

# Ethics and Morality FAQ: Teleology and Ethics

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Teleological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus on the consequences which any action might have (for that reason, they are often referred to as consequentialist moral systems, and both terms are used here). Thus, in order to make [correct moral choices](#), we have to have some understanding of what will result from our choices. When we make choices which result in the correct consequences, then we are acting morally; when we make choices which result in the incorrect consequences, then we are acting immorally.

The idea that the moral worth of an action is determined by the consequences of that action is often labeled consequentialism. Usually, the "correct consequences" are those which are most beneficial to humanity - they may promote human happiness, human pleasure, human satisfaction, human survival or simply the general welfare of all humans. Whatever the consequences are, it is believed that those consequences are intrinsically good and valuable, and that is why actions which lead to those consequences are moral while actions which lead away from them are immoral.

The various teleological moral systems differ not only on exactly what the "correct consequences" are, but also on how people balance the various possible consequences. After all, few choices are unequivocally positive, and this means it is necessary to figure out how to arrive at the correct balance of good and bad in what we do.

Note that merely being concerned with the consequences of an action does not make a person a consequentialist - the key factor is, rather, basing the [morality](#) of that action on the consequences instead of on something else.

The word teleology comes from the Greek roots *telos*, which means end, and *logos*, which means science.

Thus, teleology is the "science of ends." Key questions which teleological [ethical systems](#) ask include:

What will be the consequences of this action?

What will be the consequences of inaction?

How do I weigh the harm against the benefits of this action?

## Types

Some examples of teleological ethical theories include:

**Ethical Egoism:** an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable only to the moral agent performing the action.

**Ethical Altruism:** an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the moral agent.

**Ethical Utilitarianism:** an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone.

## Act and Rule Consequentialism

Consequentialist moral systems are usually differentiated into act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism. The former, act-consequentialism, argues that the morality of any action is dependent upon its consequences. Thus, the most moral action is the one which leads to the best consequences.

The latter, rule-consequentialism, argues that focusing only on the consequences of the action in question can lead people to commit outrageous actions when they foresee good consequences.

Thus, rule-consequentialists add the following provision: imagine that an action were to become a general rule - if the following of such a rule would result in bad consequences, then it should be avoided even if it would lead to good consequences in this one instance. This has very obvious similarities to [Kant's](#) categorical imperative, a [deontological moral principle](#).

Rule-consequentialism can lead to a person performing actions which, taken alone, may lead to bad consequences. It is argued, however, that the overall situation is that there will be more good than bad when people follow the rules derived from consequentialist considerations. For example, one of the objections to euthanasia is that allowing such an exception to the moral rule "do not kill" would lead to a weakening of a rule which has generally positive consequences - even though in such instances following the rule leads to negative consequences.

## Problems

One common criticism of teleological moral systems is the fact that a moral duty is derived from a set of circumstances lacking any moral component. For example, when a teleological system declares that choices are moral if they enhance human happiness, it isn't argued that "human happiness" is intrinsically moral itself. Nevertheless, a choice which enhances that happiness is moral. How does it happen that one can lead to the other?

Critics also often point out the impossibility of actually determining the full range of consequences any action will have, thus rendering attempts to evaluate the morality of an action based upon those consequences similarly impossible. In addition, there is much disagreement over how or even if different consequences can really be quantified in the way necessary for some moral calculations to be made. Just how much "good" is necessary to outweigh some "evil," and why?

Another common criticism is that consequentialist moral systems are simply complicated ways of saying that the ends justify the means - thus, if it is possible to argue that enough good will result, then any outrageous and horrible actions would be justified. For example, a consequentialist moral system might justify the torture and murder of an innocent child if it would lead to a cure for all forms of cancer.

The question of whether or not we should really be committed to taking responsibility for all of the consequences of our actions is another issue which critics bring up.

After all, if the morality of my action is dependent upon all of its consequences, then I am taking responsibility for them -- but those consequences will reach far and wide in ways I cannot anticipate or comprehend.

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