

Frame101x: EPISODE 11

Ecstasy is a party drug that is popular at dance parties. The chemical composition of the pills, which are illegal to buy and sell, can differ enormously. Some of these pills are extremely dangerous. From time to time, people actually die from taking them.

This raises an interesting moral dilemma. Should local authorities make it possible for party-goers to check the safety of XTC pills before taking them? On the one hand, everybody wants to prevent fatalities, and drug checking can prevent people from taking dangerous pills. On the other hand, any government that allows such checks at the very least implies that it condones XTC use. In other words, drug checking might encourage party-goers to think that XTC use is acceptable.

This is a real dilemma – Now, suppose that you are opposed to these checks but you obviously don't want people to die, either. Consider the following frame:

Checks create a false sense of security. Whether or not you die from using MDMA does not just depend on the chemical composition of a particular pill but also on your level of physical fitness. If you are not in top physical condition, any MDMA pill can kill you.

The strength of this frame is not just that it is “sticky” – or that it satisfies the other requirements of a good frame – but that it releases us from a tricky moral dilemma. In this frame, we are no longer faced with a choice between allowing drug checking or risking people's lives. And because it releases us from this dilemma, we are susceptible to this frame. We are eager to hear that these checks create a false sense of security. There is a dilemma and this frame offers a way out. As noted in previous episodes, frames that are based on values or emotions are particularly powerful. As it turns out, they can also be very powerful if they release us from a moral dilemma.

Frames can be even more effective if they explicitly tackle the underlying moral dilemma. Imagine a famine or an armed conflict that is creating a huge stream of refugees. One country has already absorbed a large number of refugees, and the question now is whether it should accept any more. Consider the following frame:

On the one hand, we have a moral duty to help these people, a moral duty. On the other hand, our country has already done its fair share. Our society cannot absorb any more refugees. I believe that we should look after these people in their own region. That is what we ought to do. They should be looked after close to home – not here, where they are far from home.

This frame presents the problem at hand as a moral dilemma. When faced with such a dilemma, we become susceptible to the “close to home” frame, which offers a way out. The essence of this frame: it presents the problem as a moral dilemma and then presents the proposed solution as a way out of this dilemma. In this way, it appears to transcend the original problem.

Finally, this frame is actually a very common. If you are a conservative who believes that the government should show compassion toward the poor, you can call yourself a compassionate conservative. If you are a liberal, but you also want to be tough on crime, you can talk about

muscular liberalism. The German region of Bavaria is conservative but also wishes to be modern, so Bavarians talk about *Laptop und Lederhose* – innovation and tradition. The idea behind this frame is that, by embracing an dilemma, you can transcend it.