**Are intentions or actions more important? Well, it’s not that simple.**

by Lina Zein (11th grade)

Some of the most engaging philosophical questions to examine are those with implications in our daily lives. For almost every single person in the world, options and choices are of a unique pervasive nature. The ensuing decisions we make can often result as intended but could also have unexpected and perhaps even disastrous consequences. An immensely fascinating question arises: are the intentions behind our actions or the actions themselves more important? In addition to being extremely worthwhile to consider in and of itself, this question is especially important because it can help clarify some aspects of other philosophical questions.

For example, in Plato’s Socratic dialogue *Meno*, Socrates and Meno discuss the question of whether virtue can be taught. During the dialogue, Socrates proposes for deliberation the case of a person who desires good but is mistaken and believes certain evils to be good. Is this person good despite being inadvertently engaged in evil? This piece in the larger puzzle of whether virtue is innate or taught cannot be fully understood without resolving a much more fundamental question about what constitutes goodness itself­—the vital question of whether actions or intentions are more important.

Consider the improbable example of a truly evil person who, while trying to concoct a poison, accidentally creates the cure for cancer. Take this illustration a step further and imagine that this evil person accidentally spills the substance on a counter in his laboratory. Hours later, when someone comes to clean the lab, he or she is exposed to the cure. Coincidentally, this person had cancer and is now saved. In this case, a bad person with bad intentions managed to do considerable good. Does that make him a good person? Most would say that it does not, considering that he was trying to create poison. In this case, there is a stark contrast between the evil motives behind an action and the goodness of the action itself, helping clarify an answer to the question of whether intentions or actions are more important.

Intentions are inexorably linked to the moral qualities of a person. Despite the good action of the evil person in the example above, his intentions were bad and therefore, he is not a good person “at heart.” The positive result of his action does not have an effect on his moral character, especially considering that this bad person may not have even been aware that he created a cure. Correspondingly, actions are clearly linked to the greater good. In other words, the bad intentions of the evil person do not negate the intrinsic goodness of his action. The ambiguity of the question, “are intentions or actions more important” is suddenly very apparent. A better question might be, are intentions or actions more important in the context of a person’s moral character? What about in the context of the greater good? Since intentions correspond to moral qualities and actions tend to correspond to the greater good, it follows that the true central question is an altogether different one: is a person’s moral character or the greater good more important? If the former, then intentions are of chief importance. If the latter, then actions win out.

In the way that utilitarianism, for example, allows us to easily answer the question of whether to sacrifice one life to save millions, the separation of intentions and actions as stemming from two different conceptions of “importance” provides a lens through which to think about other philosophical questions. In the case of Plato’s *Meno,* the idea of virtue is fundamentally concerned with a person’s true desire to do good. Thus, the initial stage of being a good person in an all-encompassing sense—the stage that precedes good actions—is the real matter in question in *Meno*. It is now possible to work backwards. Since moral character is of singular importance in the idea of virtue, intentions must be critical. We can now answer the original question of whether a person who desires evils but believes them to be good is good. Since this person’s intentions are good, they are virtuous. The effect of this person on others (the greater good), however, can be completely independent of his or her virtuousness.

The fact that actions and intentions can sometimes be inherently contradictory illustrates the importance of contemplating this question. When we are faced with situations that beg the question, “are intentions or actions more important?” we must consider what is at stake—our moral character or the greater good? Therein lies the answer.