Thinking Ethics as a Grey Zone

- Easy Pieces -

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Approaching the ethics of an action as a grey zone amounts to thinking ethics as lying on a continuum, in between being "purely unethical" and being "purely ethical". There is some good in most actions, as well as some bad. In other words, most actions are both ethical and unethical. But it is not the same to look at the ethical aspects or to look at the unethical aspects.

My observation is that there is some dissymmetry in the ethical and unethical sides of the ethical judgement. Thinking about how ethical an action is entails a distinct cognitive, emotional and experiential process than thinking about how unethical an action is. Depending on the situation and depending on what to judge, one side of the judgement seems to be easier to perform, or be associated with more positive emotions, or observed to be easier to share with others. For instance, one can be biased towards the ethical side of one's own action while being biased towards the unethical side of others' actions. In general, our ability to think about both sides of the ethical judgement seems to be bounded and biased by our emotions, our interest, our mental habits and self-image, our cultural context and work environment, etc.

With effort and training, we can develop our ability to consciously look at both the ethical and unethical aspects of an action. Having a dual ethical analysis increases ethical awareness and helps to elaborate an improved ethical judgement. However, it is sometimes a difficult process which can be uncomfortable.
Considering that an action has both an ethical and unethical side does not preclude the comparison between actions, i.e. judging that an action is more ethical than another. On the continuum, some actions remain closer to "purely ethical" or to "purely unethical" than others. Also, note that this duality of the ethical judgement seems to be at work when one justifies an action by pointing its ethical aspects while at the same time rejecting an alternative by pointing its unethical aspects.