



The Trolley Problem

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There is a famous conundrum in moral philosophy.

You are the driver of a train that is hurtling down a railway line. It's out of control and the brakes have failed. Ahead, five workers are working on the track and apparently face certain death. You try to stop but you can't. Then, you notice a side track on the right, where there is one worker on the track. Do you turn the train down the side track, killing one person, or continue straight ahead and kill the five workers. What should you do? Should you steer the train down the side track?

Now try this. The runaway train is again heading towards five workers. This time you are an onlooker standing on a footbridge, next to a very big man. The only way you can stop the train is to push the big man over the footbridge onto the track. His bulk will stop the train and five lives will be spared. What should you do? Should you push him?

Most people believe it's acceptable to divert a runaway train away from killing five people who are working on the track, even if by so doing, the train would crash into and kill one other person. But the majority of people do not think it's acceptable to stop a train by throwing a large man in front of it - even if this would save five lives.

But why might the two train cases be morally different? What was the moral difference between the two? After all, in both cases it's a choice of one life or five. What does the conundrum tell us about what sort of moral creatures human beings are? And why does any of this matter?

It's a moral conundrum that philosophers have been grappling with for several decades. Why does this apparently arcane philosophical puzzle matter in the real world?

The answers we give in such cases have huge implications in numerous practical areas, such as abortion, capital punishment and the conduct of warfare.

The solution to the conundrum has implications in numerous practical areas, including warfare.

The Trolley problem

-Invented by moral philosopher Professor Judith Jarvis Thomson, who taught at Massachusetts Institute of Technology

-**Case one:** A runaway train is heading towards five workers on the tracks. You are approaching a side track that you could steer down, but there is one worker on that track. Would you steer the train down a side track, where one worker is, killing one person instead of five?

-**Case two:** Same problem, but you are a bystander. You are watching from a footbridge. You could push a fat man next to you off the bridge, and his bulk would stop the train, killing one person instead of five. Would you do it?

All West Point cadets now study philosophy and the so-called trolley problem, a problem that continues to absorb some of the most brilliant minds in moral philosophy.

These include Jeff McMahan, of Rutgers University, who has also taught at West Point.

McMahan forcefully makes the claim for the relevance of the trolley problem.

He says it adds weight to a crucial moral distinction - enshrined in international law - between killing civilians as an aim, and knowing civilians will die merely as a foreseen consequence of military action: between attacking a munitions factory aware that there will be, to use that euphemism, collateral damage, and aiming at civilians intentionally.

In the classroom the new breed of philosopher soldiers are being taught Immanuel Kant, who thought that there were some things it was always wrong to do to other humans whatever the consequences, and without whom the modern conception of human rights is almost inconceivable.

It is hard to know how the 18th-Century German philosopher would respond to this updating of his philosophy.

Outside the classroom, one officer, Major Danny Crozier, admits that there is a danger in teaching cadets to think reflectively for themselves - the danger of insubordination.

But the risk is worth it, he says, because soldiers must not obey unjust commands.

Philosophy can help them draw the necessary distinctions.

His young soldiers could be required to go to Afghanistan, and if engaged in combat will have to take snap decisions about what to target, when to shoot.

Their moral instincts have to be trained alongside their military ones.

Harming the Innocent

According to the principle of utility, we should always do whatever will produce the greatest amount of happiness and whatever is necessary to prevent the greatest amount of unhappiness. But what if the only way to produce happiness, and to prevent unhappiness, is to harm or even kill innocent people?

1. Suppose you are driving through a narrow tunnel and a worker falls onto the road in front of you. There is not enough time for you to stop. If you keep straight, you will hit the worker and kill him, but if you swerve left into oncoming traffic, you will collide with a school bus and kill at least five children. What's the right thing to do? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?

2. Suppose ten thousand innocent civilians live next to a munitions factory in a country at war. If you bomb the factory, all of them will die. If you don't bomb the factory, it will be used to produce bombs that will be dropped on fifty thousand innocent civilians in another country. What's the right thing to do? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?
3. Suppose a man has planted a bomb in New York City, and it will explode in twenty-four hours unless the police are able to find it. Should it be legal for the police to use torture to extract information from the suspected bomber? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?
4. Now suppose the man who has planted the bomb will not reveal the location unless an innocent member of his family is tortured. Should it be legal for the police to torture innocent people, if that is truly the only way to discover the location of a large bomb? Does utilitarianism have the right answer?
5. You are a passenger on United Flight 93, headed from New Jersey to San Francisco. Once the flight is in the air, four armed terrorists take over the plane and intend to divert the plane towards Washington, DC and fly it into the U.S. Capitol building. Do you attempt to regain control of the plane forcefully, which may result in the plane crashing and killing everyone on board, all 44 passengers? Or do you let the hijackers fly the plane into the U.S Capitol building, possibly killing thousands? Does utilitarianism have the right answer?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2010/05/100423_will_you_kill_big_guy_one.shtml (part 1)

http://www.justiceharvard.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=8 (Harvard University, Justice with Michael Sandel course debate videos – Episode 1)

The Moral Side of Murder: If you had to choose between (1) killing one person to save the lives of five others and (2) doing nothing, even though you knew that five people would die right before your eyes if you did nothing—what would you do? What would be the right thing to do? That's the hypothetical scenario Professor Michael Sandel uses to launch his course on moral reasoning.