**How Should we act Online?**

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**Introduction**

A couple was enjoying playing *Overwatch* one night, when suddenly, without provoking anyone, they were receiving extremely hostile messages from a group of teammates. Some of these messages included: “fine be retarded then tipsy if anyone ever has kids with you I hope your firstborn dies” and “i hope you do kill yourself pussy” (CuttinUpHoes, 2018). How would that feel, after simply wanting to play a relaxing game for fun, would you then get verbally harassed for wanting to play? This is known as toxicity. In general, online gaming is very notorious for toxic individuals. The increased popularity of it over the past decade does not help its case either. While in the real world, it is impossible to completely remove toxicity from online culture, we can theorize which moral philosophy would do the best at countering toxicity and ensuring that players have a positive experience when playing a competitive, online game. In this paper, I plan to cover the ideas of three moral philosophies: utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics, and examine their effectiveness on countering toxicity if players were to enact them. In general, even though there is researched evidence of each philosophy helping with an aspect of toxicity, virtue ethics most effectively deals with the issue of toxicity due to it targeting the root of the problem most effectively.

**Utilitarianism**

The first moral philosophy that can be analyzed in terms of curbing toxicity is Bentham’s utilitarianism. The main idea of utilitarianism is based on 3 factors:

1. Consequentialism – Each moral action is determined by its consequences.
2. Hedonism – Good is how much happiness (pleasure or pain) comes from an action.
3. Impartiality – Everyone’s happiness counts equally (Rdzak 2022).

The main factor that should be focused on is impartiality, which in terms of gaming,

means that the player should consider how teammates feel as much as themselves. How often does toxicity brew from others only caring about themselves?

One extremely popular multiplayer game, League of Legends, which can be abbreviated as LoL, has many cases where a teammate is not willing to cooperate with the rest of the team. A study by Jeremy Blackburn and Haewoon Kwak stated that about 330,000 report cases out of about 1,400,000 cases in total are categorized as “intentional feeding” (2014). Feeding is a term in gaming that describes a low kill and assists to deaths ratio, or KDA, as more deaths than kills results in the enemy team getting more overall money to buy items and overpower the feeder’s team. Feeding can be caused by lack of teamplay, as a more coordinated team could single out and easily kill a player trying to kill the entire team solo.

Utilitarianism would argue that to avoid toxicity, players should consider their teammates happiness. That is, they should avoid feeding the enemy team, and support their own team as much as possible. Utilitarianists would say that players should consider their teammates interests as much as their own, and if they want to win, then the player should too. They would also consider the enemy’s happiness, and not flame the enemy team, but also not feed into their happiness in a way that causes their team’s to drop.

**Deontology**

Another moral philosophy to consider is Immanuel Kant’s deontology. The main idea is that all people have universal duties that they must always follow. These rules are as follows:

1. Be honest in dealings with others.
2. Do not kill or harm innocent people (in real life).
3. Respect the humanity of all persons.
4. Be loyal to family and friends (Rdzak 2022).

Based off these rules, a deontologist would argue that profusive language would harm

innocent people mentally and be disrespectful to the humanity of those people. It could also be argued that your teammates in video games are your “friends” for the match duration, so disrespecting their skills would be considered disloyal. And unlike utilitarianism, the ends do not justify means, so even if the player’s team loses the match, it does not excuse toxicity.

So, how much toxicity would be curbed based off of these principles? From a study from Delft University, players are more likely to be toxic if they are losing rather than winning and are more likely to praise when winning than losing (Märtens et al. 2015). Deontology would say that losers should praise as much as the winners are, and they should not leave toxic remarks if they are losing, as deontology is non-consequentialist. So, if people enacted deontology in gaming, it at the very least would remove that difference in toxicity between winners and losers.

**Virtue Ethics**

Finally, virtue ethics theorized by Aristotle targets the purpose of gaming, and why people play certain games. Virtue ethics, in general, unlike utilitarianism and deontology, focuses on the being rather than actions. People should also seek the highest good in all activities (Rdzak 2022). So in other words, people should seek activities such as gaming with the intent to enjoy the game for the game itself, rather than trying to seek glory, or become better than anyone else in a competitive game.

An interesting study compared the correlation between intrinsic motivation and competition. Intrinsic motivation can be defined as wanting to do something for the something in it of itself and no other rewards that are associated with it. In a psychology study, Males and Females were given a puzzle that they had to complete, half of them were being scored against each other on time, and the other half were simply told to complete the puzzle. They were then asked how much they enjoyed the puzzle or learned about it. The scores were then added between each participant and compared, and males who were not in competition scored 43.1 points more than those who were, and females scored 154.9 points more (Deci et al., 1981). This study demonstrates that by taking away the means of competition, people are more likely to enjoy the activity for what it is rather than treating it as a competitive sport.

So how does this tie into virtue ethics and gaming? Aristotle would argue that being extrinsically motivated to play a puzzle to beat out others in the study would not be the highest good. He would argue that honor from winning a puzzle is too superficial (Rdzak 2022). Effects of this study can be seen in competitive gaming as well. Many games such as LoL have ranked systems in which players gain or lose rank depending on if the win or don’t. If virtue ethics was enacted, people would only see the highest good in video games, meaning that they would not fixate on rank, and instead just enjoying the game itself. If the players are enjoying the game, they are less likely to want to flame others if they are not frustrated.

This leads to the reason why virtue ethics is the most effective moral philosophy. As this moral philosophy targets the motives of those who are playing, it extinguishes the potential motives for toxic behavior.

Think of it like a weed in a garden. The weed will grow from the roots on up. If one wanted to remove this weed, the best approach would not be to simply cut off the leaves or pull a few roots out. The weed will simply grow back overtime due to there still being underlying roots in the soil. Rather, that person should ensure that every part of the weed’s roots is killed. That way, there isn’t any possible way for that weed to grow back in the future.

This is like the difference in approaches between virtue ethics and the other two theories. The other two theories simply give a guideline in what to do in toxic situations and how people should treat each other. They never focus on making the person better, but virtue ethics tells the player to stop playing if they no longer feel fulfilled by the game. That way, when the player does play, they will bring their best attitude and best self automatically without even thinking about it. Therefore, virtue ethics is the best, as it creates better people, not better guidelines.

**Conclusion**

All in all, virtue ethics is the most effective moral philosophy at curbing toxicity as it targets the root reason of why players would be toxic to each other. Sure, there is researched evidence in areas where utilitarianism and deontology would reduce toxicity, but toxic motives are still lingering inside if people follow these principles. Virtue ethics squashes these motives altogether, and overall produces the best environment for everyone playing.

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