

THREE ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

UTILITARIANISM, DEONTOLOGY, AND VIRTUE THEORY

Consequentialism or utilitarianism holds that the highest principle of morality is to maximize happiness (for all, not just for the individual). This is usually understood as a matter of maximizing *utility*, or the overall balance of pleasure over pain (Sandel, 2009). Whatever makes the most sense in arriving at pleasure over pain, would be the **utilitarian** thing to do. Actions are correct if they are useful or they benefit the majority.

Consequentialism doesn't require that individuals form specific kinds of character either; the appropriate character traits are just the ones that maximize happiness in a given circumstance. In Consequentialism or utilitarianism, the end (the benefit of the majority) justifies the means of achieving it.

2. **Deontological or Kantian ethical theory** believes in the worth of human dignity and focuses on the rules required to respect that dignity. These rules describe actions that a person must take and that they are prohibited from taking (duties) as well as freedoms that others are prohibited from infringing upon (rights). These universal rules push us to do our duty and not to infringe upon others' rights.

Deontology is defined as an ethical theory that the morality of an action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong under a series of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action. An **example of deontology** is the belief that killing someone is wrong, even if it was in self-defense.

3. **Virtue Theory or Aristotelian ethics** emphasizes the idea that all moral decisions should be based on considerations of character (Sandel, 2009). The goal of morality, in this view, is for a person to be the best sort of person they can be. What sort of person one is, in this view, is a matter of character traits, not merely actions. In contrast to consequentialism and deontology, the focus is on *being* and so your choice of actions is based on your character or disposition. Morality, then, is a matter of the character traits (virtues/vices) of a person rather than just their actions. A person who has virtues will act in a way that leads to positive outcomes and human flourishing. Their actions are a reflection of who they are rather than a result of societal pressures to do what is expected to be the right thing.

This theory also posits that to learn virtue, one must practice virtue; and to practice virtue, one must know the reason for virtue. Aristotle stated "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (Sandel, 2009); and accomplishing these acts serves as an example to others to learn and practice virtue themselves.