

# Actions and Events

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin by distinguishing actions from events, before looking at the ethical and non-ethical factors in action. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Actions and Events](#)
2. [Ethically Relevant Considerations](#)
3. [Ethical and Non-Ethical Considerations](#)

## 1. Actions and Events

To begin with, recall that ethics is the branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong. It does this not only to provide standards of evaluation, but also to guide **actions**.

Actions are only one type of event. Other kinds of events aren't the immediate result of human decision or agency.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The weather, tripping over your shoe laces, bird migration, heart disease, blushing, the current state of the stock market, and so on

Note that some of the events do involve humans. But the important point is that where these events do involve humans, they are not the immediate cause of the event. For instance, we do say things such as "Althea blushed." But when we say that someone blushes, we don't mean they decided to blush, because we know it is unintentional or involuntary. It makes sense to say that blushing is something that "happens to" someone, rather than being something someone "does".

Contrast this with some instances of actions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Remaining dry by using an umbrella, eating unhealthy food, taking your dog for a walk, brushing your teeth, helping your friend move home, and so on.

You should also note that even if someone is not passive in the event (such as blushing), they might still not be the immediate cause. For instance eating unhealthily is an action, but the heart disease that may result is not an action because the unhealthy diet didn't make it happen immediately.



### BIG IDEA

Human events are *not* actions if the agent is either passive or only indirectly involved in it.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Action

An event whose immediate cause is the decision of an agent.

## 2. Ethically Relevant Considerations

When you want to act ethically it is desirable to consider the full impact of your action. Depending on what ethical framework you use, you would need to consider how your actions impact: other people, animals and the environment, society (including customs and institutions), the present and the future, and people's moral character (both your own and others).

When deciding what to do, it is common to overlook these factors. For instance, it may be easier to ignore these factors if you want to keep a good conscience while acting in your self-interest.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Say you wanted moral justification for indulging in cheap fast food. You could choose to ignore the cruel living conditions of the animals you are eating. It could also be the case that you fail to consider all relevant considerations because there are too many to possibly calculate. Many of our actions will have effects that we cannot foresee.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps you take the train one day, not realizing that rail workers are in a dispute over pay and working conditions. By doing so you may have damaged the chances of the employees' battle for a better life for their families.

We cannot always know all relevant ethical considerations because of how many people our actions affect on a day-to-day basis. But it is important not to purposely ignore these considerations.

### 3. Ethical and Non-Ethical Considerations

Any particular situation will likely have a combination of actions and events, and will have a mixture of ethically relevant and non-relevant considerations.

#### IN CONTEXT

Suppose you're deciding how to vote in the next presidential elections. In case your preferred candidate wins, there are many ethical questions to consider when voting. For instance, you might ask, will my preferred candidate: help the disadvantaged, tackle corruption, fight prejudice, encourage fairness?

It would also be ethically relevant to think about how your vote will affect the candidate him- or herself. For instance, you could ask: what kind of person will this candidate become if they win? A political career may make them more sensitive to global problems, but political compromise may also undermine their integrity.

Other non-ethical consideration may also inform your decision. For instance, you might be inclined to vote for the candidate that you find most charismatic or interesting. You might want to vote for the party that your family or friends vote for. The mood you happen to be in on the day of the election might inform your decision. Perhaps you will choose the party with the policies that most directly benefit you.

It should be noted that there is a combination of actions and events in this kind of situation. For instance, deciding you're not going to vote because you think there is little difference between the candidates is an action. But failing to go to the polling station because you woke you with a bad back is an event.

Some situations have no ethically relevant considerations. This is most usual when the situation is comprised of only events; for instance, the place of the earth in its orbit around the sun. This is dictated purely by events, and there are no ethical considerations in play.



#### SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by defining **actions and events**, focusing on the role of the agent in immediately causing and intending an action. Then we looked at some of the **ethically relevant considerations** that we might overlook for various reasons in our day-to-day decisions.

Finally, the mixture of **ethical and non-ethical considerations** in certain situations was examined. This revealed the complexity of a situation when evaluating which choice is morally desirable.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Action

An event whose immediate cause is the decision of an agent.