

Ethics Tests



Compare Test Conclusions

How many ethics tests should I use in this situation?

Which test(s) should I choose?

How to compare conclusions from different ethics tests

In many business and professional situations, **one ethics test will provide all the guidance needed** in the time available for making a decision.

It is helpful, however, to **use more than one ethical principle to increase the level of confidence** in the rightness of the decision when:

- the situation is complicated
- the decision will make a significant difference to a person or organization
- there are contrary points of view supported by what seem to be good reasons.

In ethics as in politics, it is important to be confident but never certain.

Using several principles will increase the chances of generating new insights into why an action is right or wrong.

Having different perspectives on why something is wrong can be very **helpful in designing alternative actions** that will produce the good that made the action attractive in the first place but without the qualities that made it wrong.

Using several principles also **gives an opportunity for the strengths and weaknesses of the principles to balance each other out.**

- The choices and rights approaches focus attention on the importance of respect for the individual whereas exceptions and utility focus more on outcomes.
- Exceptions and choices focus on how the decision is made whereas utility is concerned with results rather than the conditions or rules the action can meet.
- The character/virtue approach focuses on what kind of person or organization we aspire to be and secondarily on judging individual actions.
- Utility focuses on total net happiness for all affected individuals whereas the common good test reminds us that we should consider more than just the goods of individual.

My experience suggests that **for most ethical situations multiple ethical tests will yield the same judgment of right or wrong.** The only difference will be their reasons why the action is right or wrong.

In some situations, however, the principles will give different answers. **When the principles conflict, what is a person to do?**

- If action being considered is ethical according to some of the principles and not ethical according to others, a person can appeal to reflection and judgment to indicate which principle(s) capture the most important features of the situation. Reflection can either be an internal conversation with yourself, or better a conversation with other people in the firm whose judgments you trust.
- Ethical people can and do sometimes disagree as to which principle(s) should govern in a particular situation and therefore disagree about what was the ethical thing to do. At least these disagreements are among people who are using ethical tests to determine how they should act.
- The trading of insights among the various ethics tests is part of the practical wisdom that we should all cultivate. Maximizing happiness in the utility test or maintaining the common good may require tempering or even forgoing the exceptions, choices, rights, justice and/or character principles. Strong considerations raised by the exceptions, choices, rights, justice, and/or character principles may override the claims of the greater or the common good. We should be conscious, however, that we do this at the apex of a steep and slippery slope. When making those kinds of decisions, a person should remember that
 - Strong emotional charge carried by his/her intuitive individual judgment does not guarantee that the judgment is right;
 - When reflecting on the judgment with myself, I will often give myself special considerations that I would not give to others;
 - To overcome the limitations of my intuitions and self-reflection he/she should engage wise and experienced people in a discussion about the best balance among the ethics tests for this situation.

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

For a discussion of how to compare conclusions, you may wish to read Markkula’s **Consistency and Ethics** (<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/consistency-and-ethics>) and **Ethical Relativism** (<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/ethical-relativism>).

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).