

Is it ever wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons?

Humans are very complicated; their actions even more so. These actions are classified based on whether they are morally justifiable. In the instances where a positive outcome stems from a questionable motive, moral evaluation becomes difficult. I argue that doing the right thing for the wrong reasons renders the action morally unworthy, but does not negate its moral impact or significance. This is because motivations and outcomes answer fundamentally different moral questions, and are incommensurable, necessitating their separation. Any single moral judgement fails to capture all dimensions of morality, as it forces the prioritisation or neglect of either motives or outcomes, thereby undermining moral plurality. Separation preserves moral plurality because intentions determine the moral worth and character, whilst consequences determine the moral significance and impact. This separation can be visualised through a model I call the rectangle of moral greatness, which serves only as a descriptive representation rather than a substantive solution in itself. It allows moral impact and moral character to remain distinct, rather than arbitrarily reconciled. Though it does not resolve disagreement, it accommodates it without contradiction.

The debate between deontology and consequentialism has long divided moral philosophy. Immanuel Kant proposes a deontological view wherein he introduces the concept of moral worth. He firmly believes in the notion of a good will being the dominant driver to one's decisions; a will so committed to morality that an action only possesses moral worth if it is driven by a good will. He argues that followers of the Moral Law are motivated by the 'thought of duty' and it is a fight to overcome competing immoral desires. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy states: 'Kant confirms this by comparing motivation by duty with other sorts of motives, in particular, with motives of self-interest, self-preservation, sympathy and happiness. He argues that a dutiful action from any of these motives, however praiseworthy it may be, does not express a good will.' ^[1] Therefore, to determine moral worthiness/moral unworthiness — awareness of intentions is necessary. Kant's moral philosophy is preserved through separation.

Expanding on Kant's moral philosophy, Aristotle contends that moral character is a product of all the virtues that they had cultivated. For Aristotle, it is the virtues that shape moral character and that define the moral worth of an action — if it was not driven by virtue, then it is a morally unworthy action. 'However, moral virtue does not lie simply in finding and performing the right action but in developing the traits of character that make performing the right action natural.' ^[2] Therefore, the moral character of an individual is determined by the virtues they cultivate, as reflected in their actions. Aristotle's philosophy coexists with Kant's without contradiction. Therefore, it also is included in separated moral evaluation on the horizontal axis alongside Kant.

Though Kant and Aristotle share common claims — an opposite perspective was introduced by John Stuart Mill. His consequentialist view states that an action is only morally right if it induced the greatest amount of happiness or utility. Consequentialism measures the morality of an action in terms of its effects on future happiness or utility. When the 'bigger picture' is involved, motives and intentions become insignificant. ^[3] Mill's philosophy contradicts both Aristotle and Kant. Moral evaluation can only consider all if assessed through separation. It would be on the vertical axis of the rectangle of moral greatness

Though these philosophies function coherently independently, they collapse when they are used to evaluate the same action. In an example where a wealthy businessman feeds numer-

ous homeless people with the motive that in doing so, he would gain fame. Applying Kant's moral philosophy to this example renders the action morally unworthy — even if it produced good consequences. The objective of fame only benefits the businessman; therefore, it is a self-driven desire and is not driven by the dominant good will. Thus, it is not morally justified. Aristotle's philosophy would support this notion as if the character of the businessman was truly moral, then he wouldn't need a motive; generosity itself being a virtue and the driver of the action — regardless of the outcome. Yet Mill's philosophy would contradict both. If it is acknowledged that both the businessman and the homeless people are benefited — the action caused the greatest amount of happiness and is therefore, ethically satisfying. The underlying intentions and moral worth of the action become insignificant when measuring impact on a historical scale. If both traditions are valid frameworks, a single judgement cannot exist without invalidating one. Therefore, unified evaluation is structurally unstable. This causes inevitable rhetorical tension, aligning with Isaiah Berlin's account of value pluralism. 'According to Berlin's pluralism, genuine values are many. 'They may – and often do – come into conflict with one another. When two or more values clash, it is not because one or another has been misunderstood; nor can it be said, a priori, that any one value is always more important than another.' [8] By this logic, if any other method of moral evaluation merges motives and outcomes, but prioritises or requires ranking them; it is invalid. If a positive action is rejected because of a questionable motive — that expunges the impact of the action entirely; a lack of moral worth does not erase the moral impact the action has; they persist independently within an action. These contradictions only arise because motives and outcomes are being merged into one evaluation. A fair ethical assessment requires treating motives and outcomes as separate determinants; only then would all philosophical traditions withstand each other's contradictions.

Separating intentions and consequences for the businessman would yield a low moral worth and high moral impact — using these two data, the moral greatness of the businessman can be represented descriptively, without collapsing character into consequence. I argue that if the moral worth of an action or the moral character of the agent is on the horizontal axis of a graph, and the moral impact of the action or the moral significance of the agent is on the vertical axis — the rectangle that these two points form measures the moral greatness of the individual. A rectangle is optimal for representation because it maintains pluralism the most straightforward way. The rectangle of moral greatness for the businessman shows a narrow width but lengthy height; low moral worth, high moral impact. Figure 1

Counterarguments/Applications

Some philosophers may argue that the separation is merely helpful but not necessary for moral evaluation. T. M. Scanlon expanded on the idea of contractualism which takes an impartial stance between consequentialism and deontology — he defines the status of an action using contractualism as 'An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement.' [4] This relies on the general judgement of others for an 'objective' ethical status. Effectively expecting general unbiased agreement. However, a psychological study conducted by Mark Alicke disproves this exact expectation. Participants were asked to read about a car accident between two speeding drivers with different motives. One was hiding cocaine from his parents, and the other was hiding an anniversary gift. Participants judged the driver as more responsible for the accident when the motive involved cocaine. [5] Even when the outcome and behaviour were identical, they produced different blame because people perceive moral character first. The inclination

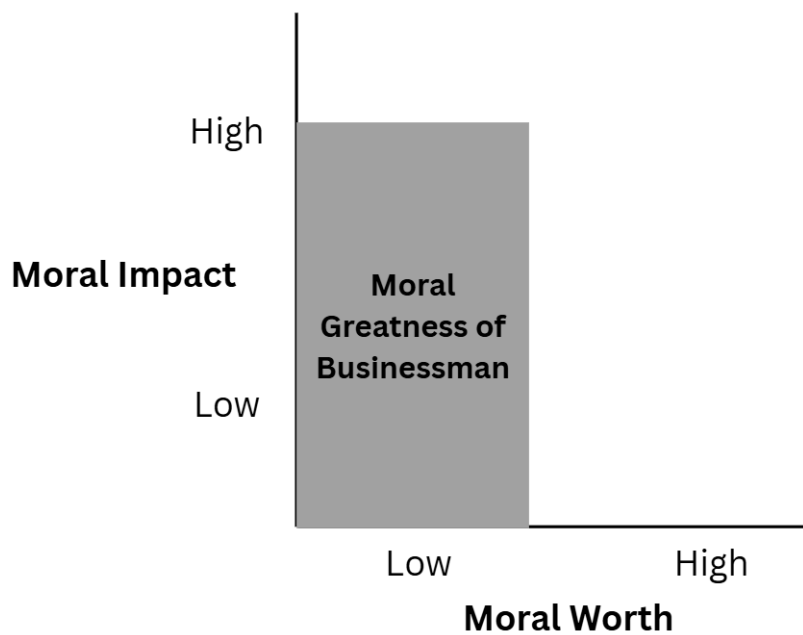


Figure 1:

toward character demonstrates how it fails to consider outcomes with equal importance as well as contradicting Berlin; as he states that one philosophy is equal to another even if they conflict — thus, giving one an advantage creates unavoidable philosophical conflict. Even in an ideal unbiased agreement, it still conflicts with pluralism. Therefore, separation is a superior alternative to contractualism because of its objectivity in scale and independence of bias.

Another contradiction that claims merging motives and outcomes is possible for moral assessment is the concept of ethical weighing. Initially proposed by William David Ross, he argues that the evaluation of an action should be done by weighing both sides and analysing which dominates; thus, merging motives and outcomes. ^[6] However, this is morally ambiguous — the basis and scale of weighing remain unclear. Weighing cannot be executed without either ignoring or prioritising motives or outcomes — directly conflicting with Isaiah Berlin. For example, Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 demonstrate this framework. His public motives to visit China included to gain political leverage against the Soviet Union and to exploit the Sino-Soviet rift. Though the visit had multitudes of diplomatic benefits too — including reduced Cold War tension and international trade. ^[7] Attempting to weigh in this instance would result in several confusions and ultimately deem weighing implausible. The problem becomes assigning abstract impact measurable values — objectivity becomes impossible to achieve. Even if conditions favoured one side and weighing is significantly easier — it still neglects the other side and lacks moral pluralism. The rather abstract concept might function rhetorically but collapses practically; any attempt to produce a single 'right/wrong' judgment requires arbitrary weighting between incommensurable values. Whereas, two separate axes make evaluation coherent theoretically and practically. Richard Nixon would exhibit low moral character and moral worth — however, that won't inherently reject the high moral impact he had. Therefore, if moral evaluation demands coherence, separation is fundamental for fairness.

Lastly, a contradiction that not only states that motives and outcomes can coexist in one evaluation — but separation is impossible without distortion, is proposed by Bernard Williams. 'the reason why utilitarianism cannot understand integrity is that it cannot coherently describe the relations between a man's projects and his actions.' This statement expresses how ignoring the relationship between intentions and consequences is fundamentally flawed and therefore, separation breaks moral reality. He further expresses that isolating either motives or outcomes cannot be done because that disconnects the entire ownership the agent has over their actions. ^[9] However, this misunderstands the purpose of separation completely; it is not a critique on how actions exist but a method of analysing them. Just as science isolates variables to clarify understanding without denying their interdependence, separating motives and outcomes elucidates moral judgement. Reality is far more complex than mere scenarios where instances exist that do not have a distinct right or wrong — such as the case where something right is done for the wrong reasons — and separation is demanded for clarity. Williams confuses his description for the inherent nature of actions as the objective method to judge them. Instead of solving the difficulty, Williams merely acknowledges it to the extent of avoiding it. Though reconciliation of intentions and consequences may describe action, evaluation demands distinction through separation.

One recurring pattern is that all these counterarguments prioritise or ignore either motives or consequences unequally and unity often leads to oversimplification and inability to withstand complex ethical scenarios. While they unify intentions and outcomes; they fail to unify traditions and result in lacking moral plurality which is the very benefit of bi-axes separation. Separation, therefore, is not merely clarifying — it is necessary to avoid contradiction and to equally account for all dimensions of judgement.

Conclusion

Thus, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons may make their actions devoid of moral worth and themselves devoid of moral character — whilst their actions still preserving moral impact and themselves still retaining moral significance. Unification is simply impossible without risking genuine moral plurality. Neither deontology nor consequentialism dominate but both operate independently on their axes. An ideal moral judgement should be structurally plural — which is what the rectangle of moral greatness achieves; whilst integrating all dimensions of judgement into a coherent model. An individual should typically aim for high moral impact as well as high moral character; however, for the instance where someone does something right because of a wrong reason — the rectangle remains tall and thin. A single moral verdict is not incomplete — it is inherently distorting moral perception.

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