

The Lifeboat Dilemma

Professor (Welcome):

Welcome to the Lifeboat Dilemma! This ethical scenario puts you in a no-win situation that forces you to choose between options that are *far* from ideal. Listen carefully as I describe the dilemma. Then, you'll get the chance to see representatives of four major ethical theories explain and debate how *they* would respond to the situation.

Professor:

You are the captain. Far from land, your ship struck an iceberg and sank. All but one lifeboat was destroyed. As your ship was sinking, **ten** survivors (including you) crowded aboard the only remaining lifeboat, intended to hold a maximum of **six** people. The lifeboat is packed, with people piled on one another and little room to move. The seas are frigid and rough. The only possibility for rescue will require great efforts of rowing from those on the lifeboat. A treacherous storm is approaching. It's obvious that the lifeboat will have to be lightened by **four** people if anyone is to survive. However, anyone not in the lifeboat will certainly die. What will you choose to do?

Elaine the Ethical Egoist:

Hi, I'm Elaine. As an ethical egoist, I believe that human beings **should always act in what they perceive to be their own best interests, as individuals**. In this situation, it's pretty clear that maximizing the chances for my own survival has to be my top priority, regardless of what happens to anyone else. If we don't force four people over the side, *I* will drown, along with everyone else. So, as captain, I'd choose to throw four of the others overboard.

Ulysses the Utilitarian:

Hello, Elaine. My name is Ulysses, and I'm a Utilitarian. As such, I make all my ethical decisions based on the answer to one question: "**Which action will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people?**" Not to seem harsh, but while you appear to be concerned only about yourself, my focus is on what's best for *everyone*. In this situation, it's pretty clear that doing nothing is *not* the way the go, because all ten of us will die, resulting in no good for anyone. Really, the only option is to throw four people overboard in order to serve the greater good of saving six. Yes, four people will have to die, but, at least with this, six people are saved, rather than all ten dying needlessly. **The ends justify the means.**

Elaine the Ethical Egoist:

I agree with you, Ulysses, that the ends justify the means. **It's the outcome that matters.** But my concern is with my own outcome, not everyone else's. It's just a coincidence that, in this case, it's in *my* best interest to also save five others, because they can help me with the rowing. The four that are thrown overboard are on their own. As far as who to keep? Well, I'd choose the five who were the strongest, so that we'd have the best chance of rowing safely through the storm. What about you?

Ulysses the Utilitarian:

Yeah, the outcome *is* all that matters. So, selecting the strongest six to stay onboard is essential, since rowing is necessary. But as a Utilitarian, my concern isn't really for *myself*, but for the good of the *many*. So, I'd have to consider which of the people could contribute *most* to the survival of the group. If I *weren't* one of the strong ones, then I'd *have* to choose to jump overboard as one of the four people who would die for the good of the many. With Utilitarianism, it's not the individual who necessarily matters, but rather what's best for the **majority** of the people impacted by the decision. This is true, even if that means the majority benefit at the expense of others or even at *my* expense, as the decision maker.

Kara the Kantian:

Hey, guys, I have to say, I think you're both really off base on this one. Oh, sorry, I should probably introduce myself. I'm Kara, and I'm a Kantian. It's clear, from listening to the two of you, that you're only concerned with the *consequences* of your ethical actions. I mean, it's great that you want to save six out of the ten survivors, but in the process, you're trampling all over the rights of the four people you're proposing to throw off the lifeboat! Ethics isn't about the morality of the *outcome* – it's about the morality of the *action* itself. And some actions are just wrong, regardless of the consequences – like murdering four people by throwing them out of a lifeboat to their deaths. We have a moral duty to value *all* human life.

Elaine the Ethical Egoist:

Wait a second, Kara. You said you're *Kantian*? That means you agree with the ethical views of the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant. His ethical theory is **deontological**, right? So you *don't* agree that the ends justify the means?

Kara the Kantian:

Exactly right, Elaine. While you and Ulysses ask questions about consequences, like, "What action serves my own best interest?" and "What action will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people?" Kant used, what he called, the **Categorical Imperative** to determine the best ethical action. A "categorical imperative" is a command that is absolutely binding, without exceptions, and Kant's can be expressed in several ways. The two main ones are:

1. First, "**A person should act only in ways that would be acceptable if everyone else acted that same way,**" and, second...
2. "**We should never treat people only as a means to an end, where the outcome is our only concern, but as valuable in and of themselves.**"

Ulysses the Utilitarian:

OK, Kara, so what would *you* do in the lifeboat situation?

Kara the Kantian:

Throwing people overboard against their will is treating people only as a means to an end. It's forcing them to lose their lives to serve the end or goal of saving the others. It doesn't value *their* lives at all. That violates the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative. So, that's out of the question. Every life counts.

Elaine the Ethical Egoist:

So, you'd let all ten people die? None would be saved? Even *you* would die.

Kara the Kantian:

Well [drawn out], maybe not. One way to value everyone's life equally would be to *ask* for *volunteers* who were *willing* to give their lives to save the others. Another way would be to *ask* everyone to participate in a lottery, like drawing straws, to see which four people would jump out of the lifeboat. Either way no one would be forced out against their will, and everyone's life would be treated equally. But, if not enough people volunteered to give their lives or to participate in the lottery, then, you're right, I wouldn't force anyone overboard. So, all ten people would lose their lives.

Ulysses the Utilitarian:

But if it is in your power to save six lives, and you don't – instead, you choose to let all ten die – won't you be morally responsible for the deaths of these people you could have saved?

Kara the Kantian:

I don't think so, Ulysses, because I didn't put them in that situation. *My* actions didn't cause their deaths. But if I *push* them out of the lifeboat, I am *acting*, and that action is *not* morally acceptable, because it is not *valuing* their lives. It's murder. Better to *not* act and *not* be responsible, than to *act* and cause *death*.

But you know, guys, I'm not so sure your ethical models are that easy to apply either. You both say you're all about choosing the option that results in the greatest good, either for yourself or for the most people, but how can you really know that unless you can see into the future? For example: Ulysses, as a Utilitarian, you'd have to choose the four people to throw overboard. What if one of the ones you sacrifice would have discovered a cure for cancer, saving countless lives? There's no way you could know that. That's why I don't think ethical theories that are based only on *consequences* are good enough. We need something more reliable than that.

What do *you* think, Veronica?

Veronica the Virtue Ethicist:

I see that all of you are focusing on the *action* that should or should not be taken. But, I think **character** and **virtue** are the most important considerations. Virtue Ethics focuses on **being** rather than just **doing**. That's why it values the development of *virtues*, such as honesty, courage, integrity, trustworthiness, wisdom, and justice. So, we need to ask ourselves, "What would the courageous and just person do?" I think, she would be brave and treat everyone equally. So, she would die alongside everyone else on the lifeboat, and not push any to their deaths – holding true to her integrity until the very end.

Ulysses the Utilitarian:

Yeah, but what would the *honest* and *wise* person do? Aren't these virtues, as well? Wouldn't she *openly* explain the *wisdom* of sacrificing four lives so that six could be saved, and then be *courageous* enough to carry out that decision, even if some didn't agree?

Veronica the Virtue Ethicist:

You have a good point, Ulysses. I suppose her actions would depend on which virtues she sees as most important – which ones she has developed as part of her moral character. Another approach might be to identify which virtues have priority, and then select who will be saved based on which individuals best conform to that ideal or model of virtue. So, for example, if “achievement” is a virtue, she would save those who have achieved the *most* in their lives or who have the *most potential* to achieve great things.

Kara the Kantian:

That seems a little arbitrary to me, Veronica. Like, how do you determine which virtue or virtues are the most important? Don't you need some kind of rule or principle on which to base them?

Veronica the Virtue Ethicist:

I'm not sure about a rule, Kara, but Aristotle, the Greek philosopher with whom Virtue Ethics is most associated, proposed, what he called, “**The Golden Mean.**” By this he meant that we should aim for the middle point between extremes. So, if on one extreme we have *cowardliness*, on the other we would have *recklessness*. We should try to cultivate the virtue *between* these two extremes, which would be *courage*. In this case, we don't want to be reckless by standing by and allowing the deaths of all ten people, but neither do we want to be cowardly, unwilling to sacrifice our *own* lives. So, the *courageous* captain would send four to their deaths to save the six, but would take one of those four spots for herself, setting a brave example for the other three, and giving her life to save others.

Professor:

Okay, thanks to our characters who represented four of the major ethical theories we're discussing in this course, you should have a pretty good sense for how each of these theories applies to an ethical dilemma. As you can see, it's not always as easy as we might think at first glance. While the concepts of an ethical theory may be clear when we talk about them in the abstract, applying those concepts to real situations can sometimes get messy. And even when you have two people who hold the same view, two Virtue Ethicists for example, there's no guarantee they will agree on how to apply their shared ethical theory. And to further complicate matters, these four aren't the only ethical models out there. The Divine Command Theory, Care Ethics, and Ethical Relativism are others to consider. As you attempt to apply these theories to moral issues, keep in mind each of these characters and try to see the issue from a variety of perspectives, including those different from your own. This will help you gain a better understanding of the topic, as well as develop a respect for the opinions of others. What about you? What would you do, if you were the captain of this ship? Remember, it's not just about giving an answer, but also explaining *why* you made the choice you did, and identifying both the strengths *and* weaknesses of your chosen approach.