

What is the Right Thing to Do?

The First Session: A Summary of Thinking Morally according to Consequences or Principles

Beginning with Hypotheticals

In the session last month, we began by considering just *how* we reason when it comes to the moral. Sandel used a case-study approach to illuminate this. You may remember it concerned the trolley and the problem of avoiding loss of life by choosing to turn into the path of one person rather than five people. The majority of students agreed with the proposition that it was better that one rather than five die. The minority rejected that reasoning one reason was that such a rationale is the sort of thing that genocide is made of.

The case-study develops further, with the addition of a fat man who you could possibly push off the bridge in order to stop the trolley car altogether. Most students are not convinced of this option, because it means that you actually intervene to kill the fat man, while in the first case, the man just happened to be on the tracks and you cannot avoid him. Here there is a difference in or degree of intentionality, where you cognitively, internally engage to *actually* murder the fat man, whereas in the first case it was more a question of killing the man by reluctant necessity in order not to kill the others.

Finally, we moved to the medical scenario, where you have a number of people who will die unless they receive transplants. There is a healthy man in the next room who just happens to be napping. You as the surgeon, could theoretically take his organs and save five people, while he alone dies. No-one among the students would consider it an ethically acceptable option. However, one student proposed an alternative scenario, where the surgeon awaits the death of the weakest individual and then uses his body for transplants. This upsets Sandel's "apple cart".

Stepping Back and Gathering our Thoughts

We then step back from the cases and reflect on the moral principles implicit in the discussion.

1. The principle that moral reasoning involves consideration of consequences or results: "better that one must die instead of five".
2. But then the other cases of the fat man pushed off the bridge or the patient murdered as spare parts for the other people at risk, created problems. For most students, even though the consequences appeared demonstrably better if action were taken, the actual intervention, the act of murder, violated their sense of principles. Such actions crossed the line of what was categorically right.

Accordingly, then, within the West, there have been two principle ways of moral reasoning:

1. **Consequentialism that locates morality in the results or consequences of an act.** In this school of thought, the dominant expression is Utilitarianism, initiated by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by John Stuart Mill.
2. **Categorical Reasoning, that locates morality in duties and rights.** This reasoning is grounded internally in our will or intention. The idea here is that everyone can aim to do what is right, because it is right. In categorical reasoning, we know what is right, not because of consequences in any particular case, but because of reason alone. The criterion used for this, that Sandel has not referred to yet...but will later...is something called *universalizability*. The dominant voice of this school of thought is Emmanuel Kant.

Conclusion

Sandel ends with a warning about the risk of doing philosophy - personally and politically He makes the point that thinking philosophically makes us step back, distancing ourselves from conventions, established assumptions and settled beliefs. Once we have thought something and moved beyond conventions, we can never unthink it.

The Next Session will examine Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham – “the greatest good for the greatest number” testing his thinking with the British law case, “The Queen vs Dudley & Stevens.