

*What Choice Leads To The Best Outcome?*

While virtue ethics suggests that we should think about character and Kantian-style deontological ethics aims at a choice derived from duty – all things that stand prior to your choice -- a consequentialist is more interested in what happens *after* you choose. What decision will yield the best outcome? Consequentialist moral reasoning also requires you to make some decisions about what constitutes a good or a bad outcome. For the moment, let's assume that you believe that your moral goal is to minimize or avoid harm, if possible, and to promote the happiness and well-being of everyone concerned..

Kelly has given you a choice that can have a number of likely results. If you choose not to tell Taylor and Kelly breaks off the affair without Taylor ever being any the wiser, it's possible that all could be well. No one would need to be unduly upset, and Kelly would have an opportunity to work to improve their relationship. Still, Taylor could learn of the affair later from some other source, which would cause harm to Taylor and open damage to Taylor's relationship with Kelly. If you choose not to tell Taylor and Kelly continues the affair, then you are enabling Kelly's deceptive behavior, but if Taylor still never finds out, it's still possible for things to go reasonably well. Of course, experience suggests that secrets of this kind are ultimately difficult to keep, and the longer the deceit continues, the more likely it is that Taylor will discover it, with or without your help. If the affair continues and Taylor discovers the truth without your assistance, things could go very, very badly – Taylor will certainly be hurt by Kelly's behavior, and if your complicity in hiding Kelly's infidelity is uncovered, then that will cause further harm, especially to your relationship with Taylor. There may also be negative outcomes for Kelly and Taylor's children (especially if their parents' relationship ends badly) and for the spouse and family of Kelly's coworker/fellow cheater. If you tell Taylor what you know, you run the risk of doing rather a lot of damage all at once: Kelly will be hurt, Taylor will be hurt, their relationship to each other and their respective relationships with you will be harmed, and you may also be hurt yourself.

If you approach this puzzle from the position of an act utilitarian, you will need to answer one question for yourself: is your ultimatum to Kelly the best approach you could take, or should you make a different choice (either to keep Kelly's secret or to reveal it immediately to Taylor)? It appears to you, once you consider all of the likely outcomes, that while there are no entirely harmless options for you in this case, your original ultimatum minimizes damage and promotes a happier ending. The main reason your choice to encourage Kelly to be truthful and to end the affair (and to break the news yourself if Kelly does not) is preferable to either keeping the secret or telling immediately is because it accomplishes two