

Topic 2: **Deontology and Teleology**

Prologue

What guides our actions, our judgements, or our cognition as a whole? How does one decide if an action should be justified to be done? Philosophers have proposed two ideologies, or rather, modes of operation one may utilise - deontology and teleology, and they shall be the subject of discussion.

Definitions

As for any philosophical discussion goes, it is important to first establish the subject. The ideas shall be defined as follows.

Deontology: An idea that suggests actions should be judged according to a clear set of rules, regardless of their intended end purpose.

Teleology: An idea that suggests actions should be judged according to their intended end purpose, but not what they intrinsically are.

Analysis

The trolley problem

First, let's consider a very well-known hypothetical - the trolley problem. The problem raises a scenario where an uncontrollable trolley is hurling down the tracks where it is going to hit and subsequently kill five people strapped to the track. However, there exists a lever one can pull to divert the trolley to another branch of the track, where it will only kill one person whom it would otherwise not have hit. Should one then, let the trolley kill the five people, or pull the lever to have it kill only one?

The answer might seem to be very obvious, and indeed, a study showed that 90.5% of the subject opted to pull the lever (Navarrete et al., 2012). While most considered from the point of view of the five people, who would go from certain death to escaping said death, what about the other one person, who would face the exact opposite situation? What if you were one of the five people, would you be content knowing that your life was only saved by sacrificing another?

Arguments against teleology

Supporters of teleology, and the large majority of the general public most certainly will swiftly pull the lever and that would be the end of it. As a matter of fact, this is the approach used in the majority of society, to sacrifice the interest of the few to benefit the many. The popularity alone should prove it to be a sufficient methodology, right?

However, the reason behind the popularity is merely because it is easy to evaluate and implement, simply because it implies the existence of a parameter to measure the "effectiveness" of any given policy. But reality is never straight-forward, and definitely cannot be condensed into one single parameter.

Consider a hypothetical hostage scenario where the captor has bombs attached to the hostages. The captor has requested a large sum of money and a car for them to escape by. From the eyes of teleology, the police force should not hesitate to shoot and kill the captor as soon as possible, even though the hostages might die to the bomb, since if the captor's demands were to be met, they would be at large and could put the entire city's residents at risk. It would be the natural extension to the methodology used in the trolley problem - one person versus five, and a few hostages versus the city's entire population. However, we see that this isn't the case in the real world. The police are usually advised to comply with captors and meet their demands lest the hostages get hurt.

To illustrate the flaws of teleology, consider some more extreme examples. One of the ideas and initial goals of Hitler was to abolish the impure to make room for what he deemed to be the superior race and to allow the growth of a better new world. While his actions were undoubtedly extreme, can we really fault him for the desire for a better world? In an alternative universe where his plans had actually been gone through, we might even be praising him for his work through the eyes of his ideology. So why did we correlate him to the devil himself, instead of admiring his goals of building a better world through the sacrifice of the inferior?

Those might have been far-fetched or controversial examples, so let's consider a real-world example. Big corporations around the world are exploiting people in third-world countries to manufacture products as cheaply as possible. Economists even gave this practice a glorified term of "global sourcing". When put this way, the corporations definitely seem to be guilty. However, if we consider that the entire global supply chain would collapse if not for these unethical practices, and that they are only doing what they need to meet the global public demand, are they only doing the necessary evil, the sacrifice of the few to benefit the many? And, are they the true evil for these practices, or are we, the consumers, the true evil for our demands despite being very much aware of them?

Arguments against deontology

It has been established that teleology is not the methodology to follow. So then, should the lever not be pulled? While teleology proposes the sacrifice of stakeholders, deontology proposes the sacrifice of options. However dire the circumstances may be, actions simply shouldn't be taken if they would result in the sacrifice of someone's interest. While this may ensure the well-being of those often-overlooked or neglected minorities, we can soon see that it is simply infeasible in practice.

Consider the story of the crew of *Mignonette*. When the crew had to escape to a lifeboat after abandoning the ship, they killed the already dying handyman to feed themselves by cannibalism after twenty days without food. Deontology suggests that their actions are not justified since they committed murder, regardless of the condition they were in. They should have not pulled the lever, and starved to death with the dying handyman instead of killing him. The unacceptability of cannibalism might colour the scenario differently. So let's consider one where there was a pet dog instead of the handyman. Would it then be acceptable to slaughter it to feed on, despite killing both the handyman and the dog would be unacceptable in any other circumstances?

Consider medicine. During the research and development of new medicine, animals are often used to be tested upon to investigate the adverse effects of said medications or medical procedures. While this certainly helps make the R&D much more efficient and the end product safer, it also undoubtedly involved the sacrifice of the animals, both physically and mentally, not-to-mention the very frequent deaths they face as the result. Must we then sacrifice the option of animal trials to uphold the interest of their well-being? Again, to sidestep the argument of animal lives versus human lives, let's also consider the medical breakthroughs and

advancements during the World Wars. Then, doctors generally lacked ethics or morals and treated their patients more like lab rats than humans. Practically all experiments were permitted, however horrific or traumatising they may be to the patients, or rather, test subjects. Physical mutilations, psychological traumas, and deaths were not a rare sight. However, coincidentally, that period was where medicine advanced the most rapidly. As "doctors" and "researchers" do experiments after experiments with little concern, they were able to learn large amounts of knowledge and the true limits of the human body. Setting aside the evil surgeons, many medical procedures were also creatively devised by the army medics due to the lack of proper tools and assistance. So can the wars be said to be beneficial to the general public due to it triggering medicine advancements despite killing millions?

For a point closer to home, consider how governments handle the pandemic, specifically the vaccine allocation. They have decided that children and the elderly should be given priority over the rest of us. This undoubtedly had put the rest of the population at more risk than they otherwise would have, in the name of protecting the vulnerable. This policy traded virtually complete immunity if the vaccines were given to adults for moderate immunity with the risk of complications when given to children and the elderly. So should the policy not be deemed a viable option?

Denouement

Too many hypotheticals may serve to detract us from realistic considerations, so allow me to veer from philosophical ideals and argue realistically.

Humanity

Humans are fundamentally emotionally driven. The existence of these ideologies are over-simplifications of the human thought and evaluation process. To ask us to judge purely logically is impractical. If an entity, for example, an AI, were to act purely logically, they would gladly sacrifice the 49% if it meant to satisfy the 51%.

Humans are also intrinsically self-centred. By evolution, we are programmed to value self-preservation. No one would like to be the minority to be sacrificed even if it is for the greater good. There is literally no way to change this fact either. Our own point of view is the only one we will ever get to experience. And no matter how hard we try to stand in others' shoes, they will only be our projection of what others actually experience.

The impossibility of judgement

Acts of gauging the happiness or interest of a group are also fundamentally biased. There is no holistic gauge or index one could use to determine if a decision or action is just. Reality is infinitely complicated and it is infinitely impossible to judge something neutrally. There is and never will be a central authority to dictate the definition of morality. Even if there is, the rules will be nothing more of a vague general consensus instead of something concrete. Morality is purely defined by our values and world-view. For example, some cultures may deem the ritualistic sacrifice of animals, children, women, et cetera to be acceptable and perfectly moral since it would please the gods and bring them peace and joy from their perspective, and who are we to judge their actions if all the participating stakeholders hold the same opinion? In the same light, how many of our "socially acceptable" or "moral" actions would be justified in the eyes of a truly neutral being?

A soldier who sacrificed himself to shield his team from a grenade might be considered a hero, but if he didn't "bravely sacrifice", perhaps the team would just have suffered from tolerable injuries instead of the death of one member? Or perhaps he simply had enough of the battlefield and decided to take this chance to selfishly

get out of this misery? What about his family who had to suffer from this trauma as the other side of the coin of his sacrifice?

Consider a cult where the members have to make a small weekly donation. The leader is no doubt using religion to make a profit. However, what if the donations are small enough that they don't pose any actual harm to the participants? What if a member actually dismissed their suicidal thoughts due to the hope, faith, approval, and strength provided by the fake religion of the cult? While this may be highly illegal in one pair of eyes, it might only be mutually beneficial to both parties in another. What if the cult was relabelled as a church or a psychologist? Are established entities any different from shady ones if their actions yield a similar outcome?

Enlightenment

To judge is impossible, nor is it the purpose of any being. Until every single possible point of view, and every single narrative, and every single piece of fact is considered, any conclusion or decision made would never be just. And if none of us can meet the said criteria, who are we to say what is moral and what isn't?

My personal enlightenment would be to not judge others purely based on my own point of view. No matter how horrible one's actions may be, they wouldn't have done it if they didn't have their own reasons. There were countless times where I had imposed my own judgement on someone before trying to understand them or even listening to their plea. Presumptuous judgements are dangerous. Despite our inability to ever grasp the true holistic picture of anything, it doesn't mean we shouldn't try our best to. The only thing to keep in mind would be to remember this fact even if you think you have learned enough to make a hint of an informed decision or judgement. Detach yourself from the subject matter if possible. As an old Chinese saying goes, "the involved parties are often more clouded than the outsiders".

The other thing would be that I shouldn't dwell on decisions made in the past, even those that are seemingly misguided. Let's not consider actions as consequential as one that could have its morality judged, but rather the minute everyday actions. What I ate for breakfast, what clothes I decided to wear, how I spent my time, how I treated my friends, how I performed in school, et cetera. The list would go on. It is not that I should stop caring about them, just that I should ask myself at the moment whether I find my actions appropriate at the time of action, and put my full enthusiasm into them. The only thing that I could judge is not whether I have made the correct decision, but if I had put my fullest effort into each action and decision I have made.

For every "wrong" decision, one has merely discovered a way that doesn't work, or rather, discovered an alternative way where alternative opportunities are available. While the numerous philosophical ideas may be able to guide in times of indecision, they will never be more than mere theories. The true judge is yourself, and as long as it wouldn't result in horrible undoubted catastrophes or break any serious socially conventional regulations, any judgement imposed by the society couldn't override your own.