

Topic 1 (Mary Wollstonecraft)

Introduction

In our day-to-day life, we are obliged to make decisions all the time: we need to determine how we are going to act, what are the concrete actions we are going to pursue, how will they impact others and how are they going to impact our overall conviviality. In general, we, as individuals, tend to make statements such as “I shall pursue good actions”, “I should do what is good and reject the evil”, “I shall do the right thing” ... These common phrases seem to imply, in a way, that “what is good” is easy to identify, and it’s part of common sense. However, we should stop for one minute and think, is it really that way? Is it that simple and straight-forward to determine what is right and what is not? If we were to have a large group of people, would they all agree? Many philosophers across the history of humanity, like Socrates, Kant and Mill, have discussed, and conformed different moral theories that verse about these topics and attempt to respond to questions such as: what is good? What is bad or evil? What shall be keep into account to differentiate them? Therefore, the mentioned subject is not so simple, and it requires further in-depth analysis. This is where ethics come into the scene. Ethics is a philosophical area that discusses the morality of acts, including, but not limited to, what is to be considered as “good” or “right”, what shall be deemed as “evil” or morally incorrect or condemnable; and, more importantly, what is the criteria that shall be used to differentiate the two of them, which are the standards established to make such classification.

In the selected quote, Mary Wollstonecraft states that no man chooses evil, because it’s evil, but instead because he mistakes it for happiness. This phrase implies that people often times pursue actions that are generally considered as “evil”, because they think that is what will make them happy, and, therefore, what is right to do and pursue. Basically, that they decide their path and course of action based on “happiness”, which is directly linked to some moral theories. I would also like to mention that her use of the expression “it *may* be asserted” seems appropriate, as, although she is saying that her statement could possibly be generally true, she is not closing up the door or the possibility for discussion, and, hence, her phrase is not excessively ambitious. Following up, Mary states that the noble ambition of enlightened understanding is the desire of rectifying these mistakes, and that that is the impulse of feelings that Philosophy invigorates. According to my interpretation of this last part of the quote, the author is saying that a thorough understanding and respect of others takes a relevant role to rectify, or at least, attempt to make up for the mistakes or wrong-doings an individual has done, and promote conviviality. Let’s keep into account that we still have to define the words I have placed quotation marks for in order to get a better understanding of the meaning of the quote, which I will do slightly later on this essay. Additionally, as a side note, even though the author has employed the words “men” and “he”, which in language are utilized to refer to men; I will generalize the statement and consider it to be referring to society as a whole, and not only for the male gender.

Through this essay, I will mainly defend M.W.’s statement, making some explanations and pointing out possible objections or counter-arguments that it may bring forwards. In order to do that, I will first take a moment to analyse the meaning of “happiness”, which is key on this topic, linking it to some theories, like Socrates’ virtue morals and Mill’s utilitarianism. Then, I will argue that individuals sometimes choose to pursue “evil” acts due to selfish behaviour or a mistaken conception of happiness, often being unaware, “unconscious” or ignorant of the actual implicitness of their acts and without realizing, at a first glance, that they could be deemed as “evil”. Following on, I will sustain that understanding and respect for others is, at least, a starting point to rectify mistakes once realized even if they sometimes cannot be completely “fixed” or made up for. As I bring up each argument, I will be presenting possible counter-arguments to them. Finally, keeping all the mentioned into consideration, I will conclude.

Before beginning, it's relevant and important to define one word that I have mentioned a few times already, which is the conception of "evil". What is evil, or how can we determine if something is or is not evil? Well, this goes along with the question "what is good?", since we could basically define evil as what is not good or right, it's an antonym for it. Now, onto the second question, there are different conceptions, according to diverse moral theories, about what could be deemed as good or morally right. According to some, an act is morally right if it goes in accordance to an universal moral law or principle, and if it's done because of it, without necessarily keeping into account its consequences. Other postures say that an act is right as long as it promotes happiness, which can be defined in different forms and is basically what the entirety of this argumentation turns on about, and that's why I have decided to destine a whole argument to that definition. However, in order to keep it *relatively* simple *as of now*, and maybe risking it being somewhat too --- of a definition, I will consider "evil" to be the absence of good, so that includes acts that provoke mental or physical pain, sadness, insecurity and overall harm to other individuals, the society as a whole, or even one-self; and then I will get back to this after the first argument is presented.

The concept of happiness

There are some moral theories that define that an act is morally right based off it leading to happiness. However, what is happiness? How is it achieved? Is this definition of a morally right act viable? At a first glance, the concept of happiness *seems* way too subjective, as in, if we were to ask different individuals the question "What makes you happy?", we will probably get too many different answers to even be able to record them all accordingly. Nevertheless, is the so-called individual or personal interests and passions what we are looking for while defining happiness? I would say no, as happiness is a concept that goes beyond those aspects, and we will analyse that now.

Starting off, according to Mill, happiness is conceived as the pleasure and absence of pain, and an act is morally right when the maximus level of happiness is achieved for the entirety of the society. This does not necessarily imply, however, that everyone should be constantly guessing all the hypothetical consequences of their actions before acting upon their rational thoughts: that's impossible, there will always be a potential consequence that we may not be aware of, due to ignorance or age, or that it is not even a direct consequence of the act; and that does not mean we are completely responsible for it. For example, let's say that I did not call a friend to ask them about how they were doing with homework, so they didn't do it and they got a bad grade. That's just a weird combination of factors and there is not a direct link between me not calling to ask a casual and not essentially relevant question, and my friend getting a bad grade at school, as their homework does not depend on me, and, therefore, I am not directly responsible for their grade.

After analysing that particularity, we can go on with the following definition of happiness, the one that brings up back to Socrates. He pointed out that happiness is achieved when virtue is practiced. That is, when justice, liberty and other values are kept into account. Those may seem like complex words that we would also need to define thoroughly, but we can generally say that this theory also focuses on the well-being on the society as a whole, and does not essentially focus on personal interests or "subjective happiness". Therefore, keeping those definitions into account, I will consider happiness from this point on, in the context of the conception that a moral act is defined as one that leads to it, as the overall well-being of the society, while also keeping into account the preservation of human and individual rights at all times, so phrases like "we will sacrifice a certain sector of the population for the benefit of others" would not be immediately and necessarily valid in this context without proper argumentation.

A possible counter-argument to this statement would be the non-consideration of individual happiness and the potential sacrifice of it in favour of overall happiness. Is it being forgotten? Does it not matter? Well, I will formulate a new question that is basically the underlying discussion here, and that is: Are individual and societal happiness really different, separated and conflicted concepts? My answer to this

question would be not necessarily, as they are strongly connected. When the society is doing “well”, and that is, it does not present internal conflicts, civil wars, discrimination, severe economic difficulties, high level of poverty, among other aspects; then individuals will also be doing alright in particular. The society’s situation directly impacts on the individuals’, even if there can exist particular cases in which certain groups are benefitted while the majority isn’t, that is not necessarily the rule, as the majority of the individuals will see their “personal happiness” damaged. Let’s pretend someone says that it’s right should exploit a minority of the society if it brings benefits for the majority. This is not right, given that said minority is still part of that overall society, and, therefore, turning a group of people into slaves does not benefit the overall society.

After all the mentioned analysis, we can say that the conception of a moral action being defined by it provoking happiness is viable, even if it isn’t the only theory possible, and, therefore, we may continue on with the rest of the analysis of the phrase. This aspect was really important as the quote itself requires this conception to be valid or viable in order to exist, it’s implied in the original phrase and it’s technically the conception it’s based on.

Why do some people choose to pursue evil actions?

In this section, I will argue about the reasons some individuals choose to pursue evil acts – if it is that they actually “choosing” evil -. Now, as evil acts, we will consider those that do not benefit or contribute to the overall well-being of the society, and, instead, harm and go against it; keeping into account all the aspects mentioned in the argument number one. Now, the principal reason is probably a misconception or mistaken definition of happiness, given that it tends to be ambiguous to most people, as mentioned in the previous section, and societal happiness, which is strongly connected to individual happiness, may be confused with personal or sectorial benefits, as I exemplified previously. When personal benefits are considered over the actual well-being of the society and its conviviality, the agent is committing to a, we could say, selfish behaviour; in which they are only taking into account personal desires and aspirations. This is, their ambitions for material possession or the feeling of power and dominance over other individuals, as they think this is what will bring them joy and happiness over time. However, that is not the case, given that, even though it may bring them temporal pleasure or positive emotions if they truly have those ambitions, it will eventually turn around on them, given that they are not positively contributing to the society.

In order to illustrate the aforementioned, let’s take a look at a quick example. Suppose a king/queen, or even a dictator, as you prefer to imagine, decides to put in prison and torture a particular racial or ethnical group just because he/she dislikes them. If they have the ambitions I previously mentioned, this will probably bring them temporal joy or pleasure because it’s a demonstration of power and force over them, however, since it’s damaging the society and conviviality, it will eventually “reboot” or turn into them, sooner or later, as people begin to realize and act upon societal happiness (and so, carrying out morally right acts). The people of the country can and, eventually will, stand up, alone or with the collaboration of other nations across the globe, given that, even through there exist national societies, there is an even bigger society, and, that is, the universal community, that also looks forwards to peace, conviviality, and its overall well-being.

Now, some people may say that this is only valid for a particular set of cases, and that, apart from those who have a misconception of happiness, there indeed exist individuals that pursue evil acts out of “pure evil”, so that they do it just because it’s evil and they look for the worst possible outcome for everyone but them. Now, I believe this is kind of an extreme conception, and can be re-directed of a misconception of happiness as well. Although it’s true that, in some situations, like the mentioned previously or a serial murderer scenario, it may seem from the outside that the agents are acting out of “pure evil”; it’s actually that they believe that those actions will give them personal happiness, and,

therefore, they are the right path to follow, they are good to pursue. However, as I established previously, first of all, societal happiness is more relevant when defining the morality of an act, and, secondly, as I argued, the action will turn action on them eventually, in the society's search of "true happiness". That is, in this context, its overall well-being. Therefore, we can say that individuals not necessarily "chose" evil, but instead they seek to choose happiness, just that with an incorrect conception of it. With this, I have argued about the first half of Mary's statement.

Understanding and respect for others as a starting point to rectify mistakes

In this section, I will defend that understanding and respect for others is a starting point to rectify the mistakes made. In the previous arguments, I have argued that evil acts essentially come from a misconception of happiness, based on selfish behaviour and certain personal ambitions. Now... How can these mistakes be rectified? Is it even possible to make up for them? On this subtopic, I stand by the idea that mistakes may be, partially or completely, rectified, depending on the particular case. However, in order to do this, it's required that the agent feels some sort of guilt or redemption because, otherwise, it's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to actually understand the damage done and be able to act upon to improve the situation and make up for it. Now, in order to feel said redemption, it's necessary to start off by respecting and be open to understanding them and make amends. How can one make up for an evil act if they do not respect the damaged individual at all? That's hard to conceive, as respect for others is a basic value that leads to a prosper conviviality. That is, consider them as a pair, a similar, no matter their skin colour, ethne, religious beliefs, socioeconomic position or overall differences between them. Respect and understanding is, then, really relevant to take on the next steps of the mistake-rectifying journey, as being "sorry" or making up for mistakes is not just about words, it's about actions and actual redemption. There is no point in trying to be redeemed for an act if they are going to repeat it immediately after.

To this argument, some individuals may point out that it's not possible to make up for one's mistakes in terms of evil acts, since the damage is already done and the consequences of the action have already taken place and cannot be undone, even if there are is actual redemption on the agent's mind and feeling. This may be true in some cases, like the serial murdering and genocide scenarios described, as lives cannot be recovered once the damage is done. However, it is not always that way. Some situations, after actual redemption and time of reflexion may be made up for with concrete actions, as, let's say, community service. For example, in the case of a robbery, the stolen items may be returned; in the scenario of an insult, true forgiveness can be asked for, and a different behaviour could be displayed in the future towards the victim, and any other individual in general. Therefore, making up for the mistakes made may be possible in some circumstances, and the understanding and respect for others is a starting point to do so. With this, I have analysed the second half of the author's quote.

Conclusion

Through this essay, I have defended Mary Wollstonecraft's quote stating that it may be confidently asserted that no man chooses evil, because it is evil, but because he mistakes it for happiness, with three arguments; concerning the concept of happiness, which turns out to be essential in this case, the nature or reasons or evil actions taking place, and the possibility of redemption and mistakes rectification, starting off from the understanding and respect for other individuals as a way to promote conviviality and carry on the feelings invigorated by Philosophy. With all of this into consideration, I conclude this essay by mentioning that, therefore, Philosophy, followed by respect and an enlightened understanding, are fundamental to rectify mistakes, attempting to not pursue evil acts, and, in general, promoting conviviality and integration, especially in the world we live today.