

Philosophy 235

Direct action and monkeywrenching

environmental direct action / monkeywrenching: action outside legal channels, taken to prevent or disincentivise people from practices they are legally permitted to engage in but which harm the environment

An example of direct action

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgXeHk6G9ks>

Other examples of direct action / monkeywrenching:

Why is direct action morally problematic?

- a. If x is illegal, then it is morally wrong for anyone to do x .
- b. If x is illegal and the law against it was created by democratically elected officials, then it is morally wrong for anyone to do x .
- c. If x is illegal and the law against x is a good law, then it is morally wrong to do x .
- d. If x is a known violation of A 's property rights, and A does not consent to x being done, then x is wrong to do.

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Direct action, harm, and the violation of rights

1. On The Bachelor Season 19, the public can vote on which contestant goes on to the next round. To gain support, both of the last two contestants sincerely promise on air that they will do whatever the majority of the public ask them (via Twitter) to do. Twitter is almost overwhelmed with responses (these are sincere requests, not due to hacking etc.): 22 million viewers request that Kara strangle a 90 year old on live TV.

Would it be morally wrong for Kara to strangle this 90 year old?

Would it be morally permissible for Kara to not strangle this 90 year old?

Would your answers to these questions change if the number of viewers requesting this went up?

2. Same scenario as in 1, with one additional point. Imagine that Kara knew that strangling this person on TV would bring great pleasure to all of the viewers. The viewers have never seen someone die, and doing so would help them understand the value of life. In turn, this would help them live fuller, more meaningful lives – having seen what death looks like, they would appreciate life that much more for all the time remaining to them.

Would it be partly good to strangle the 90 year old?

Might it be overall good to strangle the 90 year old?

Does the goodness of the strangulation increase with the number of viewers? Does the badness of badness of the strangulation increase with the number of viewers?

Some vocabulary

Prima facie duty/right: a *prima facie* duty is normally a duty or right, except when overridden by a (significantly?) stronger duty / right.

absolute duty/rights: an absolute duty can never be overridden by another duty.

override: if x and y are both *prima facie* duties / rights, and x overrides y , then when x can only be fulfilled by violating y , it is not wrong to violate y

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To see if there is a *prima facie* duty to x , ask yourself:

Is it permissible to for a person to **not** x even when there is no reason for them to **not** x ?

If the answer is “yes,” then there is **no** *prima facie* to x .

If the answer is “no,” then there **is** a *prima facie* to x .

For example:

Is there a *prima facie* duty to scratch my nose?

So, x = “scratch my nose”

Plug this in the “ask yourself” question:

“Is it permissible for me to not [scratch my nose] even when there is no reason for me to not [scratch my nose]?”

Yes, it is permissible – there’s nothing wrong with not scratching my nose either way.

So, there is no *prima facie* duty to scratch my nose.

Is there a *prima facie* duty to not club baby seals?

So, x = “not club baby seals”

Plug this in the “ask yourself” question:

“Is it permissible for me to not [not club baby seals] even when there is no reason for me to not [not club baby seals]?”

The double negatives cancel out, and we get:

“Is it permissible for me to club baby seals even when there is no reason for me to club baby seals?”

No, it is not permissible.

So, there is a *prima facie* duty to not club baby seals.