

# Kant's Deontology and Bentham's Utilitarianism: An Ethical Approach to the Society

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## Abstract

Bentham's utilitarianism describes the morality of actions according to their consequences, holding that moral actions that maximize happiness for the greatest number of people, based on the *principle of utility*. It highlights a theoretical analysis comparing a philosophical writing with interpretations to assess each theory's assumptions, strengths, and limitations, and to explore their implications for moral decision-making. Kant analyses how ethical framework is rooted in universal duty and rationality, expressed through the categorical imperative, which demands that actions be guided by principles that could be willed as universal laws applicable to all rational agents.

**Keywords:** morality, judgement, reason, analysis, dignity, happiness

## Introduction

Ethical theories provide contexts of principles and values that help us judge moral actions and make ethical choices. They not only tell us *what* is right or wrong but also *why* it is so. Ethical theories guide how individuals and societies determine what is right or wrong. Two major moral philosophies that have deeply influenced Western thought are Immanuel Kant's deontology and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. While both aim to guide moral action, they differ in foundation, principles, and social implications. This paper critically examines both theories and explores how they shape moral reasoning and societal values. Ethical theories guide ethical decision-making in personal life, law, public policy, business, and social issues. They provide tools for resolving moral dilemmas, where moral duties and outcomes may conflict. They help us justify moral judgments. Ethical theories differ in how they define what makes an action morally right.

Immanuel Kant established a duty-based ethical theory in which morality depends on adherence to rational moral laws, not consequences. According to Kant, moral actions are those performed out of duty guided by the categorical imperative. This is a universal principle that one should act only according to maxims that can be willed to become universal laws.

The root of this theory is duty and universal law: Morality stems from acting on rules that can be universalized. His key concept is its respect for persons that state the Individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. To him moral integrity is the intention behind an action matter more than its outcome.

### **Implications of Deontological moral theory in the society:**

Kant's ethics stresses individual dignity and rights. In a societal context, this framework supports legal and human rights protections because it forbids sacrificing individuals for collective benefit. However, deontology can be rigid demanding adherence to moral rules even when breaking them might produce better social results. For example, strict honesty may be required even in dangerous situations, which many find counter-intuitive. a deontological theory that grounds morality in rational duty, not in consequences. For Kant, moral worth resides in acting from duty from a principle that can be universalized as a law that all rational beings could will to be universal. This is expressed in his Categorical Imperative, which essentially states that one should act only according to maxims that could be adopted as universal moral laws. Kant also insisted that individuals must be treated as ends in themselves, not merely as means toward an end, highlighting respect for autonomous rational agents as a moral requirement.

According to Kant, morality isn't based on feelings, desires, or personal goals. Instead, moral duties are derived from pure practical reason the rational capacity that all human beings share. Morality is universal and unconditional, meaning that moral laws apply to everyone equally, regardless of personal circumstances. For Kant, a morally good action is done not because it produces good results, but because it is done from a sense of duty and reason.

Kant identifies the good will as the only thing that is unconditionally good. Other qualities such as intelligence, courage, or fortune can be used for bad purposes; only the will — the rational intention to act according to moral laws are intrinsically good. A moral action must therefore be motivated by principled commitment to duty, not personal gain, desires, or fear of consequences. The centrepiece of Kant's moral theory is the Categorical Imperative — the fundamental principle of morality. This is an unconditional moral law that applies to all rational beings. Kant's laws are

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. “This means that you should only act in ways that you could reasonably will everyone else to follow as a general rule. “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means. “This demands respect for persons, requiring that individuals never be used merely as tools for someone else's goals. Rational beings must legislate moral laws for themselves, acting as autonomous agents who contribute to a “kingdom of ends” a community where everyone respects each other's rational freedom. One of the most distinctive features of Kant's moral theory is that motivation and principal matter more than outcomes. An action is morally worthy when it is done from duty that is, out of respect for the moral law not for personal advantage or to produce happiness. For example, if you tell the truth to avoid punishment, your action lacks moral worth. But if you tell the truth because it is your duty, then it has genuine moral value. Kant held that moral agents are autonomous they are not bound by external authorities or natural desires, but by rational self-legislation. Moral autonomy means that we give moral law to ourselves through rational will. Freedom for Kant does not mean doing whatever one wants; it means acting according to rational principles that one gives to oneself, consistent with duties.

Kant's Philosophy is the idea that morality is grounded in reason. According to Kant, humans possess rational will that can determine principles of action independently of inclinations, desires, or external consequences. A morally right action is one that rational agents would will to be a universal law.

Jeremy Bentham is a consequentialist moral theory that evaluates actions based on their results. For Bentham, the moral worth of an action depends on how much it maximizes happiness and minimizes pain for the greatest number of people. Greatest happiness principle that is actions are right if they lead to the

greatest overall happiness. Social welfare focus: Morality is measured by positive outcomes and overall utility.

### **Societal Approach:**

Utilitarianism aligns well with collective decision-making and public policy because it seeks to maximize social well-being. It has influenced economics, law, and policy assessments especially where resources are scarce, and societal good is prioritized. Utilitarianism can permit morally troubling decisions by justifying actions that harm a few if they benefit many. It may also downplay individual rights, as it allows for unequal treatment if overall happiness increases. The moral rightness or wrongness of an action depends on its tendency to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This principle evaluates actions based on their consequences specifically, their effects on pleasure and pain. Bentham's utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism: Actions are morally right if they lead to good consequences (increase pleasure or happiness). Actions are wrong if they lead to bad consequences (increase pain or suffering). For Bentham, happiness means pleasure and the absence of pain, and this is the ultimate goal of human action. He famously stated that nature has put humans "under two sovereign masters: pleasure and pain," meaning our behavior naturally seeks happiness and avoids suffering. Bentham's utilitarianism rests on hedonism, the view that: Pleasure (happiness) is the only intrinsic good. Pain (suffering) is the only intrinsic evil. Moral actions aim to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

This means that quantity of happiness is what counts — a simple increase in pleasure is considered good regardless of the type of pleasure. For example, Bentham argued that "pushpin is as good as poetry" if both generate equal amounts of pleasure. Both theories offer distinct lenses for evaluating social decisions. Kantian ethics emphasizes rights and duties, making it more suitable for protecting individual freedoms and upholding justice. Utilitarianism is more pragmatic for policy decisions and societal programs where collective well-being is central.

### **Critical observations:**

Deontology protects rights but can be too stringently detached from practical consequences. Utilitarianism facilitates social welfare optimization, but critics argue it may justify injustices as long as overall happiness increases. Moral Decision-Making: Kant's approach insists on "moral law", whereas Bentham's method evaluates utility, offering flexibility but potentially undermining individual rights. Deontology underlies constitutional rights and legal structures that protect individuals regardless of social outcomes.

Moral philosophy has long wrestled with a central question: What makes an action right or wrong? Two towering figures who offered radically different answers are Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham. Though writing in the 18th century, their ideas continue to shape debates in politics, law, human rights, economics, artificial intelligence, and bioethics.

Kant grounded morality in duty and rational principles. Bentham rooted it in consequences and human happiness. Together, they form the backbone of two dominant ethical traditions: deontology and utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism influences policy design, economics, healthcare prioritization, and public budgeting — areas that aim to maximize social benefit. An integrated ethical framework often emerges where duties and outcomes must balance — for example, in public health decisions where individual freedoms are weighed against societal welfare.

Kant's deontology and Bentham's utilitarianism remain foundational ethical theories with profound implications for society. While Kant emphasizes moral duty and universal principles, Bentham highlights the practical consequences of actions on societal well-being. Each theory has strengths and weaknesses: deontology excels in protecting individual rights, and utilitarianism excels in shaping policies aiming for greater good. A critical approach suggests that ethical decision-making in society benefits from understanding both perspectives and applying them contextually rather than exclusively. Utilitarianism judges' moral actions by their consequences. Jeremy Bentham, considered the founder of modern utilitarianism, advanced the idea that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Utilitarianism is consequentialist morality depends on outcomes rather than intentions. Bentham's utilitarianism emphasizes impartiality, meaning that each person's happiness counts equally in moral calculations. The goal of moral action is to maximize overall well-being and minimize suffering. Utilitarian principles have been influential in public policy, economics, and law, especially where maximizing social welfare is a priority. For instance, in healthcare allocation or legislative decisions, utilitarian reasoning often guides choices that aim to optimize collective benefit. Utilitarianism can justify morally actions, such as sacrificing individual rights for majority benefit if that increases overall happiness. Critics argue that it can permit ethical injustices if they lead to better overall outcomes, undermining individual dignity and minority concerns. Kant's ideas continue to shape debates in law and human rights. Meanwhile, utilitarian frameworks influence economic and welfare policies where social outcomes are valued. deontological principles guide legal rights and protections (e.g., human rights laws), which ensure that individuals are not unjustly treated as mere means to societal ends. Both theories have significantly formed moral philosophy and continue to influence ethical decision-making in society. A critical understanding of each allows for nuanced judgment in both personal ethics and public policy. Integrating insights from both can lead to richer moral reasoning — recognizing duties while considering the impacts of actions on societal well-being.

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