MORAL UNCERTAINTY

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Lecture in ‘Ethics’, MA Philosophy & Economics

2500 years ago, we didn't know what moral rules to follow – so we created the field of ethics.

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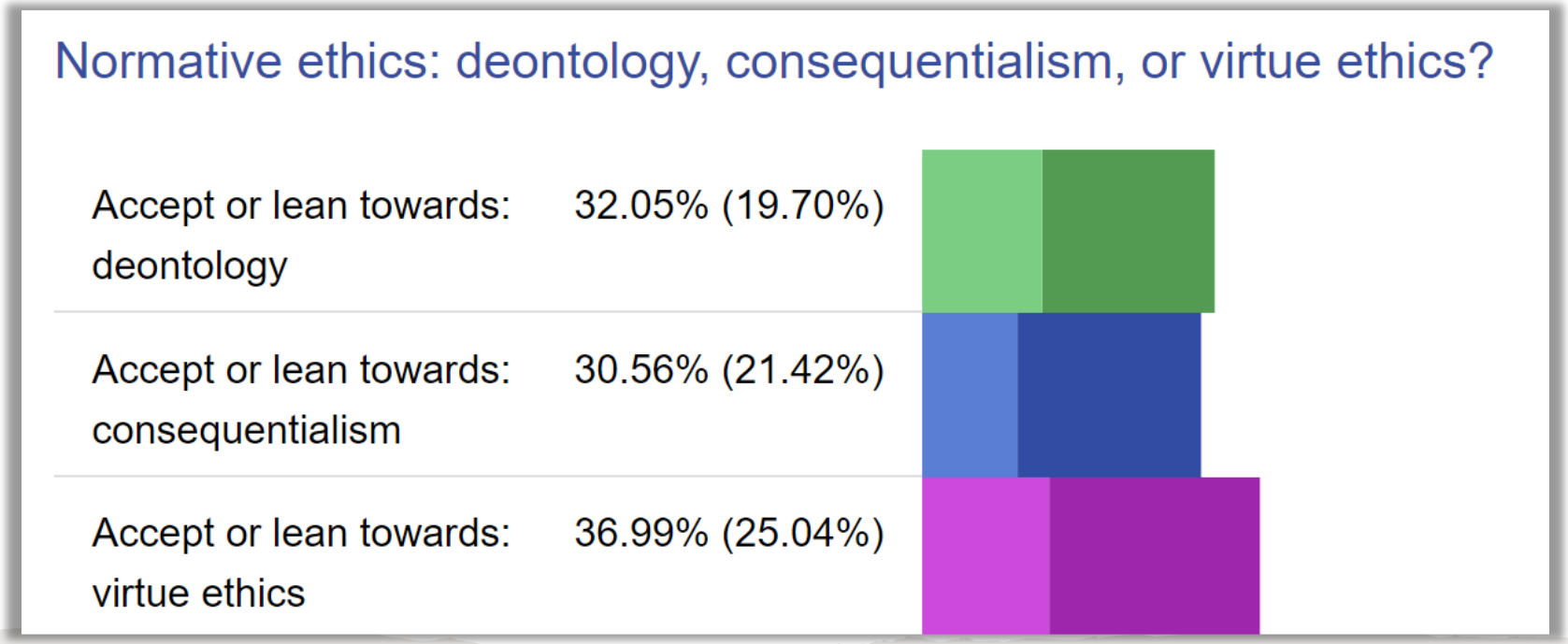

PhilPapers Survey (of professional philosophers), 2020

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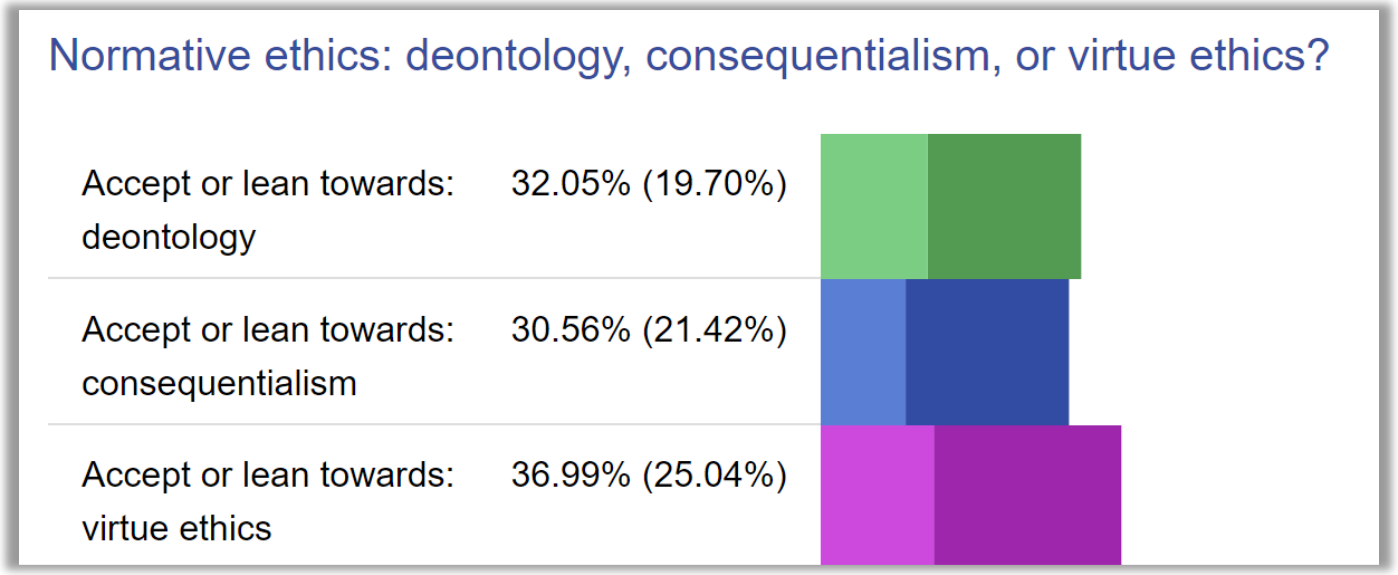


Moral certainty seems far away.

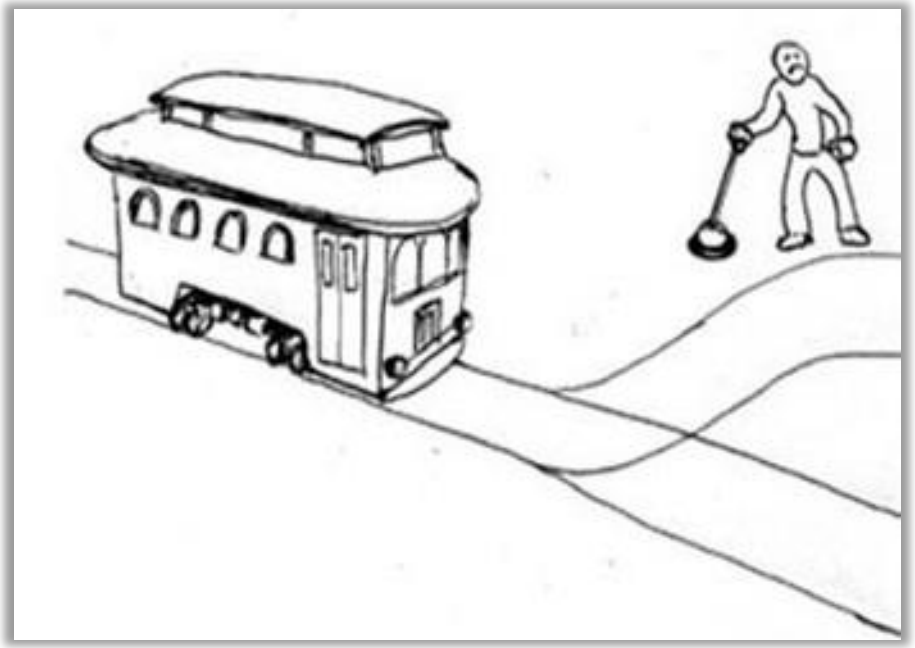
What now?

The Problem of Moral Uncertainty

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL UNCERTAINTY

AN ATTEMPTED DEFINITION

You see a lever next to some train tracks. Should you pull the lever?



We need more information to answer that question. But what kind?

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL UNCERTAINTY

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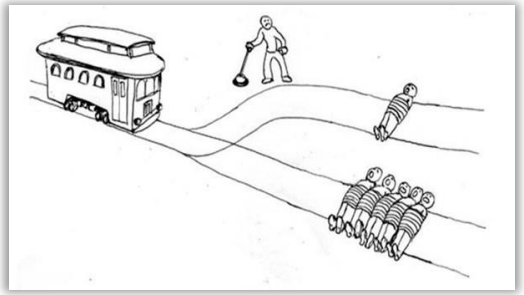


To make that choice, we need…

Empirical information – about the lever and the world:

What will be the outcome of our choice?

What happens if I pull this lever?

But also normative information – about ourselves and morality:

What moral value do we assign to the outcome?

Is what happens good or bad?

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL UNCERTAINTY

AN ATTEMPTED DEFINITION

To make a choice, we need information on two levels:

We need empirical information: What will be the outcome of our choice?

But we also need normative information: What moral value do we assign to the outcome?

We face uncertainty on both:

SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

There are plenty of reasons to be empirically uncertain:

- We don't know a lot about the future…
- We are provided with conflicting evidence…
- Things might be up to chance…

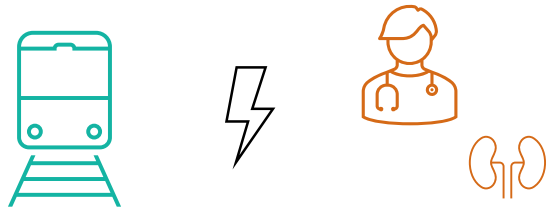
What could be reasons to be morally uncertain – or not?

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL UNCERTAINTY

SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

Expert Disagreement: Many people have thought a lot about moral theory – but with very different results.

Conflicting Intuitions: In different situations, we might favour different moral theories. Which is our 'real' moral belief?



Conflicting Motivators: Some of our moral beliefs might be informed by religious mandate, some by social norms, some by independent reasoning.

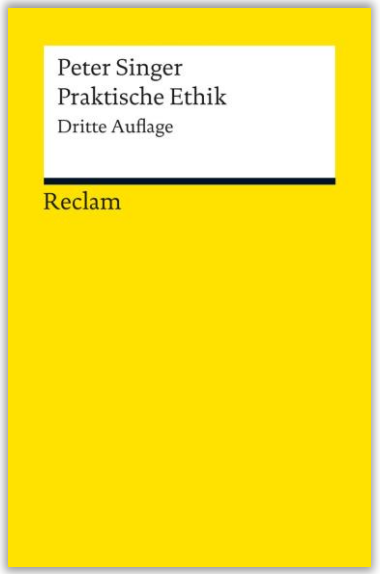
Choosing under Moral Uncertainty

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

BELIEFS AND CREDENCES

A has always been a strong believer in a rule-based moral view. But recently, being obligated to visit an ethics lecture, she had been assigned some reading on Peter Singer, and began to develop an inclination for a utilitarian moral view.

?



CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

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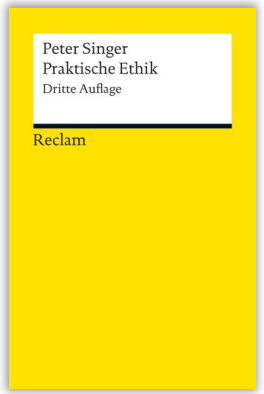


Credence ($C_{\text{Rule-based}}$) = 67%

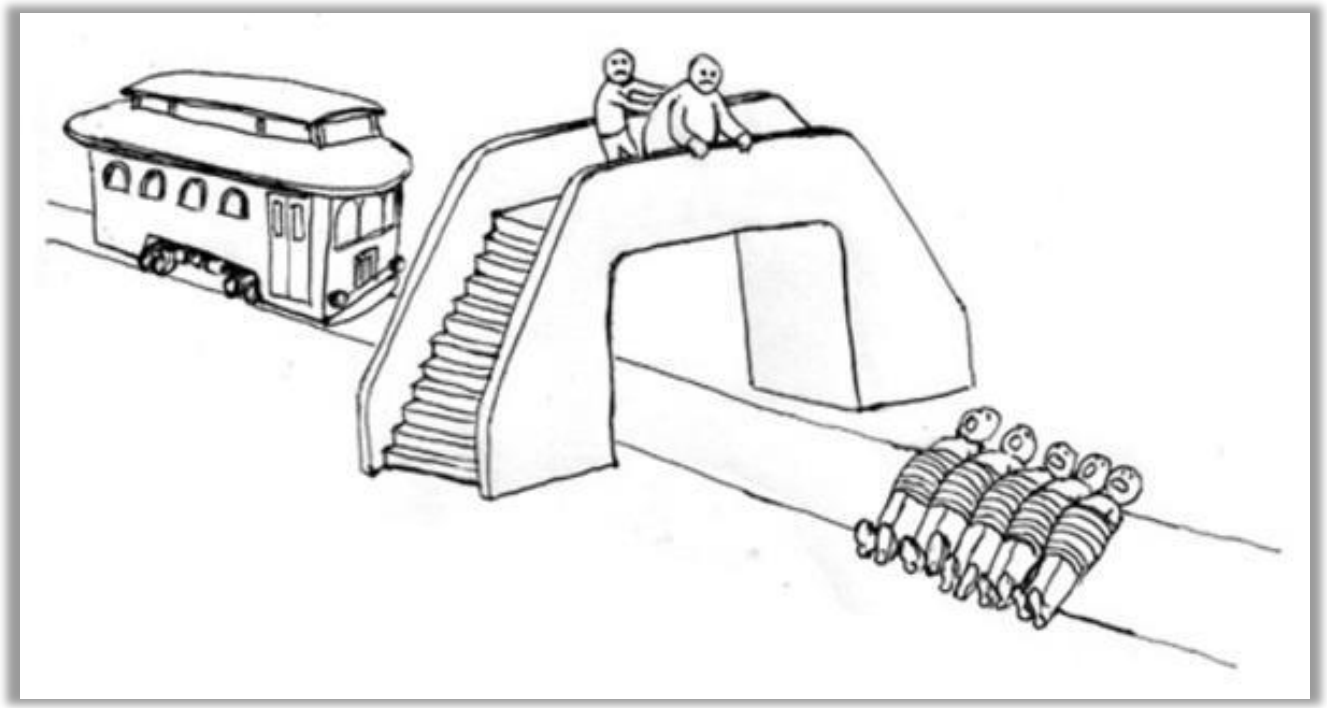
Credence ($C_{\text{Utilitarian}}$) = 33%

A's uncertainty can be expressed in terms of *credence*.
Right now, A believes the rule-based view is about twice as likely to be true as the utilitarian view.

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

AN EVERYDAY PROBLEM

Now…

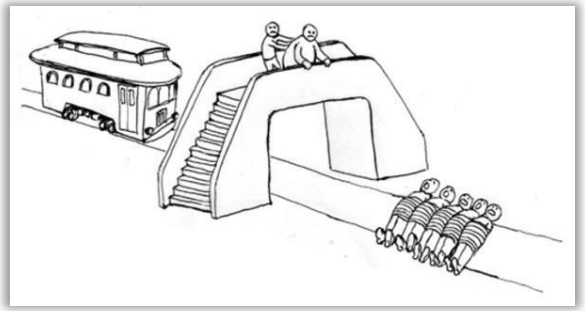


CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

AN EVERYDAY PROBLEM

Utilitarianism tells A: 5 lives are more important than 1.

The rule-based view tells A: You must not kill.



Now what?

	Kill 1, Save 5	Let 5 Die, Spare 1
Utilitarianism (C=33%)	5	1
Rule-Based View (C=67%)	0	6

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

MY FAVOURITE THEORY

A first, simple option is to choose what our favourite theory tells us.
In this case, that's the rule-based view - so we choose to let 5 die. We ignore the judgement of the utilitarian view.

This approach is My Favourite Theory, in short MFT.

	Kill 1, Save 5	Let 5 Die, Spare 1
Utilitarianism (C=33%)	5	1
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… objections?

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

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MFT's recommendation to ignore all other theories becomes counterintuitive:

Kill 1 to Save 5 – MFT suggests to do nothing

Kill 1 to Save 100 – Do nothing?

Kill 1 to Save 10.000 – Do nothing??

Kill 1 to Save 1.000.000 - Do nothing???

Under MFT, it does not matter how high the stakes are. MFT is *stake-insensitive*.

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

MAXIMISE EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

Under empirical uncertainty, we usually consider all options – not just the most likely.

So under normative uncertainty, we might similarly consider all theories.

We can do so by drawing on Expected Utility Theory (EUT).

Reminder: EUT calculates an option's expected utility by multiplying the value v of possible outcomes with their likelihood p of occurrence.

$$EU = v_a \star p_a + v_b \star p_b \ldots$$

CHOOSING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

MAXIMISE EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

We could take all theories into account by drawing on Expected Utility Theory (EUT).

Reminder: EUT calculates an option's expected utility by multiplying the value v of possible outcomes with their likelihood p of occurrence.

$$EU = v_a \star p_a + v_b \star p_b \ldots$$

Analogously, we can calculate an option's expected choiceworthiness by multiplying its possible moral values m under each theory with the credences in these theories.

$$EC = m_a \star c_a + m_b \star c_b \ldots$$

We then choose the option with the highest choiceworthiness. This approach is **Maximise Expected Choiceworthiness**, in short MEC.

MAXIMISING EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

EXAMPLES

	Kill 1, Save 5	Let 5 Die, Spare 1
Utilitarianism (C=33%)	5	1
Rule-Based View (C=67%)	0	6
Expected Choiceworthiness	5*0.33 + 0*0.67= 1.67	1*0.33 + 6*0.67 = 4.33

MAXIMISING EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

APPLICATION

	Kill 1, Save 5	Let 5 Die, Spare 1
Utilitarianism (C=33%)	5	1
Rule-BasedView (C=67%)	0	6
Expected Choiceworthiness	5*0.33 + 0*0.67= 1.67	1*0.33 + 6*0.67 = 4.33

	Kill 1, Save 100	Let 100 Die, Spare 1
Utilitarianism (C=33%)	100	1
Rule-BasedView (C=67%)	0	6
Expected Choiceworthiness	100*0.33 + 0*0.67=33	1*0.33 + 6*0.67 = 4.33

MEC is *stake sensitive*.

MAXIMISING EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

ISSUES & CRITICISM

…any issues?

OPEN QUESTIONS

MEC requires assigning choiceworthiness to options under each theory. There are some pitfalls:

Intertheoretic Comparison: How can we meaningfully compare duty violations and units of welfare? Moral theories might be incomparable or incompatible.

Fanaticism: If a theory has very high or infinite stakes, we might have to follow its judgement – almost no matter the credences.

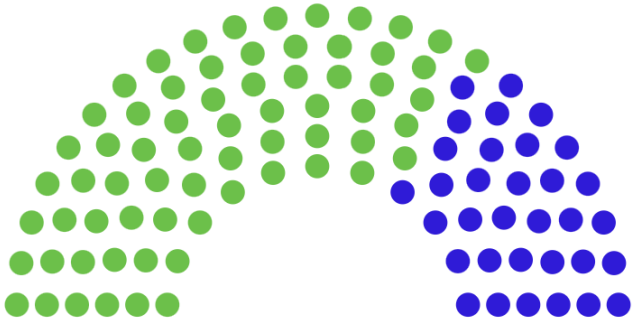
Equal Say: What mathematical model do we use to assign choiceworthiness values such that all theories are treated equally?

MAXIMISING EXPECTED CHOICEWORTHINESS

OUTLOOK

Two major approaches to address these pitfalls dominate the current literature:

Voting Approaches: Assignment of choiceworthiness is like a democratic process. For instance, we implement a 'parliamentary model', where each theory has votes based on its credence.



Mathematical Normalisation: The choiceworthiness assigned by each theory must fulfil some shared mathematical criterion – e.g. the same sum, the same variance, the same end points, etc.

For every theory,
$m_a + m_b + m_c$ must equal 6.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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