

Risky Trade-Offs in *The Expanse*

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Chrisjen Avasarala faces a difficult choice when deciding whether to nuke *the Sojourner*: waiting to identify the vessel could put the Earth's entire defense system at risk, but an immediate strike could mean attacking an innocent civilian ship. Avasarala's choice is a moral one; it is concerned with doing the right thing. Although often difficult to make, moral choices are made easier by their focus on one type of value, moral value.

Sometimes, however, we must choose between radically different types of values—values that are not even in the same ballpark. In addition to moral values, there are aesthetic values, prudential values, epistemic values, scientific values, and others. How should we go about making a decision when competing, but apparently incommensurable values are at stake? *The Expanse* doesn't provide an easy answer to this vexing question, but considering conflicts of values on the show can help us reason about tough choices in real life.

Epistemic Value vs. Moral Value: Evil Scientists

Jules-Pierre Mao, for example, must decide whether the protomolecule research justifies risking the lives of the children he met on Io. Is the risk worth it? Jules-Pierre Mao's interest in protomolecule research is motivated primarily by power and wealth. Insofar as his self-interest leads him to disregard the suffering inflicted on his human guinea pigs, he is an evil character. The scientists involved in his projects appear unconcerned with the moral consequences of protomolecule research. Instead, they seem to be driven exclusively by epistemic values—such as knowledge and understanding.

Antony Dresden's hubristic aspiration is captured in an exchange between him, Jim Holden, Fred Johnson, and Joe Miller in "Doors & Corners." Dresden claims that by mastering the protomolecule we will be able to "apply it to everything" and "become our own gods." When Holden asks him, "And that justifies all of this?" meaning incidents like Eros, Dresden exclaims,

“Of course it does!” For Dresden, the loss of life on Eros is worth the sacrifice for a chance at mastering the protomolecule. This fits with his pursuit of knowledge as an epistemic value. Dresden, we know, went a long way to overcome what he perceived as limitations to scientific research: after all, he underwent transcranial magnetic hyperstimulation, as all Protogen researchers did, in order to see human lives as expendable in the name of scientific progress.

Lawrence Strickland did not have to undergo transcranial magnetic hyperstimulation in order to show a complete disregard for the life of human children—for example the deception and lack of consent involved in experimentation for Project Caliban. This alone would make him morally worse than Dresden. He understands the moral reasons that are sufficient to quit the project, yet he chooses to live in denial. Not only that, his awareness of the morally abhorrent nature of his research only leads him to attempt to shield Jules–Pierre Mao from the horrible consequences of the experiment. He is concerned not with the atrocities he is committing, but with the fact that they might lead his sponsor to shut down the project. In fact, even Mao has a moment of moral remorse, though only after he forms a bond with Mei and sees the horrible consequences of the experiment with his own eyes. When that happens, an unfazed Strickland tells him “I’m sorry that you had to see that.” And when Strickland tries to convince him not to stop the project, Mao reveals to him what he knew all along: “we’re torturing children” (“Assured Destruction”).

Aesthetic Value vs. Moral Value: Mad Scientists, Agog Reverends

Unlike Dresden, Paolo Cortázar does not exactly volunteer for transcranial magnetic hyperstimulation. However, once he undergoes the treatment he decides to remain under the effects of the mind–altering drugs permanently, and he no longer has qualms about extreme human experimentation. In “Static,” when confronted by Holden, Johnson, and Amos about the Eros incident, Cortázar shows no concern for human suffering or for Dresden’s death. With his mind focused solely on the protomolecule research, he asks, “what about the project?” “are you taking up the project?” Nor does he understand why anyone would want to develop a vaccine. His exchange with Amos later in the same episode reveals how obsessive fascination with the protomolecule has

replaced any sensitivity to even the most basic moral values. Julie Mao was not “dead,” but “beautiful,” even “becoming.” When Holden describes the state of the protomolecule on the *Anubis*, Cortázar is deeply upset. But his upset is like the reaction one might have to the potential death of an extraordinary or irreplaceable specimen, or to the extinction of a species. In fact, whereas Dresden’s interest in the protomolecule is pragmatic and transhumanistic in nature—aimed at overcoming our limitations—Cortázar’s curiosity is almost child-like, verging on the aesthetic. At the end of season 5 we see a happier, enthusiastic Cortázar on Laconia speaking of “beautiful results” (“Nemesis Games”). More than a scientist, Cortázar seems almost like a minister devoted to a natural god.

Anna Volovodov, though not wholly innocent, is markedly different from Cortázar. Her curiosity about the ring, fed by her discussions with Kolvoord (“It Reaches Out”), leads her to ask Tilly to help her stay aboard the *Thomas Prince* (“Intransigence”). Anna struggles to understand this desire to remain. First, she tells Tilly, “It’s the only miracle that’s happened in my lifetime. And it’s not a miracle–miracle, but ... It changes everything, and to be so close and then just turn away? It seems wrong.” However, pushed to reveal her real motivation, Anna eventually agrees with Tilly’s words: “You want to indulge in a selfish desire to be a part of something amazing.” Previously, Anna willingly sacrificed her own prudential interests in order to do the right thing when she decided to stay at the UN instead of going back to her family. But things are different on the *Thomas Prince*. Nono reminds Anna, “First, it was a few weeks away to write a speech at the UN, now it’s months at the edge of the solar system?” (“Delta–V”). Nono’s tone upsets Anna, perhaps precisely because it reveals to Anna that her main motivation to be on the ship was never moral (providing pastoral support), but rather the aesthetic desire to experience the sublime.

Anna could have made a morally better decision, as her curiosity about the ring leads her to neglect her family. But maybe her decision was not wrong. Perhaps it is sometimes okay to prioritize aesthetic value or self-interested pursuits. However, the desire to understand, or even just to witness the mystery of the ring, leads Anna to ignore Jordaan Nemeroff’s repeated calls for help,

resulting in his suicide (“Dandelion Sky”). She thus fails at her chosen purpose in life—helping others in need. In whatever way we decide to consider competing values, Anna’s case is problematic.

Epistemic Value vs. Prudential Value: Intrepid Scientists

Sometimes, the quest for scientific progress demands that we go to extremes, taking great risks to advance our understanding beyond its current limits. The political arrangement of *The Expanse*—in particular, colonization of the Belt—is made possible only by the speed of the Epstein Drive and the death of its inventor. Sometimes, scientific progress conflicts with the prudential value of self-preservation. Dr. Iturbi and Colonel Janus exemplify this conflict in their attitude towards the protomolecule. Iturbi complains that Janus “lacks imagination” and “can only conceive of the world in terms of things he’s already seen” (“Paradigm Shift”). This attitude, as Avasarala points out in the same episode, is a useful skill for talking to politicians. However, it is likely to be far less useful when it comes to understanding an alien substance that defies the known laws of physics. It is Iturbi who is more willing to leave his comfort zone to confront the uncertainty of things we have not already seen. He eventually convinces Janus to further investigate the mystery with him, although this means becoming an experiment themselves, as the protomolecule takes apart the *Arboghast* and its crew in order to understand more about human beings (“Caliban’s War”).

To sacrifice everything for the sake of knowledge in this way requires a truly scientific mindset. From the beginning, Holden lacks any such interest in the purely epistemic value of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Although he is granted special access to the mysteries of the protomolecule, he would much prefer not to be in such a position: he does not appear to value his privileged status. The conflict between the prudential and the epistemic plays out again when Dr. Elvi Okoye chastises him for not appreciating his direct line of communication to the protomolecule. In “A Shot in the Dark,” she tells Holden: “You make it sound like a burden ... You are being given knowledge and answers that humans have only dreamt about.” When he complains, “I’ve also been given horrific nightmares and visions of death I can never unsee,” Okoye replies,

“To me, that sounds like an acceptable trade-off. I have traveled billions of kilometers to be the first exobiologist to study the most basic forms of extraterrestrial life, and you, on the other hand, are the only person in human history with a direct line of communication to an advanced alien species, and you're annoyed? ... Any scientist would kill to change places with you. I know I would.” Okoye would happily exchange Holden's nightmares for the blessing that he insists on seeing as a curse.

Conflicts Between Values

How should we understand the conflicts between the incommensurable values that we have mentioned—prudential, moral, epistemic, and aesthetic?

One way to understand the conflicts is as dilemmas. Dilemmas are situations where whatever we do, we do something wrong. For example: what would you do if you had to kill either your father or your mother, otherwise both your parents would die? This relatively straightforward case exemplifies an intra-domain moral dilemma: either decision would ultimately be morally wrong, even if you have reasons pulling you in either direction. Building on this, we can understand inter-domain conflicts in the same way. Consider an example in which moral value and aesthetic value conflict: suppose you had to kill your parents in order to save the last existing copy of *The Expanse* book series. Killing your parents would be morally wrong, but destroying *The Expanse* would be aesthetically wrong. Whichever option you choose, you are doing something wrong: it's a lose-lose situation.

A second way of understanding conflicts between values is to see them as situations in which it doesn't really matter whether you prioritize moral, prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic value. Perhaps these are situations in which individuals are free to decide for themselves, in accordance with their own idiosyncrasies. Just as it doesn't really matter whether you choose chocolate or strawberry ice cream for dessert, perhaps it doesn't really matter whether you choose moral value over epistemic value. The James Holdens of the world would choose a life without nightmares, the Elvi Okoyes would kill for them. Perhaps both are equally permissible choices, based on the individual's unique preferences.

There is a third way to understand conflicts between values. Perhaps there is a definite right answer about what we should do. For example: you should not kill your parents, because they are more important than *The Exppanse*. Perhaps moral value is always more important than aesthetic value. Or, perhaps we would need much more aesthetic value to outweigh the wrongness of killing your parents: not just *The Exppanse*, but the Mona Lisa and the rest of the contents of the Louvre too. Importantly, making the right choice does not guarantee freedom from a lingering sense of regret about the choice that you didn't make. You wouldn't feel good about killing your parents no matter how clearly you reasoned about the values involved in the decision.

We now have three ways of understanding value conflicts: as situations in which every option is forbidden, situations in which every option is permissible, or situations in which some options are obligatory and some options are forbidden. According to the first two options, the conflicts are not resolvable, and you can't do much more than decide whether to be pessimistic or optimistic about your predicament. Pessimists will think that these situations are dilemmas, and the human condition is fraught with choices in which everything we do is wrong. Optimists will think that it doesn't really matter what we choose. Both of these answers are frustrating because they don't help us decide what to do when values conflict. However, if some options are right and others are wrong, then the conflicts are resolvable, and making the right choice is important.

So, how should we do this?

One answer is that we can rank values in terms of their importance. Of course, people will disagree about rankings. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was committed to aesthetic value over everything else! You, by contrast, might be committed to moral value over everything else. If moral value is always more important than epistemic value, then the decision whether to conduct purely theoretical scientific research by torturing children is an easy one: never do it. Perhaps even sending the *Arboghost* to explore the protomolecule crater is morally wrong: that money could have been spent supporting Earth's many destitute citizens. But, this would mean that we always have to sacrifice the opportunity to gain significant scientific knowledge if it conflicts with even the

smallest amount of moral value. Even the most significant scientific breakthrough would not be justifiable if it meant, say, failing to return a library book, or breaking a promise to meet a friend for lunch, or stepping on someone's toes. Moreover, the idea that we can rank values suggests that they share a common currency—a sort of overarching or “meta” value that we can use to adjudicate conflicts between them. After all, how could we say that, for example, epistemic value is in any sense “better” or “worse” than moral value if there was no way to measure them against each other?

The idea that all these different kinds of value can be traded with a common currency is tempting. But contra Keats, beauty is not truth; and it certainly isn't goodness, as Tolstoy says. Epistemic, moral, prudential, and aesthetic values are very different.

Comparing all the radically different human values is worse than comparing apples and oranges. Apples and oranges, at least, are both kinds of fruit. We can compare how they taste, or how well they go with a particular meal. To push the analogy further: while it is fine to like apples more than oranges, it is less obviously fine to like beauty more than truth, or truth more than goodness. In some contexts it might be appropriate to prioritize one rather than another—truth in the laboratory, beauty in the art studio. Well-rounded humans value each to the appropriate degree and in the appropriate way.

Perhaps, then, we should be pluralists about value. We should simply accept that our lives involve many incommensurable values, and which value takes precedence depends on the situation. Epistemic value is important when doing scientific research, but moral value is important when governing. Although pluralism respects the specific nature of each sphere, it offers little practical guidance on how to resolve specific conflicts between values. How can we even begin to think of weighing values against each other if they all use different scales?

Risky Trade-offs

There is a further difficulty. When deciding whether to prioritize, say, moral or epistemic value, we cannot know exactly how things will turn out. If we are unsure about which kind of value is

important, then we are taking a risk that we are getting it wrong. This puts us in a different kind of predicament—even if we get it right, we are being reckless!

For example, if I think that a particular situation is one where epistemic value is the most important consideration, then I would think that risking life and limb is justified. However, what if I am uncertain about this? This is likely: cases of this sort are complex, and often it is difficult to work out which kind of value is more important. If I am uncertain, then I am taking a risk that my sacrifice of one kind of value in pursuit of another is correct. I am risking doing something wrong. Such action displays a kind of recklessness: someone who ignores the pull of moral value at the expense of other kinds of value is reckless about moral value. They display a culpable indifference to it.

This makes trade-offs between values difficult: even if the risk pays off, a residue remains—taking a decision to prioritize one kind of value demands sacrificing other kinds of value. Of course, no such residue appears if we are certain about how the values line up. But, certainty is no good without good reason to be certain. Cortázar and Dresden are certain that their research into the protomolecule justifies all the moral costs, or perhaps that the moral costs are negligible. Either way, their certainty is suspicious—it does not seem to be based on good reasons. In the end, certainty might be a risk as well.

Perhaps the lesson to take from all this is that avoiding risk is impossible. Sometimes, like Holden on Tycho station (“Churn”), we must go through life pushing buttons as we find them, accepting the risks that come, and hoping we manage to make the right choice when the time comes.