

Finding counterexamples

If product x is (a) completely harmless, (b) makes everyone's life better no matter what, and (c) can be readily understood by young children, then it is permissible to market x to children.

If any of (a), (b), or (c) is false, then it is wrong to market x to children.

Some good rules of thumb for finding counterexamples:

1. **Don't forget that you have two conditionals!**
2. Pick the conditional most open to counterexample:
 - a. This is typically the more controversial conditional
 - b. Or the most expansive conditional (the antecedent applies to more situations – the one with “or”)
3. Consider examples right near the borderline between the conditionals.
 - a. These are cases that just barely fit the antecedent of the conditional the counterexample is relevant to.
 - i. When the antecedent says “If (a) *or* (b) *or* (c), then...” look at cases where only one of these conditions is met, and the others are not.
 - b. Don't be afraid to add a lot of details that make your view look bad, even if they are very unlikely to occur. You only need to show that there is a *single* counterexample, even if it is a very rare type of case.
 - i. If the antecedent has a lot of “or” conditions, make just one of them met, and just barely, while the others are maximally *unmet*.
 - c. Alternately: think of features that are not mentioned at all in the antecedent. Are there situations in which one of these might seem really important?

Responding to counterexamples

Thesis: if person A is competent and chooses to sell a service which should be illegal, and A is not physically threatened by anyone into selling this service, then A's actions are morally wrong.

Part 2

Monty is a single father of a young child. The child needs expensive medical treatment, which insurance does not cover and which Monty cannot pay for with his current job. Monty knows of no legal options for getting this money – his family and friends do not have enough money to pay for the treatment (even if they pool their resources), his credit cards do not have a high enough limit to cover the treatment, and no one will loan him the money. If his child does not receive this treatment, the child will experience horrible pain for months and then die. Monty's boss offers Monty a lot of money if Monty will help the boss cheat on her income taxes; his boss will not give him the money unless Monty helps her. Monty chooses to help her. Cheating on one's taxes should be illegal – states serve morally crucial functions, but could not exist without taxes, and could not exist if they let people get away with cheating on their taxes. So Monty is choosing to sell a service which should be illegal, and Monty is not physically threatened into doing so. Even so, it is intuitively permissible for him to do so.

This is because it seems permissible for parents to do things that are ordinarily wrong in order to save their children's lives, as long as they don't do more harm to others than they benefit their children. Helping his boss cheat on her taxes does relatively little harm – the state will function fine without one person's taxes – so it meets this condition. Further, whatever is wrong about cheating on one's taxes is less important than the life of a child. Other illegal means of getting the money to save the child (e.g. stealing, mugging, murdering rich people) are much worse, and more wrong, than cheating on taxes. So it is permissible for Monty to choose to help his boss here, even though his choice is competent and Monty is not being physically threatened.

Part 3 (version a)

It is clear that the best option available to Monty is to help his boss cheat on her taxes, and save his child's life. But the best option is not always the permissible one, and in this case the best option is in fact wrong. This is because it is wrong to implicate other people in harmful actions they would not consent to, even if this is to help those people. For example, imagine that A goes into debt to buy B a birthday present, and B would be strongly opposed to A's going into debt for this reason. This is immoral, because it implicates B in the harm to A, and B does not want to be implicated in this way. [more argument needed] In Monty's case, Monty is basically being forced into breaking the law against his will, which is a harmful and degrading experience. Monty's child would not want Monty to experience these harms, and so Monty is implicating the child in these harms against the child's will. So, Monty is wronging the child for the child's benefit; this is wrong even if it is best for the child...

Question: Could we add details to the counterexample in Part 2 so that this response no longer works?

Part 3 (version b)

I agree that what Monty does here is permissible. However, Monty cannot be competent in this situation, and so this case is not relevant to my thesis. Psychological research of parents whose children are close to death shows that these parents lose certain cognitive capacities, rendering them incompetent to make serious choices ... [I don't actually know this is true, and if you were to claim something like this in your paper, you'd need scientific evidence to back it up]

Part 3 (version c)

I share the feeling that Monty's behavior is permissible, but we should not trust this reaction to this example. It is based on morally unimportant aspects of the case. To see why, imagine a somewhat different case. In this version, there is a child with the exact same condition, who is a stranger to Monty and lives in a different country. Monty has never met this child, but hears about their condition. The child's family cannot afford medical treatment for the child. Monty is moved by the child's plight, so he approaches his boss and tells her that he will help her cheat on her taxes for money, which money he then sends to save the child. The people I've talked to tend to see this as wrong, even if they see Monty's behavior as permissible in the original example. But sick children are sick children, no matter who or where they are. If it is morally permissible to sell tax fraud services to help *nearby* sick children, then it should be permissible to do so to help sick children that are far away [more argument would be needed]. But the identify and location of the children makes a big difference to our reactions to this case. This means that our reactions are affected by morally irrelevant features of the case, and we should not trust them. So this is not a good counterexample to my thesis.

Question: Is this response potentially overlooking an important difference between the example in Part 2 and the example it discusses?

Writing style

My thesis is: *If a person takes a job as an executive for a company they do not own, then they have done something morally wrong.*

My thesis is counterintuitive. It might initially seem more plausible to say that it is always permissible to take a job as an executive for a company one does not own. This can be rephrased as a conditional: If A takes a job as an executive for a company A does not own, this is morally permissible. Since this is a conditional, it can be disproved with one counterexample. Imagine that A is considering taking a job for Geno-corp. Geno-corp's entire goal is to find states that commit genocide, and to provide tools that make these genocides faster and more efficient. It is clearly immoral to become an executive at this company.

This shows us that it is wrong to take a job with a company when one knows that the goal of the company is to do immoral things. This suggests that those who disagree with me should endorse the following view: if one does not know that their job will involve immoral behavior, then it is permissible to take a job as an executive for a company they do not own. But this is still false. To see why, start by noting the following: it is always possible that the owners of a company will ask executives to do something seriously immoral. We might often not expect that this will happen, but we can never be sure that it won't. So, when a person takes a job as an executive, they have to plan for this possibility. They will plan to do one of two things: to do what they are asked, or to plan not to. As I will now show, both are wrong.

If the person takes this job planning to do what they are asked, then they are taking the job planning to do something seriously immoral. Whenever someone makes a plan for a particular situation to do something seriously immoral, it is morally wrong to make this plan, even if the situation they are planning for is unlikely to occur. To see why, imagine that Fred is heading the park, and brings his gun. Joe asks Fred, "Why are you bringing the gun?" Fred says, "Well, if I see any infants frolicking, I'm going to shoot them." It is wrong for Fred to go to the park with this plan, whether or not he actually carries it out, and whether or not he thinks it is likely that there will be infants at the park...

What if this person takes this job planning to *not* do what they are asked? In that case, they are deceiving their future employers. If someone deceives their future employers, this is morally wrong ...

One might object that I have not really considered all of the possibilities. For example, one might enter into a contract that specifically states that the executive is not agreeing to do anything immoral. In that case, one might argue, the executive would neither be planning to do something morally wrong nor deceiving their employers...

Another objection is that it can be permissible to plan to do something wrong in the future, as long as one has good enough reasons now to make that plan, or if it is too costly to not make that plan. For example...