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Response Paper #2

Thought experiments and moral dilemmas are typically very thought provoking and interesting. There doesn’t always seem to be right answer, but only a difficult, multifaceted question or idea. This is evidenced through the well known thought experiment named the Trolley Problem. It deals with moral distinctions between two avenues of action. Similar distinctions existing in this thought experiment are also found in other thought experiments.

A variation of the Trolley Problem deals with a runaway trolley about to run over five people. As a bystander in the moment, you have the option of pushing or dropping a very large man onto the tracks, knowing his body will be enough to derail the trolley and save the five people (Lin). Logically it makes sense to save the five people, if each life is equal. However, it also makes sense to feel a “moral distinction between *intending* someone’s death,” by purposely killing the innocent man next to you, and “merely *foreseeing* it,” by allowing the five innocent people to die (Lin). Intending someone’s death makes a person directly responsible for another life being lost, while foreseeing someone’s death — or five people’s deaths — is indirect and a person may not feel responsible. If a person doesn’t feel the responsibility to interfere with the trolley they may be more at ease simply *letting* a group of people die. Physically pushing a person makes the bystander directly responsible for the death of one person. People can not decide which option is more moral.

In a similar vein, if the President orders a nuclear attack killing thousands of people, the deaths caused by the nuclear weapons may not be apparent. This is where Roger Fisher, a Harvard law professor, offers a proposal. It is known that in order to fire nuclear weapons the President needs the nuclear launch codes. Fisher suggests that these nuclear launch codes be “in a little capsule” that is implanted in the living body of a volunteer (Doctorow). This would mean the codes could only be revealed if the President would, “with his own hands,” take the single life of the volunteer who has the codes (Doctorow). This idea is similar to the Trolley Problem because it has similar conflicting moral distinctions.

The Trolley Problem deals with foreseeing and intending (Lin). Foreseeing an event is indirect. Killing thousands of people by stating a code and watching a computer screen feels equally as indirect as watching a trolley kill five strangers. Killing the innocent volunteer with the nuclear launch codes feels as direct as pushing a man in front of a trolley. This adds a new emotional level to launching nuclear weapons. As seen with the Trolley Problem, the President’s dilemma rests on the feelings of responsibility associated with two different choices. Another similarity between these two scenarios is the missing answer. Should the President need to fully understand the death he is causing by killing someone in front of him? Or should the President be able to keep his distance from the situation in order to continue thinking clearly? The answer is unclear and multifaceted.

Deciding what is least wrong in each situation can be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Of course more layers of difficulty could be added when considering the large man pushed onto the tracks is your favorite uncle and the man with the nuclear launch codes is your best friend. Now are the lives of the people equally important to you? Should they be?

Works Cited

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