

In Defense of “Engineer Solutions” of the “Trolley Problem”

In my contribution, I discuss the trolley problem as a tool for illuminating and deciding between the evaluated moral norms. I try to show that examples and similes make the discourse of norms rather more than less complicated. The existence and the status of norms are not thereby doubted, but I will argue for the relative precedence of meaningful situations and examples to (particular) norms (rules), rather than the other way round (precedence of universal rules to understanding of the situations).

The “trolley problem” is a well-known ethical exercise. It serves as an illustration exposing possible *clashes* between ethical *norms* presenting themselves:

1. Five lives are more than one. It is right to choose the option that saves (or is beneficial for) more people, at the necessary expense of a smaller number of people.

2. Every live is sacred in itself, regardless of number. To do intentionally anything that results in killing a person cannot be justified, despite the number of the putatively saved lives.

The norms embodied in the two answers seem to be hardly compatible in this particular example. That is one of the reasons why this story is used as an instructive example in various introductions in ethics, illuminating the complicated nature of ethical issues. Students of engineering science (for instance), when presented with the trolley problem within an “Introduction to Philosophy”, may be prone to solutions like “why, if I break the lever, the rail switch will be blocked, which stops the trolley and saves everybody”. It is difficult to explain to them that the particular “face value” of the example is irrelevant, as it should have served only as an illustration of a more general “philosophical” problem. In short, the young future engineers were not asked to find out the way of stopping the trolley, but to find out what ethical *norm* is relevant in situations of such ethical dilemmas. Unfortunately, they refuse to understand that.

In the “fat man” variant of the problem, throwing the fat man down can be interpreted as conforming to the same norm as switching the lever and thereby diverting the trolley to the side-track. In both cases I prefer the lives of the five to the life of the one. Yet many people who would switch the lever are unwilling to throw the fat man down – to kill someone actively “is not the same” as to prevent killing of the five by an action that “may” result in killing someone “later”. Unlike the fat man doomed to die, the person on the side-track might jump aside, or could survive the clash with the trolley because she/he stands in a greater distance than the five and the vehicle could perhaps slow down by that time, etc.

Entering such further details into my reading of the situation allows one to find a viewpoint from which there is a way I could act without killing anyone. The engineer solutions of the trolley problem – blocking the rail switch etc. – are of similar kind. These suggestions should not be understood as attempts at “cheating out” of the problem. They are attempts to make the example meaningful to the judging person who has a particular history and unique personal, familiar, cultural, historical, professional, etc. experiences.

The philosopher’s objection is: “This *is* cheating. The point of the trolley problem is to construe a situation of a dilemma and on this background to illuminate the problem of ethical norms that can be incompatible. The engineers just bypass the dilemma. But dilemmatic

ethical situations really occur in our lives.” But posing the trolley problem as a paradigm for ethical dilemmas misses the point. Dilemmatic situations are such where the agent *has already investigated all the possibilities* she/he has been able to see and *has not found any one acceptable*. The abstract, non-specific outline of the trolley problem is far from having all the possibilities covered. When we are, having investigated all the options and additional details of a situation, not capable of seeing any desirable, we make a “difficult decision”. The difficult decisions we make in reality are difficult because we feel – despite all the moral reasoning we perform – that there remains at least one rule that we have *not* ruled out as irrelevant or secondary, and yet we violate it.

Only a sufficiently detailed account of the situation allows a decision, which is can be reasonably explained and perhaps justified, even though it violates an acknowledged rule. The explanation does not introduce another, stronger rule, but lists the particulars of the situation. In explanations like “I could not refuse Jack’s request to help him rob the bank /I ought to have helped him/, because I have known him for more than 20 years, since our childhood, and we have experienced a lot together” I appeal to no norm, yet my actions are thereby explained and some may even say justified.

Situations falling under a general rule in an unequivocally assessed way are rather rare and mostly are abstractions. The explanation “because I have known Jack...” establishes a certain rule, but this does not mean that there are any other examples apart from the above one where “because I have known Jack...” is a meaningful *justification*. The rule is not “it is right to do anything Jack asks, because of the shared childhood”, but not even “it is right *for me* to do anything Jack asks, because of the shared childhood” (not to mention “it is right to do anything a friend from childhood asks, because of the shared childhood”). It may be right for me to rob the bank on the basis of this reason, but perhaps not to lend him money. The question how *anyone else but me* could follow such a rule is off hand here.

I do not want to deny the existence of any universal norms (i.e. to argue that only “individual”, specified rules can exist and exercise a power). Rather I think that the trolley problem and other such similes allow us to focus on the way rules pervade the life and the decisions of an individual. A rule can govern an individual’s action only insofar as it appears *meaningful* to her/him, in terms of her/his present situation as she/he understands and experiences it. For another person who is an observer, there may be a different rule making sense of the situation in a different way, resulting in a different moral evaluation.

We think of rules in very different meanings: as i) building blocks for a universalistic ethical system, and as ii) tools for forming and making sense of one’s (moral) life within which they play a role. In this sense, the engineers refusing to address the trolley problem in the prescribed universal form – to opt for either answer – try to find a unique personalized way to orient within the example may be those who understand the problem more properly. They are justified in refusing to answer the problem as a dilemma before try all its “technical solutions” (until that, the problem does not make any sense to them as a dilemma).

We can legitimately say that the default, non-specific form of “trolley problem” does not include *the* reason deciding clearly for one option. Various reasons are inherent to its various personalized readings.