

Should the Moral Worth of Our Actions Be Judged Solely by Their Consequences?

Introduction

The debate in this essay over whether the moral value of our actions should be assessed only by their outcomes is an important issue in moral philosophy. It will analyse what makes an action right or wrong, whether the results it produces are justified, and whether other factors like intention, duty, or character are important. This question is important because it influences how we assess people's actions and make decisions in difficult situations. It also affects how we judge responsibility and blame, especially when actions lead to unexpected results. Several philosophers argue that only consequences really matter, claiming that an action is right if it leads to the best results. This view is often linked to the utilitarianism concept, which focuses on increasing happiness or overall well-being. Others believe this view is too basic and suggest that we also need to consider why someone did something and whether their action follows moral rules. They argue that good intentions and respect for moral duties are important, even if the outcome is not ideal. This essay will show that, while results matter, they are not the only thing that determines moral worth. A more complete view of morality also considers intentions. This essay argues that while outcomes are an important factor in moral evaluation, they are not sufficient on their own, as moral worth must also take into account intention, moral principles, and the individual's character.

A focus on Consequences

Utilitarianism is a common theory that looks at actions that are based on their outcomes.

The two philosophers that the Utilitarianism theory is linked to most are Jeremy Bentham¹ and John Stuart Mill.²

Jeremy Bentham states that:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do³

This idea shows that the best action is the one that brings the most happiness for everyone concerned.

John Stuart Mill expands on this idea, claiming that happiness is the aim of morality.

He asserts that:

actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness⁴

¹ Steven Sverdlik, *Bentham's an Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation : A Guide*, in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Oxford Guides to Philosophy Series (Oxford University Press, 2023).

² Ben Eggleston, Dale E. Miller, and D. Weinstein, *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Clarendon Press, 1907), p.1.

⁴ John Stuart Mills, *Utilitarianism*, ed. by Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press, 1998),p.7.

In utilitarianism, what matters most is the outcome of our actions rather than our intentions. If telling a lie helps prevent serious harm to someone, that lie could be considered morally acceptable because it leads to a better overall result. This theory has several positive aspects; it is practical and flexible.

It allows us to consider each situation separately rather than strictly following rules, so we can respond to different circumstances. In medical settings, a doctor may need to choose between two difficult options, and utilitarianism supports selecting the option that yields the best overall benefit. This can be especially helpful when quick, important decisions are necessary. Also, utilitarianism encourages fairness. It values everyone's happiness the same, which generally feels fair to most people. No one's happiness is seen as more important than someone else's.

When governments make decisions about healthcare or education, they often aim to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people, aligning with utilitarian ideas. This approach is appealing because it offers a straightforward and practical way to make choices. But it also assumes we can always predict and measure all consequences accurately, which isn't often realistic in complicated situations. While utilitarianism makes sense in many cases, it also raises serious challenges when we judge moral value only by outcomes.

Issues with focusing only on outcomes

Consequences can sometimes be unpredictable, and that can be completely normal in life. When making decisions, it's natural not to know exactly what the future holds. Something that seems helpful now might lead to problems later on.

A government policy aimed at boosting the economy could unintentionally harm certain groups. If we only judge moral worth by outcomes, it becomes hard to evaluate actions at the moment they're taken, because consequences are often uncertain and out of our control.

Bernard Williams⁵ complains about this feature of consequentialism, arguing that:

It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions⁶

This means that people are judged mainly by the results of what they do, even if they genuinely believed they were doing the right thing. Sometimes, this might feel unfair because it doesn't fully take into account our feelings and intentions. Another thing to think about is that ideas based only on what happens can forget about the hidden meaning behind actions. In our everyday lives, we tend to believe that meaning matters. If someone causes harm by accident, we usually judge them kinder than if they meant to hurt someone. But if we only look at the outcomes, we might miss some important points. This difference often disappears; also, judging actions only by outcomes can lead to morally troubling conclusions. This can make moral judgment feel too harsh and separated from how people normally think about right and wrong. Think about losing one innocent person to save five others. In a utilitarian world, it might seem acceptable because it increases happiness. But most people

⁵ Alan Thomas, *Bernard Williams* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ Bernard Williams, Critique of Utilitarianism, in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973) pp116-117.

would find this upsetting because it feels wrong to them. These issues show that consequences alone can't fully determine moral worth.

Kants View

Immanuel Kant⁷ disagrees that consequences define moral value.

Kant⁸ argues that the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will.

This means that an action is morally respected only if it is done for the right reason.

In Kant's view, a person must act out of duty; what this means is that they act because it is the right thing to do, not because it leads to good outcomes.

If someone tells the truth because they believe it is their responsibility, then their action has moral substance. But if they tell the truth only because it benefits them, then their action is not honest.

This means that if everyone couldn't apply an action without causing conflict, then that action is likely morally wrong. If everyone lied, trust would collapse, so lying shouldn't be a universal rule.

Kant's theory helps us see that some actions are wrong no matter what the outcomes are. Another perspective is that punishing an innocent person might sometimes lead to good results, but it would still be morally wrong because it defies the core principles of justice. This emphasises an important weakness in judging moral worth solely based on results. It reminds us that moral rules and intentions are also important. Unlike utilitarianism, Kant's method refuses to justify morally troubling actions, such as harming an innocent person for the greater good, but it can be criticised as too strict in situations where outcomes clearly matter.

Character and Morality

The Virtue ethics idea offers another way of thinking about moral worth. Instead of concentrating on actions or consequences, it focuses on the character of the person acting.

Aristotle⁹ argues that the goal of life is to achieve eudaimonia, which means living a flourishing and fulfilling life.

To accomplish this, people need to cultivate virtues like courage, honesty, and generosity.

Aristotle explains that 'virtue then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean'.¹⁰

This implies that virtues involve finding a balance between extremes. Let us say, courage is the balance between recklessness and cowardice. In virtue ethics, the moral worth of an action depends on whether it reflects a laudable character. A person who helps others out of kindness is morally good. But if someone produces the same result for selfish reasons, their action is not honest. This shows that focusing solely on outcomes overlooks an important aspect of morality. It does not consider whether actions come from good character. A person might produce good outcomes by luck or by using others, but this does not make them a good person. Virtue ethics also features long-term moral development. It suggests that morality is

⁷ Paul Guyer, *Kant*, Routledge Philosophers (Routledge, 2006).

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. by Herbert James Paton (Routledge, 2008), p.9.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Book I*, ed. by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999).

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Book II*, ed. by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999)

not just about individual actions, but about becoming a better person over time. This is something that ideas built on consequences often ignore or overlook. This emphasises an important limitation of consequentialist ideas: they can overlook the moral character of actions. However, virtue ethics can be criticised for lacking clear direction on how to act in certain situations.

Justice and Fairness

Another problem with judging moral worth solely by consequences is that it can lead to unjust outcomes. A purely utilitarian approach might justify harming one person if it benefits a larger group. This is at odds with the idea that individuals have rights that should not be violated.

John Rawls argues against utilitarianism on the grounds that it 'does not take seriously the distinction between persons'.¹¹

This suggests that utilitarianism treats individuals as part of a shared outcome rather than as persons with independent moral worth, this idea of moral luck challenges views based on consequences.

Thomas Nagel¹² argues that moral judgment is often influenced by factors outside a person's control.

For instance, two drivers might both act rashly, but only one ends up causing an accident by chance. If we measured only by results, we might blame one driver more, even though both their behaviours were the same. This seems unfair and suggests that moral value shouldn't depend solely on outcomes. Instead, we should also account for intention and control.

A Balanced View

Despite these criticisms, it would be wrong to ignore the consequences completely.

The outcomes of our actions matter. A decision that leads to serious harm cannot be considered moral, even if it was made with good intentions.

As John Stuart Mill argues, morality must consider 'the happiness of all concerned'.¹³

This shows that outcomes are an important part of moral logic. But they should not be the only factor. A more balanced approach is to recognise that moral worth depends on other elements.

William David Ross¹⁴ suggests that we have several moral duties, such as keeping promises, avoiding harm, and helping others.

These duties can sometimes clash, so we need to exercise judgment when deciding what to do. This method weighs both consequences and moral principles. We usually follow rules such as telling the truth but allow exceptions in serious situations where the outcomes are important. This makes a more practical and flexible moral system. This approach is more realistic because it reflects the complexity of moral decision-making, in which both outcomes and principles must be considered together rather than in isolation.

¹¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971), p.27.

¹² Thomas Nagel, *Moral Luck*, in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) p.28.

¹³ Mills, *Utilitarianism* p.17.

¹⁴ William David Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford University Press, 1930), pp.19-21.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while outcomes are important in judging actions, they are not enough on their own to determine moral worth. Utilitarianism shows why outcomes matter, but it also has weaknesses, such as uncertainty and the risk of unfairness. In contrast, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics show that intention, duty, and character are also important. Overall, a more convincing view is that moral worth depends on a combination of consequences, intentions, and principles. This reflects real-life situations more accurately, where moral decisions are often complex and involve balancing different factors.

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