

Essay Title:

**Is the moral worth of an action
dependent upon the reason why
it was performed?**

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Main Body Word Count: 2,161

Introduction

The question of what gives an action moral worth lies at the centre of ethical theory. One key issue is whether the value of an action depends on the reason it was performed, such as the agent's intention, or on other factors, such as its consequences. For Immanuel Kant, moral worth depends entirely on the agent's intention, specifically whether the action is performed from duty in accordance with the moral law. In contrast, utilitarianism, as developed by John Stuart Mill, places less importance on intention and judges actions by their outcomes. A third perspective is offered by Aristotle's virtue ethics, which focuses less on individual actions and more on character, suggesting that moral worth is based on developing good habits.

This essay will argue that while the reason behind an action plays an important role in determining its moral worth, it cannot be the sole factor. Kant's emphasis on intention captures an essential aspect of moral evaluation, but his account is too restrictive in ignoring consequences. Conversely, utilitarianism provides a practical framework by focusing on outcomes, yet fails to account for the moral significance of intention. Virtue ethics offers a more balanced approach by incorporating both motivation and character, although it lacks precise guidance for action. Ultimately, a complete account of moral worth must recognise the importance of intention while also considering consequences and character.

Kant: Intention and Moral Worth

Immanuel Kant argues that the moral worth of an action depends entirely on the reason for which it is performed, rather than its consequences. Kant argues that the only unconditionally good thing is a 'good will,' acting from

duty in accordance with the moral law.¹ Within Kant's framework, morality is grounded in rationality and universal principles, particularly the categorical imperative, which requires individuals to act only according to maxims that could be willed as universal laws.² This emphasises that moral evaluation must focus on the agent's intention, since outcomes are often beyond one's control.

Kant explains this distinction by comparing actions done from duty with actions that appear dutiful but are actually motivated by self-interest. For example, Kant describes a shopkeeper who charges fair prices not out of honesty, but because it benefits his business and maintains his reputation. Such an action is in accordance with duty, but lacks genuine moral worth. In contrast, an action performed solely from duty, even at personal disadvantage, possesses true moral value.³ This distinction highlights Kant's claim that the moral value of an action lies in its motive rather than its consequences. As Robert Stern explains, Kant's focus on intention reflects his idea of moral autonomy, where individuals act from rational principles rather than external incentives.⁴ However, this position can be criticised for being overly rigid, as it appears to disregard the importance of outcomes in moral evaluation.

This suggests that Kant's account risks detaching moral evaluation from the real effects of actions. While intention may reflect moral integrity, it seems counterintuitive to regard an action as morally worthy if it ultimately leads to significant harm. For example, an action performed from duty that unintentionally causes harm would still be considered morally praiseworthy within Kant's framework. This raises doubts about whether intention alone is sufficient to determine moral worth, particularly where consequences have

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, rev. edn, ed. by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 9–15.

² Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 33.

³ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 12.

⁴ Robert Stern, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 44–50.

clear moral significance. Critics such as J. J. C. Smart argue that this neglect of outcomes limits the practical relevance of Kantian ethics, especially in instances where moral decisions must account for their effects.⁵ More recent scholarship also questions whether Kant's separation of intention and consequence fully reflects how complex moral choices can be.⁶

In contrast, consequentialist thinkers such as John Stuart Mill argue that moral evaluation must ultimately be grounded in the outcomes of actions, since it is their effects on wellbeing that determine their value.⁷ Mill also suggests that Kant's own moral theory cannot fully avoid this appeal to outcomes.⁸ This provides a direct challenge to Kant's emphasis on intention and raises the possibility that moral worth may depend on more than the reason for which an action is performed.

Utilitarianism: Consequences and Moral Worth

In contrast to Kant's emphasis on intention, utilitarianism rejects the idea that moral worth depends on the reason why an action is performed, arguing instead that it is determined solely by its consequences. According to John Stuart Mill, the moral value of an action lies in its ability to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number, a principle known as the principle of utility.⁹ This suggests that actions should be evaluated based on their outcomes rather than the motives behind them, since it is their effects that impact the wellbeing of others. Within this framework, an action performed from selfish motives may still be morally right if it produces

⁵ J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 5–7.

⁶ Johannes Haag, 'Kant on Duty and Moral Motivation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Kant*, ed. by Anil Gomes and Andrew Stephenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 315–319.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863), pp. 9–14.

⁸ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 5–6.

⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 9.

beneficial consequences, directly challenging Kant's claim that only actions performed from duty have moral worth.¹⁰

Utilitarianism therefore offers a more practical and outcome-focused approach to moral evaluation. For example, donating to charity for self-interest may still be morally good if it increases wellbeing. As Christopher Bennett explains, utilitarianism prioritises impartiality by treating each individual's happiness as equally valuable, thereby providing a universal standard for moral decision making.¹¹ This emphasis on consequences allows utilitarianism to address real world moral problems in a flexible and context sensitive way.

However, this rejection of intention can also be seen as a significant weakness. By focusing solely on outcomes, utilitarianism appears to ignore the moral importance of an agent's motives, raising the possibility that morally questionable actions could be justified if they lead to beneficial results.¹² Critics argue that this undermines the distinction between acting morally and merely producing good outcomes, as actions performed for selfish or harmful reasons may still be regarded as morally acceptable. As Bernard Williams argues, utilitarianism may require individuals to set aside personal integrity and moral commitments in favour of maximising overall happiness.¹³ This suggests that the theory risks justifying actions that conflict with widely held moral intuitions, particularly in cases where individual rights are sacrificed for the greater good.

Furthermore, this criticism suggests that utilitarianism can alienate agents from their own commitments by requiring them to treat deeply held projects as just one item in a wider calculation of utility.¹⁴ More recent scholarship has also raised the question of whether a purely consequence-based account can

¹⁰ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 9–10.

¹¹ Christopher Bennett, *What is this Thing Called Ethics?* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 55–58.

¹² Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 93–99.

¹³ Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', pp. 99–104.

¹⁴ Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', pp. 110–117.

adequately capture the complexity of moral life, especially when considerations such as intention and character play an important role in ethical judgement.¹⁵

Despite these criticisms, utilitarianism still challenges Kant's emphasis on intention by showing that consequences cannot be ignored in assessing moral worth. However, its neglect of motive suggests that moral evaluation may require a more balanced approach, reflected in virtue ethics, where both action and character are considered.

Virtue Ethics: Character and Moral Worth

In contrast to both Kantian and utilitarian approaches, virtue ethics shifts the focus of moral evaluation from individual actions to the character of the moral agent, suggesting that moral worth is not solely dependent on the reason for which an action is performed. According to Aristotle, moral virtue is developed through habit, as individuals form stable traits that enable them to act rightly.¹⁶ This implies that morally good actions arise naturally from a virtuous character, rather than from a conscious adherence to duty or a calculation of consequences.¹⁷ Within this framework, moral worth is grounded in character rather than isolated actions.

Virtue ethics therefore gives a broader account of moral evaluation by considering intention and action in relation to character. For example, a generous act is morally valuable not just because it follows duty or produces good outcomes, but because it reflects the agent's generosity. As Rosalind Hursthouse argues, virtue ethics emphasises that moral judgement involves

¹⁵ Christopher Woodard, *Taking Utilitarianism Seriously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 33–35.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 26–27.

¹⁷ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 11–13.

assessing what a virtuous person would do in a given situation, rather than applying fixed rules or focusing strictly on outcomes.¹⁸ This allows for greater flexibility and sensitivity to context, addressing some of the limitations found in both Kantian and utilitarian theories.

However, virtue ethics can be criticised for lacking clear guidance on how individuals should act in specific situations. Unlike Kant's categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle of utility, virtue ethics does not provide a precise decision-making procedure, which may lead to uncertainty in complex moral dilemmas.¹⁹ As Hursthouse notes, a common objection is that virtue ethics appears less practical because individuals may be unsure what a virtuous person would do in difficult circumstances.²⁰ Furthermore, the emphasis on character raises questions about how moral worth should be attributed to individual actions, since it becomes less clear whether actions can be judged independently of the agent's overall character.

Despite these challenges, virtue ethics provides a valuable alternative to both intention and consequence-based approaches by highlighting the importance of moral development and the role of character in ethical life. As Christopher Bennett suggests, this focus on character enables a deeper understanding of moral behaviour, as it recognises that ethical actions are shaped by long-term habits and dispositions rather than isolated decisions.²¹ More recent accounts also emphasise that virtue ethics captures the complexity of moral reasoning by allowing for contextual judgement and practical wisdom.²² In this way, virtue ethics offers a middle ground between Kant's focus on intention and utilitarianism's focus on outcomes. It suggests that moral worth

¹⁸ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 28–30.

¹⁹ Nafsika Athanassoulis, 'Virtue Ethics', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/virtue/>> [accessed 20 April 2026].

²⁰ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 34–36.

²¹ Bennett, *What is this Thing Called Ethics?*, pp. 102–105.

²² Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, 'Virtue Ethics', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2023) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>> [accessed 21 April 2026].

cannot be reduced to one factor, but should also be understood through the character of the moral agent.

Critical Evaluation: Intention, Consequences, and Moral Worth

The question of whether the moral worth of an action depends on the reason for which it is performed reveals a fundamental tension between intention-based, consequence-based, and character-based approaches to ethics. Immanuel Kant's insistence that moral worth lies entirely in acting from duty captures an important aspect of moral evaluation, namely that actions performed for the right reasons reflect moral integrity.²³ However, as previously discussed, this account appears too restrictive, as it excludes the moral relevance of consequences, even in cases where actions result in significant harm. This raises doubts about whether intention alone is sufficient.

In contrast, utilitarianism offers a compelling alternative by grounding moral worth in the outcomes of actions. By focusing on the promotion of overall happiness, utilitarian thinkers such as John Stuart Mill provide a practical framework for evaluating moral decisions in real world contexts.²⁴ This approach has the advantage of recognising that the effects of actions matter, particularly when they impact the wellbeing of others. However, utilitarianism's rejection of intention introduces its own difficulties, as it risks justifying morally questionable actions if they produce beneficial results. As Bernard Williams argues, this may require individuals to act against their moral intuitions or personal integrity in order to maximise utility.²⁵ This

²³ Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 10–12.

²⁴ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 9–10.

²⁵ Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', pp. 110–117.

suggests that a purely consequence-based account fails to capture the full moral responsibility and significance of human action.

Virtue ethics offers a more balanced perspective by shifting the focus from isolated actions to the character of the moral agent. According to Aristotle, morally good actions arise from a virtuous character developed through habituation.²⁶ This approach integrates both intention and action within a broader account of moral development, thereby avoiding some of the limitations associated with both Kantian and utilitarian theories. As Rosalind Hursthouse argues, virtue ethics can still guide moral judgement by asking what a virtuous agent would do in particular circumstances, thereby recognising the importance of context, judgement, and character.²⁷ Nevertheless, its lack of clear decision-making procedures may limit its usefulness in resolving complex moral dilemmas, particularly where competing virtues are involved.

Taken together, these approaches suggest that no single factor, whether intention, consequence, or character, can fully determine the moral worth of an action. While Kant rightly emphasises acting for the right reasons, and utilitarianism highlights the importance of outcomes, both accounts appear incomplete in isolation. More recent philosophical discussions also question whether moral evaluation can be reduced to a single principle, especially where ethical judgement involves character, integrity, and practical reasoning.²⁸ Therefore, the moral worth of an action cannot be understood as dependent solely on the reason it was performed, but must be evaluated through a more integrated framework that considers intention, consequences, and character.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 26–27.

²⁷ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 34–36.

²⁸ Woodard, *Taking Utilitarianism Seriously*, pp. 70–75.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the moral worth of an action cannot be understood as dependent solely on the reason for which it was performed. While Immanuel Kant is right to emphasise the importance of intention and moral integrity, his account is too restrictive in disregarding the significance of consequences. In contrast, utilitarianism, as developed by John Stuart Mill, provides a more practical approach by focusing on outcomes, yet it fails to account for the moral importance of intention and risks justifying actions that conflict with moral intuition. Aristotle's virtue ethics offers a more comprehensive framework by recognising the importance of character and moral development, though it lacks precise guidance for action.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that moral worth is best understood as arising from a combination of intention, consequence, and character. Therefore, while the reason behind an action remains important, it is neither sufficient nor exclusive, and must be considered alongside other dimensions of moral evaluation to provide a complete account of ethical judgement.

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