

Zweite Runde des Bundes- und Landeswettbewerbs Philosophischer Essay (Winterakademie Philosophie Münster)

Essay zum Thema IV: Milton Friedman (Nobelpreisträger für Wirtschaftswissenschaften 1976) im Interview mit dem Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin, Heft vom 23.06.2006

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The quote in question “[...] *It is equally immoral to take money from the rich and give it to the poor, provided that the rich have earned their money honestly. Why is stealing moral? And what is the difference between taxation and theft?*” discusses the gap between poor and rich and whether rich people should be forced to transfer their money to the poor even if they have worked very hard for it themselves. It even goes so far by questioning if stealing can be morally justified and be equated with taxation.

The multifaceted economic field embodies a controversial question in our society nowadays and it has done that for centuries. People have different ways of earning their money – some have it harder and some have it easier. Our society can be divided into the classic three classes system. The upper class portrays the very few rich people in our society, and the lower class the poor people. In most cases countries have fewer rich people and more poor people. However, most people are part of the middle class, which is mediocre. As mentioned before, some people do have it easier in life when considering the economic field. For instance: People who inherit their money from their families that have lived in wealth for centuries. A lot of these people do not even have to work anymore and can live a luxurious lifestyle with excessive materialism. Meanwhile the poor must work extremely hard for many hours just to get a little bit of money. If people of the upper class could just imagine how it is to shift for hours just to get the tiniest bit of income and feel exhausted and tired at the end of the day. Not only is it degrading a human being, but it is also exploiting them to the point where even their health is jeopardized. Now this leads me to a few questions. How can society let this be normalized? How can we agree with these circumstances? And what can we do to fight against this unfair system?

Human beings have been studied in philosophy for many centuries now. For instance, Immanuel Kant describes every individual as a self-determined human being that is capable of recognizing that other people are also self-determined and may have different ways and ideas of living their lives. Nevertheless, he focuses on the argument that every individual and their dignity ought to be respected. Kant is a representative and symbol of enlightenment. This is why he develops deontological ideas of philosophy. Immanuel Kant prescribes to only consider the action itself and not the consequences. To evaluate whether an action is morally good or bad he creates his so-called categorical imperative. The categorical imperative only considers an action as morally good if it is universally applicable and can be transferred into general law. In relation to the quote, it was asked why stealing is moral, which did not sit right with me. I do not believe that stealing could be moral because it harms other people in some kind of way. Even if someone is just stealing a little thing from a wealthy family and it would not seem to jeopardize them in any way, it does interfere with trust, and it can lead to fear of being stolen from again. Furthermore, stealing could also never be universally applicable and agreeable as general law in our society, which is why it is not compatible with the categorical imperative and therefore in Kant’s sight not morally good. Although I am a big believer of Kant’s philosophy, I cannot agree with it being practicable for every choice in life. I agree with his ideas, however it is very hard to always act out in a way that is compatible with his faculty of understanding when it comes to morality.

This leads me to another point – When considering my lifestyle, I have noticed that I have always tried to make good decisions and take responsibility. Nonetheless, sometimes we human beings are stuck in dilemma situations where we do not want to hurt ourselves or others. At the end of the day both things are bad for us human beings. With this in mind, I strongly believe in moral integrity. In considering different points of views and different philosophical ideas, instead of just one. It is highly important for us to widen our knowledge and to get into exchange with other people. Especially people who are different from us. People who share different beliefs about morality, religion, culture and much more. It could quite literally be anything. Whether that person is introverted or extroverted.

The most important thing is that we dare to try to understand others instead of just taking it the way it is. We as self-determined human being should try to morally develop as an individual and the great thing is that we hold the power in our hands to do so. Even in Kohlberg's step model of morality, he describes three levels with he divides into two steps each. In total he demonstrates 6 steps, which illustrate how far a human being is morally developed in life. In the first layer he describes mostly children who "learn" whether something is good or bad by their parents through a punishment or reward principle. If a child does something good and gets rewarded for it, the child is most likely to be doing the same good thing again. The second layer describes teenagers to adults. People who are aware of law and have a basic faculty understanding of why something is bad and why something is good. These people take the law as it is. Now the last layer of moral development includes only the fewest people in society. It addresses people who think above the law and people who criticize and question law. They use their mind to the fullest and do not believe that every law in our system is perfect the way it is. A lot of people do not understand the dangers of always taking everything as it is. But how does that even jeopardize us, most people would question. For instance, when we take into consideration how systems used to look like many centuries before we now recognize the many flaws that it used to have. The fact that women were not equally respected like men, and still are not. Or that antisemitism used to be normal for many people. Or even death penalty, which some countries still have. All these things are a part of our world history and unfortunately used to be considered normal and are still considered that way in some countries. But even worse, some of these were also integrated into law. This alone proves my point that people who have thought deeper and further in life; people who have used their faculty's understanding to the fullest; Those people we must thank for and use as role models. There can always be something wrong in law, we just must be brave enough to use our understanding and speak up about topics that are not agreeable with our perception. Now that we have taken a look at human beings, their powers, their autonomy and moral development, I would like to introduce further perspectives.

The quote in question mentioned how stealing and theft could be moral. Previously, I have refuted this statement, but I would now like to explain why sometimes it is better to steal than not to. Obviously stealing on its own could never be morally good, but can we as human beings also always act out only morally good? Frankly, I do not believe so and I envision that this forms us as human beings. It is good to make mistakes and it is good to sometimes act out morally bad to an extent. Unless we do not truly harm other people to an extreme point, it is good that we make mistakes. But why can doing something bad be considered good? We as human beings should always keep in mind that this is the first time on earth for everyone. For me, for you, for your parents and your friends. Everyone is here for the first time and must face multifaceted difficulties. Doing mistakes is part of a learning process. It helps us to develop as a person. Although stealing does not automatically lead you to a great learning process, it does help some people in many ways. There are people in the world who are not even capable of filling their basic needs. People who do not have enough or any food at all. This is something where we as a society have failed. So how bad is it to steal food from others in order to survive? Here I would go so far and say that it is not that bad. Human beings are incapable of thinking clearly when they are in a survival mode. With this in hand, I would even say that it is our mistake. The mistake of the wealthier people and also the people of the middle class. It includes every single person who can speak up and donate but refuses to. It includes every developed country who can help those in need. We as society have failed strongly in filling the needs for everyone on this earth. Which is why I believe that poor people stealing food in order to survive, is a consequence of our inaction.

Sometimes people should be allowed to not act morally good in order to help themselves. Teleological ethics also spread knowledge about acting out by viewing the consequences, instead of just the action. This is opposite to Kant's idea of morality. However, utilitarianism is more tangible and practicable for everyone because it is not a universal principle but more dependent on the situation. Utilitarianism also has a calculus/ scale just like the categorical imperative in Kant's deontological ethics. One of them is called hedonistic calculus. This evaluates whether an action is good or bad by considering the consequences. It tries to convey more joy and less sorrow in total.

Therefore, every individual's point of view must be taken into consideration. In relation to the quote, if one poor person steals food from a rich family in order to provide the entire family with basic needs, then the action is better than bad. This is because the gain of the poor family is much bigger than the loss of the rich family. The poor family will share more joy, than the rich family will show little sorrow. Therefore, it indicates more joy and less sorrow and can be justified morally. All things considered; this proves that it is important to contemplate with more than just one moral idea. Moral integrity can be the key for a better future and a better understanding of human beings. I have also once read a quote which described that there could not be any law about morality. This is because people have different perspectives of morality, and the field is so diverse and multifaceted. Not to mention, morality cannot truly be recognized from the outside, which is why we need to get into exchange and socialize in order to understand each other.

Now I would like to dive in a little bit further into fairness. Fairness also plays a huge role in philosophy and society. Some people are faced with more injustice and some less. But what exactly does embody a fair society? Aristoteles for example builds up theories on how to achieve bliss in life. He mentions that everyone should use their faculty of understanding to the fullest, just like Kant, and should get the most work out of their day and entire life. It is important to set a goal and to follow that goal in order to achieve happiness. This arises from a lot of hard work, discipline and majority. Once an individual starts to follow his goals and constantly tries to become a better version of himself, then this individual can achieve bliss in life. However, when it comes to fairness, Aristoteles differentiates between chrematistics and economy. Aristoteles believes in people achieving a higher position in the economic field when working very hard for it. Nonetheless, he disagrees when people have an excessive amount of wealth even though they are not working for it. Here is where the quote comes back in question. Milton Friedman mentions in his quote that it is not morally agreeable when people must transfer their money to the poor, although they have worked extremely hard for it. In some points his point is quite understandable. Aristoteles mentions that it is morally agreeable for people to build up in the economic field. Nevertheless, this does not justify acting out with chrematistic ideals. People who live out chrematistic standards, are the ones who live in excessive materialism. This is unvirtuous in Aristotle's perspective and in Platon's. Aristoteles even goes so far by mentioning that the golden middle is always the best. So even if you have worked very hard for your money an extreme amount of materialism is still not morally justifiable and unvirtuous. Referring to Milton Friedman's quote, I actually disagree with his perspective that wealthy people who have strongly worked for their wealth should not have to share their money. At the end of the day, it is all about sharing and helping others out. Only in this way we can help to form a better future, once we stop thinking so egotistically and start thinking more about people in need.

John Rawls also speaks up about justice and injustice in his work "Fairness as Justice ". He follows the basic idea that in a group everyone should be able to agree on an order from which everyone benefits and is coherent with. He specifies that even if two people who are totally different and share different religious beliefs are still able to form a great order which both feel satisfied with. This point is very important because it includes everyone. John Rawls was also one of the few philosophers to include slavery into his ideas of morality. He was one of the few ones to bring slavery and injustice towards women into the room. Although Aristoteles also included women in his ideas of economy, he did not take slavery into consideration. This again shows the importance of ancient moral ideas but also modern moral ideas. John Rawls develops the veil of ignorance. With this he leads us into a thought experiment. In the veil of ignorance, one must imagine to be in a society in which you do not know what position you hold. There has also once been an experiment in an Italian village, that took about hundred people into an empty village with the same needs. Not even one of them knew what position they would have in that society. Everyone had the same basic needs and could decide on their own how to make the best out of it. Imagine a world like that. A world, in which everyone starts with the same chances and basic needs. Without any privileges or obstacles set by their families. In this kind of world everyone can use their own interest and strengths to the fullest. This is also what Aristoteles and Platon try to convey. That people should work in a field, where they are interested in and get the

most out of it. This is even considered as a double profit because you are fulfilling your interests and working in the economic field. People using their own faculty of understanding and following their interests instead of stepping into the shoes of your family or of society. Often, we human beings just do what we are told to do and lose our interest from time to time. This weakens us immensely, without even noticing, and takes away joy from our lives. Obviously, this kind of experiment cannot fully be transferred, because the people that visit this village have already “lived a life” before. So, they are not really starting from zero. Back to what John Rawls tries to convey is that everyone should have the same fundamental freedoms. This he calls the “freedom principle”. Another one of his principles is the “difference principle” in which he explains that it is morally justifiable for one to have a higher position in the economic field if they provide a higher performance. All things considered, he demonstrates a society in which all people share the same fundamental freedoms and have the chance to develop themselves and even achieve a higher position in society and profit by their hard work. This is his understanding of Fairness. For instance, it would be unfair for a cashier to earn the same amount of money as a doctor, because a doctor has to meet much more difficult requirements than a cashier.

Now meeting the last question of Milton Friedman’s quote, in which he questions whether there is a difference between taxation and theft. This is something that adds to the things that I have previously mentioned and disagrees with my moral standards. Taxation is something that provides our system and here in Germany it even helps people of the lower class to achieve somewhat the same chances as people of the middle-class. For example, Germany pays Hartz IV for many people who are not capable of work. This is so that they can have the basic needs of a human being to survive. It would be unfair of us not to help out people who are incapable of working themselves. This is why I do not view taxation as a theft because it is a good form of helping other people out. I believe that more countries should set an example of Germany and do the same. It is important to do something good for the generality even if you do not fully profit from it. Of course, you give away money that you have earned by working hard by taxation. Nonetheless, this does not justify letting other people suffer, because we want to have more money and live a “better life” while others are hardly getting in their basic needs. People need to stop thinking so egotistical and start to be more empathic. If we work together as a whole and help each other out, we can build a much stronger bond and become happier as a whole. Not to mention, I firmly believe that this is transferable globally and that countries should also help each other out. Teamwork is the best form of work. We should never forget that we live on this planet together and that we should always consider how our actions transfer onto others.

In conclusion, I understand the points mentioned in the quote. However, I see things differently and believe that we are responsible for each other. Therefore, we also must provide for each other and especially help those people in need. What is so terrible about sharing your wealth with others, when you are only losing a portion and they are gaining a huge portion? At the end of the day, you are doing something morally good by sharing and at the same time you are creating much more joy while arranging less sorrow. This essay hopes to provide enlightenment and hopes to help people realize how much power they hold in their hands. Socialization, empathy, moral integrity and getting into exchange with people who differ from you are key to a fulfilled life.