

Compare Contrast and Evaluate Nietzsche and Mill on Conventional Morality

At the time Nietzsche and Mill were writing conventional morality was, and arguably still is today, Christian morality, best summarised as Kant's Deontological Ethics. Interestingly both of the two Philosophers take a similar stance towards this view of morality. They are both concerned that it's uniform approach leads to a stagnation of ideas, what Mill refers to as an "unthinking mediocrity" and Nietzsche calls "a herd morality". However they offer radically different alternatives, Nietzsche's assessment of the 'herd morality' develops into him championing 'Master Morality', whereas Mill's assessment develops into his liberal utilitarianism. These alternatives come about from the subtle differences in their assessments as to why these problems evolve, and it is through looking at how their alternative moral codes developed from their views on conventional morality that we can get the best illustration of how their views differ.

It could be seen that Nietzsche's development from his criticism of conventional morality is more logical, in the sense that his morality is a logical evolution of his assessment, yet we must accept that – on the surface at least - society seems to hold closer Mill's ideals. One example of how Nietzsche seems to have the more logical approach would be Mill's justification of why happiness is desirable, he says simply "that people desire it". The first problem with this is that to say that something *is* desired does not justify that something *should* be desired, (for example I may desire a cigarette, yet to have one would be detrimental to my health and the health of those around me – perhaps not so desirable after all!) a line of reasoning that Bertrand Russell described as "so fallacious that it is hard to understand how he could have thought it valid". However, let us take it as a strong, sound, altogether brilliant piece of logic for a minute. Whilst it is true that I desire my own happiness, and quite plausibly the happiness of those around me and those I hold close to me, to say that I *desire* the happiness of someone I have never met, and further more am not even aware of the existence of seems impossible. However the argument that people desire happiness and so happiness is desirable could be used with some strength to justify Nietzsche's Egoism if we take the feeling of happiness to be a by-product of the affirmation of the will. Of course, the point Mill is trying to illustrate is that if people desire happiness then happiness is desirable, and so as a collective we should aim to maximise this. The problem he has is that seemingly at no point does he justify this collective idealism.

Mill differs from the view of Conventional Morality only on how the value of an action should be judged, not really on the course of action that should be taken, however he rightly recognised the huge implications of this seemingly minor difference. The difference lies in the differentiation between the value of the action and the level of blame/credit given to the person committing that action. Mill's Utilitarianism would advocate almost exactly the same course of action as Conventional Morality in most situations. As a Rule Utilitarian he would rule out the taking of human life on the basis that it would rarely be

conducive to overall happiness, he would also agree that theft and adultery are undesirable, and would probably agree with more or less all of the Christian moral code. The difference comes in why these actions should be ascribed a value. Conventional Morality would dictate that these actions were in themselves 'good' or 'bad', and that the value of them lies in the action itself, whereas Mill's Utilitarianism argues that the value of the action is in the consequences that action has. So in the case of someone giving money to a charity, Conventional Morality would advocate this as a good action because it demonstrates the 'virtue' (in the non-Aristotelian sense of the word) of generosity. Mill's Utilitarianism would also advocate this, but because the consequences would probably result in a greater aggregate happiness, rather than because the action itself was intrinsically good or because it demonstrated an intrinsically good personal quality.

However whilst Mill judges the value of the action itself differently to a conventional moralist, it is a mistake to think he would judge the person committing the action any differently. Mill writes, "Actions should be judged according to their probable consequences regardless of any religious codes or binding principles." The implication of which is that a person should be judged on their intentions in committing an action in exactly the same way as they would be in a conventional moral system. In order for you to intend to do something, you must first be aware of the likely effect an action will have so that you can choose which action will have the closest outcome to your intention. Likewise, in order to judge a possible action according to its 'probable consequences' you must first have an ideal you wish to achieve, an intention.

It is in the differentiation of the judgement of the action itself and the person committing the action that Mill's morality stems from. This differs from conventional morality, as by judging the action itself as good or bad, and the person committing the action on their intent to commit the action, conventional morality may only have two moral classifications – good, or bad. Whereas Mill, by judging the action according to its consequences, and the person committing the action on what they may reasonably have believed the 'probable consequences' were is left with a classification by varying shades of value. This in itself seems entirely reasonable; few people would deny that lying about why you had failed to keep an agreement was on a par with the brutal murdering of a child! However it could lead to the Nietzschean idea that any action is permissible, as surely on a sliding scale of value it must be accepted that any action has a *value* and that the point at which this value goes from positive to negative is hazy, leaving it up to personal interpretation to decide if your action is acceptable? Mill gets round this with the introduction of the harm principle – "one may offend, but never harm".

Mill's harm principle comes about from his utilitarian ideal for increasing aggregate happiness. The implications of his method of judging the action and the actor as distinct from one another could be logically manipulated to permit any action. By introducing the harm principle Mill attempts to ensure that the aggregate happiness is maintained by defining the point at which an action goes into negative value according to its "probable consequences", and so

provides a clear cut of line in an otherwise sliding scale of degrees of value. Mill's reasoning for allowing one to offend is again linked to his ideal of increasing overall happiness. Let us assume that I am gay. My being gay may cause offence to certain people, and as a result may slightly reduce their feeling of happiness. However if I were to suppress my gay tendencies in order to avoid causing offence, I would live my life feeling unsatisfied and untrue to myself, significantly reducing my feeling of happiness and well being. In allowing me to cause offence to the people whom my being gay offends, the aggregate happiness of society should go up.

Mill's assessment of Conventional Morality has serious implications for the running of the State. By saying that anything is permissible provided it does not harm another, Mill opposes the view that the state's purpose is to enforce "God-given" codes of conduct, a view that Conventional Christian Morality would champion. At a time when homosexuality was illegal, and free -speech, particularly with regards to religion and politics, was limited, this indicates what a huge shift from Conventional Morality Mill's Utilitarianism was and how this came about purely as a result of a different method of judging the moral worth of an action, even though the result of these judgements would come out almost exactly the same as Conventional Morality for any given individual action.

In order to understand Nietzsche's view on morality, it is perhaps helpful to look at what he says in the first chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil – On the Prejudices of Past Philosophers*. In this chapter Nietzsche argues that all philosophy to date has simply been a reflection of its authors pre-held beliefs, and not completely rational and logical as it would be had that we should believe. Instead they are nothing more than a deep psychoanalysis on the part of their authors and can be viewed as nothing more or less than one perspective of many, rather than as absolute truth. This belief as to how philosophies are formulated has a huge impact on any moral code for Nietzsche, as this too must simply be one perspective among many. Of Kant's deontological ethics, Nietzsche writes that it is "his (Kant's) hearts desire made abstract" and in order to understand Nietzsche's views on Conventional Morality this perspectivist viewpoint must be remembered.

Nietzsche believed conventional morality to stem from Christianity. However, Christianity, he believed, like any other value system, could be understood and explained, and therefore explained away. Nietzsche systematically goes about doing this in *the Genealogy on Morals*, saying that all morality was an expression of the will, and Conventional Morality an expression of a weak will born of "resentment" towards the oppression of the strong willed. He argued that the result of this was that we entered a system in which the strong were now oppressed by the weak, going against the natural order of things, in which he argued the exploitation and oppression of the weak by the strong was inherent.

Nietzsche believed that language had a huge influence on the current view of morality, and he argued that it was an error within the construction of language that had allowed the error within our morality to arise. The subject -

predicate distinction, Nietzsche argued implies a choice - and therefore a blame - that doesn't exist. Nietzsche illustrates his point with the following example:

"The Bird of prey kills the Lamb"

He argues that the distinction between the subject (the bird of prey) and the predicate (killing) implies other possible courses of action, which in reality don't exist. If the bird of prey didn't kill it would simply be 'the bird' and not 'the bird of prey'. As an argument that there is a problem with the construction of language this certainly seems a strong one, however Nietzsche attempts to apply this to human morality. Nietzsche then gives the example:

"The Master exploits the Slave"

The argument he makes is that just as the bird of prey has no choice but to kill the lamb, so too, the master has no choice but to exploit the slave, it is neither moral nor immoral, it is life. However what Nietzsche fails to realise is that whilst in the first instance it is the subject that dictates the predicate, in the second it is the predicate that dictates the subject. The best way to illustrate this is by assuming for a second that their positions had been reversed, and it was in fact the lamb that had killed the bird of prey, and the slave that was exploiting the master. Whilst it is still true to say that 'the lamb kills the bird of prey' to say that 'the slave exploits the master' is fundamentally wrong. As soon as the slave is exploiting the master the slave is no longer slave but master, and likewise the master is now the slave. Nietzsche may argue that it would be as impossible for the slave to exploit the master as it would be for the lamb to kill the bird of prey, and whilst this may be so, it is not, as he would have it, because the slave is necessarily too weak, but because as soon as he does so he ceases to be a slave.

However whilst his linguistic argument against the blame that conventional morality prescribes may have some flaws, his look at the genealogy of the moral codes themselves is far harder to criticise. Nietzsche believed that any moral idea has a history behind it, and that this in itself undermines the application of them. Good, he argues was once a word used by the noble, ruling caste to distinguish themselves from the common masses. He argues that they used it to denote all that they saw as distinguishing themselves from these masses - strength, nobility, power. However the masses, realising they could never achieve these qualities, instead took the word and gave it a new meaning, precisely the opposite of what the word had originally meant - humility, kindness, pity. Nietzsche believed that the implications of this were that the idea of good held no constant value, and could therefore be rejected. It is very hard to argue against this using the same brutal logic that he does, however, one could regard the changing meaning of the word not to signify that it holds no value but rather that it is an ever evolving idea. Yes, it is true that there is no constant value in morality, but I'm not half glad that we no longer live in a society that believes public flogging to be an acceptable form of punishment. Of course, this argument would hold no water with Nietzsche, who would probably dismiss me as one of the weak masses, necessarily stupid and blind to my own ignorance! (In this sense Nietzsche has a foolproof argument - you disagree? Then you're stupid!)

However Nietzsche's biggest frustration with conventional morality was its advocacy of ascetism. He believed it to be the ultimate denial of life, a complete denial of the will and therefore life itself. He writes that those who were so weak that there was absolutely no one upon whom they could exercise their human instinct to inflict cruelty, as a last resort turned this instinct upon themselves by denying themselves that which they most desired. He writes, "Self-denial was the last resort of the almost powerless". This is the sense in which Nietzsche believes Conventional Morality to be a slave morality, it panders to the weak and denies the basic instincts of the strong, the masters.

Yet, as has been mentioned, in order to understand Nietzsche's view of morality you must bear in mind his perspectivist views. The reason that the slave sees the master as bad is that the actions of the master have bad consequence for him, the reason that the master sees the m as good is that they have good consequences for him. However, surely this very argument that Nietzsche uses to knock down Conventional Morality, could equally be turned against him in favour of a more Utilitarian ideal? Mill would agree with Nietzsche that the value of an action was determined by the consequences of it, but would argue that rather than this justifying that what was good for me was best, that what was good for the greatest number was best. This isn't something that Nietzsche would consider, as it requires pity for your fellow man, something that he considered to be a weak characteristic, but it is easy to see how the argument might be structured, and it is certainly an alternative perspective to consider.

In order to understand the impact of these two assessments it is perhaps useful to look at what effect they have had on modern morality, and the society we live in today.

On the surface society seems to have developed into something closer to what Mill would have desired than Nietzsche's Master morality, with the few ruling the many. We live in a democracy, in which every adult has a right to vote on who they want the government to lead them. We largely apply the harm principle, at least in as much as the only grounds for sending someone to prison is if they are deemed to constitute a threat to society. And whilst we are still to some extent restricted on what we do to our own bodies, in the sense that certain drugs are still illegal, we none the less seem to have more right to freedom than we ever have done before. Homosexuality is now not only legal, but also largely accepted, free speech far less restricted than it ever has been before, and we have the potential to make of our lives what we like, rather than being confined by the family, or class that we were born into. This, at least, is the view that we are expected to hold.

However, when we look a little closer at what is really happening in the world, and the way our society functions it is surprising how easy it is to fit it into a model Nietzschean society. Whilst we, the 'dumb masses', congratulate ourselves on creating such a free and liberal society, in reality it is Nietzsche's privileged aristocracy that are making the decisions.

Nietzsche believed that the redeeming feature of religion was the level of control it held over its followers, and how this control kept the masses quite, echoing the sentiments of Marx's famous quote that "religion is the opiate of the masses". In modern society it seems strange to claim that this is still the case, as church attendance dwindles, and the idea that the bible is the literal word of God has been rejected by society as a whole. Yet whilst once we used to attend church, predominantly on a Sunday, to be told what we should think, now we buy newspapers, predominantly on a Sunday, to be told what we should think. And the power of the media should not be underestimated, as by selecting what they chose to publish, or on what page to publish it the newspapers can win or lose an election. It could be argued, for example, that one of the main reasons Tony Blair got into power in 1997 was that he received the backing of the most popular daily newspaper, The Sun.

So if we look at the media as the new religion, subtly controlling everything we do think and say, who then are the masters? Well the masters are those who control the media, businessmen and women, fantastically rich and therefore fantastically powerful. A handful of businesses control almost all the media, everything we see and hear. These businesses, or rather the owners of these businesses are therefore more powerful than the government itself. As Bill Hicks says in his *it doesn't matter who you vote for, the government always get in* rant, "there is only one party you can vote for, the business party." Because if this minority of the population who have the power of censoring all that we see, then whatever party is elected to government must keep these people happy in order to have any chance of being re-elected. Therefore they, not we, have all the control, we are just the tools that they use to achieve their ends by censoring what we see and hear such that we will believe their best interests to be our best interests, and we will demand their demands.

So the media, we could say, is the new religion, the handful of businessmen who control the media are the new masters, and therefore we are the new slaves. We live in the capitalist society that the new masters need in order to keep their power. The upshot of which is that we all work for somebody else, and are reliant on somebody else to survive. Very few of us are not dependant on a corporation that is ultimately owned by a rich 'master' businessman. Therefore we are in a situation where we rely on these masters to survive, and so can easily be exploited for their benefit. This is essentially what business is, the exploitation of others for personal gain, and we are the exploited who are fooled into the belief that if we work hard for somebody else then eventually we will be the ones who are being worked for, that we can keep our noses clean and work our way up through the system. In reality, all the work we do will always be for someone else, as long as the western world is still run on capitalism.

The fact that the two arguments can often be used to explain the same situation in completely different ways, and yet at the same time the arguments can almost be used to back up the opposing conclusion shows how similar, the assessments of conventional morality are, and yet also the huge difference the conclusions that arise from these assessments. The difference

clearly lies in the differences in opinion that the two philosophers held before making their assessments, their prejudices as Nietzsche would put it. In addition we have seen that even in today's society, which would usually be regarded far more utilitarian than Nietzschean, the argument can be made the other way. This further illustrates the fact that they share a lot of common interests. The reason for this is that the two systems need not be mutually exclusive, they are in fact just different perspectives of the same assessment of the problems with traditional moral practices. As such, when the problems that these assessments highlight are noted by society at large, likewise both of the counter moralities advocated will begin to develop.

This is best illustrated through the section on moral systems in modern society. The fact that we can believe society to be largely utilitarian, then equally make the case that it is instead a class based system of exploitation of the masses demonstrates that as a society we have accepted the criticisms that both Mill and Nietzsche made. How we believe these criticisms should be addressed will depend on our prejudices from before, just as Nietzsche argues, but the fact that this is the case clearly demonstrates the two branches of moral philosophy to be different perspectives of the same issue.

Nietzsche makes the stronger logical arguments. He is brutal in his assessment of conventional morality, boiling it down to its origins, destroying these origins and then leaving himself with the position he goes onto champion – master morality. Whether or not you believe this position to be correct it is hard not to admire the calculated precision with which Nietzsche has reached his conclusion. However, his perspectivist viewpoint is both his greatest strength and greatest weakness. On one hand it allows him to dismiss any attempts at attacking his ideas. If I see something differently to Nietzsche, he can simply make the argument that the reason for this is simply that I am weak and therefore see things from a slave's perspective, which makes his position virtually unfalsifiable. On the other hand the very nature of his perspectivist deconstruction of conventional morality leaves him with a conclusion that is just as much a perspective as conventional morality, and therefore subject to almost exactly the same deconstruction through origin.

Mill's rule utilitarianism is considerably less beautiful in terms of the strength of the logic behind it, to the extent that sometimes it is difficult even to work out what point he is trying to make. However, if we accept both the premise that all are born equal and that happiness is an end in itself, (two things that Mill failed to adequately justify) then there is no denying that a utilitarian world would be the best possible world. In addition, whilst Mill fails in actually justifying these things I believe there is a case to be made to say that they are true. For example, on an evolutionary level it must be accepted that as we all started 'life' as a single, unconscious cell, in which there would be absolutely no way to differentiate between any one of us, we must accept that any hierarchy of value is therefore not natural, but imposed. For this reason, although utilitarianism is considered a joke amongst many philosophers, Mill in fact still has as much relevance today as he did when he was writing.