

Does the end justify the means

Psychology



**ASSIGN
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Lesley Rawlins The end justifies the means The end justifies the means is an expression that is often used in society to validate or excuse distasteful and objectionable actions undertaken by its people. In effect, the phrase is a justification for dispensing with all morality and principle in the passage towards a successful conclusion. The Greek writer Sophocles wrote in *Electra* 409 BC " the end excuses any evil. " This was a thought later considered, by the Roman poet Ovid, ' the result justifies the deed' (c. 10 B. C.). In simpler terms, anything is reasonable if it leads to a significant and meaningful outcome. The term has been used to explain actions and behaviours ranging from cheating to pass an exam, stealing to feed a starving child, carrying out tests on animals to increase medical knowledge and even the nuclear bombing that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War 2, The devastation of these cities along with huge civilian fatalities was sanctioned to bring forward the close of the war. Milgram, a psychological researcher conducted an experiment in 1963 which was influenced by the holocaust.

Milgram wanted to establish what factors led ordinary people to obey orders from a figure of authority to inflict pain and suffering on another person. The experiment involved three people: authority figure, teacher (participant), and the learner (stooge). The participant asked the learner questions and was authorised and encouraged to implement an electric shock for each incorrect answer. The shocks started at 15 volts and increased by a series of 15 volts for each incorrect answer to a total of 450 volts. The stooge cried and screamed when the supposed electric shock was administered.

All participants went to at least 300-volts on the shock generator. 65% of the participants believed that they had administered the full 450 volts to the

learner. The majority of participants employed the electric shock even when the learner complained about the pain and displayed audible signs of fear, panic and pain. Milgram's research confirmed that most people will obey orders that go against their conscience. Milgram's research was later supported by Sheridan and King (1972) who used a puppy as a learner.

As with Milgram's original procedure the puppy was given small electric shocks and every time it made a mistake the puppy jumped and howled in pain. The participants (teachers) were led to believe that the shocks were becoming more severe. Several participants carried on implementing shocks even after learning that the puppy had lost consciousness. Finally the puppy received an anaesthetic to create the illusion that the electric shocks had killed it. The study found that 20 out of the 26 participants complied up to the end of the experiment.

Hofling (1966) carried out field studies on nurses who were unaware that they were involved in an experiment. Hofling wanted to establish if nurses would comply with the correct procedure when faced with a difficult situation. Nurses in a hospital were given orders from a doctor (stooge) over the telephone to administer a dose of medication above the maximum dose allowed. The medication was a placebo, however the nurses thought it was real. An alarming 95% of the nurses carried out the orders. They were not supposed to take instructions by phone, let alone exceed the maximum dose.

Hofling demonstrated that people are reluctant to question 'authority', even when they might have good reason to. Zimbardo's prison experiment at

Stanford University was a study on what the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard was on the individual. Zimbardo wanted to investigate whether the cruelty reported among guards in American prisons was due to the aggressive personalities of the guards or the prison environment itself. Twenty-four well adjusted undergraduates were selected out of over 75 to play the roles of both guards and prisoners.

The guards were permitted to devise most of the rules. A third of the guards exhibited “ genuine sadistic tendencies,” and subjected the prisoners to torture. After the initial rebellion most of the prisoners stopped opposing the guards losing their personal identity and self-belief. Zimbardo’s research demonstrated that people can behave uncharacteristically when placed, in new social or physical roles and adopt the attitude and behaviour of their perceived roles, in some cases particularly zealously.

The argument that ‘ anything is reasonable if it leads to a significant and meaningful outcome’ ignores the moral and ethical questioning of the method and the use of this principle to countenance experimentation is debatable All the studies outlined, involved a degree of deception and can be criticized for the lack of informed consent. Examples of which include; Milgram’s volunteers believed that they were shocking the learner although Milgram used stooges throughout his experiment. Zimbardo deceived his volunteers by having them arrested at home.

Like Milgram and Zimbardo, Hofling was criticised on ethical grounds. This was because the nurses were unaware of their participation in a psychological study and might have felt threatened by the results and their

implications. In all sets of studies the participants were put under particularly high levels of stress furthermore there was no precautions put in place to insure that the volunteers came to any physical or psychological damage. The ethical question of whether these practices were acceptable is up to the individual or society as a whole to decide.

There are occasions when personal values may be in conflict with the demands and policies of the organization. Social influence often leads people to conform; often their personal values give way to various conforming factors, such as, peer pressure, group size, apathy, low self esteem, age, gender and politics. Those accused of heinous war crimes, distanced themselves from their personal responsibility by expressing publicly that they were just obeying orders. The evidence of the experiments outlined earlier demonstrates that people will conform to authority even if it goes against their own personal belief systems.

This places a serious responsibility on those in authority and society as a whole, to explore the moral and ethical implications of the laws, policies and above all, the example it sets for others. Following World War 2, several countries set up guidelines for carrying out research. The British Psychological Society (BPS) set up ethical guidelines that include; deception, consent, confidentiality, debriefing, the right to withdraw, physical and psychological protection of all participants.

Children under 16 must have parental consent. One of the ethical questions formally discussed in papers written by members of the BPS was social experimentation as part of their activities in developing their ethical code of

conduct. Dr John Raven a member of the BPS wrote ' it is unethical and unscientific for research psychologists to concentrate on showing that certain educational practices do, or do not have particular effects on pupils.

They should attempt to identify all the unintended (often destructive and damaging) and long term effects of those practices' (Raven 2000) In conclusion, sometimes the means are not always attractive but all the same necessary to achieve a " good" end. If the end result is on the right side of the moral line it is all the more justified in the ultimate goal, a successful conclusion. So, in the words of Sophocles, " The end excuses any evil," but an evil end will not. Otherwise known as the end justifies the means.