

Case Study on Ethics:

“It is 3 am and you are late getting home. As you approach the intersection you notice that no one is around. Do you drive through the red light?”

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Introduction

What to do when the traffic-lights are red but there is no time to stop due to a serious predicament.¹ Taken in account that it is three in the morning and no living soul is to be seen at the intersection, would it be morally justified to ignore the dangers?

This paper will touch on several ethical viewpoints. Some of the viewpoints (i.e.: egoism, emotivism) are interwoven in the secular Western society and thus interesting to use in the analysis and solutions of this case.

Problems

Dangers

The possible dangers can be a good reason to stop altogether. Even when the intersection seems to be clear one cannot be fully sure. It depends heavily on the circumstances and the nature of the intersection whether one can drive on or not. Are there obstacles that block one's view, how fast is traffic allowed to travel. Even so, knowing that the traffic lights often work with detection sensors can bring doubt whether the sensor detected a vehicle and switched other lights to green. Ignoring the lights is a gamble which can cost people's lives.

Penalties

There is the pressure of penalties. Are there cameras installed or is there a policeman waiting around the corner—the rule is enforced by high penalties.² This will make people very cautious. Ignoring the red light can result in a discretionary disqualification. Many people need their car for their work. Others will simply have not enough money to pay the fine. Also, if one is summoned by a police-officer to pull over it will take more time than simply waiting for the light to go green.

Breaking the law

There are people who will get into serious trouble with their conscience if they break a rule. One can refer to this view as 'absolutism' which means that certain actions are absolutely right or wrong. A Christian for example, can argue that God commanded to obey the law of the government (Romans 13:1-2). If one holds this view it is very difficult to decide, because ignoring the light will be regarded as wrong or sinful. Yet, coming too late can be regarded by one as failing one's responsibility. For a Christian this can be failing Jesus' command to love one another (John 13:34-35).

Coming home in time

Finally, there is the main issue of this dilemma. This dominant issue can overrule all other decisions. When these minutes have dire consequences all other decisions become less important. The situation can be very emotional, especially when one holds the absolutistic view. For them there is no good answer, they have to choose between two wrongs.

Possible Solutions

Response to the Danger

Egoists can say that stopping could be in the interest of others as well thus a seemingly altruistic decision—which is undesirable in their view.³ This 'altruistic' approach can be explained that by stopping they *act* as if they give weight to others, thus hoping that others give them weight in return.⁴ Decisions from this point of view are not very reliable because who is to say that one's self-interest is beneficial for others?⁵ Others will state that the 'wrongness' of ignoring the light

1 One's child is seriously ill.

2 OGL, 'Penalties'.

3 Hinman, *Ethics*, 110.

4 Shaver, 'Egoism'.

5 MacKinnon, *Ethics*, 26.

depends on one's moral disapproval of it.⁶ The emotivist accepts only that which can be proven by logic or experiments.⁷ In this case, logic says that there is no danger to be detected which makes it all right to drive on.

In conclusion we have two options. Firstly, one can stop and take the extra seconds. This is the safest option but can result in an unpleasant wait and for some great scruples. Even so, it is better to come home in one piece than causing potential danger to oneself and others. Secondly, one can slow down and observe the intersection. However, this does not guarantee a clear view, thus can cause dangerous situations. Additionally, one can ask if this is worth the time saving. One could argue it is the best option to combine these two—to stop shortly, look around and drive on. This might be very cautious but it does not do much in gaining time.

Penalties

Most people will consider the costs. An emotivist however, could argue that it is not logical to get into trouble as he or she explored the intersection and could not detect cameras or police-officers. This is a good point because in England it is not allowed for the police (and cameras) to hide from the participants of traffic.⁸ Thus, unless clear signs, there would be no reason to worry about cameras. However, considering the fact that one is in a hurry, it would not be strange that one overlooked warning signs or even a patrolling police-car driving around. So unless the person knows who is driving behind him, if at all, it would not be wise to take the risk of getting pulled over.

Breaking the Law

For a variety of ethical views this is no consideration in itself. However, as mentioned earlier, there are persons who see this as a serious failure. They will have to choose between two bad things. Doing this they might embrace the more liberal stance, namely the 'conflicting absolutistic' view. Sometimes absolute rules conflict with moral issues. In these cases one should adopt the lesser evil—trusting that God is willing to forgive.⁹

Coming home in time

When these minutes have dire consequences all other decisions become less important. Everybody will probably agree that it is in their own interest (rational and emotional) to take the risks as mentioned above. Egoism, in its purest form, could argue that one will lose all the goodwill from others when he or she decided that the other risks were more important. As for an emotivist, it would be most satisfying to ignore all the other issues. In a less urging situation, most people will probably decide to wait as that will be safest in both the physical and legal sense. Nevertheless, for an emotivist ignoring the red-light can still be the most emotional satisfying thing to do.

Final decision

As discussed, people can come to logical decisions that, although differently argued, can be partly adapted by Christians. Many Christians hold to a deontological view. This does not mean that they do not consider the results, but the results do not determine that what is right.¹⁰ Demonstrating God's nature should be a profound concept in a Christian's decision.¹¹ In this situation one can adopt the 'conflicting absolutistic' view. Sometimes absolute rules conflict with moral issues. In these

6 Ayer, *Language*, 110.

7 Bowie, *Ethical*, 77-78.

8 DfT, *Traffic*, 122.

9 Geisler, *Christian ethics*, 20.

10 Ibid, 17-18.

11 Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40; Galatians 5:14.

cases one should adopt the lesser evil—trusting that God is willing to forgive.¹²

In a dire situation the red light should be of secondary importance. Nonetheless, it would be an unloving act to drive on without considering the dangers. The best thing to do is slowing down in order to have more time to detect unexpected dangers. Detecting cameras should not be a dominant issue in this situation. In case of a patrolling police-car one can decide to drive on and explain later. However, if one still needs to drive a long way it would be better to stop and possibly ask the officer for help—help in the way of escorting or bringing one home in time.

12 Geisler, *Christian ethics*, 20.

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