

David Edmonds

Would You Kill the Fat Man?: The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us About Right and Wrong.

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Suppose you come upon the following situation: There's an abandoned trolley out of control and you notice that if nothing is done it will continue on its track to kill five persons tied to it. You also notice that you are the only person that is involved in this situation. But you also notice that there is a lever that if you were to pull it, the trolley would be diverted to a side-track (a spur) where there is one (other) person tied to it. You know that if you do nothing, five will be killed by the trolley; you also know that if you pull the lever, you will save the five from being killed by diverting the trolley to the side-track, but also be doing something that will kill another person (who wouldn't have been killed otherwise) in doing so. What would you do?

A large majority of people, across cultural groups, answer that they would pull the lever. This itself may be problematic, but what makes things genuinely problematic is when this case (let's call it Spur) is contrasted with another case: Everything is the same as in Spur except that instead of there being a side-track (spur), there is a bridge on top of the track (where the trolley is loose) and you are present on it with a man with sufficiently large girth who, if you were to push him off the bridge, would derail the trolley and thereby save the five people on the track from being killed. (If I haven't described things in a politically correct way, then imagine that the man has a massively large enough purse that can't be detached from him, but would work to derail the trolley.) And so the question is: Would you push the (fat) man off the bridge? A majority of people answer this question with a "no." At this point, we have a real philosophical problem. If in the original case, Spur, most say "yes, pull the lever" and if in this case, Fat Man, most say "No, do not push the man over," and if it looks like in both there is a killing of one to save five, then we get the question of "What's the morally significant difference between the two cases such that it is permissible to kill in one but not in the other?"

In David Edmonds' *Would You Kill the Fat Man?* one gets more than just an answer to this question. One gets an historical, if not rich, narrative perspective. If one doesn't accept Edmonds' solution to this problem (discussed later in the review), one can at least gain a great understanding of the 20th Century's progression in philosophy via this problem. Edmonds should be congratulated on his grand undertaking, and what I take to be his successful illumination of an important problem.

As he explains, the Trolley Problem originates with Phillipa Foot, but then along the way gets a more sophisticated touch from other philosophers, such as Judith Jarvis Thomson. These are philosophers concerned with reviving the importance of ethics in philosophy – and not just the meaning of ethical terms and judgments. Now, this is an important thing to consider. Many early and middle 20th Century philosophers would have considered moral judgments concerning the above Trolley scenarios as meaningless – yes, I mean to say "meaningless." It's not just that such judgments are misled, or false. Instead, they are not capable of being true or false, and as such meaningful in the first place. (To give you an idea of a meaningless statement, consider "Booyah!") But as 20th Century philosophy unfolded, so did the notion of meaningless moral judgments unfold on itself, and with its own drama. (To be fair, there are serious contemporary ethical theorists who propose neo-meaningless views, but a significantly large number do not these days – something that couldn't be

said 60 years ago). Edmonds, I should say, does a rather good job in showing to the reader this rich drama of the meaning debate concerning moral judgments from our last century.

So how about current times? How about times in which many thoughtful people take these scenarios to be meaningful? Three things should be said at this point. First, Edmonds ends his book by considering those who might not take such scenarios seriously. According to this view, the very large literature on trolley problems should not be considered seriously; but the reasons are not due to the old 20th Century arguments against hypotheticals like trolley problems, and instead due to findings from neuroscience. Unfortunately, Edmonds is not very forthcoming, or at least not straightforward, with his view on this new kind of skepticism (or, antagonism) concerning trolley problems.

A second thing about Edmonds' book and the issue of meaningful trolley judgment has to do with his discussion of recent findings in the relationship between emotion and rationality. Overall, he does a great job in incorporating knowledge concerning the decisions of those presented with information which is emotionally-loaded versus those who are not. Furthermore, he adequately shows to the reader that the debate concerning emotion and rationality contextualized to trolley problems brings out another important feature – namely, that theorists are overall way less concerned with whether these kinds of moral judgments are meaningful (once again, capable of being either true or false) and more concerned with whether the specific moral judgments are true as opposed to false. As Edmonds suggests, those who have utilitarian inclinations (that is, those who endorse the idea that morally right acts and practices are those that maximize overall goodness, in this case the saving of lives as opposed to deaths, which is bad) will want to account for why many of us think it's wrong to push, and kill, the fat man off the bridge to save five lives. And the further suggestion from Edmonds is that such utilitarians will say that we are misguided by our emotions in thinking that something is wrong, when in fact nothing is wrong. Thus, our judgment “Pushing the fat man is wrong” is false, not true, but not meaningless either. What's important, though, according to such utilitarians is that the judgment is false, and so by a little logic, we should conclude that, in fact, the morally right thing to do is push the fat man off the bridge. Let me note that Edmonds does do a good job in considering the possibility that perhaps our emotions get it right, though – that although we are emotionally driven to save the fat man, we are nevertheless in the right in doing so. Our emotions are capable of tracking the (moral) truth.

A third thing to be said about the Edmonds and his treatment of the meaningfulness of moral judgments concerning Trolley is this: He is clear to the reader that he himself not only believes them to be meaningful (once again, capable of being true or false), but that most of us are making true, not false, judgments concerning them. Yep, most of us are right according to Edmonds. But as a philosopher, Edmonds owes us reasons for us to believe that he is right in thinking that we are right in what we believe.

And so what is Edmonds' reason in thinking we're right in saying “yes” to Spur and “no” to Fat Man? He basically appeals to the Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE). Basically, DDE can be formulated as an existential claim: There are cases in which one can permissibly act in such a way that there are two effects: (i) an intended morally good effect and (ii) a foreseen morally bad effect. Take the example of an abortion in which this is necessary to protect the life a pregnant woman. What is intended is the protection of the pregnant woman's life (morally good), but what is foreseen is the death/killing of the fetus (morally bad, let's just suppose). According to DDE, such cases can be morally permissible. So, let us now apply this to Trolley. In the case of Spur, we do not intend the death of the one person on Trolley, but merely foresee her death (morally bad). We are intending

to save of the five on the original track in Trolley Spur (morally good). Therefore, given that the content of the intention is saving five persons, it's permissible for you to pull the lever to save the five (but thereby kill the one on Spur). But in the fat man case, things are different. The only way to save the five is by the fat man falling to his death and derailing the trolley. It looks as if what is needed is his death. According to DDE, the man/woman is intended to die (not just foreseen to do so) so that the other five are saved; and so, DDE does not apply to show that pushing the fat man is morally permissible. One has to intend something morally bad (the death of the fat man). And so, it's morally wrong to do so.

As a way of criticism, I want to add that Edmonds does not go into much detail concerning the very many undergraduate classroom solutions and concerns to the Trolley problem – that is, what's the moral difference between Spur and Fat Man, and what is the importance of the problem in our daily lives? Perhaps this is not his fault. But as a philosophical ethics professor, one would want a bearing on how such proposed solutions are to be managed. For example, some students don't even have the intuition that it's okay to pull the lever in Spur. What are we to make of this? Perhaps such students are wrong, and what is owed is an explanation to how they are wrong. If they're not, then the problem doesn't get off the ground in the first place – it's just never morally okay to harm another person even if this helps a larger number of persons (setting aside cases where this would be the only way to help 1000s of others), independent of whether this is intended or whether it is foreseen. As such, Fat Man also looks “easy,” in that of course it would be wrong to push him. But also, students want to know why this problem is so important. Edmonds does better than anyone I know in print or in person in giving actual cases that resemble the hypothetical trolley problems. Edmonds should be congratulated for this. But he falls short for those who want to know how this relates to mass-scale social policies, where this affects millions of people in practice and not just in the universe of hypothetical cases.

I should conclude, though, with saying that: David Edmonds' book is very good. His book is, in fact, important. But Edmonds' book will not continue to be read in the future because of his solution. Instead, it will continue to be read because of the history provided considering this 20th Century question, and his illumination of how current work in the social sciences bear on it. Nevertheless, it is a question that we, in the 21st Century, are continuing to consider. Finally, I would like to say that this book could work in a variety of ways: (i) as a book for any casual reader, (ii) as a book for those wanting to get a better sense of normative philosophy today framed relative to problems in the last 100 years, (iii) as a book for introductory students in ethics, (iv) as a book for a more advanced and focused philosophy course – where the topic could range quite a bit, and (v) for any serious philosopher working in applied or theoretical ethics, and including moral psychology. Overall, job well done Edmonds!

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