

## View of life in an extreme situation

— Consideration through a case study —

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### 要 約

When people have to adopt one of some choices in a critical situation on life and death, how do they make a decision and cope with the situation? As for medical and health care staff in medical institutions, this is an everyday occurrence.

In author's class of Bioethics, a question was given in one created case - a scene of drowning - that should put the students in a dilemma. The answers from those sixty-three students were divided into following four types on the main ethical theories.

1. Answers based on "ethics on principles" or "deontology" ---9.5%
2. Answers based on "situational ethics" or "consequentialism or utilitarianism" ---11.1 %
3. Answers based on the eclectic theory of both mentioned above---66,7%
4. Others---12.7%

The answers based on the eclectic theory of deontology and consequentialism accounted for the majority of the students' choices. It can be said this is a result of their effort to seek for desperate measures to save all the people. They could not sacrifice one person's life as they knew human's life had equal weight, but they wanted to avoid the worst result that all the people drown.

From their choices, it might be said that many students have a wholesome view of life, which will make them do their best even in an extreme situation. On the other hand, this showed a Japanese trait that we do not like to make a choice between two things. In this assignment, the simulated case caused the students to think about what it was to make a decision in a crucial situation on life and death. It is hoped that this will motivate them to review their personal values of life and to consider life and death of people who are facing death.

### Key words

an extreme situation, ethical theories, consequentialism, deontology, eclectic attitudes based on the two ethical theories

## Introduction

When we have to make a decision in a critical situation related to life and death, how do we make a decision and act? In fact, this is an everyday occurrence in medical institutions. This is an example. Suppose that three patients in equally serious condition are taken to a hospital. Unfortunately, the hospital has only one vacant bed for the emergency patients. Who should be given this one bed? How do we find a solution for a dilemma like this? Each person has a different answer depending on his or her ethical standpoint or sense of values.

In author's class of Bioethics, a simulated case related to a critical situation was used for students to ponder on life and death, with the objectives of stimulating an awareness of their values and ethics and fostering a deeper view of life.

This article presents to you the results, findings and part of the view of life entertained by Japanese young people through this case study.

## Methods

At first, a simulated case was given as an assignment to the female sophomores of the School of Nursing at the Toyama Medical and Pharmaceutical University. They wrote frankly about what they thought on this situation. Sixty-three out of fifty-four students submitted their paper. After that, their answers were analyzed on the main ethical theories.

## Case

The given situation : Thirty-one people are drowning at sea. A life boat arrives to save them. The Captain picks up thirty people who are young and old of both sexes. As he pulls

the thirty-first person (a young man) on board, the boat begins to sink. So, in great haste, the Captain drops the young man back into the sea, but his conscience bothers him. There are no life buoys and the shore is far away.

The given problem : If you were the captain, what would you do in this situation? You could leave the site without rescuing that young man, you could drop someone else off among thirty passengers still in the boat in order to rescue him, or you could pull him on board even if the boat would sink, or . . . . Use your imagination and write your choice with an explanation of your reasoning.

## Results

The following is a classification of the sixty-three students' answers by applying the main ethical theories : one is the ethics of principles and the other is situational ethics. In the ethics of principles, to follow an ethical principle you believe has priority, even if the result is unfavorable one. It is acceptable as long as it is caused by your faithful attitude to the ethical principle you believe. Deontology falls under the ethics of principles and philosophers such as I. Kant take this standpoint.

In situational ethics, it is not a principle but the situation that decides the right or wrong of a matter. From this standpoint, if a result is good, then what you did is morally right. Consequentialism falls under this category. Moreover, as the quality of a result is judged by how much utility it brings, it can be said that consequentialism overlaps with utilitarianism in some parts. Philosophers such as J. Bentham and J. S. Mill take this standpoint. The utilitarian way of thinking is very influential in this materialistic modern society.

In addition to the classification mentioned above, there is another classification of ethical

theories. That is by the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. The ethics of conviction means to behave faithfully to absolute values you believe in regardless of the outcome it will cause, or an ethical attitude that supports such behaviors in your mind. On the other hand, the ethics of responsibility means to estimate the result caused by an action and behave according to this estimation with a sense of responsibility for the result, or an ethical attitude that supports such behaviors in your mind. It can be said that the ethics of conviction, in a way, shares some factors with deontology. The ethics of responsibility, likewise, has a connection with consequentialism.

These are the main classifications of ethical theories. In breaking down the answers of the targeted students, four categories were set up: attitudes based on deontology, attitudes based on consequentialism or utilitarianism, eclectic attitudes adopting advantages from both ethical attitudes, which are sometimes used as a theory to modify extreme deontology and consequentialism, and attitudes that do not fall under any of three categories mentioned above.

The results were as follows: Eclectic attitudes accounted for the majority of the targeted students' choices, 66.7% of the total answers. Attitudes that do not fall under any categories

accounted for the second majority, 12.7%. Attitudes based on the situational ethics or consequentialism (utilitarianism) accounted for the third majority, 11.1%. Attitudes based on the ethics of principles or Deontology accounted for the least, 9.5%. (Figure 1) Here is a summary of the targeted students' answers:

1. The 1st category consisted of answers classified by attitudes based on the ethics of principles or deontology---The emphasis was put on equality of human life: They could not stand by watch one person drown even in order to save thirty people's lives. They would rather drown together than refuse someone on board. (9.5%)

\* One student wrote, "I would dare to choose to get all the people on board. To sacrifice one person's life has the same meaning as losing thirty-one lives to me. The young or elderly, each life has equal weight regardless of age."

\* Another student wrote, "I would help thirty-one people at the risk of sinking. It is too critical an issue for me to decide the fate of the last man."

\* A third student said, "I do not have any right to decide who should be sacrificed. I would choose to take the thirty-first person on board at the risk of sinking. I would not want to live the rest of my life with the painful thought of

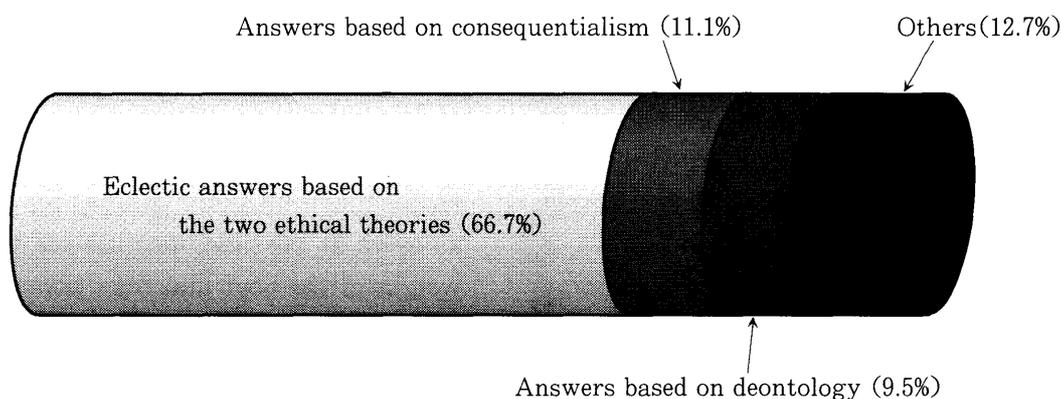


Figure 1 Classification of students' answers by applying the main ethical theories (n. 63)

that one person left at sea.

\* Another comment : "The last man should be taken on board whether the boat sinks or not. It would be impossible for me to leave someone there. On the other hand, I would not want to be left there as a Captain."

2. The 2nd category consisted of answers classified by attitudes based on the situational ethics or consequentialism (utilitarianism) --- The emphasis was put on the utility of the result : Under this simulated situation, to sacrifice one person's life could not be helped in order to save the other thirty people. (11.1%)

\* One student said, "If I were the Captain, I would pick up only a group of people who have a good chance to survive in the situation and then leave the site. People who are not cooperative should be dropped off the boat. This decision making should be left to the Captain."

\* Another student said, "I would choose to leave one person in the sea. When the circumstances force us to choose either to let one person drown or to have everyone including the Captain drown together, to save a larger number of people has the priority in decision making. I feel sorry for the misfortune of the unsaved person."

\* Another comment: "If I drowned thirty people in order to rescue the last person, I would regret it very much. So, I would not take the last man on board. First, I should rescue the thirty people without fail."

\* The next student added, "If we could not improve measures to help the last person, there would not be any option for him other than to give up. It would be worse if all the people drowned in order to help one person."

\* Other student also agreed, "There is no point in the idea that the Captain jumps off the boat because the boat needs a person to steer it. If all the people get on board, the boat will sink certainly, which means committing mass suicide.

It sounds cruel but I would choose to leave the last person in the sea, since a lower number of the bereaved is desirable."

3. The 3rd category consisted of answers classified by eclectic attitudes based on the two ethical theories mentioned above.---The emphasis was put both on equality of human life and utility of the result : They tried to improvise measures to help all the people composed of thirty-one passengers and the Captain with all their strength. (66.7%)

\* One student said, "I could not leave one person in the sea or drown all the people. I would ask some men who still have energy to get off the boat and hold on to the boat to reach the shore."

\* The next comment proposed a similar solution : "Everybody has an equal right to life and it is equally the same for the Captain. I would ask people who could swim to get off the boat and swim to the shore in turn, or make a rope by tying passengers' clothes together to tug the swimmer along with the boat."

\* Another student mentioned that "I would ask the people on board to hold and support the person in the sea not to drown anyhow, and sail to the shore."

\* The next student commented that "The thirty-first person and the Captain should take turns getting off the boat and holding on to the boat. In case they got tired, the younger people who still have energy should get off the boat instead of them."

\* The following comment was a little different from the previous ones : "I would make the people throw away the things they are wearing, as much as possible, into the sea to lessen the weight of the boat and then take the last man on board."

\* The next student came up with a novel idea : "The Captain should take the last person on board and then get off the boat himself. He

should make a life buoy out of his trousers and wait for rescuers to arrive. Let the thirty-one people leave the site ahead of him."

\* The next student said, "I would ask all the people who could swim to get off the boat and hold on to the boat."

\* The following student's comment: "The first idea that came to my mind was to sacrifice the elderly but it is too cruel. I would ask the young and energetic men to get off the boat and swim or hold on to the boat in turn."

\* Other comment: "I am the Captain, who is responsible for everything, so I should not get off the boat. I would ask all the people who could swim to swim in turn."

4. The 4th category contained "other" types of answers classified. The emphasis was put on sacrificing the Captain's life in order to save the thirty-one people. (12.7%)

\* One student said, "I would sacrifice my life as a Captain. If I were a religious person, I would feel rather delighted with self-sacrifice for others."

\* Another student said, "I would get off the boat and help the thirty-one passengers as a Captain. Even if I should save my life at the cost of the last person, I would regret it for the rest of my life."

\* The next student commented that "I am obliged to save the drowning people because I am the captain of the boat. So, I would save all the drowning people, even if I had to sacrifice myself."

\* A final student stated honestly that "Idealistically, after I would take all the people on board, I would get off the boat by myself. However, my real self might go without helping the last person."

## Discussion

The students's answers were classified into

four categories. However, it may be appropriate to say the self-sacrifice of the Captain classified into "Others" is closer to the attitudes based on the ethics of conviction.

Many of them did not want to sacrifice one person's life because of the equality of human life. At the same time, they wanted to avoid the worst case that all the people drowned. Their wish allowed them to improvise desperate measures to help all the people at the site. As a result, eclectic attitudes accounted for the majority among their choices. Many students wrote, "If I were that Captain, I could not leave the last man behind at sea." It was important for them to do their best to save all the people in that extreme situation. Their choices seemed idealistic while simultaneously a little impractical. However, their choices seemed to derive from their sound views of life.

In the situation given to the students, the boat was supposed to be a medium-sized one and no one could swim, which was to be understood from the description, "thirty-one people are drowning." Due to lack of explanation, they imagined a little different situation from the one intended. They imagined that the boat was small enough to hold on to, and that when the people were drowning, some of them could get rejuvenated enough to swim by taking a rest on board. This resulted in their variety of answers.

It was intended originally to make them face the alternative of saving the thirty people and the Captain by sacrificing one person or of pulling the last person on board at the risk of everyone drowning. However, their answers were a little different from what was expected to receive.

This shows a Japanese trait of not liking to make a choice between two things. It is appraisable that the sound thinking is found amidst their answers that they would do their best in

an extreme situation, even if the measures they improvised were not practical ones.

It is difficult a little to draw a conclusion about Japanese values or view of life just from these results. This survey was conducted only to female students at a nursing school. If it is conducted to different people, such as male students, health care givers, or working members of society, different results should be acquired. It is requested to expand the target of the study in the future. Furthermore, as opportunity permits, it is desirable to conduct a survey with the same question to young people in foreign, especially western societies. In that case, the percentage of answers based on deontology or consequentialism would be higher among western youth, since definite principles are preferred more in western societies than in Japan. However, this is only premature conjecture without further survey.

The students' desire to do their best in a difficult dilemma will be respected when they face a critical situation or a dilemma in their medical or nursing practice in the future.

Self-sacrifice of the Captain to rescue all the people were the second most frequent answers. They may have written this answer under the influence of heroism. They overlooked the Captain's obligation to bring all the people back to the shore safely. When a person risks his or her life for his or her belief, this attitude falls under the ethics of conviction, which may attract young people. On the other hand, this attitude often diverts their attention from making it clear who is responsible for the situation. Consequently, the problem becomes more complicated and no solution for a dilemma is given. Their immaturity is reflected in this sort of answer. They do not come up with the question, "Who would steer the boat in case the Captain jumped into the sea?" Analysis of their answers made me hope keenly for them to

form good habits of acting with awareness of responsibility in critical situations.

Answers classified under the categories of deontology (the ethics of principles) and consequentialism or utilitarianism (the situational ethics) respectively accounted for small numbers among the answers. This showed how it was difficult for them to make their decision about either everyone drowning or sacrificing one person. Still, it is noteworthy that thirteen students chose either of these. The percentage of each group was almost the same.

Deciding the right or wrong of the matter is pointless. The point is that students are expected to develop confidence in making better choices, in order to act ethically when they are put in various situations as care givers in the future.

## Conclusion

The situation given to the students was simulated with the aim to provide them an opportunity to ponder what their behavioral judgement should be in a situation of difficulty, and to review their values and view of life. Therefore, the chance of an occurrence of exactly the same case as the simulated situation might be very low.

However, situations similar to this simulated case occur sometimes in medical institutions. Many people consider that human life has the same weight. But, there is the case with medical or health care staff to be forced to limit the number of lives to be saved depending on the situation. In such a case, the more they realize the importance of human life, the more they are puzzled. It can be said how seriously they face the problem makes differences. If they follow someone's instruction or authority easily without pondering on it and suffering so much,

it is sure that people in the weakest position would have to pay the price for their easy decision making in the end. From this point, it is vital for medical or health care staff to have a sensibility that enables them to sense a dilemma as it is and have a mind to tackle it seriously for the best. This attitude would ensure that human life is still respected and treated rationally in situations of difficulty.

These days, young people's views of life become controversial when a tendency for making light of human life is pointed out. Nevertheless, they keenly expect the students who are aiming to be health care givers to be extraordinarily sensitive to matters of life. In this assignment, the simulated case caused the students to think about what it was to make a decision in a crucial life and death situation. It is expected that this will motivate them to keep their awareness of the importance of life

when they treat people in medical institutions in the future.

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## 極限状態における生命観

— ケーススタディを通して —

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### 要 旨

人は生死に関わる重大な局面で選択を迫られる時、どう判断し行動するのだろうか。過日、筆者は生命倫理の授業で、ジレンマに陥らざるを得ない1つの事例を提示して、学生に考えさせてみた。それは、学生に自らの価値観や倫理観を再認識させ、生命観を養う契機を与えるためであった。学生63人の回答を主な倫理学説に沿って分類した結果は次のようなものであった。1. 原則倫理又は義務論に即した回答：9.5% 2. 状況倫理又は結果主義（功利主義）に即した回答：11.1% 3. これら2つの学説の折衷的思考方に即した回答：66.7% 4. その他：12.7%。折衷的な考え方が多数を占めたのは、生命は皆同じ重みを持つので1人を犠牲にできぬ、さりとて全員死ぬのは最悪だ。そこで全員助かる方法はないかと学生が苦肉の策を考え出した結果であり、極限状態の中でもベストを尽くそうとする健全な生命観を表明したものと見える。一方で、ここからは、二者択一を好まぬ日本的心性も窺える。学生には今後、生命の重さや死に直面する人達を凝視する姿勢が求められる。

### キーワード

極限状態, 倫理学説, 結果主義, 義務論, 二大倫理学説の折衷的思考