

## Ethics Tests



### Common Good Test

Are we doing our part to look out for the common good in this situation?

You may wish to begin with the discussion of the **Common Good** ([www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/the-common-good/](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/the-common-good/)) from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Then return here to see how the test is operationalized and study the two examples linked at the bottom of the page.

#### How to use the Common Good Test

To use this test, ask

- Are we doing our part to look out for the common good in this situation?

#### Why is this a valid way to decide right and wrong?

Being able to live together in a community requires that we pay attention not just to our individual goods but also to the common conditions that are important to the welfare of us all. This common good includes the social systems, institutions, natural and technological environments, and ways of understanding that we all depend on to pursue our individual goods. For a community to be sustainable, these must work in a manner that benefits all people. Since we all have access to the common good and benefit from it, we all have obligations to establish and maintain it.

#### Applying the test

**STEP 1: Specify what parts of the common good are involved.**

Which social systems, institutions, environments and ideologies that we depend on for a functioning and healthy society could be advanced or damaged by our actions in this situation? What actions will strengthen them? What actions will weaken them?

- Whereas the utility test focuses on the total benefits and harms produced, the common good test focuses on whether the action or situation contributes to or harms a particular aspect of the common good.
- The common good includes among other things the family, social, educational, and health care systems required for human growth, development, and happiness; the police, courts, military and political system required for public safety, a functioning government, and peace; the businesses, financial, and legal systems necessary for the production of goods and services and economic development; and the ecosystem and technology which make all these activities possible. The common good also includes the sets of ideas we use to understand the different aspects of the common good.

**STEP 2: Explain why we have obligation to promote or protect the common good.**

- What obligation does my company or I have to maintain these aspects of the common good because we benefit from them?
- If my company benefits from having stable families and educated workers, for example, do we have an obligation to promote these aspects of the common good, or at least not to harm them?

**STEP 3: Does the proposed action conflict with this obligation?**

- Do our employment policies and actions in the community weaken family stability or education or put these aspects of the common good at risk?
- This question might help an investment banker recognize that even though he is due a multimillion dollar bonus, the common good of restoring trust in the financial system may require that he give it up; that the common good of maximizing the good effects of distributing federal stimulus money in a severe recession means that lobbying for a particular interest group needs to be restrained more than in ordinary times; or that the common good of maintaining the courts as an efficient problem resolution mechanism requires that even though a company's deep pockets enable them to stall a lawsuit indefinitely by filing an endless motions, they should not do so.

**STEP 4: Draw a conclusion.**

If the action conflicts with my or my organization's obligation to contribute to the common good, it is the wrong action.

### Strengths

- It provides an important reality check for individuals and organizations. No matter how much a person or group has contributed to their own success, the test reminds them that society and the natural and technological environments also contribute to that success and that existing institutions and ideologies enable them to carry on their activities.
- It is a good check on the free rider problem where the efforts of others may allow me not to contribute.

### Weaknesses

- There is a great deal of disagreement over what constitutes the common good and over what relative value the parts have should they conflict.
- The test runs contrary to a long-standing tradition of individualism and the pursuit of self-interest in some western societies, so it may stir up immediate resistance that could distract from the ethical issue to be resolved.

### Case Examples

For case examples, see

- **"Less Sugar" Marketing** (<http://bit.ly/less-sugar-marketing-case>)
- **Phantom Expenses** (<http://bit.ly/phantom-expenses-case>)

For a page of quick links to move between ethical theories and steps to operationalize these theories, refer to the EthicsOps **Theory + Practice** page ([bit.ly/theory-plus-practice](http://bit.ly/theory-plus-practice)).