

**ETHICS CHECKLIST:
TEN TESTS OF ETHICALITY**
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Ethical decisions are often judged not only by their outcomes but also by the principles on which the decisions are based. In the study of philosophy, theories of moral justification are often classified into one of two major systems. These two systems, known as *teleological* justification and *deontological* justification, can be applied to ethical decision making.

Teleological ethics (from the Greek *telos*, “end”; *logos*, “science” or “reason”) refers to a moral decision defined by an end result, goal, or outcome. Teleological justification holds that the basic standard for an action being classified as morally justified is based on whether or not the action achieves a morally desirable goal or outcome. In other words, it is the *consequences* of an action that determine its ethicality or moral worth. Teleological morality is reflected in the argument that “the end justifies the means.”

Deontological ethics (from the Greek *deon*, “duty”; *logos*, “science” or “reason”) holds that the basic standard for an action being classified as morally right or wrong is independent of the good or evil consequences that are generated by the action. Deontology is based on the moral *duty* or obligation one has toward another person, such as the duty to be honest or the duty to be benevolent. Deontological moral obligations are based on the foundational moral principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity. In the words of ethicist Celia Fisher (2009), “deontological theory prioritizes absolute obligations over consequences” (p. 40), whereas teleological theory “prioritizes the consequences (or utility) of an act over the application of universal principles” (p. 41). Good decisions involve both deontology and teleology, basing one’s actions on ethical duties as well as considering the consequences of one’s actions.

The Golden Rule, which is shared in some form by no fewer than 12 of the world’s major religions, reflects deontological morality based on moral duty and obligation: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This cornerstone moral principle reflects *universality* (applying the same principle to every person in a similar situation), which takes into consideration the application of moral principles regardless of a person’s race, gender, religion, socioeconomic level, and so forth. The universality of the principle of *justice* is depicted by the icon of *Justitia*, the Roman goddess of justice, wearing a blindfold that represents the objective application of justice (“blind justice”) regardless of the identity, social standing, or financial status of the accused.

The universality of the Golden Rule must be balanced with *diversity*, which is not blind but which takes into consideration the differences of persons in a similar situation. Sometimes described as the Platinum Rule (Doverspike, 2000), this variant takes into consideration differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic level, and so forth: “Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto *them*.” Nevertheless, as a single general principle, the original Golden Rule represents probably the single most encompassing test of the ethicality of one’s actions: “Are these actions something that I want others to do to me? Conversely, are these actions something that I would not want done to me?”

In addition to the Golden and Platinum Rules, there are other tests of the ethicality of one’s actions. In making an ethical decision with respect to one’s course of action in a specific situation, a simple ethics checklist can be derived from 10 basic questions or tests of ethicality (Doverspike, 2000):

- 1. Universality Test:** Would I recommend these actions to anyone in the same situation? In placing principles above personalities, the test of *universality* asks whether I would recommend these same actions to another person operating in similar circumstances.
- 2. Diversity Test:** Are these actions fair to the specific person involved? Will my actions appropriately take into consideration the other person's age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic level, and so forth?
- 3. Justice Test:** Are these actions fair to everyone involved? Conversely, will my actions unfairly discriminate against stakeholders (i.e., others affected by the action) on the basis of age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth?
- 4. Honesty Test:** Do my actions represent the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Viewed from its polar opposite, dishonesty not only includes acts of *commission* (e.g., committing a lie by distortion, misinformation, or bearing a false witness) but also acts of *omission* (e.g., omitting the truth by not disclosing a minor detail or important information that a reasonable person would want to know).
- 5. Religion Test:** Are my actions consistent with my faith? Would I be able to explain my actions to my rabbi, priest, pastor, imam, sponsor, or spiritual director? In other words, am I practicing what I am preaching? More importantly, am I practicing what the most respected spiritual leaders in my religion are preaching?
- 6. Parent's Test:** Would I be able to explain my actions to my child? Would I expect him or her to act in the same way?
- 7. Child's Test:** Would I be able to explain my actions to my mother or father? Would I expect them to be proud of my actions? Would I be proud of my child for doing what I am thinking of doing? Conversely, am I hiding my actions from my parent because I know it is wrong?
- 8. Publicity Test:** This one is also known as the Reputation Test or Front Page Test. How would I feel if my actions were reported on the front page of my local newspaper? Would I want my actions to be known by my most respected peers? Would I want my actions to be posted on Facebook? ¹
- 9. Privacy Test:** This one is also known as the Conscience Test or Dark Parking Lot Test. Even if no one were looking, would my actions leave me with a clear conscience? Conversely, would my actions go against my conscience? Whereas *reputation* is based on what others think of us (i.e., Publicity Test), *character* is based on who we are inside (i.e., Privacy Test). ²
- 10. Consequences Test:** What are the possible consequences of my actions? What are the short-term and long-term benefits and risks of my actions on others who may be affected? In professional practice, this test is considered a cornerstone of decision-making: What is in the best interest of the client?

How does this list of questions correspond to teleological or deontological ethics? How does each of the 10 checklist items correspond to either a teleological or deontological moral justification? Review each of the items and consider the definitions of teleological (T) and deontological justification (D). After completing the checklist, check your answers using the Answer Key on the last page.

Answer Key

Answers: 1 (D), 2 (D), 3 (D), 4 (D), 5 (D), 6 (D), 7 (D), 8 (D), 9 (D), 10 (T).

Notes

1. The Test of Publicity is sometimes framed in this manner: “Would it pass the *Washington Post* front page test?” This question encourages a public official to think about how his or her private actions might appear to the outside world if the actions were made public. Unfortunately, improprieties are more commonly expressed in this manner: “It would fail the *Washington Post* front page test.”
2. In some ways, the Test of Privacy is more related to *guilt*, which is more internal and private. The Test of Publicity is more related to *shame*, which is more external and public.

References

- Doverspike, W. F. (2000, November 1). Ethical decision making: Doing the next right thing. Ethics workshop presented to the Department of Psychology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
- Fisher, C. B. (2009). *Decoding the ethics code: A practical guide for psychologists* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Resources

- Doverspike, W. F. (2000, November). *How to take an ethics inventory: A key to striving for excellence.* <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Documentation

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