Utilitarian Ethics and Moral Choice in the Trolley Problem

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Introduction

The problem of the Trolley problem is a mental experiment in ethics, first formulated in 1967 by the English philosopher Philippe Foot. Being outside the framework of standard philosophical questions, the problem of the trolley plays a big role in cognitive science and neuro-ethics.

A heavy, uncontrollable trolley rushes along the rails. On the way to her are five people tied to the rails by a crazy philosopher. Fortunately, you can switch the arrow – and then the trolley will travel in a different, alternate way. Unfortunately, there is one person on the siding, also tied to the rails. What are your actions?

The concept of utilitarianism prescribes a mandatory switch of the arrow. According to this concept, switching arrows is not the only permissible action, but, from the point of view of morality, the best action (the other possibility is not to do anything).

The problem of the trolley was first investigated from the standpoint of cognitive science by J. Michael. He suggested that the answers of people will not be practically dependent on their gender, age, cultural level and education since their decisions are based on an unconscious “moral grammar” that, in some senses, is analogous to the equally unconscious universal grammar underlying the ordinary language.

In subsequent cross-cultural studies, explicit counterexamples for this hypothesis of “universal moral grammar” were discovered. Further evidence against the idea of Typographical: remove literal “Invisible zero-width space artifact” texta universal moral grammar was presented in a meta-analysis of 6,100 participants. They showed that women demonstrate stronger deontological tendencies in choosing a solution than men, while men demonstrate only a slightly more utilitarian approach than women.

In order to study this problem from the point of view of neuro-ethics, D. Green and J. Cohen used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) as a method. In their experiments, people’s answers to the questions asked in the original formulation and in the formulation with the “fat man” were analyzed. The hypothesis of scientists was that solving these problems would cause both emotional and cognitive reactions and conflict to arise. The results of the research showed the following: in situations that cause a strong emotional response (“fat man”), there is significant activity in those parts of the brain that are associated with conflict resolution. At the same time, in more neutral

situations (for example, the original problem of the trolley), activity is observed in the brain region that is responsible for higher cognitive functions(Mill, 1863/2004). Thus, potential ethical ideas in this situation revolve around a person's ability to make rational decisions of a moral quality.

Analysis

So, following the results of the seminar in one of the groups, I promised to make a kind of generalization to the first seminar on the so-called. "Trolley problem" (trolley problem/train dilemma) and answer the question. Well, as I promised, let's go. So, we used the following wording:

"One sunny autumn day, you walk down the street, and then your phone rings. On the phone, an unknown voice suggests playing an interesting (and very philosophical!) Game and communicate the following information.

1. There is a fork in the railroad at a fairly considerable distance from you.

2. On the right path, to which the train movement is switched now, there are five people. They were chained to the rails by an unknown maniac (hmm, is not he talking to you on the phone?).

3. On the other hand, on the left path, he also chained one person. You do not know anything about the five or about this one.

4. These people carry a train full of passengers (the trolley was not a dramatic enough option). If nothing is done, the train will go along the right path and kill five. But there is another option: next to you, literally in two steps, there is a remote control point for the fork (which, according to strange chance, there are no workers – who know, maybe they are chained to the rails?). You can use it to transfer the train to another way to kill only one person.

5. You do not have time to forge them, and more so do not have time to do it, rescuers if you call them. The train is approaching at a tremendous speed and will not have time to stop, and if you want to derail it, then remember that the train is full of passengers. The decision must be made quickly enough. So, in fact, you have only two options: move the arrow or leave. What should you choose and why? "

Now, let's look at two classic answers.

Option 1: a utilitarian approach

Argument in favor of the deontological approach

The deontological approach insists on the need to follow the rules incl. because we can never accurately calculate all the consequences of our actions. In the history of the locomotive, for example, we do not know anything about the chained people.

And suddenly, for example, one person to the left is, say, a cardiac surgeon who saves lives every day, and to the right are five ringleaders or murderers-recedivists? If you chose a utilitarian decision, should you also be responsible for the lives that the surgeon will not save and the murders that criminals will commit?

Of course, we do not know how it really is, but it is also impossible to exclude the described variant, right?

Robin Hood and “Death Note”

The above story, generally speaking, is one of my favourite topics in literature and cinema. For example, Robin Hood (again a Briton!) He is an obvious utilitarian – he robs a few of the rich for the sake of the happiness of numerous poor people while violating the law. By the way, the logic of Robin Hood was also guided by many revolutionaries who insisted on the need for a radical transformation of society, the overthrow of power, etc.

The other side of the coin is also well-shown in various artworks. The first thing that comes to mind is the Death Note. In this anime (as well as manga, film, etc.), Light (“Kira”) is an obvious utilitarian, and “L” is a supporter of the deontological approach. According to the plot, Light begins seemingly with a good goal to eradicate crime, but the fact that he ignores the law and decides to commit lynching very quickly takes his decisions beyond the bounds of humanity.

The pathos of all these stories is about the same thing: if we destroy evil, but we ourselves become villains, does this mean that the evil in the world will not decrease, but simply we ourselves will take the place of that slaughter that won? And if so, why such a victory?

And are there any examples other than the trolley?

Of course, in fact, you can come up with a lot more realistic situations than the history of the locomotive. Specially chose several quite different options. Note that in some cases, we intuitively lean towards the deontological approach, and in others, we lean toward a utilitarian approach.

Let’s assume that a serious malfunction has occurred on the passenger aeroplane (with passengers on board), and with a high probability that the plane is about to collapse. Now, it is flying over residential buildings, which also go right up to the airport. If you try to reach the airport, then there is a big risk that not only passengers on board will die but also the residents of the houses below. There is an alternative: to take the plane aside where the residential areas end. There, the pilot will have time to reach, but then the plane will definitely collapse, and everyone on board will die. Again, the deontological approach, in general, rather requires the last attempt to save passengers on board because their lives can not be deliberately sacrificed, the way and for the sake of a good goal. Utilitarianism rather requires sacrificing oneself and passengers in order to avoid large sacrifices.

The second story. There is a policeman who detains a particularly dangerous re-murdered killer with

sadistic inclinations and knows that this killer has a very good “roof”. The policeman understands that this killer will soon be released and again kill someone. However, the policeman has a choice: he can stage resistance when arrested and shoot the criminal. Since the criminal is listed as “armed and especially dangerous”, there will be no questions to the policeman. Should the policeman kill him, or should he strictly follow the law? By the way, this plot is perfectly beaten in “Star Wars” in the history of Anakin and Count Dooku.

The third story. There is a doctor, and he is brought to an accident by a motorcyclist. The motorcyclist is in a very serious condition, and the chances that he will survive, although there are, are small enough. At the same time, this doctor means that there are three people who are waiting for organ transplantation, and if you do it right now, all three can be saved. Should the efforts be made to save the motorcyclist and remove organs to ensure the rescue of three, provided that every minute counts, and if the decision is not taken quickly, then the three waiting transplants will also die (become inoperable, etc.)? Again, from the point of view of the deontological approach, the doctor should not even think that such an option for saving patients waiting for transplantation is possible. From the point of view of utilitarianism – why not?

And a little bit about politics

The approaches described are by no means abstract. For example, in politics, both approaches have the most direct expression.

As applied to politics, deontological ethics implies an “idealistic” policy model, which is characteristic of many European leaders. Supporters of this approach insist on the importance of international law and treaties, as well as institutions like the UN. For political thinkers of this type, for example, criticism of the US for invading Iraq bypassing the UN decisions is characteristic (this decision of the US was argued by classical utilitarian arguments).

Utilitarian ethics, in many ways, lays the foundations of a “realistic” approach in politics that calls for the pragmatic selection of the most promising solutions in this particular situation in order to achieve that same good for more people. Sometimes, this may involve breaking the rules if this is required in order to make decisions on which complex bureaucratic apparatuses simply are not capable. A classic story that can be used against opponents of this approach is the genocide in Rwanda, when, due to bureaucratic delays in the UN, slow and inadequate instructions killed both many Rwandans and UN peacekeepers.

Other examples, including those from the field of modern politics, you can surely come up with yourself.

PS

Interestingly, by the way, the problem of the trolley has long become an object of mass culture. On Facebook, for example, there is a whole group of Trolley problem memes

(https://www.facebook.com/TrolleyProblemMemes), and in the computer game “Destiny” there is a weapon called “The Trolley Problem” (Rachels, 2003). The description of this weapon (“Pull the lever. It’s the right thing to do”) and its name directly refer to the mental experiment being analyzed.

References

Mill, J. S. (2004). Utilitarianism (Original work published 1863). Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11224

Rachels, J. (2003). The elements of moral philosophy (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill. https://books.google.com/books?id=OWAZAAAACAAJ