Philip Dumaresq

Values in the workplace

Leslie Elliot

The Trolley Problem

­­­The Trolley problem is an old ethical dilemma created for a group of undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin. The problem is simple: there’s a trolley speeding down the tracks. In its path are 5 people who will die, however you can change the direction of the track to avoid killing them. On the second track is a single person who will die. What do you do? You have the option of not doing anything and just letting the 5 people die, or you can make the choice to save them by killing one person.

Kantian ethics is based around Immanuel Kant’s 3 categorical imperatives.

“Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”

“A rational being must always regard himself as giving laws either as member or as sovereign in a kingdom of ends which is rendered possible by the freedom of will.”

The first one meaning that if you do it, then it should unconditionally mean that others can do it too. The second one meaning that you should treat people as you want to be treated and not only use them, while the third one means that you should act as though your actions will be law in a hypothetical place where people aren’t treated as a means to an end. These three categorical imperatives must be followed when making a decision from a Kantian point of view. The third categorical imperative is a summary of the first two, so that one won’t be focused on.

According to Kantian ethics, the person should pull the lever to save the 5 lives. The idea behind this is that you aren’t killing one person, but rather saving 5 lives. People should always have the intention of saving lives when they see people’s lives threatened. The scenario could also be thought of as using the one person as a means to an end, using them to save people. But it’s not the outcome of the situation that matters, it’s the intentions behind it. People’s intentions should always be good and to help save people. So applying this in other situations means that you end up always saving the most people as possible, which should be people’s intentions. The second categorical imperative isn’t violated because it’s not thinking about the situation as using the one person, but rather their death is the consequence of saving the 5 people, which should be the intention.