

UNITED WISDOM

The Lesser Evil: Conditions and the Danger of Self-Justification

Freedom and Action

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A-16-N04 · EN

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Epigraph

> *actions are in the class of particulars*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III.1, short excerpt from W. D. Ross's translation. The context considers actions under pressure; the excerpt does not say that general ethical constraints disappear.

What this article is about

A workshop discovers that a batch does not match its promised description. Correction would delay delivery and reduce income. Its manager proposes sending the products now: otherwise the workshop could lose the order and employees part of their pay. He calls it the lesser evil, comparing a defect the buyer might not notice with the team's readily imaginable loss. This hypothetical scene does not establish the defect's seriousness or all the agreements. It therefore supplies no ready decision. It shows how quickly a comparison becomes permission when the person bearing the chosen loss disappears from view.

Sometimes available actions really do leave substantial harm. At other times, two bad options are named too early and a third is never discussed. The ethical work lies in distinguishing these cases, examining consequences, and retaining responsibility for one's choice. Lesser needs comparison; evil needs acknowledgment of what remains wrong or painful. We will consider how to examine necessity, who bears the decision's cost, and why regret is different from justification. This concerns ordinary ethical decisions, rather than permission to break the law, conceal risks, or handle emergencies independently.

I. The Formula Must Name What Is Being Compared

The manager sounds persuasive because he knows the team personally. Lost pay can easily be imagined through faces, dates, and household consequences. The buyer currently exists as a party to an order who might notice nothing. This difference in visibility does not prove that the buyer's harm is smaller. Before comparing, describe what changed in the product, what was promised, and the use the buyer intends. Something unknown cannot be considered insignificant simply because it lies outside the familiar workshop.

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Harm is not reducible to one number either. Reduced income, delay, lost trust, an unsuitable result, and repeated work differ in kind. Money can sometimes express part of a loss, but not every consequence becomes an equivalent sum. Even a financially minor defect may deprive a buyer of choice. If the proposal depends on the buyer not learning the truth, that circumstance belongs in evaluating the action. It is not a neutral technique for making the calculation convenient.

One must also identify one's own share of the cost. The manager may lose profit, the team wages, and the buyer quality. A collective we can conceal that these losses are distributed differently. It makes a decision resemble shared self-restraint even when part of the cost falls on an absent person. In this scene, distinguish what the decision-maker loses, what consenting participants lose, and what is imposed on people who did not choose. This is an author-designed distinction, rather than universal moral arithmetic.

A precise description sometimes changes the question itself. Instead of sending the batch or going bankrupt, the question may become what happens if the discrepancy is truthfully disclosed and another deadline discussed. This proves neither the buyer's consent nor the disappearance of losses. It permits discussion of the actual choice. If lesser harm appears only after excluding consequences for the other party, comparison is unfinished. Beginning honestly brings back those whose absence made one's own advantage look like an indisputably more important good.

II. Two Named Options Do Not Yet Exhaust the Choice

The manager names dispatch and abandoning the order altogether. Between them there may be warning, partial replacement, additional time, separate agreement to an altered result, or another producer. These possibilities cannot be presumed in advance. Their absence also requires checking, particularly when a decision is called necessary. Time for clarification is limited, but that limit does not make the first proposed dilemma the only one. In our scene, one concrete starting question is whether we are willing to tell the buyer what we already know.

A third possibility need not be pleasant. An open conversation may cost the order and reveal the workshop's mistake. That is sometimes precisely why it is omitted: it disrupts the picture of two inevitable disasters between which the manager chooses heroically. Unpleasant acknowledgment of responsibility differs from having no action available. If an option is rejected mainly because it exposes one's contribution to the problem, necessity becomes a way of avoiding that contribution's assessment rather than the result of a complete capacity check.

Searching for alternatives also has limits. A person cannot be required to exhaust every imaginable solution in every difficult case. A proportionate check in an ordinary workshop

might mean clarifying order terms, assessing correction, and hearing the buyer's answer. Available knowledge matters, rather than a fantasy of perfect foresight. Record what was actually considered, what was rejected for substantial reasons, and what remains unknown. A list assembled afterwards solely to defend a decision is no substitute for that distinction.

If bad options remain after checking, they are not thereby equally permissible. One may involve deception, another an honestly acknowledged income loss. The loss's severity and the action's character need discussion together. Someone will suffer anyway is too broad: it makes how, why, and with whose consent the consequence arises seem irrelevant. Recognising that losses cannot all be avoided accepts the situation's difficulty. It does not grant permission to choose whatever method suits the person controlling its description.

III. Pressure Does Not Erase a Person's Participation

In III.1, Aristotle considers actions that would not be chosen in themselves but are taken under particular difficult conditions; his example includes throwing cargo overboard in a storm. He retains the question of an action's source in its agent and distinguishes assessment at the moment of choice from assessment in the abstract. This limited philosophical comparison helps separate pressure from complete absence of participation. It does not equate a modern workshop with a ship in immediate danger or declare every financial shortage compulsion.

The manager may face deadlines, commitments to the team, and his own planning mistake. The pressure is real. He still chooses what to disclose, who may respond, and which loss matters. That participation needs assessment. Circumstances forced me sometimes describes having no available action and sometimes conceals a preferred action. Distinguish these meanings through a particular question: what remained within my power once conditions were already as they were?

Participation does not mean equal responsibility for everything. An employee may not have set deadlines, known about the defect, or held authority to speak to the buyer. Their position differs from the manager's. A general instruction nevertheless does not automatically deprive everyone of every choice. Name the role, available knowledge, and limits of authority without demanding universal heroism. A difficult assessment need not end in a collective verdict on the team. It can distinguish creating the problem, deciding to conceal it, and individual subsequent actions.

Such particularity preserves correction. If only an evil situation is acknowledged, one's action becomes inaccessible to reconsideration. If only a bad person is acknowledged, real constraints disappear. Holding both levels is more useful in the workshop: what made choosing difficult, and what method of addressing that difficulty was accepted. Explaining

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conditions can reduce unfair condemnation without justifying every subsequent step. Explanation and permission remain significantly different even when regret is sincere.

IV. Consequences Need Grounds Rather Than Convenient Certainty

The manager feels certain that the buyer will not suffer substantially. That certainty may rest on technical knowledge or a wish to finish the discussion. The hypothetical scene establishes no product characteristics and supplies no technical advice. The ethical question begins with honestly distinguishing knowledge from supposition. If a decision depends on assumed use by someone else, acknowledge it as an assumption. Uncertainty does not always prohibit action, but must not silently become a guarantee of a favourable result.

Near Chapter V's end, Mill allows exceptional cases in which a more significant social duty changes the application of an ordinary requirement of justice. His emergency examples belong to his philosophical argument. They supply no contemporary legal permission and are not used here as a guide to coercion. For this article, the significant point is that an exception needs strong grounds rather than a single benefit. Comparison with Mill preserves the difference between utilitarian reasoning and positions in which some means have an independent prohibition.

An honest account of consequences also includes later trust. The batch might be accepted, but discovery of a concealed discrepancy could make the buyer stop relying on workshop statements. This is a possible, not measured, consequence. Include it alongside the hoped-for preservation of pay, rather than treating one as guaranteed and dismissing the other as an unlikely trifle without grounds. When benefits are estimated confidently and costs relegated to mere hypotheses, comparison becomes asymmetric before any result is chosen.

There is no need to invent a percentage of moral correctness. Identify significant consequences, the extent of knowledge, and who can clarify uncertainty. The buyer can explain whether the intended task permits an altered product; the manager can specify possible correction time. Their conversation guarantees no agreed solution, but supplies missing knowledge and the affected person's participation. In an ordinary situation, this is often an available alternative to privately deciding for someone and subsequently describing that decision as compelled care for them.

V. A Good End Does Not Authorise Every Means

Preserving employees' pay is a significant end. Acknowledging it does not automatically settle whether concealed dispatch is permissible. When helping one person transfers an unagreed loss to another, that method needs examination alongside the intended result. Objecting to the means does not show indifference to the team. Sympathy for the team does not require closing the buyer's question. Ethical discussion becomes poorer when every clarification is declared taking sides and people must first prove the right loyalty.

Romans 3:5–8 rejects an argument attributed by opponents about doing evil so that good may come. It is a polemic concerning God's righteousness, human unrighteousness, and judgment, with its own theological setting. The brief key quotation exhibits the rejected move rather than advising it. The limited comparison questions the lesser-evil formula's transformation into permission. It establishes no identity between the Christian position, Aristotle's analysis, and utilitarian comparison; their grounds and possible answers differ.

In the workshop, a simple imagined change can examine the means. If the buyer knew what mattered and refused, would our action still be the same offer? If it works only through their ignorance, that belongs to its ethical character. The question replaces neither law nor professional requirements. It reveals that the issue concerns not only allocating losses but depriving another party of an opportunity to respond. The resulting product's usefulness does not necessarily replace that lost choice, particularly where a definite promise was made.

Assessing means is difficult precisely when the end evokes strong sympathy. Someone can sincerely see himself as a protector while overlooking who pays for his action. Examination must therefore not depend on confessing bad intentions. Describe the action and available consent. The manager may want good for employees while choosing to conceal a discrepancy. Those facts can coexist. Their coexistence makes intention neither meaningless nor capable of absorbing responsibility for the method.

VI. Self-Justification Can Be Examined Without Diagnosing Character

People rarely tell themselves that they have conveniently distorted a comparison. More often, they notice postponing a question that is unpleasant to answer. The manager did not clarify the product's use, represented the buyer's refusal as inevitable, and called lost profit a threat to the entire workshop. No single sign proves a hidden motive. Each brings back a particular question. Examining self-justification begins with an omitted ground, rather than confidently reading another person's psychology or one's own secret character.

One question concerns exchanging roles. As the buyer, would the manager consider the absence of warning equally insignificant? The answer alone establishes no moral truth: different roles carry different knowledge and obligations. Yet a sharp change in requirements may reveal an unnoticed advantage given to one's own side. That advantage then needs a substantial explanation beyond personal closeness. The check preserves differences between roles while preventing those differences from becoming ready justification for every asymmetry.

Another question concerns describing the decision. Could it be explained to the affected person without removing something significant? This does not demand making everything public. Private information and professional limits remain. If an intelligible account is impossible only because it would reveal how a loss was transferred, acknowledge that fact. They will not understand may describe a genuinely difficult conversation, but it does not prove that excluding their voice improves the decision. Difficulty explaining and lack of grounds are different cases.

Finally, ask what could change the decision. If no clarification, buyer response, or other option is taken seriously anymore, comparison may have ended before discussion. This observation establishes no bad faith, but makes an honest description of the stage necessary: we are defending a choice rather than choosing. Recognising the stage helps restore one significant question. This author-designed check is no psychological test, promises to expose no complete set of motives, and does not replace assessment of the actual action.

VII. Remaining Loss Does Not Disappear After a Justified Choice

Suppose the workshop disclosed the discrepancy and agreed a later replacement. The team still lost some pay and the buyer some time. A more open method does not make the situation painless. The manager can recognise both losses without claiming that a proper conversation must deliver a good result for everyone. This especially matters for the lesser-evil formula: even a justified comparison does not turn remaining harm into good. If it cannot be removed, it can still be accurately named without requiring approval from the person affected.

Acknowledging loss does not mean indefinite self-accusation. It may mean a particular correction, an agreed contribution to repeated work, or a changed future promise. Its extent depends on circumstances and separate agreement, rather than a wish to settle every difficult feeling with one large gesture. The scene cannot prescribe compensation or a legal duty in advance. It can preserve questions about what arose through the workshop's fault, what consequences remain, and which next action both parties have actually accepted.

If the products were dispatched secretly, acknowledgment after discovery should not repeat the earlier pattern. We did it for the workers explains a motive but does not correct the

absence of warning. Name the discrepancy, acknowledge choosing to conceal it, and hear the buyer's particular consequence. One need not describe oneself as entirely bad. One needs to stop using a worthy end as an answer to a question about another action. Restored trust is not guaranteed; the other party retains the right to change future participation.

Memory of loss also matters for changing conditions. Insufficient time may have arisen from an overconfident promise, unclear checking, or silent expansion of the order. Conditions do not automatically justify concealment, but help prevent the same conflict. If management calls every occurrence inevitable without changing how it promises, necessity becomes a habitual story. A more responsible approach examines not only choices within a ready-made dilemma, but one's contribution to how future dilemmas are arranged.

VIII. A Limited Exception Must Not Quietly Become a Rule

The first decision is called compelled, the second proven, the third normal practice. This sequence does not prove every repetition wrong. It requires examining the exception's grounds again. A predictably recurring situation allows more preparation, warning, or limitation of promises. What was unexpected once need not remain unexpected after several similar cases. An earlier justification cannot automatically carry forward without considering increased knowledge and one's opportunity to prevent the conflict.

An exception needs a definite subject. What is permitted or reconsidered, under which conditions, and within what limits? A buyer's agreement to accept a different characteristic in this batch does not authorise silently changing later batches. An agreed postponement establishes no indefinite right to delay. Even habitual flexibility needs checking against real words and expectations. General trust does not become a blank page on which one side may write any terms for the other.

Lesser-evil reasoning itself needs limits. It can show that available actions have different serious consequences. It supplies no universal indulgence, establishes no precise moral score, and does not abolish distinctions among harm, falsehood, and unpleasantness. After checking, someone might find a permissible difficult choice, a means they may not use, or uncertainty requiring another person's participation. Honest reasoning must leave all these outcomes open rather than become a machine producing one permission wanted in advance.

The scene's first available step is accurately describing the discrepancy and realistic correction options. What follows depends on responses and circumstances we do not possess. The article does not conceal that uncertainty with a ready moral. It proposes considering necessity, alternatives, the means' character, the distribution of losses, and one's participation together. Lesser evil remains a serious name when it makes neither another person's cost invisible nor one's own good end a sufficient explanation of every action.

What this means in practice

Choose an ordinary situation in which you already say that otherwise things will be worse. Record the two named actions without justifying adjectives. For each, identify a significant consequence, the person affected, and how you know. Name uncertainty separately. Assign people no different degrees of dignity and make your own difficult feeling no sole measure of harm. Where threats, health, law, or professional safety are involved, this practice replaces neither competent decisions nor the relevant procedure.

Check one available alternative omitted from the first description. It may involve clarification, open communication, another deadline, or a limited task. If rejecting it, identify why it really is unavailable. Distinguish consequences' severity from the chosen means' character. Ask whose consent matters and why the decision assumes their voice is absent. Do not declare a method permissible solely because the desired result evokes sympathy.

Exchange roles in the imagined scene and examine which requirements survive. This is not a hidden-motive test, but a way to notice asymmetric grounds. Identify a fact capable of changing the decision. If none exists, acknowledge defending an already chosen action and return one omitted question to discussion. Do not demand everyone's complete agreement as a guarantee of correctness; preserve objection and the limits of your knowledge.

After acting, check the particular loss and your promised correction. What remains, who needs a message, and what future condition can change? This author-designed practice carries no research efficacy claim and grants no permission to break the law. It aims at a more precise account of choice, so that good intention does not erase means, compulsion does not conceal available alternatives, and a justified decision does not make remaining harm nonexistent.

Key quotation

> *Let us do evil, that good may come?*

Romans 3:8, short excerpt, King James Version. This is a rejected argument reported as unfairly attributed to the epistle's author, rather than an approved rule. Its theological context is retained.

Connections between traditions

Source	Context	Limited comparison	Difference retained
Aristotle, III.1	Mixed actions in difficult conditions	Pressure and participation need distinguishing	The workshop is not declared a ship in a storm
Mill, V, conclusion	Exceptional cases and a stronger social duty	Exceptions need substantial grounds	Philosophical examples supply no legal permission
Romans 3:5–8	Rejected argument about evil for good	An end does not automatically justify	Theological polemic differs from utilitarian calculation
United Wisdom	Hypothetical workshop	Alternatives, means, cost, and correction	The authors' sequence is not attributed to sources

Sources

• Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book III, W. D. Ross, MIT Classics. Continuous selected III.1 context was read, web lines 27–46; mixed actions, cargo in a storm, and an agent's participation are used. The epigraph is a short III.1 excerpt. Not all actions under pressure are declared permissible.

• John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism, Chapter V, Project Gutenberg 11224. Seventh edition, 1879. Selected duty passages and the concluding passage, web lines 459–466, were read; 461–463 is used here. Emergency examples are not reproduced as instructions or contemporary legal grounds.

• Romans, King James Version, Wikisource. Continuous Romans 3:1–8 was read, web lines 253–266; 3:5–8 is used. The key quotation is the short rejected argument within 3:8. Edition rights are not declared established worldwide; full sources are not imported.

Tags

ethics, lesser evil, choice, harm, means, end, consequence, necessity, alternative, pressure, circumstances, self-justification, responsibility, consent, buyer, promise, quality, trust, uncertainty, comparison, loss, correction, exception, rule, dignity, Aristotle, Mill, Romans

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