I am trying to understand the differences and similarities of: deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Can you explain the differences, using an exampple?

8:10 AM

Synthesized three ethical frameworks with illustrative example.

These are three of the most influential frameworks in moral philosophy, and they differ primarily in *what* they focus on when determining right action.

Deontological ethics focuses on *duties and rules*. An action is right or wrong based on whether it follows moral principles, regardless of outcomes. Immanuel Kant is the most famous deontologist—he argued we should act only according to rules we could will to be universal laws. Lying is wrong because if everyone lied, trust would collapse.

Utilitarianism focuses on *consequences*. An action is right if it produces the greatest good (or happiness, or well-being) for the greatest number. John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham developed this view. What matters is the outcome, not the intention or the act itself.

Virtue ethics focuses on *character*. Rather than asking "what should I do?", it asks "what kind of person should I be?" Rooted in Aristotle, this view holds that we should cultivate virtues like courage, honesty, and compassion. A right action is what a virtuous person would do in that situation.

An example: Should you lie to protect someone's feelings?

Imagine a friend asks if you like their new haircut, and you genuinely don't.

- A **deontologist** might say: Don't lie. Honesty is a duty, and lying violates a moral rule—even for kind reasons.
- A **utilitarian** might say: Consider the consequences. If a small lie spares hurt feelings and harms no one, it may produce more overall happiness than blunt honesty.
- A **virtue ethicist** might ask: What would a person of good character do? Perhaps a kind and honest person would find a tactful middle ground—acknowledging something positive while being gently honest, or recognizing that compassion sometimes tempers bluntness.

The frameworks often converge in practice, but they diverge when rules, outcomes, and character pull in different directions.

Thank you. Can you extend the example to actions one might take for the "trolley problem"?

Recognized trolley problem's utility in demonstrating ethical framework distinctions.

Absolutely—the trolley problem is a classic thought experiment precisely because it throws these frameworks into sharp conflict.

The scenario: A runaway trolley is heading toward five people tied to the tracks. You're standing by a lever that can divert the trolley to a side track, where only one person is tied. Do you pull the lever?

Utilitarian response

The utilitarian calculation seems straightforward: five deaths versus one death. Pulling the lever produces less total harm and more overall well-being, so you *should* pull it. The math favors action. Most utilitarians would say failing to pull the lever—when you could save a net four lives—is morally worse than intervening.

Deontological response

This is where it gets harder. A deontologist might argue that pulling the lever makes *you* the cause of the one person's death. There's a moral difference between allowing harm and actively causing it. Some deontologists invoke the principle that people should never be used merely as means to an end—diverting the trolley treats the one person as a tool for saving others. Others, however, might argue there's a duty to save lives when possible, and pulling the lever doesn't *intend* the one person's death, it's a foreseeable but unintended side effect (this is called the doctrine of double effect). So deontologists genuinely disagree here.

Virtue ethicist response

A virtue ethicist would resist reducing this to a formula. They might ask: what would a courageous, compassionate, and wise person do in this moment? They'd likely acknowledge the tragedy of either choice and focus on the agent's intentions and emotional response. A virtuous person might pull the lever out of compassion for the five, while feeling genuine grief for the one—not coldly calculating, but acting with moral seriousness. Or they might refuse to act, believing that actively causing death corrupts one's character in a way that passive allowance doesn't.

The variant that sharpens the divide

Philosophers often introduce the "fat man" version: instead of a lever, you're on a bridge, and the only way to stop the trolley is to push a large man off the bridge onto the tracks, killing him but stopping the trolley.

- **Utilitarians** should, in theory, still say push—the math is identical.
- **Deontologists** more firmly say don't push—you're directly using a person as a physical instrument of death.
- **Virtue ethicists** might note that pushing someone to their death feels like a profound violation of character, even if the outcome is the same.

This variant reveals that most people have strong deontological or virtue-based intuitions, even if they endorsed utilitarian reasoning in the lever case. That tension is exactly why the trolley problem remains so useful for exploring how these frameworks differ.