The Most Ethical Solution: John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism And Immanuel Kant's Deontology

20th century philosopher, Philippa Foot developed a thought experiment in which two scenarios were considered- rescue I and rescue II. Rescue I begins like this- someone is driving to rescue a group of five people who are in danger of drowning on the edge of the ocean. Time is precious, and when a single person calls out for help at the same time, the rescuer must make a choice about who to save. In rescue II, the rescuer is still trying to reach the group of five people by the ocean to save them, but must take a narrow, rocky road to get there. On the way, an individual is alone and trapped on the path. If the rescue stops to help the person, the other five will die, but in order to get to the five, the rescuer would have to run the individual over, and kill him. Both situations require a choice in which either one person dies, or five people die. John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant are two philosophers whose ethical approaches can be applied to experiments, to determine the most ethical solution. As Mill uses utilitarianism and Kant uses deontology, their advice for each rescue differs, but in the end, I will explain why it is evident that Kant's approach is the most superior.

The idea of Utilitarianism is that actions are morally right if and because they will produce the greatest good. This means taking all of the possible effects of an action (immediate and long-term) and subtracting the total bad effects from the total good effects. This is the theory that the rightness of an action is always a function of its effects/results; in other words, if the outcome is positive, the action was correct. Utilitarians like John Stuart Mill maintained that you can judge "whether an action is morally right or wrong by the amounts of net pleasure or pain it produces" ("Utilitarianism- John Stuart Mill." 00:24). Mill said that our actions are right when they produce happiness, and wrong when they produce "the opposite of happiness" ("Utilitarianism- John Stuart Mill." 01:04). He also said there are different rankings of pleasures. Higher pleasures are pleasures that would be chosen over another pleasure, even if some discomfort had to occur ("Utilitarianism- John Stuart Mill." 03:55). In chapter two of his writing, Utilitarianism, Mill writes that "few human creatures would consent to be changed into anything lower,"; he says for example that no "intelligent" person would ever consent to becoming foolish (2).

In the situation of rescue I, the options available are to either save the five people from drowning, and let the single person die, or save the one person and let the other five die. According to the approach of utilitarianism, Mill would tell rescuer I to save the five people and let the single person die. He would say this simply because by saving the five, more lives are preserved, and therefore the amount of net pleasure being produced is greater in doing this. In rescue II, the options for the rescuer are either to run over the individual trapped on the path in order to save the party of five people from the tide, or to stop the car on the path so that the individual trapped does not die, but the party of people will drown because of the high tide. Here, again, Mill would tell the rescuer to run over the person in the road in order to save the five people. Mill would say this to each Rescuer because by making these decisions, more people are being saved. His theory of Utilitarianism would suggest that by saving the lives of the five people, happiness is maximized and eliminates the much larger amount of pain that would result from saving the single individual, while letting the other five die.