

Social contract and immanuel kant philosophy essay



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In a society that the people are free to do as they see fit and are governed by natural laws, where individuals can abuse and exploit of one another and there is no fear of consequences is known as the state of nature.[i]When individuals give up a little of their freedom to do as they like, and voluntarily agree to obey laid down laws (civil laws) to have protection of life and ownership of property, this agreement is known as the social contract. The political philosophers would explain the social contract theory as individuals giving power to the government (state) to govern over them in exchange for protection.[ii]It must not be misinterpreted that an individual, who is under the social contract has to give up their total freedom rather, the person is still at liberty to do as they please so far as it does not cause harm or impede on another individual's freedom. Giving up this freedom under the social contract is viewed as a benefit to the society.

The social contract which brings into existence a well ordered society “ state of states”, is said to be of three key elements. The first element is an imagery of how a society will be like with no laws, under the state of nature[iii]. People would be exploited, abused and there will be no fear of justice since they are free to do as they like and are not confined by any laws that restrict them from doing unto others as they please. Individuals' attempt to escape from such brutality brings about the second element which is recognizing the “ state” to have the power to bring about order and stability to a society; recognizing the sovereign power[iv]. The third element is the obligation of the people under the social contract to respect and obey the laid down laws by the state[v]. In their obedience to these laws they are showing gratitude to the state for securing an organized and stable society.

Some philosophers believe though, that the social contract is imposed on society to demonstrate the structure of rationality.[vi]

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) born in Eastern Prussia was a German philosopher and an idealist. The author of Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, in his book he defines morality as “ an action that is not determined by its consequences, only by the intentions behind it”[vii]. He believes that a person’s intention to do good or bad justifies the action as good or bad. For example when a person finds a bag of money and the person’s intention is to report it to the police, according to Kant this makes the person good (moral). But if the outcome is different from the supposed intention that is, the person ends up keeping the money, the person is still seen as good; “ In law a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics he is guilty if he only thinks of doing it”[viii]. The outcome of the action whether good or bad should not be considered in determining an action as moral but only the original intention. These actions are said to be motivated by duty and inclination.

Duty is an action that has been outlined by society to be in the right moral direction. Duty is described in four cases; (i) when actions are contrary to duty (e. g. stealing) (ii) when actions are dutiful because of fear of penalty (e. g. paying taxes) (iii) when duty is in accordance to one’s inclination (e. g. labor of love) and (iv) actions that are in accordance to duty but contrary to inclination (e. g. not committing suicide despite being in unbearable distress).[ix]Duty is seen to be “ morally worthy” because it is approved by society whereas inclination is seen as “ praise worthy” because it is

motivated by emotions. He argues that people are more concerned about <https://assignbuster.com/social-contract-and-immanuel-kant-philosophy-essay/>

their self-interest as such, when they act in accordance to their inclinations then they are acting out of self-interest, but since duty is determined by society it will contrast with their self-interest thereby making it moral.

Kant's moral theory is centered on a system that distinguishes a moral from a maxim known as the categorical imperative. A maxim is the principle or general rule that determines an actions moral worth[x]. When a maxim has contradictions then it cannot be considered as a moral maxim[xi], an example used is when a person borrows money and promises to pay knowing very well he won't. This cannot be willed as a moral maxim then because everybody will promise and fail and people with needs will be seen as liars. His attempt to solve the problem of morality and solidify his theory brought about the categorical imperative[xii]. The categorical imperative is seen as a criterion for determining obligatory and forbidden actions and is made up of three formulations; (i) universal moral law, (ii) treat people as ends and (iii) the kingdom of ends.[xiii]

The first formulation, the universal moral law looks at how one's maxim can be accepted by another person, in other words, can your maxim be accepted by all and will everybody feel the same about it. " Act only on that maxim which you can, at the same time will it to be a universal law"[xiv]. For example my maxim is when I borrow something from somebody I like to return it as soon as I am done using it. The real test here is can this be universally adopted and willingly accepted. A universal maxim should also have the ability to remain consistent. If a maxim passes the test, then the maxim is morally accepted and is seen as permissible but if it fails then that maxim should be disregarded and forbidden. When weighing a maxim as a <https://assignbuster.com/social-contract-and-immanuel-kant-philosophy-essay/>

universal law there is no exception, an individual's maxim should not only apply to others around him but should also be applicable to him, and he must accept it with no hesitations.

The second formulation which is treat people as ends explains how we should see people as ends and not as means to an end. People can be seen as both means to an end and as end at the same time, but never should they be treated as means to an end only[xv]. An example is a man who makes a false promise to a friend so as to secure a loan. The friend here is seen as a mean to attaining his self-interest. He argues that people in themselves are ends, it is therefore wrong to use people to satisfy our selfish desires. Kant believes that in doing so; treating people as a means, we deny them the importance of their humanity. By disrespecting their personhood and dignity and not recognizing them as rational individuals we deny them of their humanity[xvi]and we denial ourselves as well of the importance of humanity.

The third formulation the kingdom of ends can be seen as a totality of the two formulations. With this formulation we are urged to imagine ourselves as the law makers in the " kingdom of ends". The kingdom of ends is " an imaginary state whose laws protect an individual's autonomy"[xvii]. In this kingdom we put our maxims to the test to satisfy the two formulations; universal moral law and treat people as ends. When these maxims satisfy the conditions of the formulations, that is, they become universally adopted and accepted, and people are treated as ends and not means to an end, then the maxims can be known as a moral law. A society that acquired its laws by the means of using the system of the categorical imperatives to Kant is an ideal society because the society is based on moral laws.

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Kant views a society under the social contract as a society based on moral laws. Under the social contract individual desires are not used in determining the law, but rather the maxim that satisfies the conditions of the categorical imperative[xviii]. To Kant this is ideal because the state addresses the wants of the people and not the desires of a particular group. He uses an example the war tax to support his argument explaining; when the state imposes a fair tax that is just, citizens cannot argue against it because the state might have legitimate reasons for imposing the tax that citizens are not aware of[xix]. This goes to justify the state concentrating on benefits of the society rather than benefits of an individual. This is Kant's description of an ideal society under the social contract.

CRITICISM

Kant's theory is based on having an ideal society that is based on moral laws. These moral laws have been acquired by the use of categorical imperatives; the criterion for determining a moral, therefore making these laws ideal. He believes that when a society is governed by these laws then people treat each other as equals and our conscience will prevent us from doing otherwise[xx]. Arthur Schopenhauer a German philosopher disagrees with Kant's theory saying, the " categorical imperatives speaks before the deed but the conscience after the deed." He argues that the conscience cannot act as a deterrent against people having their freedom impeded, since it is an afterthought after the deed has been done.

The social contract is an ideal society which seeks to bring order and safety to the people under a government. Kant's formulations of the moral laws by using the categorical imperatives are fascinating theoretically but do not
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seem to hold in real life; the universal moral law, treating people as ends rather than means to an end and kingdoms of ends. Kant's ideal society using these imperatives might be a solution to finding laws that will be accepted by all and obeyed as well, since we know how we feel about these laws help in their formulation.