

Ethics Tests



Best Outcomes – The Utility Test

Will this action produce the best outcomes for everyone affected?

How to use the Best Outcomes or Utility Test

To use this test, ask

- Will this action produce the best outcomes for everyone affected?
- Are we maximizing good and minimizing harm for everyone affected?

For the Best Outcomes or Utility Test (traditionally called the Utilitarian Principle), the consequences or outcomes determine what is right or wrong. When applying this test, it is assumed that the ends justify the means; an action is right if it creates the best overall outcome.

Good outcomes can be measured by

- Happiness and unhappiness (pleasure and pain)
- Preferences of individuals
- Money, as an indicator of preferences

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

This test is a valid way to decide which actions are right or wrong because

- Everyone counts the same.
- Everyone wants to be happy or avoid being unhappy. Therefore, good is what makes the most happiness or least unhappiness regardless of who is affected.
- In short, we can't just look at consequences for ourselves or our group to decide what is ethical, because everyone affected by the action both now and in the future has equal standing as a person.

Applying the test

STEP 1: Identify the alternative actions that are possible and the persons and groups (the stakeholders) who will be affected by these actions.

STEP 2: For each of the most promising alternatives, determine the benefits and costs to each person or group affected. These calculations:

- Require predicting probable outcomes based on facts and experience
- Should include both short-term and long-term consequences
- Should consider the relative value or "marginal utility" of an outcome to different individuals and groups

STEP 3: **Select the action in the current situation that produces the greatest benefits over costs for all affected.** If costs outweigh benefits, select the action with the least costs relative to benefits. This step shows the alternative that has the greatest net good for this one situation.

STEP 4: **Ask what would happen if the action were a policy for all similar situations.** Since what is done in one situation often becomes an example or even a policy for future actions, this step shows which alternative maximizes good for this and future situations.

STEP 5: **Draw a conclusion**

- If the same action is selected in Steps 3 & 4, then this is the ethical action.
- If different actions are selected, then decide whether the individual action or the policy will produce the greatest good and the least harm, for all affected, over the long term

Strengths

- Outcomes matter – I cannot be satisfied with simply following my personal ethical standards if bad consequences result.
- Factual data and assessing the probability of potential outcomes are important to deciding what is right/wrong.
- The welfare of animals and other entities should be included in ethical decisions since they are affected by outcomes.
- The emphasis on rational calculation and on including all stakeholders reminds us that our immediate intuitions about right and wrong cannot always be trusted.
- Requires striving for the best outcome and not simply a good outcome.

Weaknesses

- Requires accurate probability assessments of likely outcomes that may be difficult or impossible to make in complex situations.
- In organizations where outcomes are measured by making the quarterly numbers, it may be difficult to focus on long term goods and harms – in the long run everyone hopes to outrun their mistakes by promotion, transfer, or retirement.
- Is subject to several common errors when being applied:
 - *Limited Stakeholder Error* – considering outcomes only for myself or my group.
 - *Short Term Error* – considering only direct or immediate consequences instead of including indirect and long term consequences.
 - *Single Alternative Error* –deciding an action is good because its benefits outweigh its costs without considering alternatives that may have a better benefit/cost ratio.

Case Examples

For links to descriptions of ethical theories, go to **Ethical Decision Making** (www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making) at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics web site.

For a discussion of the Utility test at that site, go to **Calculating Consequences** (www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/calculating-consequences-the-utilitarian-approach).

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).