CrossMark

THE TROLLEY META-PROBLEM

Daniel John Sportiello

For many years, philosophers have argued about the Trolley Problem – but they've also argued about whether the problem ought to interest us. According to some, the artificiality of the situations means that they involve no complicating factors – and so we ought to take our intuitions about them especially seriously. According to others, though, the artificiality of the situations means that our intuitions about them are meaningless. I hereby name the puzzle of why our intuitions about this differ the 'Trolley Meta-Problem'. The story that follows illustrates this problem – and the Trolley Problem itself – in a humorous way.

You're standing in a hallway of your philosophy department, talking to five of your colleagues, when you see Professor Smith walking in your direction. 'Oh, no,' one of your colleagues says. 'He's going to want to talk about the Trolley Problem again!'

'What's the Trolley Problem?' you ask.

Your colleague sighs. 'Imagine that a trolley is about to hit five people standing on a track. Would it be right to pull a lever diverting it onto another track – despite the presence on that track of one person who would be hit? To this question, most answer "yes". But would it be right to push a heavy person into the path of the trolley – thereby stopping it before it hit the five people? To this question, most answer "no". The puzzle of why our intuitions in these two situations differ is called the "Trolley Problem". Anyway, Professor Smith is *obsessed* with the Trolley Problem – so

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much so that he routinely wanders the hallways of the department, trying to corner us so that he can talk about it. Should he reach us, we'll be listening to him talk about it for hours!'

The alarm of your colleague now makes sense to you. Suddenly, though, you remember that, halfway between you and Professor Smith, another hallway intersects with yours. 'If he turns when he reaches the intersection,' you say to your five colleagues, 'then we're saved! Should we somehow get him to walk in that direction? Maybe by telling him that there are doughnuts in the lounge?'

'No, that would be wrong,' one of your colleagues says. 'Only a few minutes ago, I saw Professor Jones in that hallway.' You remember that Professor Jones is the newest member of the department. It seems that she has not yet learned that she should close the door of her office. 'If Professor Smith doesn't corner the five of us, then he'll corner her!'

'It's tragic,' a second colleague says, 'but isn't that better? Remember that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few!'

'But Professor Jones is as human as we are,' a third colleague says, 'and so she has dignity. We should treat her as an end in herself, not a means to our ends!'

'Your analysis of the situation is wrong,' a fourth colleague says. 'We *foresee* that Professor Smith would corner Professor Jones, but we don't *intend* for him to corner her. So, even were we to get him to turn at the intersection, we wouldn't be instrumentalizing her.'

'Your memory of the architecture is wrong,' a fifth colleague says. 'Remember that, eventually, this hallway becomes that one. So, if Professor Smith *were* to turn at the intersection, and if Professor Jones *weren't* there, then he'd soon reach us from the other direction!'

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‘Nonetheless,’ you say, ‘we may instrumentalize Professor Jones. Isn’t she a consequentialist?’ Your memory is not wrong. Professor Jones was hired, despite her inexperience, because of her expertise in ethics. ‘It’s tragic that there’s no time to ask her, but it seems to me that she’d consent to this.’

Your five colleagues stare at you. ‘If you’re willing to sacrifice her,’ one of them asks, ‘then shouldn’t you be willing to sacrifice yourself to save the five of us? Conversely, if you’re unwilling to sacrifice yourself, then shouldn’t you be unwilling to sacrifice her?’

You sigh. ‘Maybe what seems to be a moral dilemma is, in reality, merely a failure of imagination,’ you say. ‘Couldn’t we be honest with Professor Smith? Couldn’t we tell him that we don’t want to talk about the Trolley Problem – that it involves situations *so* artificial that discussion of them is pointless?’

‘You could,’ says someone standing behind you. ‘But you’d be wrong’.

You turn to him. He’s Professor Smith.

There’s an awkward pause. ‘I guess that you heard some of that,’ you finally say.

‘Yeah,’ he replies. ‘It’s not a terribly long hallway.’

There’s another awkward pause. ‘I heard that there are doughnuts in the lounge,’ you finally say.

‘Listen,’ he says, ignoring you. ‘I admit that the Trolley Problem involves situations that seem pretty artificial. I argue, though, that there are *some* situations that really *are* moral dilemmas, not merely failures of imagination. And, anyway, the artificiality of the situations involved in the Trolley Problem means that it’s ideal for teaching students about consequentialism, deontology, the doctrine of double effect, consent, reversibility, and so on.’

‘Wait,’ you say, interrupting him. ‘Is that what you did to us? Did you engineer this situation as a pedagogical exercise?’

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He stares at you as though you are mad. 'No,' he finally says. 'That sort of thing happens only in stories. Anyway, I'd love to stay and talk, but I have to catch a train!'

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