

## Simulated killing<sup>1</sup>

Normative ethical theories are intended to guide us in knowing and doing what is morally right. It is therefore very useful to consider theories in relation to practical issues, in order to understand the theories and their implications better. The primary purpose of this handout is to think about how three normative theories - utilitarianism, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics - would respond to the practical issue of simulated killing.

Simulated killing is the dramatisation of killing within a fictional context, e.g. in video games, films and plays. It is not merely the description of a killing, as in a novel, but a fictional enactment of killing that the audience or gamer can see and hear. There is a difference - possibly a morally significant difference - between witnessing such a killing and playing the role of the killer. So we will first discuss simulated killing in the context of playing the killer in video games and in acting, and then discuss simulated killing in the context of watching films and plays.

We might wonder whether simulated killing should even be a moral concern. No one is actually killed; no act has been done that violates one's moral duty. For example, in a video game, all that actually happens is that pixels change. It's 'just' a game.

There are two responses to this line of thought. Obviously, if simulated killing is wrong, it is not wrong for exactly the same reasons that killing is usually wrong. But, first, we need not be concerned just with what is actually done (the simulation). Morality may take a concern with what is being represented (the killing). Is it morally acceptable to create or participate in any representation? While it has become widely socially acceptable to play violent video games, video games involving rape and paedophilia are banned in the UK. And yet we can say, just as truly, that such games are 'just' games, and no one is actually raped or molested. Our discomfort with saying this shows that simulations are not necessarily morally neutral just because they are simulations. Second, we can be concerned about the effects of simulated killing both on the people involved and on how they then treat other people in real life.

### **PLAYING THE KILLER**

#### Utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism, in its simplest form, says that an action is right if it maximises happiness, and wrong if it does not. In playing a video game, no one is actually harmed in simulated killings, so as long as the gamer is enjoying themselves, there

---

<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 332-9

is a gain of happiness. However, could engaging in simulated killing increase the risk of harmful behaviour in the real world? Could it lead to an increased risk of

1. killing
2. aggressive behaviour more generally
3. other forms of antisocial behaviour, e.g. gamers being less responsive to others' distress, or
4. changes in gamers' attitudes towards violence in general?

(This last effect, unless such changed attitudes are themselves accompanied by decreased happiness, won't figure in a utilitarian calculus. However, it is something that virtue theorists will be concerned with - see below.)

Some people think, intuitively, that playing violent games must involve an increased risk of this kind. But the claim is an empirical one, and our expectations are sometimes contradicted by psychological research. In *Ethics in the Virtual World*, Garry Young argues that the evidence is not clear. Some studies on the short-term effects of simulated killing (effects for up to 75 minutes after playing) have indicated that there is an increased risk of aggressive thoughts, emotions and behaviour. However, others found that this increased risk only occurred in people with more violent personalities, while others found that it only occurred in boys, not girls.

There have been very few studies looking at the long-term effects of simulated killing. Some reviews of the evidence have concluded that there is an increased risk of aggressive thoughts, emotions and behaviour and a decrease in empathy, but a number of the studies have been challenged as invalid or found an effect so weak as to be insignificant. There is some evidence that journals are also more likely to publish studies that find a link than studies that don't, so there is a bias in the published evidence. Therefore, the evidence that simulated killing leads to more aggressive behaviour, etc., is unclear, though perhaps we can say that there is an increased risk for some people.

Act utilitarians don't just consider the actual consequences of an action. They consider the 'tendency' or probability of the action having certain consequences. Rule utilitarianism says that an action is right if, and only if, it complies with those rules which, if everybody followed them, would lead to the greatest happiness (compared to any other set of rules). Rule utilitarians consider the consequences of a rule that allows simulated killings. The evidence so far is that we cannot say that simulated killing will probably increase actual immoral behaviour.

However, even if simulated killing increased aggressive behaviour, utilitarians will weigh the decrease in happiness that results from such behaviour in the real world against the pleasure derived from playing the game. Simulated killing will only be wrong if, taking both the happiness and unhappiness caused into account, it leads to less happiness on balance than not engaging in simulated killing.

Are we mistaken in trying to apply the utilitarian calculus to the act of simulated killing directly? John Stuart Mill argues that, in most cases, we only need to consider the 'secondary principles' of common morality. But common morality

doesn't provide an obvious guide here, given that video games of this sort have not been around very long. If we look to other games, such as children's play (cops and robbers, aliens, monsters), simulated killing is widely permitted and considered part of normal development (at least for boys).

Some people, therefore, might condemn playing violent video games as 'childish' behaviour that adults would be expected to outgrow. But the utilitarian force of such an objection is unclear. Does engaging in childish play decrease happiness? Perhaps an appeal to Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures adds some weight. Childish pleasures, such as those involved in simulated killing, will not count as higher pleasures for adults. Hence we may think worse of such a person who engages in such activity, but we will not condemn the activity itself.

### Kantian deontology

Kant argues that we should 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' - his 'Categorical Imperative'. He also expresses the principle as 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'. Because of our capacity for practical reason, human beings are ends in themselves. We have a rational will and can adopt ends. These principles define our duties. Playing a game per se is no violation of one's moral duty. But if doing so damages one's rational will or leads to neglecting or violating one's duty to other people, then we can object. We could argue that cultivating cruelty and an indifference to virtual suffering through simulated killing could undermine our willingness and ability to treat others as ends in themselves in real life. Kant notes that, at the time he was writing, butchers and doctors were not allowed to serve on English juries because they were hardened to suffering and death.

However, having reviewed the empirical evidence, it seems that there is not enough evidence to say that there is a link between simulated killing and neglecting one's duties to others.

Even if we don't fail in our duties to others, perhaps we somehow fail in our duty to ourselves. We could argue that repeatedly engaging in simulated killing erodes our sense of identity as rational, moral beings. But again, it is unclear whether this is true. If it does, then this would be a reason for thinking that it is wrong.

### Virtue ethics

A similar concern is central to Aristotelian virtue ethics. According to Aristotle, we aim at eudaimonia, the good for a human life. It is often translated as 'happiness' but Aristotle says it is 'living well and faring well'. Virtues are traits that help us achieve this. We develop virtues by doing virtuous acts. For instance, we become just by doing just acts. Likewise, we become unjust by doing unjust acts. Killing is often an unjust act. So the cumulative effect of playing games which involve simulated killing may lead to the development of character traits that are not virtuous, such as injustice and unkindness, or at least inhibit the development of character traits that are virtuous, such as justice and kindness. Simulated killing is wrong if it prevents the development of virtue, and so prevents the gamer from achieving eudaimonia.

Aristotle may be right that doing unjust acts develops the vice of injustice. But simulated killing is not an unjust act - no one is killed. So why think that simulating unjust acts will develop injustice? Once again, we can argue that the evidence doesn't support this claim.

Rather than focus on the development of character, we can ask whether a virtuous person would engage in playing video games that involve simulated killing. If so, then they will do so in the right way, with the right motive, and at the right times, as this is what defines virtuous action. What might that involve? For example, why would someone want to simulate killing someone else? Is taking pleasure in this activity virtuous?

Clearly, there is pleasure to be gained from violent video games - otherwise, they would not be so popular. But there may be more than one kind of pleasure one can take, and more than one motive for killing someone within the game. The virtuous person enjoys such pleasures appropriately, if there is an appropriate way to enjoy them. There may be morally better and worse ways of relating to simulated killing within the game. Is the point of the game just to kill people, or within the narrative, is killing a necessary means to some further goal? Does the gamer enjoy simulated killing as part of doing well in the game (so the motive is competitiveness) or just enjoy simulated killing for its own sake? And so on.

There may also be morally better and worse ways of understanding the relationship between the game and reality. It can be wrong for someone who confuses the two to play the game, but okay for someone who doesn't. Virtue ethics recognises that the right thing to do is not the same for everyone. The 'mean' is relative to each person and relates to each person's stage of moral development. If someone is at all likely to think of the game world as a model for the real world, playing such games is not virtuous for that person. Someone else could experience the rush of adrenalin as a helpful and safe expression of natural human aggression (good), while someone else again indulge in fantasies of actual killing during play (bad). And so on.

Relating this back to the empirical evidence: someone who draws a clear conceptual and emotional distinction between simulated killing and real life may be at no risk of being more aggressive after playing or developing bad character traits. Someone who cannot draw such a distinction may be at risk, and so should not play.

However, these remarks don't settle the question of whether the virtuous person would want to play such a game.

### Acting the killer

We can develop the points just made in relation to the actors in a film or play. Acting takes place within a context which is governed by a whole set of conventions about what particular actions mean. Arguably, actors don't imitate real-life killings, and even in films, which may be more lifelike with special effects, etc., violence is typically unrealistic. Instead, actors pretend to kill (and to die) on the understanding that certain actions are to be understood as killings.

Furthermore, actors - even method actors - are not supposed to feel genuine lethal rage towards their fellow actors during the scene, nor genuine bloodlust and excitement. (Method actors may feel the fictional counterparts of such emotions 'in character', but would not feel such emotions as themselves.) Suppose an actor confessed to feeling real murderous rage after the play or filming. This would be disturbing, to both them and us. Such feelings are not part of the conventions of acting, and indicate a blurring, in the actor's psychology, between the character and the actor.

What these remarks are meant to show is that acting takes place in a complex social context that sets acting apart from reality. The conventions protect the actors, enabling them to do their job without damaging themselves. Concerns about such a blurring are at issue in the discussion of playing video games: does the gamer fail to distinguish themselves from their character? Is their moral goodness compromised by the immorality of their avatar, either during or after the game?

### **AN AUDIENCE'S PERSPECTIVE**

Is there anything morally wrong with watching violent TV shows, films or plays? Such works are fictions, and it is common to talk about 'suspending disbelief' when immersed in a film or play. We 'make-believe' that what we are seeing is real. We don't believe it is - that would lead to very different emotions and actions (call the police!). But we pretend or imagine that it is real. Is it wrong to do this when what one is witnessing is a simulated killing?

Although we haven't discussed this, it is worth noting that on each of our theories, killing is sometimes morally right, e.g. in war (Aristotle) or euthanasia (utilitarianism) or capital punishment (Kant). If a dramatic work explores this issue carefully, and convincingly presents a killing as the morally right thing to do, then it is hard to see what is wrong with imagining the simulated killing (at least on the assumption that such a killing would be morally right). So for the purposes of argument, let's assume that the killing that is simulated would be morally wrong if done in real life.

The approaches of our three theories to this question have been laid out above, so we can be brief. A utilitarian will be interested in the effects on the overall happiness of watching make-believe killings (or of a rule that allows simulated killings in TV shows, films and plays). There is no immediate decrease in happiness if the audience gets something positive out of the experience. So concerns will be limited to the longer term effects. As we might expect, the evidence is very similar to the evidence connecting playing violent video games to aggression in real life. There is some evidence that the link is stronger in some groups of people than others, but overall, we don't have enough evidence to conclude that, in general, watching violence on screen or on the stage is likely to make one a less moral person. Even if there were a link, the risk of diminishing happiness needs to be weighed against the enjoyment gained by watching such works.

Let us take deontological and virtue ethical concerns together. Irrespective of consequences for how one acts, does watching simulated killing damage one's

character or good will intrinsically? Immoral simulated killings can take place within two fictional contexts. In one, the killing is represented as immoral, the killer as morally or emotionally wretched. The work can be understood as a morality tale - this is how not to be. But the killing can also be represented as moral - the morality of the work is different. This is the most problematic case. Is it wrong to imagine that something that is immoral is actually moral?

Kant would argue that it is certainly irrational. What is immoral cannot be moral. We can coherently imagine that contingent truths are different. But moral truths are established by a test of what is possible - so they are not contingent, but necessary. But is there anything morally wrong with imagining something impossible?

Again, understanding the relation between the work and moral reality is important. For example, do we think that the author intends the (immoral) values to be moral values only within the fiction? Or is the message that we should live according to the values portrayed? On the one hand, there may be something not virtuous about joining with the immoral imagination of the author. On the other hand, one may argue that it can help one understand morality more deeply. But this will only occur if one can keep one's distance from the 'morality' of the dramatisation. A virtuous person will be alive to the moral implications of the story being told, not simply in terms of its effects but in terms of its representation of what a good life is and the place of killing within it. Their make-believe will be coloured by this awareness.