

Bentham vs kant why kants theory more appealing philosophy essay



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The idea of good and wrong is an idea that is present in some of the most heated debates. Because of this there have developed many theories that revolve around the idea of the moral worth of an action. Two philosophers that have contributed to these theories are Jeremy Bentham and Immanuel Kant. Bentham's view on the moral worth of an action is based on the concept of utilitarianism and believes that all our motivations lie behind pleasure and pain. On the other hand Kant's theory of the moral worth of our actions revolves around egalitarian ideas, and according to Kant, moral truths are based on reasons that make sense to all people. When one breaks down both theories, it just so happens that Kant's comes out to be the more sensible one in most aspects.

Bentham follows a principle of utilitarianism, which evaluates an action based on its consequences. The only relevant consequences however are the overall happiness created for everyone affected by the action. Bentham believes that what ultimately motivates us is pleasure and pain, hence, happiness comes from a matter of experiencing pleasure and no pain. Furthermore, pain and pleasure help us to determine what we ought to do as well as what we will do. According to Bentham pleasure and pain follow on the idea of the standard of right and wrong as well as on a chain of causes and effects. Following the principle of utility, there is an approval of every single action based only upon how it appears to enhance or weaken the happiness of the person or group whose interest is at question. In order to measure the pain or pleasure produced by an action, one must take into consideration 4 circumstances: it's intensity, it's duration, it's certainty and uncertainty, and its propinquity or remoteness. However, said circumstances

are used only to determine pleasure and pain alone. When one wishes to measure the pleasure and pain based on the act that will produce them there are two other circumstances which need to be considered as well: its fecundity, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind that is produced from the action; and its purity, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind that is produced by the action. All in all, an action is considered right or wrong depending on the amount of pleasure and pain it produces both directly and overtly.

Bentham, through using the above steps is basically counting the consequences that an action will produce to determine the moral worth of the action. The problem with Bentham's way of determining the moral worth of the action is that it becomes much too complicated and a rather tedious process. The circumstances of an action have the ability to change on numerous occasions. This includes the circumstances, the situation, and the persons or groups that it affects causing one to re-evaluate the situation every time one acts. It is because of this that Bentham's theory becomes less appealing than that of Kant's.

Kant has a more exact view on the moral worth of an action, and believes that an action is deemed either right or wrong in and of itself and not by the consequences it will produce. Kant also believes that an action is right or wrong based on whether or not it was done from a sense of duty. Kant calls the reason behind an action a maxim. If the maxim justified, then the action is a duty. Kant also believes that one should not fulfill an action unless one feels it right that the maxim behind the action would be acceptable as a universal law, or in other words if it is able to be applied to everyone.

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Furthermore an action that is done from a sense of duty contains its moral worth not from the purpose of the action but rather by the maxim of which it is determined by and therefore only depends on the " principle of volition by which the action has taken place."

Kant does not believe that one's own happiness can be what determines the moral worth of an action, like Bentham would tend to believe. He rejects this because in particular, good will (or the intention to produce happiness) is not always proportionate to virtuous behavior. Moreover, one man's well being is not always able to be applied to all, hence his idea of a maxim being made into a universal law. Kant further believes that the duty the action is done towards, must be done in respect to the law and not in respect to how it would make one feel.

Kant focuses on the right thing to do even if the outcome causes unhappiness. This is where Bentham and Kant collide as Bentham does look into the consequences of an action, and uses the outcome of an action to determine its moral worth while Kant does not. However, Kant's theory is not entirely atrocious, for if someone tries to do something nice for you out of a sense of duty but the action causes unhappiness, you cannot truly blame him because the maxim was justified. The outcome could not have been predicted for sure, and for this reason, the fact that the outcome did not cause you happiness should not affect your judgment of his action. Although the above example cannot be used for all actions, especially those which can be predicted to have a negative outcome even if the intentions behind such an action were good, it still brings about an air of a much pleasurable view on Kant's theory, and one that makes it easier to follow.

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Kant's idea that an action should be morally right if it were to be acceptable as a universal law does bring about a good point, for if it is not right to commit the action it should not be right in any other situation as well, leaving out all room for confusion stemming from consequences. Bentham on the other hand brings about the idea of the immediate consequences of an action, and states that the action is morally acceptable when the consequences produced are more pleasurable than painful. He also states that the action should produce the same consequences if done more than once. However it is difficult to predict the consequence of an action several times, as the surroundings of the situation may change making it a complicated process to determine whether or not an action will produce more pleasure or pain, therefore making Kant's theory more appealing.

Kant's theory proves to show a path that allows the process of deeming an action morally right or wrong much a much simpler task. This is because the base of Kant's theory lies on the issue of will. What makes an action morally right lies simply in the will or intention to do the right thing, only for the sake of doing so and not for the circumstances it may produce. One must want to do something just for the sake of doing what is right, and not for any other reason; not even for that goose bumpy feeling that follows from being nice. There lies a simplicity and straight forward attitude of Kant's theory that makes it much more appealing when compared to Bentham's theory. It is a theory that only analyzes the intention of the action and not the consequences it will produce. Everyone should simply be doing their duty.

Kant's ethics is fixed. It is better than Bentham's theory based on

utilitarianism when it comes to the process of determining the moral worth of
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an action itself. This is because Bentham can keep counting consequences on an indefinite scale, while Kant's ideas have less range. Don't lie means don't lie, period, no matter what other related circumstances are present; Kant's theory is absolute: do not lie means do not lie, period, no matter what, in every situation.