

Coming out of the parking lot of one of the steel and glass monstrosities that dot the landscape of Gurgaon, I had a strange experience. The huge parking, spread over 3 levels in the basement is designed to allow hundreds of vehicles. And yet, there is only one exit and that too, in these days of control and security, staffed by two officious-looking guards who collect the tokens which are given to you when you enter the parking. Soon, I was stuck in what was clearly a logjam- 4 lanes of cars merging into this one exit ramp, trying to get out.

Now this by itself is not a strange happening- one sees it all the time at the toll booths and more irritatingly, at railway crossings. What was strange was that here were all these highly educated, very highly paid professionals, driving their BMWs and Audis and other 10 lakh+ cars and SUVs, behaving in this way. The very same people who, when a brash call center driver cuts across them at the toll booth, would hold forth on uneducated jats and gujars and how nothing will change in this country and so on. This sociological insight aside, what waiting in this chaos did was that it led me to thinking about the whole issue of morality and rationality, both individual and collective.

Rationality first. It is obvious, that purely from the individual point of view, the rational choice is to try to get ahead of the queue, if necessary by barging in front of a slow moving distracted driver. This strategy gives the individual a chance of getting out faster if it succeeds. If it doesn't, one is no better or worse off than before. However, collectively, this rationality breaks down since it is precisely each individual agent acting in his/her own interest that leads to the logjam and causes everyone on the average to be in the jam longer. This is most apparent at a railway crossing where on both sides, one finds vehicles blocking the complete road and thus leading to a much longer clearing time when the gate opens. The conflict between individual and collective rationality is pretty obvious in this case.

But what about morality? Is it morally right to barge in front of someone and thus cause a logjam for everyone in the hope that atleast you would be a few meters ahead of some of the people and hence have a better chance at spending less time in the jam? I am of course talking about normative morality and not descriptive morality.

What is, if any, the moral problem with this queue breaking action? Is it that because of my action, other people have to be inconvenienced? But that is the case with many of our actions- my throwing the garbage on the roadside saves me a trip to the garbage bin. It is rational for me. It might cause a little inconvenience to others who

use the road, though not very much I imagine. Or, take the example of an illegal act like stealing electricity. I might hook up a contraption which allows me to use electricity without really paying for it. It doesn't hurt or inconvenience directly anyone- it just means that everyone's electricity bill or the power company's profits decrease. Is this morally acceptable then, though illegal?

So, is there a scale where some perfectly rational action ( I assume of course that I would do something if and only if it is rational for me to do it), becomes immoral if it impacts negatively the well-being of others beyond a point? Can breaking the law, for perfectly rational reasons, by itself immoral since laws are meant to be obeyed for collective good?

The fundamental dichotomy then is between individual rationality and morality and collective good. One of course defines collective good in a common sense way- something which leads to an overall increase in well-being of everyone or at least the majority, with a temporal aspect implicit in it (breaking laws may not be necessarily bad for an individual or society in any one instance but repeated over time, it might lead to chaos).

Of course, one can take the absolutist view that ANY action, no matter how small and with ANY detrimental effect, no matter how miniscule on ANY other person is an immoral action. But I don't think that is how societies can function. Clearly, there are actions which by common agreement maybe uncivil but certainly not immoral. Or even if immoral, not "very" immoral and hence can be condoned.

Thus there seems to me the very important region where the four- individual rationality, collective rationality, individual morality and collective morality intersect. And it is in this region where I think almost all decisions regarding individual actions are taken.

The logjam at the exit ramp cleared but not before some suckers like me were stuck there for over an hour while some BMW driving, highly educated professional got home an hour earlier than me. At least on that day! Who knows, another day, the jat call center driver may beat him at his own game!