

Ethical systems



ETHICAL SYSTEMS Ethical Systems The ability to act as ‘one ought to act’ rather than as ‘one feels comfortable’ is the foundation of ethical formalism. Every once in a while we are confronted with an ethical dilemma, the ethical resolution of the dilemma lies in identifying the relevant facts, identifying the relevant values and concepts, recognizing all possible moral dilemmas for each party involved, deciding what is the most immediate moral or ethical issue facing the individual and finally and most importantly, resolving the ethical or moral dilemma by using an ethical system.

Sophie’s Choice

In the movie *Sophie’s Choice*, Sophie has to make a painful decision wherein she has to choose one of her two children to be sent to the gas chambers in order to save the other. The other option is to let go both the children with the guard to a certain death. Ethical formalism as brought out by Kant (Jensen, 1934), states that ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ In other words, an action irrespective of other circumstances and environment, is either right or wrong and can be applied universally at all points of time. Going by ethical formalism, in choosing for one of her children over the other, it is felt that Sophie has exercised her feelings and emotions rather than the universal law. The right choice for Sophie would have been to fight for the lives of both children even if it finally lead to the death of both the children. By deciding to send the girl away, she has wrecked havoc in the minds of both her children and herself. That she commits suicide at the end of it brings out this emotional struggle that she goes through.

However, viewing *Sophie’s Choice* from an utilitarian perspective (Harpham, 1999), choosing rather than not choosing was the right thing to do. By

choosing, irrespective of which child, she has potentially saved the life of at least one child. If she refused to choose and opted to struggle to keep both her children with her, the guard would have taken both of them away, presumably to the gas chambers. Therefore, from the utilitarian point of view, the lesser harm was in choosing one child over the other and Sophie did the right thing by doing so.

Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki resulted in the deaths of more than 100, 000 civilians and an even greater number of casualties, cannot be easily justified regardless of the attack's outcome (Alperovitch, 1995). As a result, controversy surrounds the use of atomic bombs against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an event that occurred over half a century ago. It can be argued that the bombing of the two Japanese cities won the war in the Pacific while it is also arguable that at most it only accelerated Japan's defeat, which to a large extent was an unavoidable outcome. As a counter argument, the supporters of America's decision to use atomic weapons against the Japanese populace contend that while it may be true that Japan's defeat was inevitable, if the U. S. had not used atomic weapons against Japan, the use of ground troops would have been required resulting in up to 500, 000 military casualties and an appalling level of civilian destruction (Skates, 1994). Thus, in terms of absolute utilitarianism, the use of atomic bombs against Japanese cities was the correct choice. At the same time, from the perspective of ethical formalism, irrespective of the other circumstances, the act of bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not acceptable, for these acts cannot be applied universally, as has been the maxim by Kant.

References

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