Pinto Case Study:

For years, the Pinto was the largest-selling subcompact car in America. During the early stages of its development, crash-worthiness tests revealed that the Pinto could not sustain a front-end collision without the windshield breaking. A quick-fix solution was adopted: The drive train was moved backward. As a result, the differential was moved very close to the gas tank. Thus, many gas tanks collapsed and exploded on rear-end collisions at low speeds.

In 1977, Mark Dowie published an article in Mother Jones magazine that divulged the cost-benefit analysis developed by Ford Motor Company in 1971 to decide whether to add an $11 part per car that would greatly reduce injuries by protecting the vulnerable fuel tank—a tank that exploded in rear-end collisions under 5 miles per hour. The $11 seems an insignificant expense, even adjusting to current dollars, but in fact it would make it far more difficult to market a car that was to be sold for no more than $2,000. Moreover, the costs of installing the part on 11 million cars and another 1.5 million light trucks added up. The cost of not installing the part and instead paying out costs for death and injuries from accidents was projected using a cost-benefit analysis. The analysis estimated the worth of a human life at about $200,000, a figure borrowed from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The cost per non-death injury was $67,000. These figures were arrived at by adding together such costs as a typical worker's future earnings, hospital and mortuary costs, and legal fees. In addition, it was estimated that approximately 180 burn deaths and another 180 serious burn injuries would occur each year. Multiplying these numbers together, the annual costs for death and injury was $49.5 million, far less than the estimated $137 million for adding the part.

Cost-benefit analyses typically reflect utilitarian thinking, but too often they are slanted toward what is good for corporations, rather than the good for everyone affected, as utilitarians require.

1. In the above case, was Ford justified in relying exclusively on a cost-benefit analysis, or were there additional moral considerations that they should have used in deciding whether to improve the safety of the Pinto?
2. What might duty ethicists, as well as virtue ethics, say about the case?