

Right Versus Wrong or Right Versus Not-So-Right?

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Assume you're driving down a stretch of interstate highway where road construction has recently been completed. All the construction road barriers have been removed and no road workers are present. However, the temporary 60-mph speed limit signs (the normal speed limit is 75 mph) have not yet been taken down. You decide to drive 75 mph. Are you doing anything wrong?

Your answer may depend on your "ethical orientation." You probably didn't even realize you had an ethical orientation. Simply stated, ethical orientation describes tendencies acquired through moral development that a person tends to follow when faced with making decisions that involve ethical dilemmas.

Generally, based on moral development, most of us are oriented toward one of two ethical decision making camps: (1) ethics of justice or (2) ethics of care.

An ethics of justice orientation is based on rigid and equal application of laws, rules, principles or policies with little flexibility or exceptions. It's also based on views of absolutes in distinguishing right from wrong, in that an action is either right or wrong regardless of the circumstances. In other words, actions taken in response to ethical dilemmas are inherently right (truthfulness, respect, honoring promises) or inherently wrong (breaking the law, lying, theft, broken promises). Conversely, an ethics of care orientation is based on a sense of responsibility to do good deeds or reduce harm and suffering with considerable flexibility and consideration of exceptions to laws, rules, principles and policies. It's based on views of variables in distinguishing right from wrong in that some actions might be viewed as right versus not-so-right or wrong versus not-so-wrong. In other words, actions taken in

response to ethical dilemmas are those that produce more overall good than harm in the circumstances.

For example, in the scenario above, an individual with an ethics of justice orientation would generally approach this dilemma from the perspective that "what is posted is the law" and that it is wrong to drive 75 mph when 60 mph is still posted. However, an individual with an ethics of care orientation would generally approach this from the "no harm, no foul" perspective and feel that the temporary signs were intended to be removed and, in this circumstance, it is safe to drive 75 mph.

Regardless of your ethical orientation, it is important to consider the perspectives of both orientations when making decisions about the actions one should take when faced with ethical dilemmas. The perspective of the two different orientations actually works as a check and balance on the limitations of the other. Taking an action from an ethics of justice orientation merely because the action is not against the law could still result in a harmful action that is morally inappropriate. For example, if there are road construction workers repairing a bridge on a highway and there have been no work zone or reduced speed limit signs posted, while it may not be against the law to drive the normal speed limit on that stretch of road at that time, it would be morally inappropriate to not slow down for the safety of the construction workers.

At the same time, taking an action from an ethics of care orientation that may do more good than harm for an individual while being illegal, unfair or unsafe to others is also morally inappropriate. For example, exceeding the speed limit in a personal car in a residential neighborhood to take an injured individual to a hospital (rather than using an ambulance) may be

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good for the injured individual's well-being but is against the law and risks doing significant harm to others.

So, when faced with having to make tough decisions in our professional or personal lives, always remember to consider the perspectives of both ethics of justice and ethics of care, and take the action that is the most honest, fair and respectful action that still advances the common good with the least amount of harm.

By the way, let me share with you the fact that most law enforcement officers clearly have strong ethics of justice orientations. Because as the highway patrol officer (being unsympathetic to my ethics of care argument) explained while writing me a ticket for driving 75 mph in the posted 60 mph former work zone, "What's posted is the law, my friend." ☺

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