

What are some different ways of determining whether an action is ethical?

Focus on the effects of the choice.

Consequentialism: According to this approach, you can decide whether an action is ethical only by looking at effects or consequences of that action. This approach is based on observation of effects after the action or imagining consequences and reasoning to make predictions before the action.

An expression commonly associated with this way of thinking is, “the ends justify the means” (or “greater good”). This expression states that in order to achieve a morally good outcome, one can undertake any method, even unethical ones. As long as more good is done than harm then the action is ethical.

One form of consequentialism is *utilitarianism* in which the ethically right thing to do is the action that maximizes *utility* for the most people. Utility can be defined as economic good or happiness.

Dr. House from the popular tv show *House* uses consequentialism to justify his actions. Often, he breaks hospital rules, ignores his boss, lies, or even steals but when his actions ultimately save the patient we are led to believe that all his actions prior to the outcome were ethical because he achieved a positive outcome.

Write down some of your own real or imagined examples that demonstrate this way of ethical reasoning. These should be examples that positively illustrate this approach.

Examples that negatively illustrate this ethical approach:

Ex. Surgeon killing one healthy patient, harvesting organs to save five other patients.

The case of the Ford Pinto

During the 1970s, the Ford Pinto was one of the best-selling subcompact cars in the United States. Unfortunately, its fuel tank was prone to explode when another car collided with it from the rear. More than five hundred people died when their Pintos burst into flames and many more suffered severe burn injuries. When one of the burn victims sued Ford Motor Company for the faulty design, it emerged that Ford engineers had been aware of the danger posed by the gas tank. But company executives had conducted a cost-benefit analysis and determined that the benefits of fixing it (in lives saved and injuries prevented) were not worth the eleven dollars per car it would have cost to equip each car with a device that would have made the gas tank safer. To calculate the benefits to be gained by a safer gas tank, Ford estimated that 180 deaths and 180 burn injuries would result if no changes were made. It then placed a monetary value on each life lost and injury suffered—\$200,000 per life, and \$67,000 per injury. It added to these amounts the number and value of the Pintos likely to go up in flames and calculated that the overall benefits of the safety improvement would be \$49.5 million. But the cost of adding an \$11 device to 12.5 million vehicles would be \$137.5 million. So the company concluded that the cost of fixing the fuel tank was not worth the benefits of a safer car.

Were Ford's actions in this case ethical?

In general, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a consequentialist approach.