

The Trolley Problem

1. The Trolley Problem: Consider the following pair of cases:

Switch There is a runaway trolley barreling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are standing some distance off in the train yard, next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. Unfortunately, you notice that there is one person on the side track. You have two options: (1) Do nothing, and the trolley kills the five people on the main track. (2) Pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side track where it will kill one person.

Footbridge There is a runaway trolley headed toward five people again. Only, this time, you are not in the train yard next to a lever. You are on a bridge, watching the events from above the tracks. There is a very large man next to you. You realize that, if you push him off the bridge and down onto the tracks below, the trolley will hit and kill him, but his body is so large that it will stop the trolley before it reaches the five endangered people. You have two options: (1) Do nothing, and the trolley kills the five people. (2) Push the large man off the bridge, so that he dies, but the five others are saved.

Strangely, 90% of people say that you SHOULD kill the one in Switch (by pulling the lever), while 95% of people say that you SHOULD NOT kill the one in Footbridge—though the results are the same. In each case, the option is to kill 1, or let 5 die. What explains our difference of intuition in these 2 cases?

If we think it is wrong to kill 1 to save 5 in cases like Footbridge and Organ Harvest, but permissible to do so in the Switch case, **we must identify the morally relevant difference between these cases**. This is no easy task, and the problem of identifying such a difference is known as [The Trolley Problem](#) (see also [here](#) and [here](#)).

[\[Doing vs. Allowing Harm: It is worth mentioning another popular moral distinction. Many believe that DOING harm to someone is much worse, morally, than merely ALLOWING harm to come to them. For instance, most think that, if I were to send missiles to destroy starving people in Africa, this would be wrong. On the other hand, merely sitting back and doing nothing while they starve to death is morally permissible.](#)

[However, even if doing harm IS worse than allowing harm, this does not explain away The Trolley Problem. For, in both Switch AND Footbridge, you seem to be DOING harm to the one in order to save the 5 \(either by pulling the lever or by pushing the man\), rather than merely sitting back and allowing it.\]](#)

Absolutism: Note that some do believe that killing is ABSOLUTELY wrong—that is, it is NEVER permissible to do harm. In that case, one should allow the 5 to die in both scenarios. Thus, such ‘absolutists’ do not have a “trolley problem” strictly speaking. That is, they do not believe that there is a moral difference between the two trolley cases, which deserves explanation. However, they DO owe us an explanation of why it is wrong to kill the one in Switch, given that most people do not share this intuition.

Utilitarianism: Note that utilitarians also do not have a “trolley problem” strictly speaking. For, on their view, an action is morally wrong if it fails to maximize happiness. As such, you should ALWAYS kill 1 to save 5 (in Switch, Footbridge, Organ Harvest, etc.). Yet, they DO owe us an explanation of why it is NOT wrong to kill the one in Footbridge and Organ Harvest, since almost no one shares this intuition.

2. Intending vs. Foreseeing Harm: Philippa Foot (who authored the original Switch case) suggests that the difference is that, in Footbridge, one *intends to harm the fat man as a means* to saving the others. In that scenario, it is necessary to use the fat man as a tool in order to save the others (though using him this way will kill him). Meanwhile, in Switch, one does not intend the harm at all. Rather, one merely *foresees it as an unfortunate, unintended side-effect*. We do not REQUIRE the death of the one in order to save the five in Switch. In fact, we would be quite relieved if the one somehow freed himself in time to avoid being hit by the trolley. We would not, if he escaped, chase him down and kill him! Furthermore, **it is much worse, morally, to intentionally harm someone as a means to an end than it is to merely foresee that harm will be done to someone as an unintended, unnecessary side-effect of one’s ends.**

Thus, in Switch, it is permissible to kill the one because one’s primary intention is to save the five. The death of the one on the side track is a secondary effect (sometimes called a “double-effect.” And the principle that intending harm is worse than foreseeing it is sometimes called The Doctrine of Double-Effect, or DDE). Foot suggests that we have different judgments in the two cases because there are really TWO duties of non-maleficence: (1) The duty not to harm others intentionally as a means to some end, and (2) the duty not to harm others as a foreseen, but unintended side-effect of some action—and the former is much stronger than the latter.

Application: This distinction nicely explains the wrongness in many other difficult moral cases (e.g., Organ Harvest and Innocent Conviction). Killing the innocent person is morally wrong in all of those cases, apparently, because the death is a harm that is intended as a means to some other end. Consider also this pair of cases:

Strategic Bomber A pilot bombs a factory that contains the enemy's store of weapons, and thus shortens the war, saving 100,000 of lives. Unfortunately, 10,000 civilians live next to the factory who will die in the bombings.

Terror Bomber A pilot deliberately bombs 10,000 innocent civilians in order to demoralize the enemy, thus shortening the war and saving 100,000 lives.

In Terror Bomber, the 10,000 deaths are intended as a means to ending the war and saving millions of lives. In Strategic Bomber, the deaths of 10,000 is merely a foreseen, but unintended side-effect of ending the war and saving millions. On DDE, strategic bombing is morally permissible, but terror bombing is not—and, indeed, the majority of people's intuitions are aligned with this verdict.

3. Objection To The DDE: The following case is said by many to refute the DDE:

Looping Trolley: This is the same as Switch, except that the side track with one person on it is actually a circle, which loops back on to the main track. If you were to pull the lever WITHOUT one person on the side track, the trolley would merely loop around back onto the main track and kill the five. However, since there IS someone on the main track, the trolley hits them and is stopped by their body, thus saving the five.

In Looping Trolley, the death of the one is intended as a means to saving the five. However, most people still think it is permissible to pull the lever. Is this a counter-example to the DDE? (*Not to mention: Isn't there room to claim that I do not INTEND the death of the fat man in Footbridge? Rather, I merely intend for his great bulk to stop the trolley. If he were to survive the collision unharmed, I would be quite happy. Right?*)

4. Introducing vs. Re-Directing a Harm: A moral distinction that is closely related to the doing-allowing distinction is the distinction between introducing a new threat and merely diverting a pre-existing one. Judith Thomson (who authored the original Footbridge case) considers a pair of cases:

Divert The Bomb: Terrorists have launched a nuclear missile at New York City. The only way to prevent the destruction of New York is to divert the missile. Unfortunately, if the missile is diverted, it will hit Ithaca (a much smaller city) instead. The president orders the bomb to be diverted.

Explode The Bomb: Terrorists have launched a nuclear missile at New York City. The only way to prevent the destruction of New York is to launch our own nuclear missile to destroy Ithaca. This blast will destroy the terrorist missile as it passes over Ithaca's airspace. The president orders an attack on Ithaca.

Thomson thinks that it is ok to divert the bomb, but not to explode it. [*Do you share this intuition?*] But why should there be any moral difference between the actions if the results are exactly the same? She thinks that the key difference is between (1) diverting a threat that already exists and (2) creating a new one:

Diverting A Threat: If a threat exists, and is about to harm a certain number of people, Thomson believes it is morally acceptable to divert that threat onto some lesser number of people (just as long as there are no other morally relevant factors. For example, you did not promise the lesser number of people that you would do everything you could to keep them safe).

Introducing A Threat: If a threat exists, and is about to harm a certain number of people, Thomson believes it is morally *unacceptable* to prevent the harm to those people, if the only way to do so is to create some new threat that was not already there, which harms a different group of (a lesser number of) people.

Think of it this way: You are a physician with 5 doses of a certain medicine that will cure a fatal disease. You have 6 six patients. 5 of them would be cured with a single dose. But, the 6th patient's illness is advanced, and can only be cured if given all 5 doses. It seems permissible, Thomson states, to save the lives of the 5 patients rather than the 1.

There is a single benefit, up for distribution, she says. It is permissible to direct it to wherever it will do the most good. This is not only true of benefits, but also for harms. In Switch, there is a single harm up for distribution. It is permissible to direct it to wherever it will do the least amount of harm. And, if introducing a NEW threat is much worse, morally, than re-directing a pre-existing one, this distinction solves The Trolley Problem:

- In Switch, by pulling the lever, you are merely diverting a pre-existing threat from the five onto the one. You do not create any new threat, and your action is therefore morally acceptable.
- In Footbridge, you save the five by pushing the fat man off of the bridge. However, in doing so, you introduce a new threat to the fat man that was not previously there. Your action is therefore morally unacceptable.

Furthermore, this explains why harming the one in cases such as Organ Harvest, Innocent Conviction, and Crowded Cliff are wrong (because they introduce a new harm to the one).

5. Objection To Divert-vs.-Redirect: Thomson thinks that the reason it is wrong to push the fat man, but permissible to pull the lever, is that there is a duty not to harm others by introducing a new threat (even if doing so produces a greater good). This is stronger than the duty not to harm others by *diverting* a threat to produce a greater good. But, consider the following case:

Trolley Initiation: This is the same as the Switch case, except that the lever, instead of diverting the trolley on the side track, causes two things when pulled: (1) The runaway trolley stops, and (2) A motionless trolley on the side track begins moving. It is still the case that the one dies and five are saved.

Surely it should still be permissible to pull the lever in this revised case, even though doing so initiates a threat, rather than diverts one?

6. Conclusion: If we want to maintain the ideal of capturing the intuitions of "ordinary morality", we need to come up with a model which can accurately explain our intuitions in these various cases. Why IS it sometimes permissible to kill one to save five (e.g., in Switch), and sometimes impermissible (e.g., in Footbridge)? Is there any moral distinction which explains our ethical intuitions in these cases? Answering these questions is, as we have just seen, quite difficult.

[Brainstorm: Perhaps two or more of the distinctions that we have just examined could be COMBINED in some way in order to explain our ordinary intuitions. What do you think?]