

Is it ever wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons?

In this essay, I will explore the problem of whether it is justifiable to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. This question uses and analyses the complex crossover of ethics, intentions, and outcomes. On the surface, performing a good deed seems commendable; however, when the motivation is selfish or deceitful, it raises significant moral concerns. It is argued that doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is inherently flawed because it involves misleading those who stand to benefit from the action. These individuals may believe that the act is undertaken for selfless reasons, prompting them to support and invest in the cause, only to discover that the true intent was self-interest. This creates a false sense of happiness and trust, manipulating others to facilitate the joy of selfish desires and needs. This essay will dive into the concept of deceit, examining how lying can become a habit and an escape route used unconsciously to achieve personal goals. I will analyse the thought processes and psychological foundation of individuals who exhibit this behaviour, seeking to understand the reasoning behind their actions. By exploring these themes, this essay aims to provide an analysis of the moral and psychological implications at play when someone does the right thing for the wrong reasons.

In this first paragraph, I will talk about how doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is deceitful. To understand whether this action is deceitful, we need to know what deception is and why we can compare them. Deceit is the act of intentionally misleading, tricking, or hiding the truth to gain an advantage or cause someone to believe what is false. When you do a good thing for the wrong reasons, it is so you can benefit from it. A simple example is a famous person who might donate to charity not to help people in need but for their fanbase and popularity. Now, people think this person is righteous, and it will make them more known. Something like this happened during the 1500s to the 1700s. After the Protestant Reformation, attending church made Protestant Christians around England look loyal to the nation and respectable in the eyes of the government. These Christians might have had no belief in Christ, but they went to church to make themselves look better. There was major cultural and religious upheaval against the Catholics and their beliefs, leading the Protestants to think that going to church would demonstrate loyalty. (Marshall, Peter 2003). Here, these Christians went to church (a good action) but to make themselves look like better people to the government.

In the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals written by Kant, he says, "An action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim according to which it is resolved upon." (Kant, I. 1785) This quote shows that the rightness of an action is not about achieving a certain outcome but about acting according to a duty derived from a moral law. Therefore, doing the right thing for the wrong reason, for example, for personal gain or external approval, lacks moral worth because the action is not made from respect for moral reasoning itself. The action and the reasoning don't match, and the bad moral will end up outweighing the good action in the future.

Deception can sometimes work out in a positive way. For example, the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War. Abolishing slavery was undoubtedly a good action and a significant step towards equality and justice in the United States. While freeing enslaved people was unquestionably the right action, Lincoln's primary motivation was not solely based on moral grounds. His main goal was to preserve the Union, in simple terms, to make the North stronger than the South. By issuing the Proclamation, Lincoln aimed to weaken the Confederacy's war effort, as the Southern enemy states heavily depended on slave labour. This also discouraged European nations from supporting the Confederacy, as many of these countries had already abolished slavery. In conclusion,

while Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation was a very positive action, his primary motivation was to achieve a strategic advantage against the Confederacy in the Civil War. (Foner, E. 2010) Abraham's deception could have easily turned against him; the people who were loyal to him because of his aim to end slavery would have lost trust if they knew his true intention. Deception can be good in the short term, but once the truth comes out, it will turn against you and drag you down.

Now I will discuss how lying can become a habit and something that is done subconsciously. This happened when a man named Lance Armstrong denied using performance-enhancing drugs while winning the Tour de France seven times. What made the situation very noticeable wasn't just the cheating itself; it was how deeply the lying became embedded in his daily life. Lance repeatedly denied many allegations in interviews, convinced sponsors and fans, and maintained the story for over 10 years. Many journalists and psychologists who later studied the case found that after years of repeating the same story, the deception appeared almost automatic and a way of life for Lance Armstrong. His public persona depended on the lie, so telling people the truth would have completely ruined his reputation. The good action was winning the Tour de France seven times, but he won it for the wrong reasons, and what made this even worse is that he deceived people on top of it. He took performance-enhancing drugs (the bad reason), which tricked people into thinking he won fairly when truly he didn't – instead of coming forward with the truth, he continued his lie for a decade.

Habits are commonly formed when the outcome you get from them is positive, and often doing the wrong thing for the right reasons results in a positive outcome. That is how, for some people, it can become a habit and an action they do subconsciously.

Something similar occurred when Henry Ford raised wages. In the early 20th century, Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, made a decision that would impact the mechanical industry and work practices for many generations to come. (Meyer, S. 1981) He famously increased the daily wages of his factory workers from \$2.35 to \$5 in 1914. This was so extraordinary because it was more than double the average wage for industrial workers at the time. This move was admired as a progressive step toward improving the lives of workers, but Ford's motivations were not purely charitable.

The decision to raise wages was beneficial for the employees and a step towards better pay for industrial workers. It improved their standard of living and allowed many workers to afford the same cars they were producing. This wage increase also set a guide that encouraged other industries to follow suit, gradually leading to better pay for workers across all different working sectors. Henry Ford's primary motivation for increasing wages was to enhance business efficiency and profit for his company. Lots of employee replacement was quite costly for the company, as training new workers took time, resources, and money. By offering a higher wage, Ford aimed to keep skilled workers, reduce the number of people absent per day, and increase productivity. This became a habit practiced around the world by big companies or even smaller rising companies trying to make profits. The action Henry took was not the best way of sorting out the problem. People believed he did it for the benefit of the labourers, so they flocked to his company because they thought Ford was looking after his employees when truly he was only looking to benefit his business and gain profits. Now this is a bad habit practiced globally.

Habits can sometimes be advantageous, even when it comes to doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. A clear example of this is the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project was an important event during World War II, marking a drastic turning point in modern history. It was a research and

development project that produced the first nuclear weapons, and it played a crucial role in ending the war. While the project achieved its intended goal to end the war, the morality behind it remains a heavily debated subject. The aim of the Manhattan Project was to develop nuclear weapons before Nazi Germany. However, the moral implications of the Manhattan Project are varied. While it resulted in a faster end to the war, it also introduced the world to the devastating power of nuclear weapons. In the aftermath of the war, the focus was primarily on the victory and the strategic success of the project. The broader public was largely shielded from the full moral implications and the harrowing human cost. If the true reasons behind the Manhattan Project were displayed to the public, the idea probably wouldn't have been motivated, and the war wouldn't have ended as quickly as it did, resulting in lots of deaths. Hiding the truth from the public led to the war ending quickly, but it has affected our future immensely in a negative way. Many countries have nuclear power, and it is a danger to the world. If the idea wasn't supported, the war would have ended, and maybe nuclear power wouldn't have been found or progressed as quickly. Politically, this habit has a positive outcome; if governments can subconsciously hide the truth from the public when making decisions, the action can be made quicker and more effectively. In government, you can't please everyone; this habit will be a particularly good habit to use to try and persuade the country into standing by what you are saying. It is also a good way to prevent riots and rebellion of the state. Ultimately, shielding the truth gains a short-term positive effect, but in the long term, it doesn't result rewardingly. What is meant by this is that if the truth comes out that you have tricked the public repeatedly, your government will start to lose power anyway. The state won't trust anything you say, and that will end up in a reform in Parliament. Once it becomes a habit, it feels almost impossible to break, and it is not easy. Psychologically, you become dependent on your habit, something you do without thinking because it's the easy way out of things. This isn't good because you need to be in the know of what you are doing – you can't just be reliant on what you have been practicing, and to make it worse, if what you are practicing isn't good. Habits can be useful only if they can be controlled and used correctly.

People cover their bad reasons with a good action because it makes them look like a better person, and it helps people agree with what they are doing. Letting people invest in your action even though you are not doing it for the reason they believe you are. But why do they do it? Next, there will be discussions on the psychological factors in which people cover up their bad reasons with a good action. A key example of this is the Iraq dodgy dossier scandal. The Iraq dodgy dossier scandal was when the UK government used the moral requirement of fighting terrorism around the world and defending human rights to build public support for the invasion of Iraq (2003). The concept of this is very understandable; if a government is facing a massive public backlash over a scandal or corrupt practices in parliament, they will deliberately introduce a dramatic, highly emotive, collectively supported idea to command their new policy.

Politicians do the right thing for the wrong reasons for many reasons. One explanation is the concept of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological concept that refers to the mental discomfort felt by a person who has two or more opposing beliefs, values, or attitudes at the same time. This thought process was developed by the psychologist Leon Festinger in the late 1950s. Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person experiences discomfort from holding contradicting beliefs or attitudes. Politicians, like anyone else, want to align their actions with their self-image and moral values to reassure their people. When their decisions are different from their public persona, they may use positive actions to reduce dissonance and justify their behaviour to themselves and the public. Impression management is another critical psychological strategy. Politicians are aware that public

perception can make or break their careers. To manage the impressions they give to people, they might highlight positive actions or policies to overshadow negative ones, effectively controlling what people perceive them as. The Halo effect is also used by politicians. The halo effect is a cognitive bias where the way someone sees a positive trait influences the way they see other traits. By doing good deeds, politicians can create a halo effect, where their overall image is enhanced and made to look better than it is, making it harder for the public to focus on their less favourable actions. Politicians are also susceptible to the social desirability bias, which pushes them to comply with social normalities and expectations.

Everyday people are the same, except they experience moral licensing. Moral licensing is another psychological process. This happens when people have previously engaged in good behaviour; they may feel they have earned the right to make morally questionable choices. Ambiguously, if they engage in questionable actions, they might perform good deeds to "balance the scales" and restore their self-perception as ethical individuals. Another psychological factor is the feeling of guilt and shame. They don't want the people affected to feel bad, so they cover up their bad reason with a good action to save them the feeling of guilt and responsibility for their bad action. When people don't want to face the consequences of their actions, they end up covering their bad reason or moral so they can escape the repercussions of their bad actions. To conclude, the psychological reasons for people doing the right thing for the wrong reasons are so that they don't have to face the consequences of their actions, or so that they can look better in front of people and don't have to face the guilt. Hiding the truth from public view can sometimes have a positive result. This is because sometimes it's not completely necessary for people to know what you're doing, as they won't support your idea and might end up sabotaging it. When people think you are doing it for a better reason, it gives them motivation to contribute and invest in what you're doing and your plans. Ultimately, your action should have a good moral reason because that will invite people to contribute to your action anyway, as it is pleasing to them. Doing this is much easier, instead of tricking them and manipulating them into investing in an action that is morally bad. This way of thinking can also be a show of power and control. You're trying to control what people think of you instead of letting them perceive you in the way that truly represents you.

Finally, after exploring the ethical dilemma of whether it is justifiable to do the right thing for the wrong reasons, a thorough examination and breaking down of various contexts and historical examples provide insight into the complexity that derives from this difficult question. From charitable donations to political decisions, and even the development of nuclear weapons, these scenarios illustrate that while the outcomes might appear beneficial on the surface, the motivations that drive them can come with significant moral and psychological implications.

At the heart of this issue lies the concept of deceit. When individuals or even whole institutions undertake positive actions for selfish, strategic, or deceitful purposes, they mislead others and manipulate the perceptions of the people viewing. This creates a fake image and persona of righteousness, which can foster misguided trust and support. The case of Lance Armstrong serves as a poignant example, highlighting how persistent deceit can erode trust and really tarnish reputations, even when the initial action seemed commendable. Moreover, when people consistently engage in this behaviour, it can become habitual. This is evident in the examples of Henry Ford and the Manhattan Project. While these actions may have had short-term benefits, such as improved worker conditions or a quick end to a war, the long-term consequences include unethical practices and

introducing dangers that outweigh the initial gains. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is a testament to the potential negative impact of actions taken for the wrong reasons.

Psychologically, individuals and leaders often justify their actions through thought processes such as cognitive dissonance, impression management, and moral licensing. These allow them to reconcile their actions with their self-image, often at the cost of ethical integrity. The Iraq dossier scandal illustrates how political agendas can change moral imperatives, leading to decisions that prioritize personal or national interests over genuine ethical considerations.

In conclusion, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is mostly flawed and ethically not right. True ethical action requires a clear alignment between intentions and deeds, grounded in true respect for moral principles. When actions are performed with bad motives, they not only diminish their moral worth but also pave the way for a cycle of manipulation and mistrust. Ultimately, the right thing, when done for the wrong reasons, risks sacrificing long-term ethical integrity for short-term gains that don't last.

Abena Effah, Year 8, St Edward's and St Wilfrid's

Citations:

Foner, E. (2010). *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Meyer, S. (1981). *The Five-Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Raff, D. (1988). Wage Determination Theory and the Five Dollar Day at Ford: A Critical Reassessment. *The Journal of Economic History*, 48(2), 387-399

Marshall, Peter. "Reformation England 1480-1642." Bloomsbury Academic. 2003.

Jarrett, C. (2021). A psychologist's guide to hacking your brain's autopilot. *The Experiment*.!

Cragoe, Carol Davidson. *The Reformation: The People's View*. 2009

<https://aese.psu.edu/teachag/curriculum/modules/bioethics-1/what-are-ethical-frameworks>