

Firestone recall ethics: utilitarianism

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Many times, an ethical question can seem almost ludicrously simple when looked at from one's personal point of view. When, however, a more complex system of morality is brought to bear on the same question, the amazing vastness of the ethical dilemmas that arise can be shocking. This is precisely the case when one views the Firestone recall which affected both Ford and Firestone in the 1990's. Although the ethical elements of the recall might seem outwardly simple, in reality, when one applies the concept of utilitarianism to the situation, things rapidly become much less straightforward.

One of the most interesting questions that comes to light is that, strangely enough, of company profits. Needless to say, it might seem somewhat cavalier, or perhaps even downright cruel, to focus on financial aspects in the face of the deaths and disfigurements that occurred as a result of the faulty tires. However, when one looks more deeply, the question must be answered of how much misery could be caused by the financial repercussions of the recall. For example, as a result of the recall Ford's stock fell 18% and Firestone's dropped 47%, both in just one month.

Both of these companies employ thousands of people and provide a huge economic boon to the national economy. If Firestone were to be put out of business by the recall, by a combination of the bad publicity and financial expense of roughly \$500 million, how many families would be directly affected? If Ford was forced to close one of their large production plants because of the financial toll the recall had on it, how many people would pay the price? Certainly far more would be affected negatively than were hurt by

the accidents caused by the faulty tires. Which suffering would be worse? These questions are difficult to quantify, and thus to answer completely, and yet they do raise interesting ethical questions.

On another, more callous level, utilitarianism would seek to answer how both of the aforementioned companies should have reacted to the recall by simply measuring what would have been the best thing for them, not including any consideration whatsoever for what would be best for everyone else who was involved. Quite simply, both seemed to act in precisely the way that utilitarianism would suggest they ought to. Ford, which was receiving bad publicity and incurring all kinds of other liabilities, such as civil suits, needed to limit their exposure as well as they possibly could.

The best, most efficient way to do that, was simply to blame Firestone for the problem. Of course, logically, this makes little sense. Ford, after all, was responsible for choosing the tire provider, and thereby exposed their clients to Firestone's faulty products by choosing that company in the first place. Also, they might have had some moral imperative to test the tires and make sure that they met proper quality standards. Instead of admitting to either of these things, though, it made much more sense from a utilitarian perspective to pass the blame on to another company. Furthermore, since Firestone was already in the midst of the maelstrom of bad publicity, and since they were already going to be hurt by the scandal, Ford's accusations didn't really damage them any further.

The ethical dilemmas that were faced by Firestone, on the other hand, are much deeper and more intricately woven together. Utilitarianism would

suggest that their number one responsibility was to the company, its employees, and its shareholders. This is the most basic idea. If this is true, then, just like with Ford, the option Firestone took was its best one. Namely, this was the process by which it attempted to limit its public exposure to bad publicity by conducting a hugely publicized, widespread recall and fully owning up to its responsibilities.

This was a great utilitarian decision because it can be assumed that Firestone's failure to do so, in the face of so much damning evidence and news-coverage, would've swayed public opinion so massively as to potentially bankrupt the company. By admitting responsibility they seem more socially conscious and caring, thus tapping into the more forgiving side of the consumer market.

Contrastingly, of course, there is also the fact that Firestone should have, from an ultimate utilitarian perspective, avoided the entire fiasco in the first place. The most utilitarian thing to do, in order to make sure that such a massively self-damaging set of circumstances never came to be, would have been to make sure that such a thing never took place. They ought to have done so by ensuring that their products weren't faulty. Or, after the news started coming in about the defective tires, they ought to have tried to apply damage-control more quickly and effectively to keep the story from ever becoming such a huge story. Also read utilitarianism and business ethics essay

In conclusion, it seems rather evident that the Firestone recall situation offers a multitudinous amount of ethical questions to be pored over and

discussed in further detail. Utilitarianism is but one of the many different types of theories of ethical reasoning that one could apply to come up with such questions and examine them. Obviously, however, the theories often raise more ethical questions than they can help the scholar to solve. Nonetheless, a noteworthy and intriguing work could probably be done on looking at all the various factors behind the recall and measuring the morality of how its major players behaved, given a proper depth and breadth of research and a sufficient investment of time.