



A broken computer sparks a conversation on Philosophy and the 'Trolley Problem'

A short introduction to the Philosophy of Philippa Foot

Alice and her class are planning to go on a field trip with their science class tomorrow. Today, however, someone broke the classroom's computer and now the whole class is at risk of being suspended and missing the field trip. It seems like nobody knows who broke the computer, except Alice.

Alice saw who broke the computer when she returned to the classroom during the break to get her jacket. The whole day passed by, and she didn't reveal who was responsible. But the question is: What will she do tomorrow?

Alice faced a big dilemma. When she returned home from school, she discussed this with her family. Her dad told her about the 'Trolley Problem' to help her understand the importance of making moral decisions and solving her current dilemma.

The next morning, Alice went to school an hour earlier to talk with her teacher. She revealed that she knew what happened with the computer. It was Thomas who had broken it accidentally as he was snooping around the teacher's desk to find the answers for their upcoming test. Alice explained to her teacher that it was an accident and that even though Thomas made a wrong decision by trying to find the answers to the test instead of studying to get a good result, his decision was made after pressure from other students.

Alice told her teacher that she didn't want Thomas to be the only one receiving a suspension for that, and neither did she want her whole class to miss their field trip. The teacher appreciated Alice's thinking and how she tried to reach the most ethical solution to her dilemma, so she decided that instead of suspending Thomas or the whole class Alice would give a short presentation to her class about Philippa Foot and the 'Trolley Problem'.

By the time they finished their conversation, the bell rang, and all students arrived to the classroom.

Teacher: Good morning, how are you feeling today?

Harry: I'm a bit sad, I don't want to miss the field trip.

Teacher: About that, I think there is another way of viewing this situation. So, as you all know, someone broke the classroom's computer. As a matter of fact, I know who did it.

Harry: So, the problem is solved! They get suspended and we go on the field trip?



Louiza: I don't think it's that simple. I wouldn't feel comfortable knowing we are all together enjoying our trip while one of our classmates is being suspended.

Teacher: What you have just said Louiza is very closely linked to moral emotions and the reasoning behind making moral decisions.

Harry: Moral decisions? How is this relevant to our current situation?

Teacher: Very good question Harry. In fields like Ethics, Psychology and Philosophy there is a particular study that focuses on moral reasoning. This is a study about how people think and how they decide what is right and what is wrong. Are you familiar with Philippa Foot?

Louiza: I have never heard of her.

Teacher: Philippa Foot was an English Philosopher, born in 1920 and died in 2010. She is considered one of the most important and influential philosophers of her time. She studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics and later became a Lecturer in Philosophy at both British and American universities. She is one of the pioneers of contemporary virtue ethics and introduced the 'Trolley Problem' in one of her papers on ethics and moral judgments.

Harry: What is the 'Trolley Problem'?

Teacher: The 'Trolley Problem' is a thought experiment in moral philosophy. At this point, I will need Alice's help. Alice, would you like to introduce the 'Trolley Problem' to your classmates?

Alice: Yes, I would love to! So, I will now introduce an imaginative scenario and then you could tell me what you think about it.

Let's imagine that you are walking home after school. On your way home, you pass by some train tracks. Every day the same train passes by you as you walk. But today, you see something different. You realise that the train is out of control, and you see five workers standing on the track who have no idea that they're in danger. They can't see or hear the train heading towards them. Even if you shouted at them to get out of the way, they wouldn't be able to hear you.

You start to panic when you suddenly see a small switch that can divert the train onto another track, allowing those five people to live. Your panic begins to be replaced by a feeling of relief as you reach for the switch. But then, you see something else which brings your panic back to the surface. Another worker is standing on that track who will be hit and killed by the trolley if you flick the switch. The lives of these people now lie upon you. You need to make a decision quickly as the train is rapidly approaching.

What will you decide to do?

Alice's classmates look a bit puzzled and they whisper about what they would do in this scenario.



Harry: I would like to save the five people, but I don't know if I should kill one person in order to save the five.

Alice: I agree. That's exactly what I thought when my dad told me this story. The dilemma in this thought experiment is to decide which action is morally correct for you. Let's assume we flick the switch killing one person and saving the five. What do you think about this choice?

Louiza: Well, I think that flicking the switch is not necessarily morally wrong. We are only doing this to save the lives of five people right?

Harry: Exactly! We never intended to kill anyone but since we are positioned in a situation where it's either five people dying or one person dying, I would choose to save the five.

Teacher: What you have described now my dear students, is what is known in philosophy as the 'double effect'.

Philippa Foot used the theory or the doctrine, as is most commonly used among scholars, of the 'double effect' to give answers to such moral questions. According to this doctrine, it is sometimes permissible to cause harm as a side effect of your intention to bring a good result. But it is not permissible to cause such harm, as a means of getting a good result. This is why it's referred to as the 'double effect'.

Harry: I'm confused now. Is it morally right or wrong to flick the switch?

Teacher: Although there is no right or wrong answer, I will explain the 'double effect' a bit more, and then I will ask you again, what would you do in the 'Trolley Problem'.

So, in simpler terms, according to the 'double effect' doctrine, it would be wrong to throw someone into the path of the trolley in order to save the other five as that would involve using intentional harm to that person as a means of saving the five. On the other hand, diverting the direction of the trolley onto the track where one person is, in an attempt to save the five, is permissible. In this case, you only foresee the death of one as a side effect of saving the life of the other five. This implies that your intentions are good in this case and you don't intend to kill the other one" he explained.

And now the question remains the same. Would you divert the route of the train?

Louiza: From what I understood, a moral decision in the Trolley Problem should be based on the intention of our action and not only on the result of our actions.

Harry: Yes, but in both cases; whether throwing a man in the railway or diverting the train would still result in the death of one person and in saving the five, is this correct?

Louiza: But throwing a random person on the railway, would mean you have the intention to kill that person in order to stop the train and eventually save the five.

Alice: On the other hand, diverting the train, is the consequence of your intention to save five people. It happens that one person has been positioned in the other railway



direction. You never thought or intended to kill that person, rather, the death of that person is the result of your intention to save the five.

Teacher: All of you are right in what you are saying. What is important to know is that there is no right or wrong answer. The Trolley Problem is not meant to have a solution, just like most philosophical problems. Its intention is to provoke thought about what is good, which sacrifices are acceptable, and which are not. For example, some people believe that an action can either be considered right or wrong regardless of its consequences, which means that killing a human being can never be justified. These people, therefore, believe that it's wrong to kill the person on the other track to save the other five. In the end, the final answer to the trolley problem solely relies on the person thinking about it. You need to make what you believe is the best choice in a terrible situation.

Harry: That's it! I now realise that sacrificing one of our classmates for something that might benefit the rest of us, intentionally, puts our classmate in a negative position. So, maybe we should first try to understand what led us all to this situation and I don't think anyone broke the computer intentionally.

Teacher: That's a great thought Harry. The computer breaking was simply the result of another intention. Now, it doesn't matter if that intention was right or wrong. I'd like to emphasize the importance of showing respect to your classmates and not trying to take advantage of each other. The same goes for our tests and assignments. You can always ask for help from each other and from me, but you shouldn't try to think of ways to get around your exams. You should study well beforehand and earn your marks in a fair way.

The students seemed to have realised that they all had made mistakes in this situation. As the bell rang again, the teacher told them they would all be joining the field trip tomorrow, so they should go home to prepare their things. All the students left the classroom with a big smile on their faces.