

# Example of the basis of morality essay

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



While both Kant and Hobbes offer their theories on morality, interestingly, the two theories are quite opposed and contrasting. The disparity can perhaps be explained by differences in their theses. Kant's theory is based on the rationalistic model, while Hobbes prefers an empirical approach. Nevertheless, a common theme in their approaches is that both of them adopt a subjective point of view. In other words, they prefer a person centered or subjective approach on the issue of morality. The following discussion will compare the approaches of two thinkers on the issue of morality and will also highlight the differences between them. The differences between the two philosophers rest on their differences in the understanding of the human nature, understanding of reason and of morality.

The central concept in Hobbes is the Laws of Nature, while emergence of morality is intricately linked to the Nature's Laws. However, reason plays a critical role in discovering morality. The existence of these laws is, according to Hobbes explained by the sole purpose of the preservation of human species. Therefore, as soon as the social contract is made to preserve the existence of mankind, morality also comes into picture. Before the social contract, man in state of nature is 'nasty' and 'brutish'. This is the state of pre-civilization involving war of all against all. In the state of nature, human beings are hostile and violent in a state of perpetual war. Hobbes claims, "in the nature of man, we find three principall causes of quarrel. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for Reputation. The first use Violence, to make themselves Masters of other mens persons,

wives, children and cattell” (Hobbes 70)

With the formation of social contract, however, everyone surrenders their rights and freedoms to a central authority known as the leviathan, so that the central authority can regulate the life and conduct of people and people may enjoy peace. This is also the point of time when morality emerges. In other words, since people want peace and riddance from violence and perpetual war, they come to a consensus decision to surrender some of their natural rights. In other words, morality does not exist prior to the emergence of social contract. It is evident from Hobbes’ discussion that morality is not an inherent characteristic of human beings, who are essentially selfish and violence in the state of nature. In other words, their real nature is violent and immoral, but morality is the necessary condition for them to live in peace, which requires them to curtail their rights and freedoms.

I don’t see much difficulty in concurring with Hobbes’ understanding of morality. Freudian notion of ‘id’ also acknowledges the existence of wild nature in human beings that is restrained by ego and superego. According to this explanation, just as Freud conceptualizes the existence of irrational desires in human consciousness, Hobbes, too, gives primacy to wild and irrational drives essential to human nature while rationality is secondary to wild and selfish human nature.

Kant prefers an objective basis or strict standards against which the issue of morality can be evaluated, which he calls categorical imperative. Unlike Hobbes, he places the biggest emphasis on deriving some set of moral norms or a moral law that would be universal. According to him, there is something that is objectively good and that is good will. Making it his starting

point, Kant derives his categorical imperative which is, in other words, the moral law that should be used by everyone and thus is universal. The first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, also known as the universalizable principle recommends that a person should act only on universalizable maxims. The law is stated as an imperative because they are applied to "human agents, who can recognize the obligatory nature of the human law but are affected by sensuous desires, and can still chose to act contrary to it. Therefore, the law must be stated as an imperative. The first formulation, in the form of an imperative reads: "Act on maxims that you can also will be made laws that hold universally." (Sullivan & Kant 35-36). In other words, what applies or does not apply to me should also apply or not apply on all. For Kant, therefore, the basis of morality is rationality founded on the rational principles, while for a rational agent, conformity with the imperatives is of critical importance. This is so because Kant places importance on reason over passion.

While the two theories see the basis of morality in different, it can be said, opposite, things and seem quite distinct from one another, at a closer look it can be noticed that there are certain similarities of a general kind. While Kant has a much more optimistic view of the human nature and trusts people to be able to draw the laws to be applied to everyone, to decide what is good and what is bad, Hobbes is not very hopeful and basically sees people like one more kind of animals, who, if left unsupervised, will fight endlessly and be unable to progress. Still, at some point, both Kant and Hobbes reach the idea of a universal law. In case of Hobbes, the basis of the universal law is common human nature based on irrationality, while for Kant the basis of the

same is the universal rationality common to human beings.

More precisely, Kant does not look for justification for an action in an external end but in intrinsic goodness with its basis in rationality. In other words, an action is not moral because it serves some external purpose but simply because it is inherently good with its basis in rationality. This is what makes moral acts binding in nature, that is, they have an imperative nature. However, for Hobbes, morality has an external source. It serves to make civilized life possible. In other words, the worthiness of a moral action is based on its fulfilling some larger end. According to Kant on the other hand, rational nature exists as an end in itself.

The similarities and differences in the accounts of morality offered by two philosophers can be explained on the bases of (i) Different accounts of human nature (ii) Different conceptions of reasoning and rationality.

According to Kant, 'goodwill' is the only thing that can be thought of as good without any qualification. It is intrinsically good and hence ought to be the moral principle to guide our action. In addition, Kant believes that our actions are moral only in proportion to which they conform to duty. It can be therefore, noticed that Kant recognizes human beings as endowed with rational principles driving them towards doing actions that are done not from passions or motives but out of a sense of duty, and because performing those actions are inherently good.

However, from the perspective of practical life, there are very people who are guided by reason and duty to perform morally appropriate actions. They are exemplary people while most of us are driven by passion.

Hobbes account of human nature, on the other hand appears closer to

practical life. Most of the human beings are guided by passion and emotion. People are driven by rewards and incentives, and the fear of punishment forces people to refrain from performing unethical acts.

Nevertheless, to be fair to Kant, it is also noticed that people are not only capable of acting dispassionately but also have a clear understanding that one must act out of a sense of duty, as for instance the fire fighters and administration personnel during 9/11 or at the time of crisis. Therefore, we can claim that an individual human being has both the elements – reason and emotion, while one predominates over the other under different circumstances. In other words, human nature cannot be seen strictly as black and white. Reason and passion play their roles together. The account of morality offered by two philosophers, come to different conclusions because they are based on different accounts of human nature.

(ii) It is also evident that Kant and Hobbes approach the understanding of reason or rationality in two diverse ways. For Hobbes, reason plays a role in coming to a solution. It is means to an end. In other words, reason has instrumental value. Reason shows us the way out of turmoil and chaos. Reason makes it possible for us to discover how to lead a moral and civilized life. In other words, men become men out of beasts because they are rational and have access to reason which helps them to come to a common solution for the universal human suffering.

For Kant too, men are distinct from animals and have the capacity to act morally because they are rational beings. However, according to Kant, the role of reason is not instrumental. It is not a means to an end. The role of reason is only relevant in so far as it can help universalize a moral principle.

The principles like one must not kill another person or one must speak the truth always are moral only so far as they are universalizable. This universalization can only be achieved by rational beings. However, the major difference between Hobbes and Kant is that for Hobbes, the principles like ‘do not kill others’ and ‘do not lie’ are important because these moral principles help achieve a peaceful society. The reason is important because it helps to achieve an extrinsic end.

In conclusion, therefore, we can state that while the bases of morality for both Kant and Hobbes have their sources in human nature and rationality, yet both the philosophers have interpreted human nature and rationality in their own unique and distinct ways.

## **Works Cited**

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