

Ethics Tests



Choices Test

Are the people affected by this decision able to make their own choices?

Recognition of the respect owed to all persons gives a basis for three approaches to deciding right and wrong, the **Rights Test**, the **Everybody Test**, and the **Choices Test**.

You may wish to begin with the discussion of **Rights** on the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics site (www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/rights). Then return here to see how the Rights Test is operationalized and study the two examples linked at the bottom of the page.

How to use the Choices Test

To use this test, ask

- Are the people affected by this decision able to make their own choices?

Why is this a valid way to decide right and wrong?

- Things have value because people value them.
- All people deserve equal respect as ones who give value to things. What I value has no claim to be “more valuable” than what you value.
- So let others make their own choices based on what they value. Don’t choose for them except in special circumstances. Children, for example, may not be equal because they may not know what they really value.
- Those who have made promises, signed contracts, or made other prior commitments may not be free to act because of these prior choices.

Applying the test

STEP 1: **Am I giving others freedom to choose what they value?**

- We are free to make our own choices if we not being forced or coerced to choose something we do not value.
- Are there any prior choices (contracts, promises) by which a person has limited his/her own freedom?

STEP 2: This test requires giving a person the level of information (or the opportunity to get the information) necessary to know which alternative best fulfills what he/she values. One practical test for whether the information is adequate is to **ask if that person would choose differently if he/she had additional information**. I can also ask **whether I have an obligation to provide it because of my special expertise** or at least point out, if it is publically available, that they should find it

STEP 3: **Draw a conclusion.**

Is the action unethical because it does not give the people being affected the freedom and/or the information to choose what they value?

Strengths

- The choices test reflects one of the fundamental ways of showing respect for the equality of other humans –respecting their ability to determine the course of their own lives by making choices based on what they think is valuable.
- Many ethical violations in business and professional settings involve denying people information or limiting their freedom to choose.
- The test reminds us that it is possible to determine what people value through direct questions, surveys, and focus groups.

Weaknesses

- It can reinforce a simplistic view of human decision making that people are clear about what they value and make rational choices based on those values.
- The concept of freedom is the subject of much disagreement. The line, for example, between persuasion and coercion can be difficult to draw. When does making something look attractive take away from a person’s freedom to reject it?

Case Examples

For case examples, see

- **“Less Sugar” Marketing** (<http://bit.ly/less-sugar-marketing-case>)
- **Phantom Expenses** (<http://bit.ly/phantom-expenses-case>)

For a page of quick links to move between ethical theories and steps to operationalize these theories, refer to the EthicsOps **Theory + Practice** page (bit.ly/theory-plus-practice).