Counting with Ethics

This document describes very briefly an attempt to incorporate ethics into a mathematical calculation of maxima. The world as we perceive it can to a large extent be modelled mathematically. One common example is Newton’s attraction formula between masses. As long as a model works to predict events, it serves a purpose so why not give ethics a shot?

Brans suggests in “Ethics and decision” (2002) an approach for how to do this. It is based on the assumption that the relevance of ethical principles in a specific case can be compared and given weights of importance. What is of interest to you is not the exact mathematical foundation, but the principles of the calculus. That is what you are going to give a thought.

Brans recognises that ethics cannot be exactly quantified, in the sense that they cannot be assigned an exact value of importance. He tries to tackle this uncertainty by allowing the importance to vary within a margin of error. In Figure 1-2 you can see a description of his approach to take uncertainty into account. In the example he is projecting an “ethical cone” and a “subjective cone” (representing the decision maker’s wish) onto the one particular plane in an n-dimensional space, which is assumed to maintain the most information from the vectors in n-space (neglect the mathematics). From this projection he tries to find an area of intersection where a decision will satisfy both wishes. Different options are represented by points in this plane (also projected from n-space).

What you need to consider are the assumptions that 1) ethical principles can be modelled with a weight and a distribution, and that 2) they can be given a direction compared to other principles and considerations. Finally you should think about the assumption that 3) options can be compared and placed out in a space so that their relations will indicate directions.

To understand these concepts, it might be helpful to take a quick tour of how Brans’s method is implemented in a decision making tool:

http://www.visualdecision.com/QuickTour/quicktour.html

The questions that you should try to answer are:

- How well do you think an approach that considers the influence of ethics as weight distributions relates to the real world? Does it work the same as for other economical factors? Motivate your answer.

- Is there any other way to quantify ethical aspects? Sketch a suggestion!

Reference