Which is more important in determining the wrongness of a person's action: the person's intentions or the action's effects?

This essay will argue that a person’s intentions are more important in determining the wrongness of a person’s action than the action’s effects. The injustice of moral luck, a well-supported virtue ethics view and surprisingly, a consequentialist outlook, all demonstrate this conclusion, while a deontological view does not alter it. These arguments provide an overwhelming amount of credible evidence, including from across the spectrum of normative ethics.

The issues presented by this question are excellently encapsulated in Joanna Cannon’s novel, The Trouble with Goats and Sheep, where, attempting to force an unpopular neighbour out of their cul-de-sac, the residents set fire to his house while he is away on holiday. However, he and his mother have returned early and the latter dies in the fire. There is little question that the residents did wrong, yet how wrong should we judge them? That all depends on whether their intention – to burn down the house without killing – or their action’s effects – a burnt down house and the mother’s death – is given more weight in this moral judgement. That is our overall dilemma and this essay will argue for intention.

To tackle this question, it is first necessary to set out a few definitions and clarifications about the question. A “person’s intentions” are what the actor hoped the action’s effects would be and an “action’s effects” are the result of the action. Understanding the word “wrongness” is crucial. There are 2 interpretations of this term: an objective version, to do with deviating from a known truth, and a subjective version, which is used in the context of what is morally right or wrong. In this question, we are dealing with the latter interpretation and specifically, are considering the moral wrongness of an action.

A feature of this essay will be to frequently refer to the 3 dominant views within normative ethics (Fieser, n.d.), which are:

1. deontology
2. virtue ethics, and
3. consequentialism.

Normative ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with whether an action should be classed as right or wrong and consequentially, it is concerned with what makes an action wrong. Therefore, since what is necessary for this question is to analyse the process behind concluding that an action is wrong (and whether intentions or effects play a more important role within this process), it makes sense to use normative ethics.

One of these major views within normative ethics is deontology, but this view does not give an answer to the question and so can be disregarded. Derived from the Greek word “deon” meaning “duty”, it makes sense that deontologists emphasise the role of duty in moral judgements, claiming that actions are right or wrong per se and that one has a duty to choose the right action. Therefore, since a deontological view only considers the action itself when making a moral judgement, it pays no regard to the causes of the action, the
actor’s intentions, or the consequences of the action, the action’s effects. Thus, a
deontological view offers us no further insight into this question.

However, there is compelling evidence to support intentions being more important than
effects when determining moral wrongness. One such piece is the injustice of moral luck,
credited to virtue ethicists Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. Moral luck occurs
whenever factors outside of the actor’s control, luck, make a difference in the moral
judgement of an action, yet Williams and Nagel sensibly argue that this should not be the
case. A classic example is two drunk drivers, A and B, A driving just ahead of B. A child then
walks out into the road and because of alcohol’s effects on reaction time, A is unable to
avoid killing the child (CrashCourse, 2016). Intuitively, a more damning moral judgement is
handed out to A (because A killed a child, while B did not), yet the only difference between
A and B’s actions was the intervention of, as Nagel would put it, resultant luck – the child
stepped in front of A, not B. The key issue is one of control. It is nonsensical to criticise a
person for something they cannot have any control over. Since luck cannot be controlled, A
should not actually be criticised any more than B and since a moral judgement is a criticism
of an action, there should be parity between the moral judgements on A and B. A true
moral judgement is “immune to luck” (Williams, 1981, p.20).

With this principle established, determining the wrongness of an action must be immune to
luck. This results in intentions playing a more important role in determining wrongness than
effects. It is clear from the drink-driving example, and our original arson plus deaths
example, that an action’s effects can very much be affected by luck. With regards a
person’s intentions, some may argue they too are affected by luck – constitutive luck,
another one of Nagel’s four types of moral luck. This is the luck involved in shaping a
person’s character or “inclinations, capacities and temperament” (Nagel, 1979, p.28), such
as schooling and home environment, which of course then shapes intentions. However,
rather than experiences creating a person’s character, the way a person responds to their
experiences plays an important part in shaping character. This comes from the person
themselves rather than luck. Therefore, while there may be some room for luck affecting
intentions, there is much more room for it affecting effects and so, since determining
wrongness must be immune to luck, a person’s intentions must be more important than
the action’s effects in this determining process.

The school of virtue ethics also supports intentions being more important than effects
when determining moral wrongness. Inspired from the writings of Aristotle and undergoing
somewhat of a revitalisation over the past half a century, virtue ethics emphasises the
character of an actor, specifically virtuous character. It says that a morally right action
stems from the application of a virtuous character to the situation. In other words, “an
action is right [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances”

When viewing an action, a virtue ethicist thus focuses on the character of the actor in that
situation (specifically whether they acted in accordance with virtue) in order to arrive at a
moral judgement. A person’s intentions are directly driven by their character. However, the
effects of an action are only linked to a person’s character insofar as character causes a person to act, leading to an action having effects. But what these effects actually are is dependent on many other factors, and so can include plenty of consequences unrelated to character, such as the killing seen in the opening example of this essay. Therefore, virtue ethics views intentions as more important, given character’s integral role within them.

There is evidence to back up a virtue ethics interpretation of the overall question. This comes from showing that virtue ethics addresses the problems of the other normative ethics views of consequentialism and deontology, providing a satisfactory alternative and therefore is an astute lens through which to establish an answer for this question.

Firstly, both consequentialism and deontology give us rigid rules for what is right or wrong, such as “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Bentham, 1776, Preface) or only undertake an action if “you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 2002 [1785], p.37). However, these appear “inflexible [and so] cannot accommodate the complexity of all the moral situations” (Athanassoulis, n.d.). Therefore, we need a more agile and universal guiding principle, which virtue ethics’ “act in accordance with a virtuous character” fits. Thus, with that as a preferable outlook, the virtue ethics interpretation of intentions being more important than actions in determining wrongness is preferable too.

Secondly, in an age of postmodernism where the idea of an objective reality is being seriously challenged, the idea of humans being able to discern objective moral rules is dubious. Therefore, if we cannot be guided by a rule, we have only our character (or others’ character but ultimately the only influence of this is on our character) left to guide us. Wanting our character to behave in the best – whatever that is – manner, we are led to the virtue ethics position. Therefore, we are also led to intentions being more important than effects in determining wrongness.

Moreover, for those of an atheist persuasion, there is even less reason to follow a rule as they have no law-giver from which to receive it, as argued by Elizabeth Anscombe (Athanassoulis, n.d.).

However, some would argue against a person’s intentions being more important than an action’s effects in determining wrongness, pointing to another major view in normative ethics called consequentialism. The key notion of consequentialism is that the morality of an action is dependent only on its consequences and thus seemingly falls on the “action’s effects” side of this question. Therefore, in our original dilemma, a consequentialist would advocate a strong level of wrongness because the action, the arson, resulted in both a burnt down house and a person’s death.

Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian ideas do seem to suggest a sensible reason to support this consequentialist view. The purpose of nearly everything human beings do is a striving for happiness, either directly or indirectly, in their own lives or in somebody else’s. Thus, as humans’ actions reveal that their ultimate desire is happiness – clearly a consequence, not an intention of an action – and there is no apparent reason why one person’s happiness should be valued higher than another’s, the ultimate objective of mankind should be “the
greater happiness of the greatest number” (Bentham, 1776, Preface). Deviation from an ultimate objective could be considered wrong, and therefore, whether or not an action follows that goal forms “the measure of right and wrong” (Bentham, 1776, Preface). Therefore, it follows that it is only the effects of an action (whether they further the objective) that are considered when determining wrongness.

Another supporting argument is that, with a long-term view, intentions and the actions themselves are mostly forgotten, while it is the effects that are long-lasting. Therefore, the effects have more significance and so should do likewise in moral judgements.

However, a problem emerges when an actor does not know what the exact effects of their action will be. Despite approaching the scenario with a consequentialist mindset, this problem results in us believing intentions are more important than effects in moral judgements and consequently in determining wrongness (Tomasik, 2005). A consequentialist only considers the effects of an action in relation to their ultimate objective (for example, universal happiness for utilitarianists or personal utility for egoists).

If we set the level of a consequentialist’s objective at 0 and consider an action with a 0.99 probability of increasing the objective’s quantity by 1 and a 0.01 probability of decreasing it by 1, on average, the action will further the objective by 0.99x1 – 0.01x1=0.98. Even with more conservative values for probability, such as 0.51 and 0.49 respectively, if, on average, the level of the objective increases, a consequentialist must advocate undertaking the action rather than not and deem this action right. However, if on a given occasion, the desired outcome does not occur (perfectly possible given the laws of probability), the seemingly consequentialist effects-only approach deems the action wrong.

There is a contradiction here - one cannot view the same action as right and wrong. Although it could be argued that the consequentialist has new information (the outcome of the action) in the second judgement and so is judging a different situation (suggesting no contradiction), it is still incredibly harsh for a consequentialist to call an actor “wrong” when they themselves would have advocated the action on the grounds that it is right.

Where there is a contradiction, there is a falsehood. In the above argument there is only one premise:

The only measure for moral judgements is an action’s effects in relation to an ultimate objective

and so, it must be this that is the falsehood. Therefore, we must refine this consequentialist position to one of:

The measure of a moral judgement is the actor’s knowledge, immediately prior to the action, of the action’s likely effects in relation to an ultimate objective.

However, according to this position, right actions are those where the actor, with good reason, has tried or intended to produce the optimum effects. This says nothing of the actual effects. Therefore, this necessarily revised position has led to the actor’s intentions being a more decisive dividing line between right and wrong than the action’s effects,
therefore more important in moral judgements and so more important in determining the wrongness of an action.

In light of this, the argument using utilitarianism to support the importance of effects is undermined. It is only acting with intention to deviate from an ultimate object that is wrong. Simply deviating from an ultimate objective, despite intending not to, is rather bad, not wrong. The “effects” conclusion of this argument relies on simple deviation to be wrong and therefore, is actually ill-founded.

In conclusion, a person’s intentions are more important than the action’s effects when determining wrongness. Since a moral judgement should be immune to luck, and effects are more affected by luck than intentions, the injustice of moral luck clearly leads to this conclusion. Moreover, virtue ethics holds this position and its guiding principle, applicable for all situations, along with character being the primary guide in a postmodernism society, means we must agree with its “intentions” position. In addition, even consequentialism, despite its ostensibly effects-focused position, actually leads to intention being more important for determining wrongness, while the other dominant normative ethics view, deontology, can do nothing to change the overall conclusion. Thus, there are overwhelming pieces of plausible and logical evidence, including from across the competing views in normative ethics, to validate the overall conclusion.

Reflecting on this conclusion and the difficulty in conclusively ascertaining an intention may lead us to worry about the legal system not delivering just verdicts as often as we may hope: the lucky drink-driver would be treated too lightly, while the arsonist residents too severely. Perhaps too, we may reflect internally, regarding this conclusion as somewhat of a comfort when we perform an, albeit, intentionally immoral action that has worse consequences, or as a source of guilt when we escape the vice we intended. However, most importantly, we should not be so quick to assess others based merely upon what we witness, knowing it is the unobserved intention of the action that should be weighted most heavily.

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