Cognitive Dissonance and Moral Dilemmas

No one likes having to make tough moral decisions. This became evidently clear to me in observing my fellow students in our ethics class of my senior year. Throughout the semester, I heard both complaining groans and shouts of concern from students having to act as judges in the face of difficult moral dilemmas. On multiple occasions, students would avoid the philosophical problem at hand by altering or adding to the circumstances of these dilemmas. In this essay, I describe one instance of this phenomenon taking place in our discussion on utilitarian moral dilemmas. Next, I analyze this phenomenon in terms of the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. Then, I describe the philosophical problem behind the phenomenon and evaluate the students’ actions by their possible benefits and hindrances to the overall study of moral philosophy.

Description of the Phenomenon:

I first observed my fellow students engaging in the avoidance of the philosophical problem while we were studying various utilitarian moral dilemmas. In Nielsen’s case of “The Innocent Fat Man”, a group of travelers are caught in a cave near the ocean when the fat man leading the group gets stuck at the cave entrance. The group must decide whether to blow up the fat man with a stick of dynamite, or all drown by the upcoming tide (Nielsen 237). The thought-experiment is a classic utilitarian-style dilemma in which one must choose between saving one life vs. many.

In being asked how they would decide in this dilemma, students’ responses revealed a variety of thought patterns. Many voiced comments like “It’s not fair!” or “There isn’t enough information!” Others students were clearly uncomfortable with the utilitarian dilemma and sought to solve the problem by adding other moral attributes to the characters of the situation: “Is the group demanding him to die?” or “Well, if the fat man is willing to be killed, then…”

Psychological Analysis of the Phenomenon:

It seems to me that, in examining this serious moral dilemma, the students were made somewhat anxious by the difficulty of making a judgment within the strictly limited parameters of the given situation. Rather than make a simple decision, they wanted to make the judgment easier by
adding to the situation so that judgment was in terms of an easier criterion. In doing so, they shifted our class discussion away from the deeper ethical issue at hand onto our philosophical topics.

I believe this event can be explained by the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. This term refers to a person’s mental state in which two or more of their cognitions (i.e. thoughts, sentiments, or actions) are inconsistent with one another (Gilovich et al 208). A particular inconsistency of cognitive dissonance can be aroused within a person’s “sense of self”, which most conceive as “rational” and “morally upright” (214). In my class, I postulate a mental inconsistency between students’ positive concept of themselves and a decision which necessitates the killing of another person. While there are a variety of social-situational factors which may induce cognitive dissonance, the notion of “insufficient justification” stands out for this discussion (217). Basically, the decision students must make is not in terms of a criterion by which they could easily justify themselves or feel good about what they choose.

The Problem:

By the theory of cognitive dissonance, it is clear that students’ actions are a reaction to the anxiety aroused by the difficulty inherent to the given moral dilemmas. In light of this information, we must ask: What do the students’ responses mean for our moral philosophical studies, and how should we properly use and respond to difficult moral decisions? As a possible solution one might make recommendations about what makes a good philosophical though-experiment, such as consideration for practicality or reality. Or, one might argue that students simply do not understand the usefulness of abstract thinking in philosophy which cannot be found in daily life. I believe these issues have value and include them in my arguments here. However, I believe the problem goes deeper than these solutions, into the entire way in which the education of moral philosophy is conducted.

These solutions view the problem uni-directionally; they seek to help professors and writers better communicate their thoughts, which are then to be received by students. Yet, I believe such writes off the students’ actions here as merely anxiety-alleviating and neglects the vital insights that can be drawn from their own responses. Instead, I see the issue as existing in a mutual relationship between all these persons, envisioning proper moral philosophical education as a conversation, rather than a mere transference of knowledge. I articulate both the possible benefits that can be derived from my fellow students’ responses and the possible hindrances that they pose for good philosophical study.
Some Benefits behind the Phenomenon:

In order to derive the possible insights from the students’ responses, I begin by examining the notion of an “easier” path in the theory of cognitive dissonance. Here, I theorize any instance of “easier” as revealing one’s own neurological or cognitive structure, i.e. the mental pathways that one is most inclined to think. When faced with cognitive dissonance, one takes the logical path of least mental resistance. And one can critique the student for merely avoiding the given philosophical issue. But perhaps in the larger picture, the reader is wanting to take the discussion where it really should go.

Consider the case of “The Innocent Fat Man”: perhaps there is something to be said as to why utilitarian-style reasoning of one vs. many causes so much anxiety in students. Maybe a person’s attitude towards their own death is something we should consider in our moral argumentation. Yet, unless professors and writers listen to the concerns of their students, they miss a plethora of useful information that lies available.

There is significant one a reason for the manner in which students’ thoughts travel in on the paths they do. Often when our thoughts want to go in a different direction, it is because we feel it is getting us to something we view as generally more important. This observation can be broken down in terms of two basic principles. Firstly, the students’ responses express a general desire by the larger philosophical community for examples that are realistic, i.e. have connection of likelihood to what is known about reality. The case of “The Innocent Fat Man” may be important in some sense, but because this it uses less than realistic circumstances, it can be more difficult to see its relevance. Secondly, the students’ responses demonstrate a desire for that which is practical, i.e. has benefit and utility for the things we are doing right now. We want philosophizing to match up with the daily life; so in our philosophizing about general ideals, we focus on those concepts which we deem most relevant to the matters of our general daily life. Thus, the student asks: What does the utilitarian’s reasoning of one vs. many have on me in the here and now?

Some Hindrances behind the Phenomenon:

While the students’ concerns above are valuable, the professor’s and writer’s concerns reveal many of the ways in which the interests of my fellow students were hindered and hampered by their own philosophical side-stepping. In its general character, the practice of philosophy takes a person out of his daily life, with its the categories, vocabulary, and logical patterns, and into the more abstract realm of intellectual life, which has its own set of descriptive terms and pathways. Philosophy invites us to make the mental connections which in daily life are not made as easily or as often. Yet, these unique
connections do have the enormous potential to benefit the happenings of daily life. Thus, when a student alters or adds details to a given moral dilemma, he misses understanding the concept, learning the term, or making the logical jump. He makes his immediate judgment “easier”, but misses the long term benefits of philosophical study.

And because of this unique character in philosophy, the solution to our problem may not be merely to make all our thought-experiments more realistic or practical. For the case of “The Innocent Fat Man”, sure, we will almost certainly never have to choose between one life and ten. However, by focusing on such moral dilemmas we can be made aware of the ways in which our normal moral reasoning is not as reasonable, healthy, effective, or even as realistic as we think it is. Upon seeing the evil in thinking in terms of one vs. many, perhaps we should rethink the times when we force individuals into a social circumstance because of a group decision. Maybe, we will discover in utilitarian-style dilemmas the deeper understanding of human interaction through concepts of “consequentialism” or “general welfare. However, if a student does not pursue philosophy for its own sake, by temporarily accepting the details of odd situations, these benefits will be missed entirely.

**Conclusion:**

By analyzing my fellow students’ responses in terms of cognitive dissonance theory, we are made aware of the complex neurological network behind their actions. In light of this observation, I have sought to debunk the presumptions about moral philosophical education made by both amateur and professional philosophers. In both of these issues, there is a lack of desire to listen and respond intentionally which, sadly, is mutual to both sides. To each, I give these last words:

- **To the professional:** *Listen to the amateurs. Their logic, though not as “enlightened” as yours, might illuminate a connecting point that you did not consider, the key logical pathway that you and the rest of the philosophical community are not aware of because of your own presuming logical patterns.*

- **To the amateur:** *Listen to the professionals. Studying philosophy means being willing to realize how you may not be as rational or good-intentioned as you think you are. Take a risk by learning “strange” things, and your return on investment will be skills and knowledge you could not have found elsewhere.*
Works Cited
