



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL



Of Means, Ends and Morality

ATROLLEY car is hurtling down a track. In its path are five people who will definitely be killed unless you, a bystander, flip a switch which will divert it onto another track, where it will kill one person. Would you flip the switch?

If you answer "yes", you are not alone. Judith Thompson, a modern philosopher, devised the dilemma of the runaway trolley car to study how people make moral decisions and concluded that most people would flip the switch. Letting five people die seems worse than allowing one person to die. When it comes to moral decisions, results seem to be the only factor in the equation.

But are end results enough to justify any means to attain them? Should absolute moral principles not be adhered to, so no individual is expendable and everyone can receive equal rights and treatment?

After all, while it may seem intuitive to choose to let one person die instead of five, this approach is not an innate one. Rather, it is invented and nurtured.

Utilitarianism and relativism

In philosophy, this is known as the ethical theory of utilitarianism – put forth by 19th century philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The theory holds that the right course of action is the one that maximises an overall "good" consequence. So any action that brings about more benefits than harm would be considered ethical. Conversely, an unethical action would be one that brings about more harm than benefits.

According to this theory, rightness or wrongness would depend on each situation. One can always think of scenarios where actions usually viewed as wrong – such as torture – could bring about more benefits, as in saving a person's life. In such cases, one could speak of ethical or morally permissible torture.

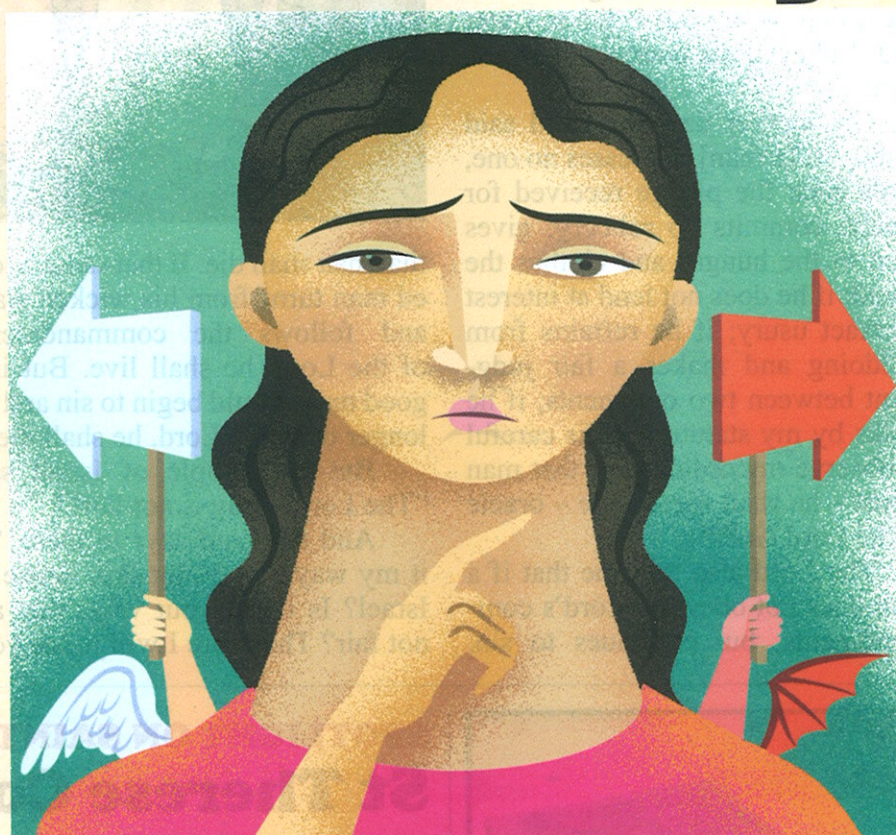
Today's ethical relativism is the result of embracing a utilitarian mentality. It seems that there is nothing right or wrong in itself, not even rape or murder. It all depends from situation to situation. A good end can apparently justify evil means.

Let us go back to the runaway trolley. Imagine that the man who would die as a result of flipping the switch was a devoted family man and worker who had been asked to stay behind after working hours to fix the railway. And that the five persons the train was going to kill were youths who had jumped over the security fence and dared each other to see who could stay longest on the tracks as the train approached. Would you still flip the switch?

If you are still thinking, it is probably because there is more to an ethical dilemma than simply counting benefits and harms.

Means and ends

We can also easily agree that while murder is unacceptable, the killing of a



In this final article in the series on Values by the Catholic Medical Guild and Caritas Singapore, we look at the fundamentals in ethical debates.

person as a result of a traffic accident is simply an unfortunate event. The difference between the two actions does not lie in the end result, which is death for both, but in the fact that one is voluntary and the other is not.

Voluntary killing makes the agent a potential murderer, and dangerous to society. Accidental killing is unfortunate, but morally irrelevant. In other words, our voluntary actions qualify us as moral persons. Good voluntary acts make persons good; wrong voluntary acts make persons immoral.

Morality is therefore about the heart before it is about external results. This is what utilitarianism forgets: Moral actions not only change the world around us (as do involuntary actions) but, more importantly, they reflect and can change what is within us.

Precisely because of this, the means matter as much as the ends. Because the means are also voluntarily chosen, the wrong means would make us moral or immoral agents.

Based on utilitarianism, the end justifies the means; but to a more realistic version of ethics, good ends must be achieved through good means.

What kind of person am I?

Judith Thompson gave a further twist to her trolley scenario: "The runaway trolley car is hurtling down a track where it will kill five people. You are standing

on a bridge above the track and, aware of the imminent disaster, you decide to jump on the track to block the trolley car. Although you will die, the five people will be saved. Just before your leap, you realise that you are too light to stop the trolley. Next to you, a fat man is standing on the very edge of the bridge. He would certainly block the trolley, although he would undoubtedly die from the impact. A small nudge and he would fall right onto the track below. No one would ever know. Should you push him?"

Most people would abhor pushing the fat man to save five people. It appears that it is immoral to use the wrong means this way. The ethical question is not, "What happens after I do this?" but, "What am I doing?" or, "What kind of person do I become if I do this?"

Only an ethical system that allows for absolute moral principles with no room for exceptions or privileges can guarantee absolute equality and respect for human dignity. If good ends can justify evil means, no one is truly safe and truly equally respected, especially if one happens to be on the wrong bridge or the wrong track at the wrong time.

As Christians, there is something we can do for our world obsessed with productive results even in the realm of ethics. We can offer a realistic ethical vision that protects all equally by preventing not only "doing wrong", but also "doing good wrongly".

Ethics in a Nutshell

What It Is

■ Ethics addresses questions about morality, that is, concepts such as right and wrong, good and evil, justice, etc.

The Current Landscape

- Ethical theories have evolved over the ages.
- Consequentialism or Utilitarianism theories hold that the consequences of a particular action form the basis for valid moral judgements of the action. A moral action is the one that maximises the overall "good" and minimum "bad".
- Deontological ethics determines goodness or rightness from examining acts rather than third party consequences. Moral actions are based on duties and rules.
- Pragmatic Ethics holds that correctness, like science, evolves as society progresses. Thus, we should prioritise social reform over attempts to account for consequences, individual virtue or duty.

What the Church Teaches

- **Our voluntary actions express and determine our individual goodness or evil.** "Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits." (Veritatis Splendor, 71)

- **Morality is not simply about weighing goods and evils.** "The weighing of goods and evils... is not an adequate method for determining whether the choice of that concrete kind of behaviour is "according to its species" or "in itself" morally good or bad, licit or illicit." (Veritatis Splendor, 77)

- **No matter what, one should never do evil to achieve good.** "It is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or promote a greater good; it is never lawful even for the gravest reasons to do evil that good may come of it." (Humanae Vitae, 14)

- **Morality is absolute.** "When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the "poorest of the poor" on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal."

Even though intentions may sometimes be good, and circumstances frequently difficult, civil authorities and particular individuals never have authority to violate the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. In the end, only a morality which acknowledges certain norms as valid always and for everyone, with no exception, can guarantee the ethical foundation of social coexistence, both on the national and international levels."

(Veritatis Splendor, 96, 97)