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PHI101

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Week 6 Reading Questions: Kant & Mill

Kant, "Duty and Reason as the Ultimate Principle" - pp. 506-512

1. Explain why Kant thinks the only thing truly good "in itself" is a good will.

Kant sees that many things can be good but only if the will behind them is good. If the will behind the "talents of the mind" is not good then these talents can become toxic and used for hurtful reasons.

2. What does Kant mean by doing our actions "from the motive of duty"? How is this different from acting out of self-interest, or out of natural inclination, or even just in "conformity" with duty?

When doing our actions from 'conformity of duty' we are protecting our own life when we are already in a good place. When we are doing our actions 'from the motive of duty' we are preserving our own life even when the life we have isn't the one we want.

3. What does it mean for an action to have moral worth based on its principle, not based on the end it achieves?

When an action has moral worth it is done not for the results it is done for what it means to do it. They are done for the sake of doing the action, not for self-betterment.

4. Explain in your own words Kant's two formulations of the Categorical Imperative, on 510 and 511-512:

a) I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law

If your actions could not be ultimately considered good enough to be a universal law or a standard that all people must be held to then you should not do such an action.

b) Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end

I took this as ‘treat others as you wish to be treated’, but even if the actions differ from person to person they are still done ultimately for good.

Mill, "Happiness as the Foundation of Morality" pp. 512-517

1. Write out and explain Mill's "Greatest Happiness Principle".

“... the Greatest Happiness principle, holds that the actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness.” If the actions you are doing promote happiness then they are good, but if they promote anything but the happiness they are bad no matter what else they promote.

2. What does Mill mean when he writes, "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied"?

It is better to have both sides and dissatisfied than to only have your own opinion and be satisfied. Even if you aren't happy with the opinion of the other side, you aren't a fool who believes their opinion is right without ever learning another opinion.

3. How does Mill discuss quality and kinds of happiness in contrast to calculating the quantity of happiness?

The Utilitarians are impartial to the ‘who’ that their actions will affect. They must look beyond themselves to place the interest of all ahead of their own. They do the good to help the majority, not the individual.

The Expedients are an ‘I before We’ group. They do a large number of good actions, but they benefit the individual and not the majority.

Doing a lot of good deeds is great when they are not done in self-interest, but one deed done in the interest of the majority is better.

4. What role does all of previous human history and the experience of wise and competent people play in figuring out what will bring the most happiness in our actions?

The human species learns from experience, so if we look at the actions done in human history than we may be able to figure out which of our actions will bring the most happiness. We may know this before we ever even have to perform said actions.