CS 59866 – Senior Design Ethics Component

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Reaction Paper - Week 3

The Trolley cart problem has been thoroughly discussed throughout the ages to gauge the decisions of many. The article from Brandeis University about the Trolley problem entails the difficult choice between flipping a lever and choosing to let one worker die or not flipping the lever and letting five workers die. This is a very difficult choice due to the various different perspectives one may have upon the subject. One may choose to flip the lever and believe they are saving five lives, or one may not flip the lever so at they do not have the conscience of murdering the one person. In my opinion, I would choose to flip the lever and save the five people. Even though some might view my decision as murder, I believe that it is generally best to first analyze situation and then go for the option that minimizes the loss. This thought process was inspired from my Artificial Intelligence class because of a similar scenario to the Trolley problem. My AI professor explained to his students in detail about a scenario where a developer for the self-driving car company had to write AI decision making in extreme cases such as accidents. The developers choose to prioritize the self-driving car’s path in a way to maximize passenger safety, then pedestrian safety and if possible, reduce damage to structures. The choices the developer made in this situation are critical because it shows that he made decisions for the self-interest of the company. Another way I looked at this scenario is that the developer programming AI that decides who lives and who dies in accidental scenarios. This type of programming may seem evil, but it is a necessary evil because otherwise without this type of programming even more casualties might happen. In fact, without this type of programming who would buy a car that wasn’t programmed to prioritize the customer’s safety. This situation that my professor exclaimed had a very deep impact on me because it opened my mind to the idea developers may have to make difficult decisions. In my opinion in these difficult ethical scenarios, one should make the decision that minimize the loss. Therefore, in the trolley problem I would choose to flip the lever to save the five workers because by doing that I would minimize the loss by only allowing one death instead of five.

In the article Killing, Letting Die, And the Trolley Problem by Judith Jarvis Thompson it is stated that killing is considered worse than letting die. It is also stated a scenario where Alfred, hates his wife so he puts cleaning fluid in her coffee and thereby killing her. In another scenario it is stated that Bert hates his wife and wants her dead, he accidentally puts cleaning fluid in her coffee thinking its cream. Bert also happens to have the antidote to the cleaning fluid, but he doesn’t give it to her, and he lets her die. In addition, it is stated that what Bert just as bad as what Alfred did and that this is a bad argument. I disagree that this is a bad argument but instead this is a bad classification. In my opinion the classification of the problem goes as the following an accidental murder turned into an intentional murder. Since Bert accidentally gave his wife cleaning fluid in her tea, it means that he had committed an accident which up to that point makes it an unintentional murder. However, since Bert’s wife is dying by Bert’s direct action even if accidental and the fact that he possesses the antidote in which he chooses not to use on his wife because he wants her to die is basically committing intentional murder. Therefore, I believe that this situation is badly interpreted by the author because in both situations it is the characters are killing their wives even if intentional or unintentional. As a result, I believe that killing is still worse than letting die. I also believe that this statement is badly interpreted a lot because letting die is only really applicable if the person is not directly involved with the person dying.

The article from the Fast Company, Why the Trolley Dilemma is a terrible model for trying to make self-driving cars safer, considers that the Trolley problem is not the best way to think about ethics especially during programming self-driving cars. I somewhat agree and disagree with the article from Fast Company. In the article from Fast Company, they state that these dilemmas don’t reflect reality because unlike the Trolley dilemma there is never a perfect 50-50 chance of killing someone in reality. While this is true, that reality is far more complex than the Trolley problem and therefore, you can claim that the Trolley problem is not best suited in the ethics for self-driving cars. It is also true that the Trolley dilemma is much easier example to program for self-driving cars. While I agree that there is most likely a better scenario than the Trolley problem, I can’t agree that it is not suited for self-driving cars because there is no other ethics problem so widespread and with as much ease to understand and program some logic based on it. The Trolley problem may not be the best dilemma, but it allows programmers to be able to program the AI of the self-driving car in a more ethical and moral way than they would’ve without the Trolley dilemma.