

PHI 202 | Study questions 4

Michal Masny | 09 October 2019

Readings:

Quinn, W. (1989). Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of the Double Effect.

Thomson, J. J. (1986). Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem.

The Trolley Problem

(a) Which actions are intuitively required, permissible, impermissible in the following cases?

Switch: A runaway trolley is heading towards five people who are tied to the main track. A bystander can do nothing, in which case the five will die. Alternatively, the bystander can pull a switch which will divert the trolley to a side track where one person is tied to the track, in which case the one will die.

Footbridge: A runaway trolley is heading towards five people who are tied to the main track. A bystander can do nothing, in which case the five will die. Alternatively, the bystander can push a large man off the bridge onto the tracks in which case the large man will die.

(b) What is the Trolley Problem, exactly? What would a solution to this problem look like?

(c) What is the significance of the Trolley Problem?

(d) Which cases other than *Switch* and *Footbridge* could we use to illustrate the Trolley Problem?

Two kinds of non-consequentialism

(a) Consequentialists think that the rightness of an action depends only on the goodness of its consequences. Non-consequentialists deny this, in one of two ways. According to the *strong view*, the goodness of the consequences does not matter *at all*. According to the *weak view*, the goodness of the consequences is *not the only* thing that matters. Which of these is more plausible?

Killing and letting die

Some non-consequentialists claim that the duty *not to kill* is much stronger than the *duty to save lives*. More generally, this view holds that it is more difficult to justify *doing harm* than to justify *allowing harm*. This is because *negative duties* (duties not to) are stronger than *positive duties* (duties to).

(a) Can we appeal to the distinction between killing and letting die to solve the Trolley Problem? (Note that in *Switch*, the protagonist is a bystander rather than, e.g., the driver of the trolley.)

(b) How are the terms "killing" and "letting die" to be defined? Are you killing or letting die in:

Barrier: A runaway trolley is heading towards five people who are tied to the main track. Luckily, there is a boulder on the track which will stop the trolley if you do nothing. However, you choose to push the boulder away and the five people die.

(c) Even if the distinction between killing and letting die cannot on its own solve the Trolley Problem, does it mean that there is no morally relevant distinction here?

(d) Thomson often uses the phrase "killing is worse than letting die". But this is just loose speech: she is *not* concerned with the value of the consequences. We might be. It is worth asking: can being killed be *worse for* a person than dying from 'natural' causes? Which theories of well-being make room for this claim and which do not?

Intended and merely foreseen harm (DDE)

(a) Some non-consequentialists claim that the intentions of the agent matter. Two actions may bring about the same harm on someone, and yet one may be permissible because the harm is *merely foreseen* whereas the other one is impermissible because the harm was *intended*. What is DDE supposed to say about *Switch* and *Footbridge*?

(b) How are the terms "intended" and "merely foreseen" to be defined, exactly?

(c) Why is the following case an objection to DDE (as a solution to the Trolley Problem)?

Enemy Switch: Everything is like in *Switch*, but this time the one person on the side-track is the bystander's enemy and the bystander wishes to kill him.

(d) Why is the following case an objection to DDE (as a solution to the Trolley Problem)?

Loop: Everything is like in *Switch*, but this time the one person on the side-track is a large man and the side-track loops around and connects to the main track. If the large man was not there, the trolley would go on to the main track and the five would die.

Creating and redirecting threats

(a) Some non-consequentialists claim that it matters whether an action involves *creating a new threat* or merely *redirecting a pre-existing threat*. How does this distinction apply to *Switch* and *Footbridge*?

(b) How are the terms "creating a new threat" and "redirecting a pre-existing threat" to be defined?

(c) Why is the following case an objection to this view (as a solution to the Trolley Problem)?

Fallen Large Man: A runaway trolley is heading towards five people who are tied to the main track. This time, a large man has accidentally fallen onto the track and cannot get up on their own. A bystander can do nothing in which case the large man will die. Alternatively, the bystander can help the large man get up, in which case the five people will die.

Necessary and unnecessary means

(a) Some non-consequentialists claim that it matters whether the harm is a *necessary means* to some end or *unnecessary means* to that end. How does this distinction apply to *Switch* and *Footbridge*?

(b) What does this view say about *Loop*?

Further complications

(a) It seems that none of these distinctions can *on its own* solve the Trolley Problem. But perhaps they all have some truth to them. Perhaps it matters both whether an action is intended and whether it involves creating a new threat. Could we combine these features in a satisfactory way?

(b) What if the stakes were lower on one or more sides? Suppose that the large man would 'only' lose his legs. Would it be permissible to push him off the footbridge?

(c) What if the numbers were lower or higher? Suppose that fifty people are on the main track. Would it be permissible to push the large man off the footbridge? Or suppose that just two people are on the main track. Would it be permissible to flip the switch?

(d) What if *you* are the large man on the footbridge to stop the trolley? It seems permissible for you to jump down. But could it be ever *required*? What if there were fifty people on the track?

(e) How much can you do in self-defence? What if you are alone and the trolley is headed towards you but you can redirect it towards the 5 on the other track? What if there were only 1 or 2 there?