

## KANT AND MILL VISIT AN OLD LADY

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AFTER taking up the views of Kant and Mill on morality, in an introductory course in ethics, some of my students began to wonder whether there were really much difference between their theories. To help them decide, I asked them this question in the examination: If you were an old lady, laid up with a broken hip, who would you rather have visit you, Kant or Mill? and why?

Kant and Mill represent two fundamental attitudes toward morality. Kant teaches that an act is to be judged solely according to its motive, Mill that an act is to be appraised only according to its social consequences. For Kant an act is moral if the will behind it is good, and the will is good if it conforms to the moral law or categorical imperative: to act always in a way that one is willing to have universalized, regardless of one's personal feeling. The inclinations must be ignored, says Kant, because they are particular and incapable of becoming universal. Kant maintains that the will to do the right thing is all that the agent should be held responsible for, since this is all that lies within his power. The motive of the act is his, the results depend upon circumstances that may be beyond his control. A man is always free to intend the right thing, though he may never be able to carry it out. Mill, on the contrary, says that acts promoting the general happiness are good regardless of their motives. He would not take the will for the deed as Kant would.

The two views seem to be entirely opposed. But some of my students saw that each tends to go over into the other. A motive envisages consequences, or it is not motor; and the consequences follow from the motive, or they are not morally consequential. How can motives be judged except in terms of the results that they

are likely to precipitate? How can results be judged except in relation to intentions? An agent should not be praised or blamed for results of accidents, or acts of God, but only for results foreseen by him, or for results which he might have been expected to foresee. Hence there may not be so much difference between Kant and Mill as first appears.

Kant says to do what is right, Mill says to do what is good. But the right must turn out to be the good, or it is not right; and the good must be the right, or it is not good. I should think, then, that whether Kant or Mill called on the old lady, it would be the same as if the other had come. It is likely that Kant's rigid schedule would not allow him to call except by proxy, but the following answers which I got to my question contain observations that had not occurred to me, and they are not all based upon misunderstanding of the supposed visitors.

This first answer indicates how their personalities might weigh more with the old lady than their principles. "I should be delighted to have both Mill and Kant call—preferably at the same time. However, if I were of a melancholy turn of mind and could have but one I should prefer Kant with his queer little fuzzy face and his gloomy thoughts on duty. But, being as I am, with the addition only of a few years and a broken hip, I think Mill would be the more welcome. Both would probably come for the same reason—Kant to perform a duty (let us hope—if it should be from inclination his visit would be immoral in his own eyes) and Mill from a little different interpretation of duty—that of increasing the sum total of happiness. But Mill would bear the burden less heavily no doubt."

I wonder if this second response is fair to Kant, who insisted that every rational being must be treated always as an end in himself, and never as a means. "If I were an old lady I am quite sure that I would prefer Mill to visit me. Kant would probably be visiting me because he felt it to be his duty, and I prefer people to visit me because they desire to, because they have affection for me, because they take pleasure in doing it, as I am sure Mill would, according to his teachings. This is my main objection to Kant. He appreciated nothing, only that which was done through duty, through respect for the law. I am just the opposite. I would not appreciate my mother taking care of me if I thought she did it because she thought she ought to. Kant's philosophy in my opinion

is cold-hearted, it may apply to politics but not to domestic life."

I think that affection and impulse should figure in moral conduct, but Kant dismissed them because they are capricious and unreliable, because mothers must always be caring for their children and cannot always be consciously loving them, and especially because he resented treating others as a means to one's own ends. He of course tried to rule out all appeal to experience or social consequences in order to make his theory universal and independent of circumstances, but he unconsciously considered social factors, and it is well-nigh impossible for us to ignore them in criticizing him. If people felt no obligation to call on old ladies, if said ladies had to rely upon selfish impulses for their visits, they might be even more lonely than they are. It is gratuitous to suppose that one who calls from a sense of duty must come grudgingly. It is naive to assume that Mill, in visiting the old lady to promote the general happiness, is for that reason taking any more personal interest in her than Kant would. It is certainly not legitimate to assert that Mill comes "because he wants to," since Mill says that the individual should sacrifice his own good for that of others. Nevertheless it is difficult to argue with a lady of any age about her preferences, once she has made up her mind as the following writer has done.

"If I were an old lady, laid up with a broken hip, I would certainly hate to have Kant to come to see me. In the first place he would only come from a sense of duty. I have no doubt that he would be very entertaining if he felt it his duty to cheer me up, but suppose he felt it his duty to tell me how patient I should be, how thankful that I didn't break my neck! I think he would be selfishly seeking his own good, the satisfaction of his sense of duty, rather than anything else. However, if Mill came to see me, I would be very glad. He would come because he wanted to, for if he didn't want to and only came to make me happy, it would make him unhappy and we would just cancel each other and not promote the greatest good of the greatest number. Again Mill would have the object of making me happy while Kant would only have the object of doing good. The fundamental difference in the two visits is shown by a study of the two men's motives. Kant wanted an ethics that told the truth whether you could use it or not, while Mill wanted an ethics that would provide for reform, that would help others. Therefore, Mill would come to see me in order to help me, but Kant

would come just because he ought to. It seems to me that Mill would come for my sake while Kant would come for his own sake, so Mill would conduct the visit to please me while Kant would conduct it as he thought it ought to be conducted. If Mill had been to see other sick people, he would utilize all the things he had learned from experience in these visits to make me happy. Kant wouldn't gather anything from experience for he would believe that good was static and what had happened on another visit shouldn't influence his visit to me. However, if Kant came when he didn't want to, if he was very entertaining, acted as if he were interested, was thoughtful only for my comfort, and did all these things when he didn't want to but thought he should, I certainly would consider him a wonderful man. However, I suppose he would even want to do them because he would consider it his duty to want to. I'm still sure I would prefer Mill."

It must be admitted that this impersonation of the old lady has been as fair as she could be to Kant, considering that she does not like him. She hit on a weak point in his system when she said that she could not be sure what he might feel it his duty to do. Kant's sense of duty is empty and formal, it never tells him what to do, other than that he should do his duty. He wanted it formal that it might be universal, for if he had said that this or that should be done, particular circumstances might make it wrong, whereas by definition it can never be wrong to do the right thing, so long as it is not said what is right. Kant wanted the truth, whatever it might be, and for him it was universal, hence abstract and almost inapplicable to practice, which is always particular. That the truly moral life should be unattainable did not daunt him. The right is what man ought to do, though no man be capable of doing it. He said: "Two things fill me with awe, the starry heavens above and the moral law within." For Kant morality is as far beyond us as the stars. Because it is not cheap and easy, because it is impossible, it is the true goal of our aspiration. Mill wanted the practical, Kant the sublime. The difference between them is that between prose and poetry, but more people are bored by poetry than by prose, and few are able to recognize poetry in prose. The student who wrote the following hardly thinks of Kant as a poet.

"If I were an old lady, laid up with a broken hip, I would rather have Mill visit me than Kant. I believe Mill would be more pleasant

in thinking of happiness and how to get it than Kant in preaching duty. For after all it would be rather hard for an old lady with a broken hip to attend to her duty. Kant's philosophy is too hard since life is so short (especially for an old lady with a broken hip). Kant might tell me that, after all, my duties throughout my life had no moral value. For an old lady who has worked hard all her life, only to get a broken hip, this philosophy is rather depressing. Mill, on the other hand, would be quite the opposite. After I told him that I had been happy most of my life he would probably say that I had been unselfish and my mental attainment was high enough to appreciate real happiness. He would say that I was among the one-twentieth who were really happy. Such flattery would be quite acceptable to an old lady with a broken hip. For you see Mill is practising his philosophy by sacrificing his own happiness to that of making the old lady happy, when he would much rather be at home reading some science or philosophy. Kant on the other hand would do what his duty demanded. If the old lady should ask him if he thought she had long to live—as hard as it may seem., Kant could not lie about it. He would say 'no—it won't be long now.' Kant could help the old lady though in telling her that in the next world she would be free to do as she pleased. Maybe she had performed her duty so well on earth that she would be ready for the next world. I certainly think Mill by all means would be the more pleasant visitor. He would probably bring flowers for the old lady to cheer the sick room. After seeing Kant's picture, I'm afraid he wouldn't bring anything. Mill, too, has traveled more than Kant. He could probably relate some interesting adventures while Kant who hardly left Koenigsberg would probably say that his life was divided into two periods, the pre-critical and the critical, and would describe in length."

It is largely Mill's worldliness that recommends him to a student like this.

"Although I have never been an old lady with a broken hip, I probably shall be some day and it is therefore expedient that I begin to think upon the subject of a visit from Kant or Mill, and the effect they would have upon the well-being of an old lady. Very few people want to die, and even though they know that they have to die, they like to have the feeling of a Hereafter wherein their soul will become immortal and such things as broken hips will not

happen. Therefore I believe when I become old that I would prefer having Kant visit me because his conversations would cheer up an old lady by stressing the life Hereafter and the freedom that will be attained there, because an old lady naturally feels that she will not live much longer and wants something tangible that she can hold onto to prepare herself for the next world. For this reason alone I would desire a visit from Kant, but, being young, I would now prefer Mill who believes in the Epicurean idea of pleasure and happiness. Poor old lady!"

It is interesting that the next student dislikes Mill for the same reason that the last one liked him.

"If I were an old lady with a broken hip, I would prefer having Kant as a visitor rather than Mill. Kant would be visiting me through his innate sense of duty and not through a desire for personal gain in my estimation, or through a desire to do me any good. I would not realize that his sense of duty was the only reason for his calling and as he would not give me any other reason I might imagine that my personal attraction was it. Mill, however, would come through his desire to do good and to do what he would have others do to him. Through being good to others he would attain happiness, in the knowledge that he had done so. He would probably cheer me in a jovial manner which I would detest, in an effort to produce the desired effect of my happiness. In his desire to attain ends, I am afraid that Mill might allow this desire to become slightly noticeable. Kant would probably come, and go, being content that he had done his duty for duty's sake, and leaving me in my ignorance that he had a feeling of duty."

Kant's kindness, overlooked by some, is brought out in the following. "Mill would probably do everything in his power to make her happy. He would talk of agreeable things and try to make her long hours shorter. I think that Kant, in spite of his opposing philosophy, would be quite the same. When Kant comes he has good intentions, and this certainly is enough to make him be an agreeable, pleasant visitor to the old woman. The difference would be very slight, except that Mill might seem more cheerful. Kant is so preoccupied with the abstract that he might not be so capable when real experience arises, but he would be delightful just because good will is such a strong factor in any deed."

Some fear that Kant's language would be too formidable for the

old lady, in addition to his manner being too austere. "Kant would be too abstruse and technical for me, and would not regard me as an experience but as an abstraction, and even if I were an old lady I should like worldly attention. Maybe Mill would tell me stories and jokes or play a game with me. Imagine Kant telling a joke! Mill might come again to see me and bring me flowers or candy. But Kant wouldn't. He would feel his duty done if he came once or may be just called up on the 'phone. His duty would stop there, as it might be too much to make a universal law of anything more than that. I don't know Kant's attitude toward women, but I believe he remained a bachelor, whereas Mill idealized his wife and I think would be nice to old ladies. Mill seems much more human and understanding and not the inhabitant of another world. Yet I should like to see Kant too, if I were well, for he does stimulate me intellectually."

Perhaps it is unfair to test Kant by his effect upon an old lady, since he tried to rule out all consideration of social consequences and to lay down a code that should be independent of experience. No more would Mill consent to having his view judged by her response to it, inasmuch as he looked away from the welfare of the individual to that of the greatest number. But Kant's metaphysic of morals can have no meaning for us apart from experience, nor can Mill's "greatest number" have significance if it is abstracted from the individuals who constitute it. If numbers are to count, it must be remembered that there are a great many old ladies who have broken their hips, or who are in daily danger of so doing. There is an old lady latent in the most virile and active of us. An important item in her nature is a conscience, and the difference between Kant and Mill on this point should be most interesting to her. Kant says that conscience is an innate sense of ought, the divine voice of duty whispering from the other world. Mill holds that conscience is built up through education and experience in this world, that its cast and color depend entirely upon the environment and history of the individual. Hence for Mill there is nothing infallible about it. There is nothing that a man's conscience may not bid him do, and to teach him that it is innate and holy may make him fanatical in his obedience to it. Conscience for Mill is simply the irrational uneasiness attendant upon the breaking of any habit of thought or action, whatever the rational value of the habit to the individual or to so-

ciety. To become moral is to overcome conscience and do that which reason shows to be conducive to the general happiness.

"Mill would advise me not to follow my conscience, because it might tell me anything, according to the nature of my habits, and he would urge me to guide my actions by the good results they would bring. This would make me feel as though it were much easier to be good than Kant's way, according to which we are told to guide our acts by our conscience through which the voice of God speaks and tells us what is right and what is wrong. Mill would make me feel flippant and light-hearted and think what is the use in worrying about what one ought to do. He would make me feel that the goal was happiness and that it lay in watching out for others. Then immediately upon his departure a visit from Mr. Kant would help me to tone down a bit and realize that life was a little more serious and that happiness was not so easy to obtain after all. Kant would make me feel that an act, if the good will was lacking, would be of no moral value. If I looked to the welfare of those less fortunate than I, but did it with a view to personal praise, my act would not be commendable. The results of my action are not so important for him as the spirit in which it is done. What counts is to act from a sense of duty."

This student has somewhat misunderstood Mill in regarding his teaching as flippant, an error that it is easy to fall into when considering the doctrine that the good is pleasure or happiness. Mill did not think that happiness was easy. He said that nineteenth-twentieths of mankind are unhappy. Nor did he counsel men to seek merely their own benefit, saying that a man should always be ready to sacrifice his own joy for that of others. He recognized that the refinement of intelligence and sympathy which enhances the enjoyment of life, involves concomitant suffering. Like Epicurus before him, Mill taught the almost Stoical doctrine that the worthwhile and lasting pleasures are those of the mind that can be secured only through control of the passions and cultivation of the intellect, and yet that the wiser a man the less chance he has of being content. But, said Mill, it were better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. This may be taken to mean that Mill unwittingly surrenders pleasure as the moral standard and appeals instead to nobility of character. Mill might reply that there is an intrinsic pleasure in wisdom that outweighs all the bliss of ignorance. That



there is such a pleasure must be taken on faith by the ignorant, just as they are asked by Kant to believe that happiness is reserved at last for the virtuous and dutiful. Kant says, Be good and you will be happy, if you are careful not to be good just in order to be happy. Mill says, Be happy, be wisely and truly happy, and in the end you will surely be good. So it should be the same to the old lady whether her visitor were Kant or Mill.

“If I were an old lady, laid up with a broken hip, and Kant and Mill should each visit me, not out of spontaneous sympathy but because of the teachings of their respective philosophies, Kant would visit me because he thought that visiting me was his duty, and that it could not be a universal law that the unfortunate should be neglected; Mill would come to make me happy. But would not Mill's purpose be practically the same as Kant's? Mill would come not to make me in particular happy, but because he conceives it to be his duty to create as much happiness as possible. Both, therefore, are acting from duty, but basing their duty on different principles, which however cannot affect me in my enjoyment of their visits, since both are coming to make me happy. Therefore, I do not care which comes.”