



THE TROLLEY PROBLEM: A VIRTUE-ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Liezl van Zyl

1. UNDERSTANDING THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

The Trolley Problem is a familiar puzzle in Moral Philosophy. It brings out the tension between utilitarianism – the view that we should do whatever has the best consequences overall – and deontology – the view that we have certain moral duties, in particular, a duty not to kill innocent people. We can begin by considering the following cases:

Bystander: A runaway trolley is barrelling down a track. There are five people working on the track. A bystander, who knows trolleys, can pull a switch to steer the trolley onto a sidetrack. Unfortunately, there is a single person working on the sidetrack. If the bystander does nothing, five people die. If he pulls the switch, one person will die. What should the bystander do?

Footbridge: A slim man is standing on a footbridge next to a big man. A runaway trolley is heading down the track towards five workmen. They are sure to be killed unless the trolley can be stopped. The slim man can stop the trolley by pushing the big man onto the track. The big man will die, but the five workmen will live. What should the slim man do?

Our first reaction, when presented with these cases, might be to suggest a third alternative: They should yell, “Get out of the way!”, or look for an emergency brake or a way to

derail the trolley. These suggestions are always met with the same response: The two dilemmas are *thought experiments*, designed to test our moral intuitions about a specific issue. We must accept the facts as stated. There are only two options! Our next reaction might be to complain that the cases are unrealistic, for instance:

“Why can’t the workmen get out of the way?” – *The banks are too steep, or: They’re tied to the track!*

“How can we be sure that the big man’s body will stop the trolley?” – *He is extraordinarily big, or: He is wearing medieval armour!*

“How can we be sure the big man’s body will stop the trolley?” – *The slim man is a trolley expert. He knows!*

Eventually we might protest:

“This is ridiculous! We’re never going to find ourselves in these situations, so what’s the point of discussing them?”

Here we will be reminded that this is not an exercise in applied ethics but in moral philosophy. Our aim is to discover a general moral principle that will tell us when, if ever, it is morally permissible to sacrifice some people for the sake of others. For the exercise to be productive we must accept the facts as they are stated, and stop asking irrelevant questions.

Let us, then, turn our attention to the relevant questions:

Bystander: Is it permissible to turn the trolley, thereby killing one workman but saving five others?

Footbridge: Is it permissible to push the big man onto the track, thereby killing him but saving five others?

If we only allow “Yes” or “No” answers, there are three possible positions one might take:

POSITION 1: DEONTOLOGY ALL THE WAY:

“No” and “No.”

In support of this position we can appeal to the deontological principle:

“It is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent person.”

By turning the trolley, or pushing the big man, the agent is guilty of intentionally killing an innocent person.

“But what about the five? They will also be killed! Isn’t that worse than killing one?” we might ask. In response, deontologists will note that by doing nothing the bystander and the slim man are not *killing* the five. They are merely *letting them die*. We have a (positive) duty to rescue people, but this duty is not as stringent as the (negative) duty not to kill.

POSITION 2: UTILITARIANISM ALL THE WAY:

“Yes” and “Yes.”

In support of this position we can appeal to the general utilitarian principle:

“One should always aim to bring about the best consequences.”

The bystander should turn the trolley, and the slim man should push the big man onto the track. This involves actively killing them, but it is acceptable in these cases because five dead people is a worse outcome than one dead person. In short: The ends justify (minimizing harm) the means (killing one).

Despite the obvious differences, the strength of both these positions is that they consistently apply a single moral principle. The bystander and the slim man face the same dilemma, namely whether to sacrifice one person for the sake of others. So if we think it is wrong to kill the big man, the same must be true in *Bystander* (Position 1), and if we think the bystander should sacrifice one to save five, the same must be true in *Footbridge* (Position 2). The question, then, is whether we should accept Position A or B, and this leads us into the long-standing debate between utilitarianism and deontology. This is an important debate, to be sure, but not one that is central to the Trolley Problem. The Trolley Problem arises because most people do *not* feel comfortable with Position A or Position B. Indeed, surveys show that the vast majority of people occupy a third position:

POSITION C. THE POPULAR (BUT PUZZLING) ONE:

“Yes” and “No”: It is permissible to turn the trolley, but not permissible to push the big man onto the track.

Can we support these intuitions?

The first is in line with utilitarianism: Turning the trolley will have the best outcome.

But the second is in line with deontology: It is wrong to kill an innocent person.

Our intuitions appear to be inconsistent. We either have to reject one of them (but which one?!). Or, if we’re confident that our intuitions are correct, we should find a general moral principle to support both, thereby showing that they are not inconsistent after all.

The question at the heart of the Trolley Problem is this:

Why is it acceptable to turn the trolley in *Bystander*, but wrong to push the big man onto the track in *Footbridge*? What is the difference between the two cases?

2. SOME SOLUTIONS TO THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

Philosophers have proposed (and rejected) many different solutions, for example:

The Doctrine of Double Effect: The difference between the two cases is that the slim man *intentionally* kills the big man, whereas the bystander does not. The bystander’s intention is to save the five, and the death of the one is an *unintended but foreseen effect* of saving the five.

A Kantian view: The slim man uses the big man merely as a means to an end, thereby violating the Categorical Imperative, whereas the bystander does not.

A rights-based view: By pushing him onto the track the slim man violates the big man’s right to life (or his right to bodily integrity). By contrast, in *Bystander*, the one doesn’t have a stronger claim against the harm he suffers than do the five.

A utilitarian solution: Everything considered, killing the big man will not have the best consequences overall.

3. VIRTUE ETHICS

The debate between (and among) deontologists and utilitarianism is still ongoing, and a satisfactory solution still evades us. When the Trolley Debate got started (in the 1970s) virtue ethics was still in its infancy, and very much lacking in confidence. But it has now firmly established itself as the third major ethical theory, and so the question arises: Can virtue ethics help us solve the Trolley Problem? Somewhat surprisingly, virtue ethicists have not joined the debate (until now, that is!).

Why the silence?

Here is a possible reason:

The Trolley Debate involves disagreements about the

correct formulation and relative stringency of *moral principles*. Virtue ethics doesn't participate in the search for principles because we *reject* the view that morality requires us to follow a set of general moral principles. Indeed, the decades-long struggle to find a solution to the Trolley Problem demonstrates that principles are not very useful when making difficult decisions.

You might accept this response, and give up looking for principles, but still wonder whether we can *apply* virtue ethics to the two cases.

When we have to make difficult decisions, Aristotelian virtue ethicists like Rosalind Hursthouse think it is useful to ask:

What will a virtuous person – someone we admire for their kindness, courage, wisdom, fairness, and so on – do in the circumstances?

Applying virtue ethics requires some discussion of the nature of virtuous people. We cannot do this in detail in this paper, but here are a few important points to keep in mind:

- Virtuous people *act* virtuously – they help people in need, tell the truth, pay their taxes, etc. – and they do so in a reliable manner.
- They also have the appropriate kinds of *attitudes and feelings* about things: they care about others and enjoy helping them, they value the truth, see the importance of justice, feel compassion for those who are suffering, etc.
- Virtuous people are *wise*. They have a good understanding of what is important, of what really matters.

More specifically, virtuous people deal well with complex moral conundrums:

- Virtuous people try to avoid such situations from arising in the first place. Because they are wise and care about others, they will insist, for instance, that everyone on the boat wears a life jacket, thereby avoiding a situation where they have to decide who to save first.
- Virtuous people are good at considering complicated situations and figuring out what their options are. They are not too quick to assume that they are facing a *dilemma* – that is, that they must choose between two evils. They will look for – and often find – a third way out.
- They deal well with the uncertainties that are typical features of everyday life. Virtuous people are wise, and part of this wisdom consists in the ability to carefully consider the limited information available to them, gather more information if there is time, and make a decision based on their best estimation of the likely consequences of available options.
- When they do face a choice between two evils they will experience it as a *tragic* dilemma – that is, they will find it painful to choose, because they are forced

to do something that goes against their very nature as a good (honest, kind, compassionate) human being.

- Moral conundrums often elicit fear or distress, which can cloud one's judgement. But virtuous people are courageous: They are able to overcome their fears and keep a cool head, and this allows them to act rationally and purposefully.

Before reading further, try to consider whether these important observations allow us to answer the questions, "Would a virtuous person turn the trolley in *Bystander*?" and "Would he push the big man onto the track?"

Before dismissing the virtue ethicist's insights as irrelevant and therefore useless, we should note that the reason they are irrelevant is that the *Bystander* and *Footbridge* cases are very *unrealistic*. The problem is not simply that we are highly unlikely to find ourselves in these situations. Rather, the problem is that it is *impossible* to find oneself in a *thought experiment*, that is, a situation in which:

- There is no opportunity to avoid the situation
- the available options are presented to us at the outset, and
- it is unwise or inappropriate to question whether these are the only available options;
- the consequences of the available actions are known ahead of time, and
- it is unwise or inappropriate to consider whether the actions will actually have these (and only these) consequences; and
- we have to make a life-and-death decision without having to deal with emotions such as fear, distress, or sympathy.

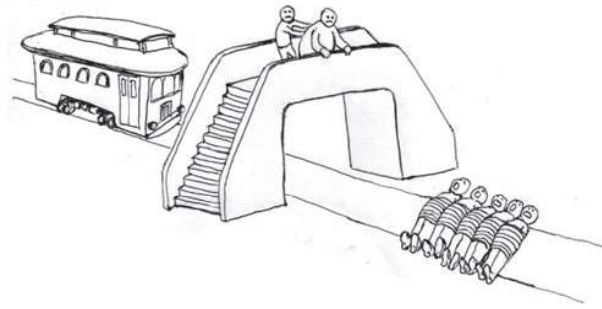
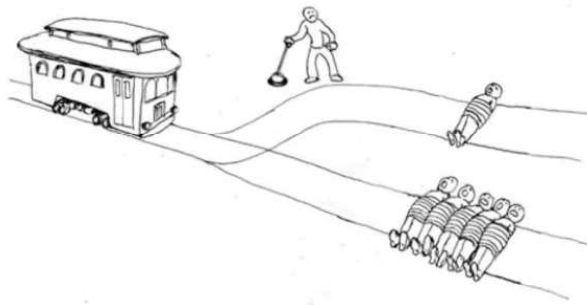
What will a virtuous person – someone we admire for their kindness, courage, wisdom, fairness, and so on – do in the circumstances?

When we consider these points it becomes easier to see why virtue ethicists have not joined the Trolley Debate: Our interest is in learning how to live well as human beings in this world, and thought experiments are generally not very helpful in this regard.

However, since we have been lured into the Debate, we might as well push ahead and consider what a virtuous person would do in a more realistic *Bystander* situation.

4. THE VIRTUOUS BYSTANDER

To this end, let us assume that the virtuous bystander finds himself in this situation through no fault of his own, that he has already figured out that there are only two options, and that he has the expertise required to make an accurate judgement about the likely consequences of turning and not turning the trolley. As a compassionate person he will



naturally feel distressed, because people’s lives are at stake. Whenever he has to make important decisions the virtuous bystander will be in the habit of carefully considering his options, gathering relevant information, and thinking through the reasons in favour and against acting in certain ways. But of course, in this situation there’s no time for deliberation. The virtuous bystander is forced to act impulsively, by instinct. When he sees the trolley racing towards the five, his first instinct as a benevolent and compassionate person will be to protect them by diverting the trolley. However, when he realises there is someone on the sidetrack, he will feel a deep aversion to harming that person. In short, then, he will have competing (virtuous) inclinations. So we can only conclude that a virtuous person will do one of two things: he will either turn the trolley to save the five, or refrain from doing so in order not to harm the one.

If you find this answer uninformative it is useful to consider some of the ways a *vicious* person might act in the circumstances. He might turn the trolley out of malice (because he hates people of a certain race or gender), for example, or because he is power-hungry, or just curious to see what would happen. He might refrain from turning the trolley because he just doesn’t care, or worse, because he is excited about seeing five people die. A person lacking

are many different ways the bystander could behave. Instead of judging the action as either “right” or “wrong” (as deontologists and utilitarians do), the virtue ethicist can evaluate it as courageous, compassionate, benevolent, malicious, careless, foolish and so on.

But still, is there a right decision in *Bystander*? Thinking about how a virtuous person would behave in the circumstances didn’t help us figure out what the right decision is. The bystander’s virtuous inclinations could prompt him to either turn the trolley or refrain from doing so. But it is helpful to consider how the bystander will feel later on, when he has the benefit of hindsight and time to reflect on his actions. Needless to say, he will feel terrible, regardless of what he did. Instead of confidently citing a moral principle in support of his actions (“It is always wrong to kill!” or “One should maximise happiness and minimize pain!”) he will doubt whether he made the right decision, and will wonder whether there was anything he could have done to avoid the terrible outcome. He will try to think of ways to prevent a similar situation from arising again. And, as a benevolent and compassionate person, I think he will also conclude that turning the trolley was (or would have been) the best thing to do in the circumstances, given that it minimized (or would have minimized) harm.

The important thing to note here is that although there are only two options (turning or not turning the trolley), there are many different ways the bystander could behave. Instead of judging the action as either “right” or “wrong” (as deontologists and utilitarians do), the virtue ethicist can evaluate it as courageous, compassionate, benevolent, malicious, careless, foolish and so on.

in courage (but not vicious) might find himself unable to do anything, frozen with fear, or he might just be in the habit of letting other people deal with difficult situations. A foolish or rash person might turn the trolley, despite not having the knowledge or experience required to make an informed judgement about the likely consequences of doing so. (For all he knows, turning the trolley will cause greater harm further down the track.)

The important thing to note here is that although there are only two options (turning or not turning the trolley), there

5. THE VIRTUOUS SLIM MAN

Let us now turn to *Footbridge*, and ask whether we have to say something similar in this case, namely that the virtuous slim man will either push or not push the big man onto the track, and then conclude, later on, that pushing him was the right thing to do. Again, it is useful to consider a realistic version of *Footbridge*, where the available options are not stipulated in advance:

Two strangers are standing on a footbridge, leaning over the rail. One of them is slim, the other is very large. They are enjoying the scenery, etc. when the slim man notices a trolley hurtling down the track. Being an expert on trolleys, he can see that it is out of control. He knows that there are five workmen on the track, and he judges – correctly – that they will all be killed unless he can find a way to stop the trolley. He also knows that the only way to stop a trolley is to drop a heavy weight in its path. The big man has his back to the trolley, oblivious to what is going on. What should the slim man do?

What will the virtuous slim man do? Will he push the big man onto the track?

I think the clear answer to this question is “No,” for the simple reason that it will not occur to him to use the big man’s body as a trolleystop. A virtuous person, or indeed, any minimally decent person, is not in the habit of seeing and using people as objects. Instead, they interact with others as human beings, that is, beings with needs, thoughts, feelings, and plans of their own. For the slim man to see pushing the big man onto the track as an option, the slim man first has to undergo a radical shift in attitude, from viewing the big man as a fellow human being, to seeing him as a mere object. That is, we are to imagine that the virtuous slim man will look around for a heavy object, notice the big man leaning against the rail, and think to himself: “There’s a heavy object! It’s heavy enough to stop the trolley! Should I do it?” This is implausible, because such a shift in attitude goes against the nature of a virtuous person.

Thus, my prediction is that the virtuous slim man will alert the big man of the impending disaster: “Quick, we need to find something heavy to stop the trolley!” Then, when he realises that the trolley cannot be stopped, he will yell out, wave his arms, or run towards the workmen to alert them of the danger. His inclination as a benevolent person will be to try to help them, even if he knows that he is unlikely to succeed.

CONCLUSION

The main reason why virtue ethicists have avoided the Trolley Debate is that it is, in a sense, “none of our business.” The thought experiments are set up to test our intuitions about moral principles (e.g. is the principle, “Do not kill an innocent person” always more stringent than “Rescue people in danger”?) Virtue ethics rejects moral principles and instead focuses the attention on cultivating and exercising the virtues, and asking, “What would a virtuous person do in the circumstances?” To apply this approach to the *Bystander* and *Footbridge* cases we have to begin by considering more realistic versions of the two cases, where the available options are not stipulated at the outset. This allows us to see that there is an important difference between the two cases. In *Bystander*, it requires some quick thinking to realise that he has the option of turning the trolley. Given that he has very little time to make the decision a virtuous person’s instincts could prompt him to turn the trolley in an attempt to save the five, or to refrain from doing so in order not to harm the one. In time, and as a benevolent person, he will probably come to believe that turning the trolley was the best thing to do. By contrast, in *Footbridge*, it will simply not occur to a virtuous person to use someone as a trolleystop. If someone asked him later on, “Why didn’t you just push the big man onto the track?” he will reject this suggestion as an impossibility: “No ways!”, for it is against the nature of a virtuous person to view and use others as objects.



CASE FOR DISCUSSION:

In March 2021 German regulators identified seven cases of a rare cerebral blood clot, three of them fatal, out of 1.6 million people who had received the AstraZeneca vaccine. Regulators had no proof that they were linked to the vaccine. The country experienced around 300 Covid-related deaths each day. Regulators faced a real-life trolley dilemma: Continuing vaccinations might make them responsible for putting some people in harm’s way (like pulling the lever in *Bystander*), but withdrawing approval for the vaccine will almost certainly result in many more people dying from Covid (like letting the trolley continue in its path).

See: Max Fisher, “Europe’s vaccine ethics call: Do no harm and let more people die? *The New York Times*, March 19, 2021.

How would a virtuous person deal with this dilemma?

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