

# Greater Manchester Humanists

## Humanist Discussion Group

22 November 2022

(Zoom meeting 7.30-9.00pm)

### Ethical Decision Making Under Uncertainty

Making ethical decisions for ourselves or society may not be easy, though it is more straightforward when the chances of different outcomes are known. But how do we make ethical decisions when the probability of different outcomes is difficult to judge? Is there a technique or approach that we tend towards based on our own attitudes to risk and how does that translate to national decisions of huge significance? Do those who are unable to assess the risks well suffer more from poor decisions? Do different countries make decisions based on their national culture or are they mainly determined by the leader at the time?

For example, what approaches should we use to decide whether and on what terms to allow:

- Manipulation of genes in embryos to eradicate hereditary diseases or undesirable traits
- Nuclear power
- Multinational corporations and fast developing technologies that while developing products and services, may exploit or destroy resources and pollute our environment
- Incorporation of AI into everything from driverless cars to lethal weapons
- New pharmaceutical drugs that carry significant side effects or risks
- Development of genetically modified foods
- Social media companies that create useful addictive services for smart phones that may, wittingly or unwittingly, be producing greater political polarisation, social isolation, and the erosion of democracy
- Existential risks such as global warming.

Brian Green identifies six approaches or risk standards to this issue. Which of these should we favour and for what, and is our choice partly a reflection of our own individual tolerance for risk and the culture we have grown up in?

1) **The Prevention Principle** takes a highly cautious approach towards ethical decision making because it specifically relates to situations with certainty of negative outcomes. It follows the general rule that “prevention is better than cure” so that harms ought to be anticipated and pre-empted, rather than experienced and solved later (as in the “Polluter Pays Principle”).

2) **The Precautionary Principle** is an approach to risk management and ethical decision making which seeks to prevent possible harms in cases where there is not yet scientific consensus on connections between cause and effect. The approach merely necessitates that there be a plausible scientific connection, not that it be certain. This approach is more likely to avoid harm, since waiting for damage to occur (and thus establish a connection) can be too late.

3) **Prudent Vigilance** is an approach to risk which seeks to proceed with the potentially risky behavior, while remaining vigilant as to risks that might be developing or becoming more certain as one proceeds. It seeks to establish processes for assessing likely benefits and risks before, during, and after an undertaking, and continues “to evaluate safety and security as technologies develop and diffuse into public and private sectors.”

4) **The Polluter Pays Principle** is a risk standard which permits risk-taking behaviour and then, if something goes wrong, assigns responsibility for cleaning up the harms to those who created them. This risk standard is responsive rather than anticipatory, and assumes that risk takers will either self-police and not make errors, or, if self-policing fails, will be capable of making up for the harms they have caused.

5) **The Gambler's Principle** counsels risk takers to avoid risking damages which, if they occurred, would be ethically unacceptable, ranging up to the largest technological disasters, including global catastrophic and existential risks. Philosophers of technology Hans Jonas and Michael Davis have each advocated this approach, Jonas describing it as “forbidding any ‘*va banque*’ (all-in or go for broke) game in the affairs of humanity”, and Davis as “don’t bet more than you can afford to lose”.

6) **The Proactionary Principle** is an approach to risk taking behaviour which argues that innovation and technological progress should be pursued with speed. It characterises the current risk conditions as unacceptably bad (i.e. unethical), and therefore argues that other risks ought to be taken in order to escape the current risky state. It is an approach to risk which emphasises action now, even in the face of possible negative effects, because if actions are not taken now, then the current unacceptable state will continue, and the future itself may be at stake.

### **The Trolley Problem**

The well-known trolley problem - “a runaway trolley car (or tram) is about to kill five people walking along a track. But you are standing by the lever that switches the points, and if you pull it the trolley will divert onto another track where only one person is stuck, and will then be killed instead. Time is running out. Do you pull the lever?”

Would you pull the lever? Most people say yes taking a utilitarian viewpoint – the greatest good for the greatest number.

A variation: A doctor at a hospital has five patients dying from various organ failures. A healthy person is waiting for an appointment, someone who would not be missed by many. Should the doctor kill that person to harvest their organs and save the five people?

Michael Jordan proposes a further variation on the trolley problem:

“What if there is actually a brake on the trolley – but it only has a 50% chance of stopping the trolley before it kills the one or the five? And unfortunately, there isn’t enough time to pull both the brake and the lever. What would you do? Would you pull the brake, or would you pull the lever?” Faced with uncertainty, do we change our reasoning?

### **References**

Green, Brian, Six Approaches to Making Ethical Decisions in Cases of Uncertainty and Risk - Markkula Center for Applied Ethics

<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/technology-ethics/resources/six-approaches-to-making-ethical-decisions-in-cases-of-uncertainty-and-risk/>

Jordan, Michael, Ethics & Uncertainty | Issue 132 | Philosophy Now, 2019.

[https://philosophynow.org/issues/132/Ethics\\_and\\_Uncertainty](https://philosophynow.org/issues/132/Ethics_and_Uncertainty)

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