

## **Consequentialism and Graduation Celebration: An Ethical Dilemma**

Following high school graduation, new graduates often celebrate with parties, automobile purchases, or travel (Ballard & Garrity, 2020). Congruent with expected norms, John and eleven of his friends flew to New Zealand with their chaperone, Charles. The thirteen-member party joined approximately 87 other passengers for a two-week cruise to Australia. On the twenty-two hour flight from California to Auckland, John struggled with nausea and jet lag – common symptoms on overseas flights (Herxheimer, 2014). Due to the perceived effects of the flight, John remained in his cabin. Within a few days, John, who had not yet been vaccinated, learned that his younger brother had contracted the measles. John knew his symptoms were no longer solely in response to the overseas flight, but that he was ill – a fact that his chaperone, Charles, became aware of the following day. John was concerned about his own health, but was more concerned about potential future blame of ruining passengers' and friends' vacation.

Once Charles had been apprised of the severity of the situation, he instructed John and his three cabin mates to remain in their cabin and also forbade any of the remaining students from exiting the ship at the next port; only half complied. As a result, Charles realized his charges could not be trusted to follow his guidance and is now in a precarious situation requiring an examination of the facts and potential consequences of his future actions including:

1. Charles knows that John is sick and has been exposed to the measles; however, a measles diagnosis has not been confirmed.
2. Does John have the right to privacy regarding his own health?
3. Is the privacy of one man greater than the safety of hundreds of cruise members?
4. Did John and Charles sign a waiver upon boarding the ship that required immediate communication of illness?

5. Is there a moral obligation to report? If so, based on what ethical standard or theoretical framework?

Universal consequentialism defines moral rightness as dependent on the consequences for all people or sentient beings (as opposed to only the individual agent, members of the individual's society, present people, or any other limited group) (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). Furthermore, consequentialism as an ethical theory judges whether something is right based on the consequences (Ethics Unwrapped, 2021). Through this lens, this researcher will argue that the ethical standard of universal consequentialism requires Charles to report John's symptoms to the ship's medic.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that Measles is a serious and highly contagious virus that is transmitted through the air (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). "It is so contagious that if one person has it, up to 9 out of 10 people around him or her will also become infected if they are not protected" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Statistics by the CDC demonstrated that 20% of those who contract measles will be hospitalized, 1 out of every 1,000 people will incur brain swelling, and 1 to 2 of every 1,000 people who contract measles will die. The proposed risks by Charles' action or inaction are to ruin the travel of 100 maritime travelers or to passively stand by, and potentially risk the long-term health, or life of a fellow cruise member or port-city resident.

According to the contractualism ethics (a contrast to consequentialism), there is consideration to be given to the significance of intention, meaning there is a distinction between harms we foresee and harms we intend (Lenman, 2009). Most importantly, a critical aspect to the risk imposition of contractualism is its ability to motivate; and finally, consent is often a significant factor in determining the legitimacy of an action (risk), and its risk is positively

correlated to the level of consent given (Lenman, 2009). This ethical theory could not be applied to Charles' situation based on the existing evidence. Charles was unable to persuade, nor receive consent, from half of his charges to deny self for the potential safety of other passengers and island residents.

In examining points two and three listed above, the ethical theory of universal consequentialism would reveal that for the benefit of the masses, John's potential right to privacy does not outweigh the potential for death or mass outbreak at the port cities. The outcome resulting from Charles' action to report (or the relative value of possible future), provide the moral relevance and confidence to proceed to present the ship's medic with evidence. Had the prompt provided insight into the contractual agreement between passengers and the cruise line, it is plausible that both Charles and John had a legal obligation to report symptoms of a contagious disease such as the measles.

Though instances may be present in the future where Charles, or other members of society, are persuaded by one ethical theory or another on how to act, there are future steps that could streamline the appropriate steps in similar situations. For example, to limit this specific instance from occurring again, future recommendations for cruise ships could include passengers signing a waiver to report first signs of symptoms of measles, and other deadly viruses such as Covid-19. Additional recommendations include requiring documented vaccinations for measles to be a passenger on a cruise ship.

Because the status of the aforementioned recommendations are unknown, Charles must make a decision through an ethical theoretical perspective. Thus, Charles' choice is one of known reduction of the value of pleasure (continuation of the cruise) to an unknown potential intrinsic consequence of great pain or death. In other words, Charles' decision to report is

elevating the potential to save a life to the value of pleasure. Such lexical rankings are par with consequentialism to allow some violation of rights (pleasure) in order to avoid or prevent other rights violations (life or quality of life) (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). Therefore, based on the ethical theory of universal consequentialism, Charles should report John's symptoms to the ship's medic, regardless of the violation of the rights of pleasure of fellow cruise passengers.

Word Count: 992

### References

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