

Philosophy 2
First Paper Assignment: Prompt 2

Though Nietzsche suggests that moral values are arbitrary, both Kant and Mill disagree by showing moral values to be rooted in an innate human faculty, which is not arbitrary. Kant and Mill do, however, disagree on the nature of this faculty: while Kant believes it is a person's inherent a priori reasoning, Mill suggests it is a person's innate aim for happiness. In the following, I will first discuss the grounds for Nietzsche's argument that conventional morals are arbitrary. Subsequently, I will address why Kant and Mill, respectively, disagree with Nietzsche's challenge.

Particularly through studying the etymology of the word "good," Nietzsche concludes that conventional morals are arbitrary. His argument draws on the difference between descriptive and normative language. Descriptive language addresses how things actually are. Normative language, on the other hand, addresses how things should be. While analyzing the etymology of the word "good," Nietzsche notes that "the word 'good' was definitely not linked from the first and by necessity to 'unegoistic' actions," as it is in contemporary times (26). Rather, the word "good" was originally descriptive: it described the preferences and activities of the dominant social class. Because the noble class held the power, they had control over what the word would mean. Hence, "it was 'the good' themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good" (26). However, through the slave revolt in morality, the word "good" came to adopt a normative meaning as well. This slave revolt began with the rise of the Jewish priestly class and culminated with "a radical revaluation of their enemies' values" (34). Jewish priestly leaders harbored resentment, or immense jealousy and resentment, of the naturally stronger.

Through sheer cleverness and the effectiveness of religious myth, the priests developed the sentiments of guilt and conscience among the naturally stronger. Nietzsche argues that guilt and conscience are merely social constructs used to enable a value reversal by making the naturally stronger believe their own actions are “evil.” With this reversal in values, the Jewish priestly class was able “to invert the aristocratic value-equation . . . saying, ‘the wretched alone are the good: the poor, important, lowly alone are the good . . . [and] the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil [and] the cruel’” (34). Thus, by determining the origin of “good” and “bad,” Nietzsche illustrates that these terms are mere fabrications that were arbitrarily designated by nobles and priests. In other words, the values of good and bad are not natural distinctions; rather, they are social constructs.

Though Nietzsche proposes that moral values are arbitrary, Kant disagrees. Kant suggests that moral values are rooted in the innate human faculty of a priori reasoning. In fact, he explicitly states, “all moral concepts have their seat and origin entirely a priori in reason” (261). When principles can be deduced through a priori reasoning, it means they are “free from everything empirical, and [are] found exclusively in pure rational concepts” (260). Because a priori reasoning is independent of experience and only requires rational thinking, it is a faculty of all humans. Kant’s theory is fundamentally built upon a priori reasoning: a priori knowledge enables people to generate categorical imperatives, which are universal laws that apply to all people at all times. Categorical imperatives, in turn, enable people to determine their duty. Consequently, a moral code stemming from a priori reasoning is not arbitrary, because it is based on an innate human capability.

Like Kant, Mill disagrees with Nietzsche's argument that conventional moral values are arbitrary. Furthermore, Mill counters Nietzsche's challenge in a similar manner as Kant—by describing a moral code rooted in an inherent faculty of humans, meaning that it is not arbitrary. Mill and Kant diverge, however, in determining what this faculty is. Mill's theory of utilitarianism seeks to maximize happiness, which can be achieved by promoting pleasure and reducing pain. In this standard, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill 69). An additional aspect of the utilitarian standard is that the "greatest amount of happiness altogether" is valued above "the agent's own greatest happiness" (Mill 15-16). In fact, by the Utilitarian Theory of the Right, an action is morally right if it produces the maximum possible amount of happiness. It has thus been established that Mill's argument is fundamentally rooted in happiness. Happiness is not a social construct; rather, it is an innate, natural faculty of any person. Something that is inherent to humanity cannot be considered arbitrary. Consequently, Mill fundamentally disagrees with Nietzsche's suggestion that moral values are arbitrary.

By analyzing the historical origins of moral values, Nietzsche concludes that they are arbitrary. However, both Kant and Mill disagree with Nietzsche because their moral codes are rooted in some sort of innate human faculty, which is not arbitrary. Nonetheless, Kant and Mill disagree on the nature of this faculty. While Kant suggests it is a person's innate a priori reasoning, Mill insists it is a person's inherent desire for happiness.