



Mains Practice Question

Q. Explain Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and compare it with the Utilitarian principle of ethics given by Jeremy Bentham? (150 words)

07 Nov, 2019 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Briefly describe Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives.
- Differentiate it with Bentham's utilitarianism with examples.

Answer

- Immanuel Kant's **categorical imperatives** prescribe a standard of rationality to which all moral and rational agents are held. It places significance on the duty aspect rather than the consequences of the actions.
 - It suggests that any human action should be such that it can be universally applicable to all.
 - It also suggests that **human beings** should be treated as '**ends in themselves**'. Thus, for Kant, '**human dignity**' is a value in itself. If a person is an end-in-himself, it means his inherent value doesn't depend on anything else. We exist, so we have value.
- This is in contrast to Bentham's **utilitarianism**, which allows for the use of individuals as a means to benefit the many or the greatest good for the greatest number.
- For eg: Bentham's utilitarianism would approve of active **euthanasia**, as it would not only relieve the suffering of the terminally ill patient but also would be beneficial for the family, both monetarily as well as emotionally.
 - However, Kantian ethics would not approve this as it treats humans as an end in itself. Future technological advancements may even improve the patient's condition.
- Similarly, **slavery** is justified from a utilitarian perspective as it benefits agrarian economy; however, it is unjust as it undermines the universal moral principle of 'human dignity'.

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