

Phil 108, September 25, 2012
Thomson, “Turning the Trolley”

Thomson’s original objection to Foot:

- In Bystander’s Two Options, we face a choice between letting the five die and killing the one.
- In Bystander’s Two Options, we *are* permitted to turn the trolley, i.e. to kill the one.
- Therefore, it *cannot* be true, in general, that when we face a choice between letting five die and killing one, we are not permitted to kill the one. In other words, the simple appeal to the idea that negative duties are stronger than positive duties is no good.

Thomson’s second thoughts:

- In Bystander’s Two Options, we are *not* permitted to turn the trolley.
- So it *may* be true, in general, that when we face a choice between letting five die and killing one, we are not permitted to kill the one.

Argument that we are not permitted to turn the trolley:

Bystander’s Three Options

- (i) Let the five die.
 - (ii) Kill someone else.
 - (iii) Kill himself.
- In this case, (ii) is *impermissible*. Bystander may not impose a sacrifice on someone else to do a good deed, when he could make that sacrifice himself.
 - But (iii) is *not required*.
 - So (i) must be *permissible*.
 - Therefore, if in Bystander’s *Two Options*, Bystander *would not* be willing, if he *were* in *Three Options*, to kill himself (iii), then “there is no way in which he can decently regard himself as entitled” to impose that sacrifice on someone else: i.e, to kill the one (ii) in *Two Options*. This assumes a principle like:
If one would not be willing to sacrifice oneself for a merely optional end if one *could*, then one *must not* impose it on someone else when one *cannot*.
 - But suppose that Bystander in *Two Options* *would be* willing to sacrifice himself (e.g., is Peter Unger) if he were in *Three Options*. Still, he cannot be entitled to assume that the one *actually is* willing to sacrifice himself in *Two Options*. And he would not be *required* to sacrifice himself, if it were in his power. (To see this, consider a different two options case, in which you can either let the five die, or kill oneself.) So, it seems impermissible to kill the one in *Two Options*.

Objection: “The above principle:

If one would not be willing to sacrifice oneself if one *could*, then one *must not* impose that sacrifice on someone else when one *cannot*.

is false. Suppose, for argument, it were true. And suppose that, if the Driver were in *Three Options*:

- (i) Kill the five.
- (ii) Kill someone else.
- (iii) Kill oneself.

he would not kill himself (iii). Then it would follow that, if the Driver is in *Two Options*:

- (i) Kill the five.
- (ii) Kill the one.

then he must not kill the one (ii). But this is absurd, since he is required to kill the one (ii).”

Reply: The objection leaves out an important qualification in the principle: “for a merely optional end.” Whereas it is merely optional to save the five in the Bystander cases, it is not merely optional to avoid killing the five in the Driver cases.

So why did we think that it was permissible to turn the trolley?

Why does it seem permissible to turn the trolley, but not to push the fat man, or to take someone’s organs, when in all of these cases—if the above analysis is right—we are killing one to avoid letting five die?

The difference in the cases merely lies in “how drastic an assault on the one the agent has to make in order to bring about, thereby, that the five live. The more drastic the means, the more strikingly abhorrent the agent’s proceeding. That, I suspect, may be due to the fact that the more drastic the means, the more striking it is that the agent who proceeds infringes a negative duty to the one.”

Thus, we are misled by the fact that in Bystander, the means are *merely turning the trolley*, whereas in Fat Man(!) the means are *moving the one into the path of the trolley* and in Transplant the means are *carving the one up and distributing his organs*. We are misled into overlooking that turning the trolley does infringe a negative duty to the one.

Review Question:

1. Suppose that the driver falls asleep with the trolley on autopilot. The “Brake Failure” alarm wakes him up. He realizes that the situation is as follows. The trolley can’t be stopped. If the trolley continues on autopilot, it runs over the five. Alternatively, the driver can turn onto the spur and over the one. Is this case closest to Driver’s Two Options, to Bystander’s Two Options, or to Repentance (from her earlier paper)? Explain. What would Thomson’s revised view say that the driver is permitted to do?
2. Recall Thomson’s attempt to explain the difference between our reactions to Fat Man and Bystander’s Two Options:
“The more drastic the means, the more strikingly abhorrent the agent’s proceeding.”

Is it problematic for this claim that the collision of the trolley with the fat man will be every bit as gory and horrific as the collision with the one in Bystander?