Phi Lambda Phi: On Ethics

Rahsaan Simon

August 2025

Introduction: The Infamous Trolley Problem

Question: Think about the weight some of your decisions can have on others. What determines an ethical decision from a "regular" decision? Furthermore, what separates a difficult decision from an easy decision?

Ethics is perhaps the most complex and diverse subject in philosophy. Most people generally are said to have an understanding of it, even when they don't quite know its formalities. Everyone has had the experience of making a difficult decision, and while doing so, hearing a voice in their head advocating for a choice that does the most good. Unfortunately, rarely do people ever think about what it means to do the most good, and at this corner of the subject is where we find philosophy.

Fortunately, there is a rather handy example, bathed in infamy, that gradually unravels ethical decision-making until ethical philosophy is forcefully thrust upon the decision maker. This is, of course, the "Trolley Problem" where, most of the time, you are to decide the fate of a handful of either different or the same number of people, each with a different set of qualities or characteristics.

For now, we will start with a relatively simple version of the problem, based on ethical *natural hierarchy*: Say you were the driver of a trolley which has had a sudden brake malfunction. The brake hadn't been replaced in a while, as the train station's workers' union was busy protesting for higher pay, so naturally, with the importance that their job held, it led to the incredibly dangerous scenario of the brake handle decaying and falling off. Up the path, you see a person, unwillingly fixed to the tracks by some madman. Both fortunately and unfortunately, you have the option to switch the gear to turn another way, which sees a stray dog in a similar position to the person. If you willingly decide to switch the gear, the dog will die; likewise, if you willingly decide not to, the person will die. Furthermore, if you willingly close your eyes and pretend that the scenario is not happening, the person will die...

Question: Which path will you choose? Is there really an ethical difference between making a choice or making none at all?

As was mentioned previously, most will make the decision to switch to the side with the dog, because of the apparent "natural hierarchy" that deems

people to be above all in life-or-death scenarios. The belief in such a hierarchy is, ultimately, up to the individual, and just as there are plenty of arguments for switching to the dog's track, there are also plenty of arguments for not doing so. Nonetheless, ethical philosophy and useful decision-making tend to be broader than this, and so, we will observe some general ethical beliefs and their philosophical backing that apply to most trolley scenarios, as well as real-world decisions.

Indecisiveness

Question: Consider this, when deciding the path you choose, was there an ethical difference between making a choice or making none at all?

A particularly clever solution to the Trolley Problem, extendable to all ethical dilemmas, is a philosophy of indecisiveness. To many, this will seem to be the best course of action, since technically, you did not make a decision at all, and thus, you cannot be accountable for the resulting actions, whatever they may be.

The unfortunate thing about this is that there seems to be ample reason that indecisiveness is, itself, a form of decision making, hence why it is referred to as a philosophy. And thus, its major advantage, a lack of accountability, can tend to be stripped away quite easily.

Indecisiveness is a form of an overall bad philosophy. Even if someone were to give you the benefit of the doubt and present you as lacking accountability, it is still not strategic enough to be aptly applicable to all scenarios. In fact, it is so universally considered poor that even the law will punish you for gross indecisiveness, mostly because it is impossible to tell indecisive behavior from a strategic decision that appears indecisive e.g. there would be no way to separate an indecisive decision from one that was deliberately chosen to inflict harm on the person rather than the dog in the previous trolley problem, simply because the outcomes are the same.

To illustrate the destructiveness of indecisiveness, here is another variant of the trolley problem involving a more compelling case...

Question: Consider the trolley problem, except this time, on the main track, there is a group of five people, and on the divergent track, there is only one person. You know nothing about any of these people, so there is no bias. Would you pull the lever to enter the divergent track, or remain on the main track?

Consequentialism

Another mode of reasoning and ethical decision making would, or should, have driven some to believe that the divergent track was the more ethical option is one of consequentialism, or rather, one which argues firmly that the results of a decision are what make it ethical or unethical, not the scenario, and so, you

could not be blamed for switching to the divergent track, because the end result is better than what it would have been without your decision.

But this still does not answer the question as to why the divergent track was more ethical in the first place. For this question, the most common answer among consequentialists is that the death of the smaller group will lead to the most potential happiness, and thus, the most potential greatness to come to the world. In other words, the decision would bring the greatest benefit for the greatest number, or it would satisfy the desires of the greatest number of people; it is a decision under the philosophical thought called utilitarianism.

Question: Recall the trolley problem mentioned earlier, how might consequentialism ignore the personal liberties and happiness of the few? In general ethical thought, is it important to consider and avoid the violation of the freedoms and rights of people, even if that does mean indecisiveness?

The main issue with utilitarianism is its violation of the rights of the few in favor of the rights of the many. One could take this as a supreme issue, since the ignorance of rights for a few could mean the ignorance of rights for all in the right situation e.g. imagine if one of the people from the primary track of the previous trolley problem was taken to replace the singular person on the divergent track, then they will suffer the same fate that the other would have, irregardless of themselves. An even more popular example of this is a situation wherein there is a doctor who has four dying patients with failing organs and one healthy one, they can, if they were a utilitarian, take the organs of the healthy patients to cure the dying patients, to the healthy patient's demise, simply because they are in the prime decision to do so.

This exposes a grander issue in the whole of consequentialism, that is, it is wholly scenario dependent, and thus, presents choices which are unpredictable in their nature. Even if we can forge a general set of guidelines for them, these guidelines are so general that it is impossible to know beforehand whether you will be sacrificed or not simply for some greater good. In other words, it relies on the emotions (i.e., desires) of people, which themselves are unpredictable and at times unreliable.

Deontology

Question: How can one make consequentialist actions more predictable and less prone to change, so that we can definitely classify them as ethical or unethical?

To alleviate the issues associated with consequentialism, deontology is an ethical philosophy that emphasizes conforming to pre-defined laws and regulations in decision-making.

This form of thought naturally comes with the benefit of one's (legal) rights being taken into consideration, so that no doctor, or any one person for that matter, is able to be involved in the harming without standing consequences.

Deontology also has the natural benefit of being incredibly predictable so that, with the right legal knowledge, no ethical decision can have a reason that is spontaneous, but rather written and predetermined. The only problem with this, however, is that sometimes we feel compelled to assist others in an unpredictable way and not coordinated by the law, but rather, by our emotions and intuition, and we normally consider these as the most ethical decisions in this matter.

To demonstrate this issue, consider, again, the previously mentioned trolley problem with the unequal groups of people. In the deontological case, we are told to ignore the problem, or in other words, be indecisive, for fear of violating people's rights to live. Yet we naturally feel that the majority should live in this scenario, simply because of reasons that are mostly utilitarian, and because one would feel bad for unnecessarily killing many people as opposed to simply choosing the death of one. However, enacting this compulsion would lead to legal punishment for a lack of ethics, wheras simple indecisiveness will lead to legal trouble being attributed to the people who authorized the train to depart without properly ensuring the brakes are functioning, since technically the operator did not do anything to explicitly ensure that the brakes did not function, and thus, that the trolley would kill the group of people. Yet we know the dangers of indecisiveness, and we know, through compassion, that the benefit of many, in some cases, outweighs the benefit of one, and so deontology alone can not suffice in describing a complete ethics.

Consider another case: the case of the monopoly. It might be unethical that the monopoly holds a grip on the products or services that we use, and thus, may control us diligently for their favor. Yet, in most cases, these corporations have the best lawyers available, and thus, they are often complicit with the law, despite the obvious implicit power they hold over their consumers. There is no empathy for the people who rely on the service provided by the monopoly when considering whether they are ethical by deontological standards, and thus, this presents a major flaw for deontology in terms of describing the human character and emotion.

Virtue Ethics

Question: How can character, and thus one's intuition, be incorporated into ethics? More specifically, what aspects of one's character can we consider when making ethical decisions?

The fix for this, it seems, is to explicitly incorporate one's character and intuition into ethical decision-making. Even better, one could incorporate their virtuous character into ethical decision-making. The prioritization of virtue in ethics is aptly named "virtue ethics".

Another somewhat interesting property of virtue ethics is that it encourages one to analyze their own virtue before making a decision, or to self-reflect. Consider, for example, someone attempting to steal from the very wealthy; they could convince themselves that stealing this money would benefit them

more than it would be at the detriment of the person they are stealing from, and thus, that it is the most ethical decision. Yet, they could also think about how it is within their moral code not to steal in the first place, no matter the situation, and thus stealing in this moment would violate this code and ruin their virtue. Thus, not only do they take the action that most uplifts their virtue, but they also identify the existence of that virtue in the first place, which will be a precursor to the subsequent arguments they may make when confronting further ethical dilemmas.

The previous example also hints at a greater problem with virtue ethics, relativity. Your virtue is not my virtue, and so, what I think is virtuous, and thus the actions I will take to bolster my virtue, could be radically different from what you perceive as virtuous, and thus the actions you will take. In fact, in the previous situation, one could have considered the action of stealing virtuous, at least in that specific scenario, because they would use the money to feed themselves and their children, who without it would starve, and so stealing would bolster the virtue of theirs that is taking care for other people, even more so their children.

The True Ethics

Question: Could the uniformity of deontology fix virtue ethics. In a similar way, could consequentialism fix the issues present in deontology, that is, the perceived lack of empathy from deontology?

In truth, it is misleading to use a singular principle to guide ethical conduct and decision-making. Not only are the schools previously described quite specific, but they were all initially designed not for acting as a guideline for creating ethical decisions, but instead for explaining how people naturally make them.

Most likely, when making a decision, we access all three of these schools to inform our decisions, with varying degrees of weight put on them relative to each other by the nature of the decision. For example, decisions, and thus they're consequences, are influenced by the need to maintain or amplify the character, and thus one's virtue, while the essence of one's character is, or has been, formed by the laws and societal regulations present around them. Thus, in the formation of ethical decisions, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and deontology all play a cooperative role in creating one's ethics. This also, unfortunately, means that there is never an exact answer to a trolley problem, as with all things, it depends on the person.

This is the true essence of ethics, and will thus ensure that the origin of ethics is never quite certain, yet we have been able to trace the basic general structures of universal ethical decision-making, and for self-reflection, this knowledge is enough. The true ethics is you, for whatever you decide and with whatever you use to inform your decision.