

Consequences Count

A science-fiction film called *Interstellar* has been at the center of recent discussions of an age-old question that we humans have asked since time immemorial, “How ought we to live our lives?” On the brink of human extinction, a controversial issue has been whether the remaining population should devote their dwindling resources to secure food production under the extreme climate or they should commit a sizable budget to find a new habitable planet via space exploration against incredible odds. On the one hand, some argue that every human life is intrinsically valuable and cannot be continually sent out to the infinite darkness to die knowing that the chance of finding a new home is minuscule. From this perspective, a dozen highly specialized astronauts should not be used as mere means to the population’s end of escaping the dying earth. Plus, family bonds should not be broken and the resources for a space program are too costly to be justified under such a circumstance. On the other hand, others argue that the destruction of humanity, as well as the earth, is quickly nearing and we, the rational agents, are not meant to go extinct on our birth planet. In the face of extinction certainty, the survival of the human race is the only thing that truly matters. Maximizing the entire species' chance to survive has the greatest utility ever even when it comes at the cost of some of its members. The end will justify the means. These two opposing views unquestionably have a great deal of persuasion and reason behind them and are rooted in their moral principles respectively. However, in times of apocalyptic crisis, we must not be too dogmatic about the constraints of our beliefs and should look to the consequences and rationality to guide our decisions. After all, without the existence of rational beings, morality ceases to exist.

The story of *Interstellar* takes place in a not-so-distant future where uncontrollable natural disaster, blight, wipes out most of the food sources, and subsequently millions of people starve to death. To quell public anger, the government announces the closure of the space agency, NASA, in the name of resource conservation, but secretly continues to fund its mission in hopes of finding humanity a new habitable planet. The man in charge of the task, Professor Brand, has assembled a team of brave men and women to probe many planets potentially habitable by organic life. These new worlds would otherwise not be possible to access without a nearby wormhole that mysteriously appeared recently, which leads NASA to believe that higher-dimension creatures have extended their helping hands to humans at this critical time. Determined and hopeful, 11 astronauts including the best of them, Dr. Mann, have traveled enormous galactic distances through that wormhole and out to the other side to observe and assess the potential for planet colonization. With the last spaceship, *Endurance*, near completion, Professor Brand, who receives positive data from previous astronauts, convinces Cooper to pilot *Endurance* to verify the promising information and help to establish humanity's new colony, conditional on a promise that by the time Cooper comes back, he will have solved the gravity equation to build a spaceship large enough to carry all humans including Cooper's family to the new planet. Things are looking up for now except that the equation is unsolvable and Professor Brand knows it. Then why does he lie to Cooper?

Professor Brand's motive to lie stems from his ultimate goal of saving the human race. Based on the devastating effects of the blight and its continuing havoc, the demise of the total population is inevitable. With a massive chip on his shoulder, Professor Brand devotes his life to solving the gravity equation on which the survival of the human race hinges. It is apparent that the enormous immeasurable value and utility his action will produce is unprecedented and

unparalleled. To him, the goal is the only thing that matters. Meanwhile, he also recognizes the part of human nature that makes us capable of just caring about ourselves and our immediate loved ones. Keeping the best interest of the entire species at heart is normally difficult for our untrained habitual thinking. Such recognition is reflected in his selection of astronauts based on criteria of zero family attachment to any of them. However, Cooper, a father of 2, turns out to be the only pilot candidate for the last space expedition. To accomplish the real plan of populating a new planet with humans, Professor Brand sells Cooper on a false promise that the unsolvable equation will be figured out and Cooper's mission is just to lay the groundwork for humanity's eventual arrival of a new home. Knowing Cooper's family will die alongside everyone else on earth without Cooper's presence, Professor Brand willfully destroys the most precious and valued thing in a person's life to save more lives. Is his action morally permissible? Is it just to maximize the happiness of the whole at the cost of a few? Some fervently disagree.

Those who side with Cooper and think Professor Brand is a villain condemn his dishonesty absolutely. A lie is a lie no matter what the results used for justification are, let alone a deadly lie. More importantly, unlike ordinary objects, humans come into this world with in-built value. He should not interfere with Cooper's desire to be with his family or even die alongside them. Cooper's autonomy in pursuit of his happiness must be respected. In the words of Immanuel Kant, Germany's foremost philosopher in the 18th century and one of this view's main proponents, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end, and never as mere means" (Kant, Groundwork). Humans have intrinsic worths that must be respected. We are the highest objective and "ends in ourselves" that cannot be manipulated for other objectives. To act otherwise is morally reprehensible and blameworthy. Kant would approve of Professor Brand's use of Cooper had it been Cooper's own

wish to pilot the spaceship. Moreover, other critics denounce Professor Brand's deceptive actions from an agreement violation perspective.

A reliable, honest, and tacit social contract that boosts human cooperation to fight against the cataclysmic disaster seems more important than ever. At a time when countries are too exhaustive of resources to even fund the military and police, "a state of nature", as Hobbes put it, has truly emerged and tested humans to the limit, except this time our survival is threatened, not by ourselves, but by a common enemy (Hobbes, Leviathan). Under such a circumstance, a greater degree of security is required not for human flourishing anymore, but for the most vital thing of all - the survival of the human race. We must constrain our behaviors, limit our choices, and rationally consider others' interests for the benefit of effective cohabitation in this do-or-die time. For Professor Brand to blatantly disregard Cooper's interests and wants, his act is morally wrong contemptible, and unforgivable. Whether it is from the deontological perspective or the Social Contract theorist's point of view, these moral arguments constitute a powerful criticism of Professor Brand's deception in the film and they should not be taken lightly. However, is Professor Brand really the bad guy that has been lambasted so far? Is there another side to the story here? I think there is and I happen to share the view on the other side.

The fundamental view of moral rightness that Professor Brand and I share is one that our actions ought to maximize the long-term total-sum of the utility of the greatest number of people possible including the people yet unborn. Rich human experience, higher mental pleasure, and even the existence of morality depend on our rational faculty which in turn depends on our physical bodies. If extinction is the final verdict for the sentient and the intelligent in the observable universe, nothing else matters. That is not to say - I want to be clear - that pleasure and utility are all that matter. I concede that we are creatures who are connected to the past, and

thus the aim to receive pleasure cannot be the legitimate justification for breaking promises, which obviously is morally wrong. Furthermore, “What about Cooper’s rights?” one might ask. His right to freedom and liberty is violated in an advanced civilization where the rule of laws, the agreement between ourselves, has been championed and cherished day in, and day out since its founding. I will grant the critics that these are all legitimate concerns, but I still maintain that Professor Brand’s actions are morally permissible and, dare I say, heroic at best, and controversial at the very least. Let me elaborate.

When we first form a government and limit our freedom in exchange of protection and security, the goal is to avoid living in the state of nature where everyone constantly is at each other’s throats. But this time, our enemy is, instead of ourselves, a hyper-destructive natural disaster. The morality of the social contract theory is a system of rules designed to help us with staying alive for as long as we can and, by extension thrive. If our lives are what we seek to protect in the first place and are now on the brink of annihilation, people are just not as motivated to adhere to that system of rules meant to protect us from ourselves rather than a common foe, not to mention the potential upside of not following it, namely deceiving Cooper into colonizing a new planet. The fundamental tradeoff between security and freedom has to be balanced or to an acceptable level for all rational parties in order for morality to emerge and to be binding. But when one side of the scale is the fate of the entire human race, upping the ante on the other side might not be so insensibly reprehensible anymore.

To the Kantian critics who think of morality as a system of categorical imperatives, I understand the argument that we should guide our will based on human intrinsic values and how we ought to be treated. On the surface, Professor Brand does appear to be using Cooper as mere means which is morally prohibited in Kantian ethics for disrespecting human dignity and free

will. But what about the human value of those who are about to be born or not yet born? Do they not deserve a chance to be born and live? A civilization is not worth saving if it does not care about its descendants. Set aside the deception, Professor Brand in the film successfully stops the government from dropping bombs to reduce the population in order to preserve the chance of survival of the species. The world is so desperate that human value is a lesser factor in their rational consideration.

Furthermore, Professor Brand's action seems to violate the universalizability principle in Kantian ethics. To quote Kant, "act only according to that maxim which you can at the same time that it should become a universal law without contradiction" (Kant, Groundwork). The categorical imperative absolutely requires him to conduct himself the same way that he would want others to do. If he does not want to be lied to - he certainly does not, given his major position at NASA, then he should never lie to anyone. Doing otherwise is morally wrong categorically. However, he does consult reason and uses his rational faculty to come up with the maxim that he follows when he convinces Cooper. He does so on the ground that lying is wrong unless it will save the entire human race. This maxim allows him to boldly and willingly lie because he certainly wants everyone else to lie to him if the result of the deception is to save the species. Kant failed to provide us with the formulation of the absolute moral rule by specifying the condition instead of a blanket sweeping statement. Even if Kant succeeded, the absolute moral rules would end up becoming rule utilitarianism that benefits the most number of people possible, which brings me to the last point of why long-term utilitarianism is the right lens for analyzing the morals of the movie.

Promoting the greatest good of the greatest number of people based on rules should be the only standard to judge moral rightness or wrongness. When the stakes cannot be higher, the

application of a moral theory has real-world consequences that we cannot afford to ignore. If Professor Brand had a chance to ensure the survival of humanity and chose not to, wouldn't he be equally blameworthy after no human life exists in the universe? Does telling Cooper the truth and having good sleep with a clean conscience have the same moral significance as a vital contribution to the continuation of the species? Think about it. The end state of humanity's story forever exists in the future so long there are still humans alive in the universe. Although the concern for the long-term prospect of the species is not a natural disposition we are born with, that primitive survival instinct will drive us forward and keep us asking questions about the future. We will always care about the end one way or the other and thinking for the group requires philosophical honing, and ethical theory like Rule Utilitarianism gives us that vital training, especially in a dystopian scenario of *Interstellar*.

John Stuart Mill, the most influential English philosopher of classical liberalism, states, "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest-Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure" (Mill, Utilitarianism).

Extinction of the human race represents the utmost form of pleasure privation. Whatever actions leading up to extinction are morally wrong because they do not prevent pleasure privation. Conversely, the alternative outcome sought by Professor Brand is a better choice of happiness and pleasure promotion. It is increasing utility and thus morally right. What's more, Professor Brand's Utilitarian characteristics should be highlighted just to add further credence to the argument. A true utilitarian can meet the most demanding part of the principle, namely the

requirement of strict impartiality that demands equal treatment toward our loved ones and strangers. Despite it being the biggest obstacle for the adoption of the principal by anyone, Professor Brand lies not only to Cooper but also to his beloved daughter and sends them away knowing he will never see her again, all for the sake of the consequence of human survival. The moral reasoning from a man of this level of sincerity and virtue deserves more trust and consideration.

Although doomsday scenarios that decide the fate of humanity in fictitious films provide plenty of food for thought, in reality, our time on earth is not unlimited, hence the need for us to take the subject seriously. We must strive to have an insurance policy for the chance to become a multi-planetary species, a chance that dinosaurs wished to have 65 million years ago. History teaches us that the awareness of our current actions' lasting impacts is what will sculpt the future for us as well as the people behind us. Given the advancement of today's technology and science, we are more capable than ever of predicting the results, it is our moral responsibility to consider the long-term utility for the greatest number of people possible.

Existential threats to life are a common occurrence in the universe, whereas what is unique is the existence of intelligent and sentient beings. If ethical principles such as side-constraint theories fail to preserve lives against deadly risks, we ought to look the other way. Let the end justify the mean.

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