will” states, “I am never to act otherwise that so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant 2.9). The categorical imperative is a rule for the man to test what can be morally good. He must consider the principle on which he is acting. If, once generalized, it does not make sense because it contradicts itself, then it is wrong to use that maxim as a basis for action. If the generalized rule does make sense, then he must ask himself whether he would choose to live in a world where it was followed by everyone. If not, he should not act on that maxim.

For his entire life, this man has lived by the maxim of keeping quiet and yet now he is faced with the decision again, connecting it precisely with his intention to set himself apart from the lifelong lie. Regardless of this intention or motive, on which a Utilitarian would base their decision, Kantian theory would also conclude that opening up and being honest is the best solution, now and always. This lie could never be universally accepted and thus it must be rejected as an unworthy act if the man is to respect the moral code to which the Kantian view stands.

Conclusion

Consequences matter not for this man, if he is to follow either of these two philosophical paths. For his entire adult life, he chose to deal with his own issues and work on overcoming them on his own, holding on to the burden of the secret instead of opening up to his mother or his aunt and cousins. Christianity's New Testament has a famous quote: "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). This is a saying that I believe both Utilitarian and Kantian philosophers would adhere to, especially in this particular case. For the former, there is the notion that the truth could in fact heal more than confining it under wraps; the former, putting aside the drawbacks of the consequences that could follow, would make the same decision, though for fundamentally different reasons. After all, one must remember that the duty in question is not relegated solely to punishment for a crime once committed but also to the soul which would in fact find peace with the removal of a lie which has been hanging coldly over this poor family for so long.