Communication Ethics and Sewol Ferry Disaster
SUMMARY

On April 16, 2014 the South Korean ferry, Sewol, was traveling from Inchen, South Korea to the island of Jenju, South Korea. Approximately 476 people were aboard (this number slightly verifies depending on different reports). Of the total aboard, 325 were high school students, 15 more where high school teachers. They were on a school field trip arranged by their vice principal. There were approximately 30 crewmembers and the remaining were “non-students.”

The Swoel was originally a Japanese ferry, but purchased by the Cheonghaejin Marine Company in 2012 and renovated. Renovations allowed for 181 additional passengers, and increased the ships weight by 239 tons. While this information may seem irrelevant, it’s important because some initial reports identify this renovation as a possible key factor in the tragedy.

En route to its final destination, the ferry is believed to have made a sharp right turn, causing the boat to list, and eventually (but quickly) capsize. Initially those aboard the ferry were ordered to stay in their rooms. It seems they were told to stay in their rooms repeatedly. When the captain finally gave permission for passengers to leave their rooms and be rescued, the ship was listing to a degree that rescuing passengers was next to impossible. There is also some confusion over if all passenger’s even heard the message because there were problems with the intercom system. When rescue boats began to arrive, the captain and crew may not have been the first off the boat, but they were certainly some of the earliest off. The South Korean Coast Guard released video
confirming the captain’s actions. That means while the captain made it safely to another vessel, hundreds on his ship perished.

The Guardian posts an article from Chico Harlan of the Washington Post stating, “maritime and disaster experts site a pile up of errors—each of which by itself may not have been significant. Crew members appeared to have little safety training. Passengers were told to stay put when the boat began to list. The captain and crew were among the first to flee. After the ferry’s distress call, substantial help was slow to arrive. And immediately after the accident, South Korean agencies jockeyed for a role, with no clear control center delegating responsibilities.” Adding to all the above factors is one more. The captain of the Sweol was not the regular captain, but a substitute. I found at least one source reporting that the normal captain had previously stated his concerns about the ferry’s safety. Further he said those concerns were ignored.

As of Sunday, April 27, approximately 187 are confirmed dead and 115 still missing. Additional fallout from this disaster include the suicide of school’s vice principal due to extreme guilt, the subsequent resignation of South Korea’s prime minister, an overall displeasure from the citizens with the government’s handling of the situation, and an additional black eye on their safety record. Remember, it was just a few months ago that a South Korean airplane crashed in San Francisco. Far fewer people died, but communication between the airplane’s pilots is largely to blame for that debacle. The last South Korean ferry disaster occurred in 1970.

For the remainder of this paper, I will refer to the Sewol captain as the Actor.
While developing this final paper, I thought there could be three ethical dilemmas facing the Actor.

1. Was it ethical for the Actor to save himself prior to saving his passengers?
2. Was it ethical for the Actor to delay evacuating and communicating to the passengers to stay put?
3. The Korean culture is based on Confucianism. Does their culture, where citizens are taught to not question superiors or elders, lead to an ethical dilemma for the junior captains and ultimately lead to a lack of insight?

Ultimately, I decided to combine the first and second ethical dilemmas and not consider the third. While I do think one could make the case, I decided to not make number three the final ethical dilemma as the answers to that question can support my dilemma.

**Ethical dilemma to be discussed in this paper:**

“Was it ethical that the Actor chose to delay evacuation and communicating to passengers to stay put, while ultimately saving himself before saving the vast majority of Sewol passengers?”

**APPLICATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

This paper will discuss three possible theories or approaches the Actor could have taken. In each possible theory or approach, the various choices will be explained, as will how those choices reflect or violate them.

**Possible Approach #1: Ethical Egoism**
“Ethical Egoism is the doctrine that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. According to author James Rachels in The Elements of Moral Philosophy, “Ethical Egoism is the radical idea that the principle of self-interest accounts for all of one’s obligations.” Ethical Egoism is a form of consequentialism. Consequentialism is a view that “normative properties depend only on consequences. This general approach can be applied at different levels to different normative properties of different kinds of things, but the most prominent example is consequentialism about the moral rightness of acts, which hold that whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.”

Reflect: The Actor’s actions reflect this theory because he decided not to help his passengers first. Thus, he thought only of himself, and his self-interest was preserved. Also, I believe that by communicating to passengers to stay put, the Actor did not lie---as long as you agree that omitting information is not a lie. While I believe evidence shows that passengers knew something was wrong—and at least one even called for emergency help—their culture is one of respect and, ultimately they didn’t question the Actor and did as they were told, which was to stay in their room. By doing this I believe the Actor was still able to focus solely on his problems and stayed self-centered. The actor’s action was right because it was to his advantage.

Further the Actor’s actions did not look out for others, Ethical Egoism says doing so would be an invasion of an individual’s privacy, and he did not make his passengers his “charity” cases. The Actor allowed them all to keep their dignity. I’ll try to explain this further with this example. By not helping others before the Actor helped himself, he was
perhaps able to help a person die who had just made the decision that morning that life was no longer worth living and wanted to die. Now, in the process hundreds of others perished, but the Actor lived (self-interest) and by minding his own business he didn’t rob someone of their dignity (in this example, dying). Preserving his own life, according to Ethical Egoism, would be the main objective in this ethical dilemma.

**Violate:** According to James Rachels, the Actor’s actions violate this theory because Ethical Egoism “endorses selfishness, but it doesn’t endorse foolishness.” 

Additionally, Ethical Egoism does not tell you to avoid helping others. The Actor’s actions are directly opposite of these guidelines. This leads us to the thoughts of Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) when he “suggested that the principle of Ethical Egoism leads to nothing less than the Golden Rule: We should “do unto others” because if we do, other will be more likely to do unto us.” Related to Hobbes comments, I believe the actor also violated this standard thought, and in the process got lucky. Why? Because while he did not help others (like his passengers), others (the rescuers) helped him.

Quick Conclusion: Overall, the Actor’s actions reflect Ethical Egoism because he made decisions solely based on self-preservation.

**Possible Approach #2: Utilitarianism**

In Ethics in Communication, Richard L. Johannesen writes that “Utilitarianism is the theory that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” In other words, Utilitarianism is about “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” Consequentialism was previously defined on page 4, but for this approach, I’ll use act consequentialism. It’s the claim that
“an act is morally right if and only if that act maximizes the good, that is, if and only if the total amount of good for all minus the total amount of bad for all is greater than this next amount for any incompatible act available to the agent on that occasion.” ⁹

Reflect: If Utilitarianism is about the greatest amount of happiness, I do not see how the Actor’s actions reflect this theory. Nonetheless, it was an option available to him. If one wanted to argue that not helping others escape was the right thing to do because everyone on the ferry was happy to die, that argument would fall short. Many, many passengers called for emergency help. In fact the first call came from a passenger asking for help. His body was later recovered by rescue divers.

Violate: Delaying evacuation and communicating to the passengers to stay put violates the Principle of Utility which states, according to James Rachels, “This principle requires us, in all circumstance, to produce the most happiness we can.” ¹⁰

Being open and honest with his passengers would have been the start of making a right decision. The Actor could have continued this trend by working with his crew members to, as systematically as possible, have passengers ready for evacuation. He could have started this process by saying to his passengers something like this: “Hello. Thank you for listening to me and staying in your room for the past few minutes. Please continue to listen to me as I tell you what you need to do next. If we follow this process our chances of being rescued increase. It is now time for us to begin evacuating. We have 25 crewmembers that will help you get to the right places on the boat. Follow their instructions. Make sure you have a life preserver on. If it is not on, put it on now. I will continue to communicate with emergency organizations and other ships ready to help us. Our crew members and I will help you.”
(Side note: Although there were more crewmembers aboard the ship, I selected the number 25 because some would need to help the Actor and provide logistics. Also, this would account for approximately 19 passengers for each crew member. It is my opinion that is an acceptable ratio.)

I cannot pretend to know the logistics of evacuating a ship. I'm sure they are complex. And based on initial reports, it seems like the crew members had little training in emergency preparedness. Nonetheless, I believe the passengers would have listened because Korean society is one built from Confucianism values. Specifically, the virtues most valued:

- **Ren** - the virtue of humanity/benevolence
- **Yi** - the virtue of righteousness/honesty
- **Zhi** - the virtue of knowledge/wisdom
- **Xin** - the virtue of integrity/fidelity
- **Li** - the virtue of ritual/propropriety

A communication like the one I provided would have aligned with their values.

Quick conclusion: Overall, the Actor’s actions do not support Utilitarianism (and also violate cultural “norms”) because it was not the greatest good for the greatest amount of people.

**Possible Approach #3: Deontology**

“The word deontology derives from the Greek words for duty (deon) and science (or study) of (logos). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of
normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do (deontic theories), in contrast to (aretaic [virtue] theories) that—fundamentally, at least—guide and assess what kind of person (in terms of character traits) we are and should be. And within that domain, deontologists—those who subscribe to deontological theories of morality—stand in opposition to consequentialists.”

Basically, no matter how morally good a consequence, some choices are morally forbidden.

A key piece in the Deontology Theory came to us from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a well-respected German philosopher. Kant gave the world the Categorical Imperative—“an absolutely non-negotiable moral law that holds up regardless of circumstances” made up of three components.

1. All actions have universality, meaning it is only right for you to do something if you think it is right for everyone else to do it.
2. Every human being is an end, not a means to an end. People may not be manipulated, and you may not lie.
3. You must act as though you are the moral authority of the entire universe.¹²

**Reflect:** The only way the Actor’s actions supported Deontology and the Categorical Imperative is because he believed he was the moral authority of the universe. In other words, what he wanted was the only thing that mattered. Also, since Deontology is based on duty, I believe the case could be made that the Actor met those obligations by calling for help. It was the Actor’s duty as captain to do so, and he did. Conversely, one
could also make the case that he violated duty because he didn’t fully do everything expected from his roles and responsibilities aboard the ferry.

**Violate:** The Actor violated the Deontology and the Categorical Imperative because he treated humans as an end. By telling them to stay in their rooms and not helping them evacuate for rescue, he was able to help himself, thus increasing his changes of survival. Further, I believe he violated the universality of actions command. While the Actor didn’t bother to help others, he certainly wanted others to help him. One could argue that by calling the emergency responders, he already proved that he wanted to help and that he fulfilled his duty by doing so, therefore he would expect others do the same for him in any and all situations.

Further, if deontology is about duty bound obligations, the Actor is certainly in violation of South Korean maritime law and the safety treaty. Which doesn’t require a captain stay on board, but does say that a captain is responsible for the vessel and passengers. That could mean that the Actor should be the last person to leave a sinking skip. In a CNN article, William Doherty, a retired captain with the U.S. Merchant Maries says, “The captain should have been passing honest and clear information onto to everyone as to the situation not, telling them to just sit.”

Quick conclusion: Ultimately, the Actor’s actions do not support Deontology because he neglected people, didn’t fulfill his duty (obligation) as a captain, and acted in a way that he would not want others to act towards him.
OVERALL CONCLUSION

I conclude the Actor opted for self-preservation above all other options. These actions most closely followed the Ethical Egoism theory.

I do not believe this was the right choice. Many, many passengers lost their life in the ferry’s capsizing. Further fallout includes, families that are forever altered, the questioning of deep-seeded cultural values, rescuers wondering if they did enough, and survivor’s guilt. The people of South Korea are not happy, and the President’s approval ratings have fallen 11 percentage points in the last two weeks. In a rare act, South Korea’s president called the crew member’s action “tantamount to murder.” 14

However, there are two more unforeseen consequences of the Actor’s actions. First, the high school’s vice principal, and lead guide for the school trip committed suicide. The Yonhap (http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/) news agency reported that the vice principal felt guilty for being alive while so many under his care were missing. 15 Second, by April 27, the South Korean Prime Minister resigned by stating, “The right thing for me to do is take responsibility and resign as a person who is charge of the cabinet.” 16 The South Korean president has also apologized, but the citizens seem to be unsatisfied with her statement and overall handling of the situation. 17

I believe this event was bound to have bad and sad consequences. However, had the rescue tapes shown him helping his passengers and demonstrating honest and open communication, I do think the Koreans would have been more forgiving of the Actor. If tapes were not available, it would also have helped the Actor if passengers would have been able to speak on his behalf and share how he acted with integrity and honesty.
One possible positive outcome from the Sweol ferry disaster could be the focus South Korea must apply to its safety standards and in dealing with a government where it is common knowledge that bribes are paid for positive systematic safety checks. This could be the deadliest ferry accident since 1970. A Washington Post online article contains a great deal of information about these two possible outcomes, but perhaps most telling is a Korean media report stating, “Chonghaejin Marine Co., which operated the ferry, last year spent 60 million won ($58,000) for lobbying and entertainment – and just 514 won ($490) on safety training.” The same article sited average ferry inspections taking just 14 minutes.  

The Actor and 14 crew members are currently facing criminal charges of abandoning ship. The Actor and has defended his actions by saying: “It is a fairly fast current area, and the water temperature was cold. I thought that abandoning the ship without discretion would make you drift off a fairly far distance and cause a lot of trouble. At the same time the reuse ship did not come, and there were no fishing boats or supporting ships around to help at that time.”  

Choosing the Deontology or Utilitarianism theories would have been better options. Specifically, by choosing a utilitarianism approach, the Actor could have produced the most amount of happiness by weighing his actions and opting to save more lives. With the deontology approach, the Actor would have truer representation of fulfilling one’s obligations—not only to job responsibilities and expectations, but also to the Korean culture which values humanity, honesty, integrity, propriety, and wisdom. Not discussed in this paper, but a third option would have been the altruistic approach. Had the Actor
selected this approach, he would have not thought about himself at all, and made his decisions solely on what was best for everyone else—even at the cost of his own life.


12. Davis, S. Peter, Three Minute Philosophy- Immanuel Kant, YouTube
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwOClmJevigw.

13. Jethro Mullen, Wednesday, April 23, 2014, Abandon ship? In recent maritime disasters, captains don’t hang around, CNN World,


