

Session 10 – Report – July 26, 2022.

The small group at this session engaged in lively discussion about:-

Robots & Artificial Intelligence
Consequentialism was revisited
Two of Zeno's Paradoxes were briefly examined.

Artificial Intelligence:

How far towards equalling or surpassing human reasoning and decision-making capabilities can we expect robots to go? Are there limits? Should limits be set? What ethical questions are there?

Robots can only carry out instructions in an internal program so the question is – can (should) humans design a program enabling robots to not only respond to external stimuli in the same manners as do humans but to also have the capabilities to reprogram themselves, self-determine their objectives and how to achieve them, without necessarily having regard to the effects for good or ill upon the human species? Only time will tell.

In the film “2001” such a computer is tasked to control a spacecraft but decides to ignore the commands of its human ‘master’ thus starting a battle of wits between the two. For how this turns out you will have to watch the film yourself!

At this stage though, the programming required is very complex for a robot to perform even some relatively simple action (for a human) such as to select and pick up an egg without breaking it, and/or to clean up the resulting mess should a breakage, because of some programming glitch or unforeseen circumstance, actually occur.

Consequentialism:

The Australia Day commemoration and celebrations of the First Fleet's landing at Botany Bay on 26-1-1788 is currently attracting adverse comment and action from groups who label the event an ‘invasion’ – an event to be despised, not lauded. An opposing view is that it was the only event which could have started that special process of development which has led to Australia being what it is today. It is naïve in the extreme for anyone to suggest, let alone to believe, that such a defenceless and resource-attractive land would not have been ‘invaded’ sometime in the past 200 years, perhaps by more than one foreign power, with an end-result arguably much more detrimental to the indigenous peoples, the event's effects on whom has spawned the most opposition..

From a philosophic ‘consequentialism’ point of view that landing by the English illustrates a difficulty inherent in deciding any course of action. Firstly, what future time frame should be considered and how accurately can the future effects of any action be predicted? Secondly, what will be the likely consequences if the intended action does not proceed?

The English decision in the late 18th century to settle Australia was based on short-term requirements – to rid England of those citizens the laws then in place deemed ‘undesirables’. Therefore the decision was able to be deemed by them a ‘good’ thing.

Fifty years later, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, the homesick and near starving English settlers and convicts, as well as the suffering indigenous peoples, would doubtless have deemed the landing a 'bad' thing.

Finally, the present-day assessment, again with hindsight, is being judged 'good' or 'bad' by individuals and groups from differing personal and group standpoints.

In summary - when considering an action from the 'consequentialism' point of view it is of value to consider also the consequences of alternative actions or even of doing nothing. The likely effects in the short-, medium- and long-terms, may also have relevance, each of these possibly favouring different choices.

Session attendees initially leaned both ways on the Australia Day subject but all agreed that to look forward and to work together to achieve unity among our peoples is preferable to backward-looking complaints about a past that simply IS and can't be altered.

Zeno's paradoxes:

Two of his paradoxical 'proofs' were briefly examined:-

1. That the faster Achilles could never overtake a slower tortoise
2. That an arrow in flight is not moving.

These paradoxes should be checked outside of session for a complete exposition of them.

Paradoxes generally contain interesting and challenging problems of reasoning. Those above are just two of several proposed by Zeno to show that absurd conclusions can come by apparently logical arguments.

A difficulty in solving paradoxes can arise from our common-sense experiences, which can motivate us to reject a paradox out-of-hand rather than to examine it carefully to discover where the 'proof' goes wrong. Paradoxes provide an excellent opportunity to develop good logical reasoning processes.

Check the three main parts of the above paradoxes:-

The initial premise(s) – the starting assumption(s) – which may or may not be valid.

The argument itself – is it based wholly and only on the premise(s)?

- is its logic flawless?
- Does it contain other assumptions? Perhaps hidden ones?

The conclusion – does it really follow from the argument?

Keith Ashfold - Convener.

Next session is Tuesday, August 8.