

# The Evaluation of Actions

by John Lumsden



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will see the different ways that ethics evaluates actions and show how this works in practice by identifying the different actions found in certain situations. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Permissible and Impermissible Actions](#)
2. [Types of Permissible Action](#)
3. [Evaluating Actions](#)

## 1. Permissible and Impermissible Actions

To begin with, recall that an action is an event that is immediately caused by an agent's decision. Actions are often evaluated and prescribed by ethics. To do this, ethics has different ways to talk about the morality of actions.

The most general terms ethics uses to evaluate actions are permissible and impermissible. If an action is **permissible**, then it is not banned or prohibited by morality. If an action is **impermissible**, then it is banned or prohibited by morality.

### IN CONTEXT

Imagine you are stuck in traffic. You have been waiting behind a driver who is slow to respond to the movement of the lane, and you notice that this is because they are distracting themselves with their phone.

Out of frustration you may honk your horn or even drive into the back of their vehicle to get their attention. The first would be morally permissible. But the second would be morally impermissible because you would be damaging their property.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Permissible

An action that is not wrong to perform.

#### Impermissible

An action that is wrong to perform.

## 2. Types of Permissible Action

All actions are either permissible or impermissible, but if an action is permissible there is still more that ethics can say about it. In other words, there are different types of morally permissible actions. These are called **obligatory**, **neutral**, and **supererogatory**.

These terms all indicate actions that aren't wrong. To see the difference between each more clearly, let's think about a situation and the possible actions in response to it.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Imagine you witness a thief fleeing a bank they just robbed. You could choose to go on with your day as normal. This is a permissible action; more specifically, it is neutral because, although it's not wrong for you to do so, it isn't right either.

Alternatively, you could pursue the bank robber in an attempt to get the money back. This is also a permissible action. But you would actually be doing more than what is morally required. That is, it is supererogatory. In contrast to this, it is obligatory for the police to try to apprehend the robber because that is part of the duty they signed up for. Of course, we know that the action of the robber is impermissible.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Obligatory

An action that it is wrong not to perform.

#### Neutral

An action that is neither right nor wrong to perform.

#### Supererogatory

An action that morally exceeds that which is obligatory.

## 3. Evaluating Actions

There are many situations in life where there are several different actions involved that can be evaluated as either permissible or impermissible, of which the permissible actions can be further evaluated as obligatory, neutral, or supererogatory.



Consider the following situation and think about how to evaluate the actions. Imagine you find out that a world leader has knowingly used misinformation to justify going to war. In response, you contact the authorities to try to put an end to an unjustified war, then contact the press to inform people of the situation. Then you volunteer to help the injured in battle.

How did you evaluate these actions? It is impermissible for the world leader to lie and to put lives at risk without proper justification. Your actions are permissible, but in different ways.

Contacting the authorities is obligatory since you ought to stop death and injury when you aren't placed in danger. Contacting the press is neither right nor wrong. And volunteering is supererogatory because you are putting yourself at risk for the benefit of others.

#### SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by distinguishing **permissible and impermissible actions**, highlighting the fact that all ethical evaluation must be made in these terms. Then we went into more detail regarding the **types of permissible actions**.

Finally, we had a go at **evaluating actions** in a specific situation, identifying the impermissible and permissible and then seeing how the permissible actions separated into obligatory, neutral, and supererogatory.

#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Impermissible

An action that it is wrong to perform.

##### Neutral

An action that is neither right nor wrong to perform.

##### Obligatory

An action that it is wrong not to perform.

##### Permissible

An action that is not wrong to perform.

##### Supererogatory

An action that morally exceeds that which is obligatory.