

Man Wishes He Could Be Ethical

Morality is a concept that man has been trying to define since the beginning of time. What is good and what is bad? What is right and what is wrong? Is morality a gray concept with exceptions or is it black and white? These are all questions that are contemplated in the journey to finding one's own moral compass. There are two different ways of viewing ethics: the Plato way, wrong is always wrong, and the vastly contrasting John Stuart Mill way, morality and ethical behavior are based on the outcome. To delve into the differences between Plato and Mill it is easiest to look at an example, such as taking a box of cookies from a kitchen. Plato would say that is absolutely wrong and you should never steal even if your life depended on it, but Mill would say that it is justifiable because the food that had been promised was not provided and no one was harmed.

Before diving into the two opposing ideals, the reader must create a picture of the philosopher's world first; what they hold to be most important and their vast sweeping statements about society as a whole create the basis for their own moral compass, their ethics. For Mill "freedom is the first and strongest want of human nature" (Mill, 74). If one is free, then one is content; they are on the road to the good life. And when freedom is deemed most important the concept of morality is overridden by circumstances because the focus is on the individual. If unethical behavior does not harm anyone else then that is all that matters. But, for Plato "goodness and integrity, institutions and laws, are the most precious possessions of mankind (Plato, 64). Plato believes there is a moral contract between man and the government and a citizen breaks this contract by acting unethically. Once the contract is broken, the man has acted against his city, his country, and his parents.

In Mill's world there is also a group mindset, a cult of conformity; "the will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most active part of the people, the majority" (Mill, 80). In other words, when there is a vast majority that will decide everything because of the group mentality.

When the general public says something is okay, people will go along with it. Which is why “ the greatest threat to individual freedom... is the tyranny of the majority as exercised through public opinion”. In a world where the public opinion/ peer pressure rules it is often hard for an individual to speak out against the group; it becomes hard for the individual to remain an individual with thoughts of their own. The circumstance of having a strong majority greatly affects what a person thinks and the freedoms they have. However, for Plato the circumstance of the matter does not have any significance in the discussion of ethics. If something is immoral it will forever be immoral. In Plato’s “Crito”, he writes a dialogue between Socrates and Crito, a friend of Socrates. During this account Socrates is in jail for something he did not do and will be executed soon. His friend Crito pays the guards and is ready to help Socrates escape, but Socrates does not want to go. Crito goes on about how he will look like a bad friend who puts money over friendship if he does not help Socrates get out (Plato, 56). But, Socrates asks him “ why should we pay attention to what ‘most people’ think?”. Socrates believes that “the really reasonable people, who have more claim to be considered, will believe the facts are exactly as they are” (Plato, 56). Does this mean that the key to viewing the world in black and white instead of gray is how one feels about what other people think of him or her?

Socrates goes on to ask Crito “ do we say that one must never willingly do wrong, or does it depend on the circumstances?” (Plato, 58). He then goes on to answer his own question: “to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonorable for the person who does it” (Plato, 58). In Plato’s mind it is always always dishonorable to act in unethical ways. The circumstances do not matter, because everyone else’s opinions do not matter. And the outcome has no effect on the decision to act unethically because “it is never right to do a wrong or return a wrong or defend oneself against injury by retaliation” (Plato, 59); in no circumstances is it right to do wrong: (Plato, 58). In the story of “Crito”, Plato would rather die for something he has not done, than break the moral codes. But, for Mill circumstance truly is everything. The world is gray, not black and white; there are exceptions to the rules. Mill said “I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (Mill, 85). Utility means practicality and when one is faced with

a moral dilemma, whether or not they should do something, they must see if what they are doing is practical; the individual must see if what they are doing has a good outcome. If the outcome is practical then the ends justify the mean and they can go along with their plan.

In 1961 Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University conducted an experiment that analyzes man's natural behavior toward morality. He decided that the most universal moral principle was the idea that one should never inflict suffering on another that has no threat to them. In his experiment he had one person as the test subject and the rest were in on the study. The test subject was the "teacher". The teacher would quiz a another person, who was placed in the next room, and when they got the answer wrong he would press a button to shock the "learner", the one in the other room. Now the person was not actually being shocked, but the teacher could hear them screaming. The highest voltage was XXX, and was potentially deadly, but TWO THIRDS of testees went all the way. So, Mill's idea of the group mindset is true; the testees were told that the experiment had to go on and so on it went. But, he would also disagree that the ends did not justify the means because harm was being inflicted on another person. However, when the testee watched two people before him decide that this was unethical and he would not continue on hurting someone else, only ten percent of people complied and went all the way to XXX voltage. What this experiment concludes is that we all wish we could be in Plato's world; everyone wishes that even in an unfair situation they would make the "right choice to be moral", but in reality man is a follower that has become accustomed to the majority rules society. In other words, most men are more similar to Mill's model. When they were told to keep going with the experiment they did even when they protested and believed it was unethical behavior. And when they were shown that they could indeed walk away, most of them did. One's ethical behavior is based on circumstance whether man likes it or not.