

DO THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS

Question: "Do the ends justify the means?"

Answer: The answer to this question depends on what the ends or goals are and what means are being used to achieve them. If the goals are good and noble, and the means we use to achieve them are also good and noble, then yes, the ends do justify the means. But that's not what most people mean when they use the expression. Most use it as an excuse to achieve their goals through any means necessary, no matter how immoral, illegal or unpleasant the means may be. What the expression usually means is something like "It doesn't matter how you get what you want as long as you get it."

The "ends justifying the means" usually involves doing something wrong to achieve a positive end and justifying the wrongdoing by pointing to a good outcome. An example would be lying on a resume to get a good job and justifying the lie by saying the larger income will enable the liar to provide more adequately for his family. Another might be justifying the abortion of a baby to save the life of the mother. Lying and taking an innocent life are both morally wrong, but providing for one's family and saving the life of a woman are morally right. Where, then, does one draw the line?

The ends/means dilemma is a popular scenario in ethics discussions. Usually, the question goes something like this: "If you could save the world by killing someone, would you do it?" If the answer is "yes," then a morally right outcome justifies the use of immoral means to achieve it. But there are three different things to consider in such a situation: the morality of the action, the morality of the outcome, and the morality of the person performing the action. In this situation, the action (murder) is clearly immoral and so is the murderer. But saving the world is a good and moral outcome. Or is it? What kind of world is being saved if murderers are allowed to decide when and if murder is justified and then go free? Or does the murderer face punishment for his crime in the world that he has saved? And would the world that was saved be justified in taking the life of the one who had just saved them?

CONSEQUENTIALISM

Consequentialism is the class of [normative ethical theories](#) holding that the [consequences](#) of one's conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgment about the rightness or wrongness of that conduct. Thus, from a consequentialist standpoint, a morally right act (or omission from acting) is one that will produce a good outcome, or consequence. In an extreme form, the idea of consequentialism is commonly encapsulated in the [saying](#), "the [end](#) justifies the [means](#)",^[1] meaning that if a goal is morally important enough, any method of achieving it is acceptable.^[2]

Consequentialism is usually contrasted with [deontological ethics](#) (or *deontology*), in that deontology, in which rules and moral duty are central, derives the rightness or wrongness of one's conduct from the character of the behaviour itself rather than the outcomes of the conduct. It is also contrasted with [virtue ethics](#), which focuses on the character of the agent rather than on the nature or consequences of the act (or omission) itself, and [pragmatic ethics](#) which treats morality like science: advancing

socially over the course of many lifetimes, such that any moral criterion is subject to revision. Consequentialist theories differ in how they define [moral goods](#).

Some argue that consequentialist and deontological theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, [T. M. Scanlon](#) advances the idea that [human rights](#), which are commonly considered a "deontological" concept, can only be justified with reference to the consequences of having those rights.^[3] Similarly, [Robert Nozick](#) argues for a theory that is mostly consequentialist, but incorporates inviolable "side-constraints" which restrict the sort of actions agents are permitted to do.^[3]

UTILITARIANISM

JEREMY BENTHAM and JOHN STUART MILL

In summary, [Jeremy Bentham](#) states that people are driven by their interests and their fears, but their interests take precedence over their fears, and their interests are carried out in accordance with how people view the consequences that might be involved with their interests. "Happiness" on this account is defined as the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. Historically, hedonistic utilitarianism is the paradigmatic example of a consequentialist moral theory. This form of utilitarianism holds that what matters is the aggregate happiness; the happiness of everyone and not the happiness of any particular person. [John Stuart Mill](#), in his exposition of hedonistic utilitarianism, proposed a hierarchy of pleasures, meaning that the pursuit of certain kinds of pleasure is more highly valued than the pursuit of other pleasures.^[11] However, some contemporary utilitarians, such as [Peter Singer](#), are concerned with maximizing the satisfaction of preferences, hence "[preference utilitarianism](#)". Other contemporary forms of utilitarianism mirror the forms of consequentialism outlined below.

NICHOLAS

First of all, what exactly is being asked? Well, simply put, if, under some circumstances, an immoral action was required to achieve, or attempt to achieve a state of greater overall morality, would this action be justified, or morally 'right'? Well, depending on which branch of thinking you subscribe to, there is an easy answer and a not so easy answer.

Let's start with the easy answer. [Utilitarianism](#) states that "good" or "moral" acts are those that yield the greatest amount of happiness and least amount of suffering for the greatest amount of people. Although it is difficult to quantify exactly how good or bad something is, it can be generally assumed that stealing a lollipop is not as bad as beating up someone for no reason. A utilitarian would take these (albeit, estimated) quantifications of an act, add up all the benefits of the "end", subtract all the bad parts of the "means" and if they end up with a positive number, then they would indeed deem the act morally justified. So, in short, yes, the ends do justify the means if the moral gains of the ends are greater than the moral losses by the means.

MATTAN GRIFFEL

This is the core of the distinction between two main ethical positions: deontology and consequentialism.

Deontology says that whether an action is "good" or "bad" depends on some quality of the action itself. Many believe that certain actions are inherently bad, things like murder, torture, stealing, etc. Some die-hard deontologists, like Kant, believe that lying, for example, is *a/ways* bad. That is to say, these actions are *never* justified.

Consequentialism, on the other hand, says that whether an action is "good" or "bad" depends on the outcome. They propose some standard by which to measure the outcome (usually "utility"), and think that the best course of action is the one that maximizes utility. For consequentialists, the ends *a/ways* justify the means.

Most people's ethical beliefs fall into some hybrid version of the two. Many people hold the deontological belief that some actions like rape and torture are never justified, while those same people may hold the consequentialist belief that it's sometimes okay to lie, like in the case of a "white lie".

JIM BARCELONA

From a constitutional framework between citizens the end can never justify the means. Also, from a deontological ethics the end could never justify the means. However, we should put the quote in context. Machiavelli never wrote, "The end justifies the means." He wrote, "Si guarda al fine," which might be better translated as "Pay attention to the result."

Machiavelli lived during a time of great civil strife between Italian city states which were used ruthlessly like pawns by the 3 great powers of the time: France, the Holy Roman Empire and the Papal States. Since peace and prosperity were preferable to seemingly perpetual warfare and economic depression, Machiavelli advocated doing what would best achieve those goals. What seemed the best plan for him was practical knowledge gained from a study of previously successful governments writ in History.

SUZANE SADADINE

I would say moral rightness of an act is determined by the expected results, from the perspective of the person performing the action. This is distinct from the person's intention because it requires them to think not only about what they intend (rather easy for most people) but also about the other possible consequences of their choice in Bayesian terms.

For example, say you have a high fever and I give you penicillin, nobly intending to save your life. Oh dear, you are allergic to it and you die. Am I culpable?

If you had told me you were allergic, then yes. I shouldn't have ignored that information. If you hadn't told me that, but there was a much safer drug available, then yes, but to a lesser extent. I should have considered the possibility of an allergy. And if penicillin was the only available drug, and I was convinced the chance of infection killing you exceeded the chance of an allergy, and I had no information about your allergy, then no, I'm not culpable.

JUSTIN SCHWARTZ

This saying doesn't mean what it appears to say. There is a standard, widely accepted theory of ethics, utilitarianism, which might be summed up crudely by the expression "the ends justify the means." More standard formulations are, "Act so as to bring about greatest happiness for the greatest number," or, "The right thing to do, or the right rule to adopt, is that that bring about the greatest net satisfaction of preferences"(presences satisfied minus preferences frustrated.)

It's been objected, I think correctly, that principles of this sort can have some pretty awful results. Suppose the greatest happiness of the greatest number or the highest amount of net preference satisfaction involved disregarding the interests of a minority, even to the point of enslaving them or killing them?

This isn't the only objection to utilitarianism, but it's an important and I believe a fatal one. Utilitarians scoff at such hypotheticals, saying that wouldn't happen in the real world. But apart from the fact that it's not clear how they know that, even if they're right, they get the right answer ("slavery is wrong") for the wrong reason, not that it never be justified, but just that the way the world is, it happens that slavery is wrong, but if the world would be different, it would be not only ok but required.

Nonetheless, utilitarianism is one the major moral theories and even if it's wrong, as I believe, it's a contender.

But what people mean when they say, "the ends justify the means," is that whatever your ends are, they justify any means at all. That's not a moral principle, it's the abandonment of morality. The idea that the ends are what make the means right applies to the adoption of means too. So if the end is the greatest happiness for the greatest number, any means you adopt have to be consistent with that. If the ends are maximizing net satisfaction of preferences (and note that this treats racist, sexist, exploitative preferences as on a par with compassionate and loving ones) the means can't be inconsistent with that. They have to pass the test too.

Moreover, some utilitarians, especially the classic ones like Bentham and Mill, have thought that the adoption of certain ends over others require justification. Thus, why happiness? Bentham and Mill say, roughly (Bentham precisely) because everybody wants it. Some have objected this embodies a crude mistake, others that it isn't true. Some people want salvation, or glory, or fame, or accomplishment, or enlightenment, even at the cost of happiness. Preference utilitarians avoid that objection but have to treat all preferences as equal. Nonetheless, the idea that ends require some justification is not silly, and might limit the means by which one might seek to attain them.

So when people say, You're just saying the ends justify the means, they're saying you're saying, anything goes. Sometimes that is what people are saying, but sometimes they're just being utilitarians.

JAMES FISHER

The moral rightness of an action is determined by both intent and outcome.

Let's demonstrate with a few simple thought experiments.

First, let's consider how the moral character of different actions leading to the same results can in fact vary. More specifically, let's say an individual acts in a manner that takes the life of another person. If this action was in self defense, then most would grant that the act was morally right or defensible. Alternatively, if the life was taken in a premeditated act, then it would be morally wrong. We would call it murder. Those who are legally oriented might call it murder in the first degree. The same outcome -- deprivation of life -- yet a different moral assignment.

Now another thought experiment in which the intent is held constant, but the outcome varies. An individual with murderous intent discharges his firearm fully intending to kill his antagonist. In the first instance he does in fact kill the other person, but in the second scenario his aim is poor (or the gun misfires) and the individual is unharmed. Though this latter act is by no means right, the two acts are unlikely to be treated as morally equivalent. Certainly the law makes a reasonable distinction in its treatment of murder versus attempted murder.

No doubt that the reader may sense a bit of moral arbitrariness in this second thought experiment. Indeed the principle here is one that philosophers sometimes label as "moral luck." One final thought experiment to illustrate: one drunk driver succeeds in driving home safely and harms no one, while another has a head-on collision and kills the other (innocent) driver. The latter outcome receives much more moral opprobrium than the former--reflecting the gravity of the outcome--yet one somehow feels that an undeniable element of moral luck has had its way.

JUDAH YOM ALT

Do the ends justify the means?" is asking for rationalizations to do evil.

This is the wrong approach framework. It sets up a false dichotomy between ends and means. Questioning in this area is because the answer is morally gray and unclear. Its rarely choice A or choice B. Means and ends are often dependent and related, tangled up together. (Partial differential equations with solutions variables made up of each other, if you like math.)

The proper question to ask is "Are the ends and means worthy of each other?"

This question asks the same thing. For this one if you take the easier out, you know full well you weren't smart enough, clever enough, human enough -- to find a better, more worthy solution.

SAMUEL MANDAL

There's no point in weaving pseudo-philosophical rhetoric around this question because, sans context, it is way to obscure to have any definite answer. But as an yardstick, **Leon Trotsky** used to say, "*The end may justify the means, as long as there is something that justifies the end.*" Meaning, of course, that the *end* cannot be self-justifying, and requires a larger justification, even if such a justification is independent of the *means*.

STEVEN REICHERT

To say the ends never justify the means, is simply being selfish. A great number of horrible things happen every day. Many of these horrible events could have been

stopped had others acted, but they did not. Whether from fear of suffering or apprehension of doing something wrong themselves, they did not act.

Stealing is wrong. I believe that we can all agree on that. But if you're family is starving, is it wrong to steal? I believe that it very well still may be wrong, but it is far worse to allow your family to go hungry because you do not want to steal. If you can provide sustenance for your family another way, but prefer stealing, you are entirely wrong. However, if you steal because it is your only means of providing for your family, I believe you are committing the lesser of two evils.

Murder is without a doubt, wrong. Is it also wrong though to kill a man, so that he can not murder others? Perhaps it is, but is it not far worse to allow others to come to harm, due to your inaction? If you allow 10 people to be killed, when you could have stopped the killer by simply taking his life, you have not simply chosen not to take 1 life, but you have also chosen to take 10.

ROB WEIR

Where it gets more interesting is in risky behavior, where one has a moral intention, but exercises it in an environment where the chances of misadventure are high. Take a policeman in a high speed chase, for example. Those are the hard cases to decide, whether the risk taking was warranted or whether it was reckless. In those cases the results themselves are not the factor, but whether the adverse results, and the likelihood of the adverse results were foreseeable or should have been foreseeable and whether action in that context was reasonable. A otherwise laudable action, performed in the context of high risk of adverse results, could be immoral. So results do matter, in that sense.

CIRIL THUNDYHIL

Consequentialism is the view that [morality](#) is *all* about producing the right kinds of overall consequences. Here the phrase "overall consequences" of an action means everything the action brings about, including the action itself. For example, if you think that the whole point of morality is

- (a) to spread happiness and relieve suffering, or
- (b) to create as much freedom as possible in the world, or
- (c) to promote the survival of our species, then you accept consequentialism.

Consequentialism is based on two principles:

- Whether an act is right or wrong depends only on the results of that act
 - The more good consequences an act produces, the better or more right that act
- It gives us this guidance when faced with a moral dilemma:
- A person should choose the action that maximises good consequences
- And it gives this general guidance on how to live:
- People should live so as to maximise good consequences
- Different forms of consequentialism differ over what the good thing is that should be maximised.

- **Utilitarianism** states that people should maximise human welfare or well-being (which they used to call 'utility' - hence the name).
- **Hedonism** states that people should maximise human pleasure.
- Other forms of consequentialism take a more subtle approach; for example stating that people should maximise the satisfaction of their fully informed and rational preferences.
In practice people don't assess the ethical consequences of every single act (that's called 'act consequentialism') because they don't have the time.

Instead they use ethical rules that are derived from considering the general consequences of particular types of acts. That is called 'rule consequentialism'.

- So, for example, according to rule consequentialism we consider lying to be wrong because we know that in general lying produces bad consequences.
Results-based ethics produces this important conclusion for ethical thinking:
- No type of act is *inherently* wrong - not even murder - it depends on the result of the act
This far-fetched example may make things clearer:
- Suppose that by killing X, an entirely innocent person, we can save the lives of 10 other innocent people
- A consequentialist would say that killing X is justified because it would result in only 1 person dying, rather than 10 people dying
- A non-consequentialist would say *it is inherently wrong to murder people* and refuse to kill X, even though not killing X leads to the death of 9 more people than killing X
Consequentialism is controversial. Various nonconsequentialist views are that morality is all about doing one's duty, respecting rights, obeying nature, obeying God, obeying one's own heart, actualizing one's own potential, being reasonable, respecting all people, or not interfering with others—no matter the consequences.

[Most terrorist outfits use this type of argument to justify their deeds]