

Does the End Justify the Means? Moral Dilemmas

Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Civics

Lesson Duration: One to two class periods

Student Objectives

- Discuss the question, “Does the end justify the means?”
- Choose an event that raises a moral dilemma.
- Write an essay about the event that explores whether its ends justify its means.

Materials

- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: Historical Heroes*
Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- What Causes Revolutions?
 - Prisoner Jean Valjean Is Transformed into Mayor Madeline
 - Javert Hunts Down Valjean
 - Valjean and Javert Meet during the Insurrection of 1832
 - Hugo's *Les Misérables* Holds Messages for Today
-
- Computer with Internet access
 - Paper and pencils

Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by showing the program segments for “Great Books: *Les Misérables*.”
2. Discuss the segment’s themes. To help spur conversation, ask the following questions:
 - What do you think of the behavior of the people featured?
 - Do you think they were justified in behaving the way they did?
 - Do you think they would have behaved differently under different circumstances?
 - Do you think they had different choices other than the ones they made?

- Did the ends ultimately justify the means?
3. Throughout the discussion, help students understand that people may behave in ways they might not otherwise just to survive. It could be argued that Jean Valjean, the main character in Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Misérables*, fell into this category. This is often referred to as "the ends justifying the means," meaning that the result—in both cases, survival—is worth any sacrifices made along the way.
 4. Divide students into groups of three or four. Tell them that their challenge is to select an event and explore it by asking questions similar to those in Step #2. Students may select any event that raises a moral dilemma. Possible topics include:
 - War on terrorism
 - The invasion of Iraq
 - Heightened security procedures at airports and in public buildings
 - The use of negative ads in political campaigns
 5. Allow enough class time to work on the project. Then, have each group write a short essay explaining why in this event the ends do or do not justify the means. They may research the topics on the Internet for more information, but students should use the assignment as an opportunity to consider their own positions regarding difficult, often ambiguous, situations, as well as the consequences of actions.
 6. During the next class period, have students share their essays. What conclusions did they draw? Did they find it difficult to answer the question? Encourage students to explain why they found the assignment challenging.
 7. Conclude the lesson by asking students what they learned from this activity. Did it make them look at the world differently? Did it influence the way they assess the outcome of world events? Poll the class to find out if they feel differently now than they did before the assignment when asked, "Do the ends justify the means?"

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students participated actively in class discussions; considered the issues very thoughtfully and carefully; worked well with their group in developing a well-constructed essay.
- **2 points:** Students participated somewhat actively in class discussions; considered the issues thoughtfully and carefully; worked reasonably well with their group in developing a competent essay.
- **1 point:** Students did not participate in class discussions; had difficulty considering the issues; had trouble working with their group in developing an essay.

Vocabulary

Les Misérables

Definition: Victor Hugo's classic novel, published in 1862, explores the difficulty of leading an honest life under cruel circumstances.

Context: Jean Valjean, the main character in *Les Misérables*, struggled to lead an honest, productive life.

moral dilemma

Definition: A problem in which there is no clear right or wrong resolution

Context: If all your friends are cheating on a test, you are faced with a moral dilemma: Should you tell the teacher or keep quiet so that you don't lose your friends?

"The end justifies the means."

Definition: An expression that says an individual, group, or nation is justified in taking action, even if it's morally questionable, to reach a goal or objective

Context: Many people believe that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II was a case in which the ends justified the means because, although many people died, the war came to an end.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media; Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process, Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing, Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions, Gathers and uses information for research purposes poses

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

NCSS has developed national guidelines for teaching social studies. To become a member of NCSS, or to view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org>

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Individual Development and Identity
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Civic Ideals and Practices

Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

