

Moral Philosophy

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1 Regina vs. Dudley and Stephens (1884)

The English yacht *Mignonette* was built in England in 1867. She set sail for Sydney from Southampton on 19 May 1884 with a crew of four: Tom Dudley, the captain; Edwin Stephens; Edmund Brooks; and Richard Parker, the cabin boy. Parker was 17 years old and an inexperienced seaman.

On 5 July, the yacht was running before a gale around 1,600 miles (2,600 km) northwest of the Cape of Good Hope. A wave struck the yacht and washed away the lee bulwarks. Dudley instantly realized that the yacht was doomed and ordered the single lifeboat to be lowered. The *Mignonette* sank within five minutes and the crew abandoned ship for the lifeboat, only managing to salvage vital navigational instruments along with two tins of turnips and no fresh water.

Over the first night, the crew had to fight off a shark with their oars. They were around 700 miles from the nearest land. Dudley kept the first tin of turnips until 7 July when its five pieces were shared among the men to last two days. On or around 9 July, Brooks spotted a turtle which Stephens dragged on board. The crew were resolutely avoiding drinking seawater as it was then universally held to be fatal and, though they devoured the turtle, they forwent drinking its blood when it became contaminated with seawater. The turtle yielded about three pounds of meat each, though the crew ate even the bones, and, along with the second tin of turnips lasted until 15 or 17 July. The crew failed to collect rainwater, and began to drink their own urine. It was probably on 20 July that Parker became ill through drinking seawater. Stephens was also unwell, possibly having experimented with seawater.

Drawing lots in order to nominate a sacrificial victim who would die to feed the others was possibly first discussed on 16 or 17 July, and debate seems to have intensified on 21 July but without resolution. On 23 or 24 July, with Parker probably in a coma, Dudley told the others that it was better that one of them die so that the others survive and that they should draw lots. Brooks refused. That night, Dudley again raised the matter with Stephens pointing out that Parker was probably dying and that he and Stephens had wives and families. They agreed to leave the matter until the morning. The following day, with no prospect of rescue in sight, Dudley and Stephens silently signalled to each other that Parker would be killed. Killing Parker before his natural death would better preserve his blood to drink. Brooks, who had not been party to the earlier discussion claimed to have signalled neither assent nor protest. Dudley always insisted that Brooks had assented. Dudley said a prayer and, with Stephens standing by to hold the youth's legs if he struggled, pushed his penknife into Parker's jugular vein, killing him.

The three fed on Parker's body, with Dudley and Brooks consuming the most and Stephens very little. The crew even finally managed to catch some rainwater. The crew sighted a sail on 29 July, and Dudley, Stephens and Brooks were picked up by the German sailing barque *Moctezuma* which returned the men to Falmouth, Cornwall on Saturday 6 September en route to its destination in Hamburg.

On arrival in Falmouth, the survivors attended the customs house. All three were candid, Dudley and Stephens believing themselves to be protected by a Custom of the Sea. However, policeman Sergeant Laverty was in the vicinity of the depositions and later questioned Dudley about the means by which he had killed Parker, taking custody of the knife and promising to return it. The men were later detained to stand trial for the murder of Parker.

2 Moral Dilemmas

2.1 Harming the Innocent

According to the principle of utility, we should always do whatever will produce the greatest amount of happiness and whatever is necessary to prevent the greatest amount of unhappiness. But what if the only way to produce happiness, and to prevent unhappiness, is to harm or even kill innocent people?

1. Suppose you are driving through a narrow tunnel and a worker falls onto the road in front of you. There is not enough time for you to stop. If you keep straight, you will hit the worker and kill him, but if you swerve left into oncoming traffic, you will collide with a school bus and kill at least five children.
2. Suppose ten thousand innocent civilians live next to a munitions factory in a country at war. If you bomb the factory, all of them will die. If you don't bomb the factory, it will be used to produce bombs that will be dropped on fifty thousand innocent civilians in another country.
3. Suppose a man has planted a bomb in New York City, and it will explode in twenty-four hours unless the police are able to find it. Should it be legal for the police to use torture to extract information from the suspected bomber?
4. Now suppose the man who has planted the bomb will not reveal the location unless an innocent member of his family is tortured. Should it be legal for the police to torture innocent people, if that is truly the only way to discover the location of a large bomb?

2.2 Telling the Truth

The principle of utility tells us to do whatever is necessary to minimize pain and unhappiness, but pain and unhappiness have many sources. There are times when telling people the truth would make them very unhappy. Should you lie to a person whenever lying is the only way to spare his or her feelings and prevent unhappiness?

1. Suppose your friend likes to sing in the shower, and he thinks he is an excellent singer. In fact, however, he sounds truly awful. Should you tell him the truth, even if it will ruin his self-confidence?
2. Suppose a man has been missing for many years, and you have just learned that he is dead. Should you tell the man's father, even if it will crush his hopes and send him into despair?
3. If you think it would be wrong to lie in one or both of these cases, do you think there is sometimes a moral duty to tell the truth despite the consequences? Does this duty mean that the principle of utility is mistaken?

2.3 Living Your Life

The principle of utility says that we should always maximize happiness. It does not matter whether we are deciding on the laws of our country as citizens and officials, or whether we are deciding what to do in our own private lives. In every possible case, the principle of utility tells us to choose the course of action that will produce the greatest amount of happiness. Is that right?

1. There are many needy people in the world who could benefit from your help. If you were to volunteer one evening per week, you could reduce need and thereby increase the sum of happiness. But if you were to volunteer all of your evenings, then you could produce even more happiness. Should you volunteer all of your spare time to helping the needy? Would it be wrong not to do so?
2. There are many poor people in the world who lack the money to buy food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. If you were to donate £100 to a charity such as Oxfam, then some of these people would get what they desperately need and you would thereby increase happiness. But if you were to donate all of your spare income each month, then even more people would get what they desperately need and you would produce even more happiness. Should you donate all of your spare income to charities such as Oxfam? Would it be wrong not to do so?

References

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R_v_Dudley_and_Stephens (Section 1 text nicked from Wiki)
<http://tinyurl.com/2vffn7w>
<http://www.givingwhatwecan.org/> – Try the calculator (Resources→Interactive tools→How rich you really are)
<http://www.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/> – The blog is particularly recommended