

Ask a Priest!
August 23, 2021

Question: How do I know if any action is Good or Bad? Do I just need a good reason? Can my end justify my means? What if I can't help it?

Answer: Morality—the goodness or evil of a free human action—has more than one indicator that needs to be considered. Like a lake filled by 3 rivers, there are not 1 but 3 factors: the Purpose, the Object of the action, & the Circumstances. For an action to be good, all 3 rivers need to be good. If any river is evil or disordered, it pollutes the goodness of the human action & spoils the whole thing—the act is to be avoided.

1. The **Purpose** [or intention, or goal, or ultimate end] is the first river. It satisfies the question “Why?” It is subjective and lies within the person. For an act to be morally good, one's purpose or overall intention must be good or neutral. If we are motivated to do something for a bad purpose - even something that is objectively good in itself - our action is morally evil. It might be ok to give my sister candy after dinner, but not if I want her to break mom's rule *so she'll get into trouble*. What is my purpose? Is my “why” good?
2. At the same time, alongside purpose, ultimate end, or intention is the immediate **object of my action** itself. It is the means I am choosing for the overall intention. It answers the question “What exactly did you do” for the above purpose? It is objective, meaning it is independent and resides outside of the acting subject. Outside of the subject or agent, many actions are intrinsically bad or disordered in themselves, for example intentionally killing an innocent bystander. Even if my intention seems good, if the action itself is bad then the “lake” or the morality of what I'm doing cannot be good.

No end can justify an evil means; and we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good purpose.

(Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1749 - #1761).

3. A third element is “**Circumstances**”, corroborating factors, etc. These have a role to play in grasping the whole scenario, including any aggravating circumstances that may influence one’s culpability for the action.

Acting under Coercion, for example, implies that beyond the agent’s purpose (n.1 above) and the action itself (n.2 above), he or she had no control or was hindered in realizing a good or stopping an evil that they were doing. This circumstance contributes to the “lake” of the morality of the whole action.

Further considerations:

- A. The 2nd river above, the Action itself (also considered the direct object of my act), is the most fundamental source or “river” in determining the goodness or evil of any decision.

So much so that, if I fully intend the immoral object/means and choose it *in my heart* (n.2 above), for an evil purpose (n.1 above), but my action is *interrupted* or not fully accomplished (n.3 above), then despite that circumstance I have already sinned in my heart. So long as my heart settled on my **choice for that means and that immoral action, then my action and myself have already been polluted by the sin. “Whoever so much as looks at another with lust, has already committed the sin of adultery” (Matthew 5:28).

The same holds for the inverse scenario: if I still choose to do a moral or virtuous act in my heart, but something doesn’t work out, the virtue is still there in my heart.

- B. Note: Exceptional scenarios involve an intended action and purpose that may have both a primary good effect alongside an unintended “second effect” that is bad. These actions can still be rightly evaluated respecting the three rivers explanation above, understanding the ethical *Principle of Double Effect*. For the action to be good, the 2ndary evil effect cannot be intended by any means, and must be sufficiently removed from the direct object of “what am I doing”.

Example of **Self-defense**: “I tried to stop the attacker. I was trying to stop him, even hurt him [reasonably] if necessary. I was not choosing to kill him. Even if that’s what happened; it was not my choice. My point was only to defend myself.

My action was not to do evil; I tolerated an evil 2ndary effect that could not be avoided while principally doing something good or necessary.