

Ethics Reflection

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Stanford defines deontological thinking as “moral theories that guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do[0].” It makes sense using moral theories as a guide but if you are not being assessed on those actions by anyone but yourself then unwanted outcomes may arise. University of Texas defines deontological thinking as “an ethical theory that uses rules to distinguish rights from wrongs[1].” Are these legislative laws? Could these rules be invented by individuals or is it more of a decision made by the collective whole? Would it not be dangerous if the legislative laws were one’s only source for a moral compass? To elaborate, imagine immorally abusing legal loopholes for monetary gain or complying with segregation laws long ago. Is one immoral when complying with immoral laws? Could the most moral action be the one that revolts against the established rules in some scenarios? If so, then deontological thinking may not be the best source for a moral compass.

“Deontological thinking can be best understood in contrast to consequential thinking”, which is defined by Stanford University as “choices which are to be morally assessed solely by the state of affairs they bring about[0].” This definition can be elaborated upon by using some mathematical language such as ‘given some input decision x , consider the moral implications of the outcomes $f(x)$. Is $f(x)$ carried out in a way that does not hurt others?’ This establishes an ethical dichotomy where you have to choose if you are going to view a scenario from a deontological rule-based point-of-view, consequential outcome point-of-view, or both if that is possible.

Deontological thinking does not work without some form of punishment for rule breaking. If there is no punishment or rule enforcement, then it would be as if the rule did not exist. Enforcement brings rules to life. If the government set speed limits on the road to 55 miles per hour but they had no officers making traffic stops and ticketing speeders, people would be more likely to speed since there was no punishment(besides the guilt of murder) and the outcome would more likely be more deaths on the road than if there was rule enforcement happening. If one considers what happens without rules and enforcement, one would likely conclude humanity would devolve into war based on previous history. On the contrary, if one made a rule but did not consider all possible outcomes then situations where moral people are following immoral laws might arise.

Before moving on there may be more to learn from other definitions of consequentialism such as one definition from The Ethics Centre who states: “An action that brings about more benefit than harm is good, while an action that causes more harm than benefit is not[2].” What are the measurements for benefits and harm? If one made a rule that limits traffic speed to 55 miles per hour, the benefit would be less people would die but more people would be late to meetings. Black and white solutions in ethics/morality do not seem common at all and most situations fall into a gray area between right and wrong. It is interesting that humanity only legislates the extremely wrong acts like murder but extremely good acts like donating millions to an orphanage has no legislation. Society values giving more than taking. Consequentialism in my own words is defined as : Some action from a person or group A that results in some good outcome for a person or group B that is less harmful than all alternative actions.

Seeing the difference between deontological and consequential point-of-views is important because they are possibly two sides of the same coin in this slippery subject called Ethics and Morality. Ideally people do good to each other. Deontological thinking is important when choosing these very good people using consequential deduction that decide rules that govern us to make it less likely for neutral people to do bad. Ideally, the people who govern us should be the most good and be masters of philosophy, Ethics, and Morality. This top 0.0001% percentile of good people should be the ones who create and enforce the rules that encourage behavior that is of good nature.

I do not remember the ethical scenarios from class but I do enjoy contemplating on the trolley problem.

“Suppose you are the driver of a trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don't work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, Mrs. Foot has arranged that there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley and kill the lone man[3]?”

Let us look at this scenario from a very rigid deontological point-of-view. The rule is you have to make a choice and obey the laws of your religion and laws of the land. The law of the land and religion would say “Do not murder with intent.” By this logic, a rigid deontologist trolley driver would do nothing in this scenario, close his eyes, and kill the five men. The trolley driver might pray to the metaphysical third-party(s) he worships during this intense moment. If we discover sometime in the future that the act of praying somehow brings metaphysical third-party(s) to reality and miraculously saves all 6 men, provided large amounts of empirically proof, then we could look back on this scenario and I may favor this choice more than the consequentialist choice. Of course I would pray to god or god(s) if they magically miraculously stopped the train. From current understandings, I would not make this gamble and choose to turn the trolley as explained in this following paragraph.

Let us look at this scenario from a very rigid consequentialist point-of-view. The goal is to maximize benefits while minimizing harm from the outcome of this choice. I would begin by asking the question: ‘Who are the people that are on the brink of death?’ Unfortunately, time constraints do not allow this. For if the train was moving at a snails pace, I would consider if the lone man does collectively more good in the world than the group of five combined. Due to this time constraint, one can not do this analysis and must look at this scenario by generalizing the value of life with little context. I would turn the trolley because I believe five brains are smarter than one and this ‘smartness’ has to be linked with doing more good. For example, five people writing one essay about ethics together compared to one person writing it alone would lead me to assume that it is more probable the group-of-five’s essay would be *more virtuous* than the lone man’s essay.

Sources:

- [0] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/>
- [1] <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/deontology/>
- [2] <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-consequentialism/>
- [3] <http://www.psy.vanderbilt.edu/courses/hon182/thomsonrolley.pdf>