

# PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

## **Session 23**

November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015



Ethics: Thomson

- Today we will expand upon the comparison of **consequentialism** and **deontology**,
  - by looking at how those ethical theories apply to a collection of famous *thought experiments*.

**Phillippa Foot** (1920-2010): British philosopher, best known for reviving & renovating virtue ethics

- introduced the infamous *Trolley Problem* in 1967

**Judith Jarvis Thomson** (1929 – present):  
American moral philosopher & metaphysician

- “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem” expands upon the Trolley Problem and aims to draw a general ethical conclusion from it
  - Thomson indicates that ethical decision-making requires much more deliberation than just applying one rule to all possible cases.



## Consequentialism

➤ (e.g., *utilitarianism*)

- judges whether an action is right or wrong on the basis of the **consequences** of performing that action.
  - concerned with securing the greatest good for the greatest number of people



## Deontology

➤ (e.g., *Kantian ethics*)

- judges whether an action is right or wrong by its adherence to moral **maxims** we are obligated to obey.
  - concerned with never treating a person as a mere means,
  - but always as a rational being whose life is intrinsically valuable

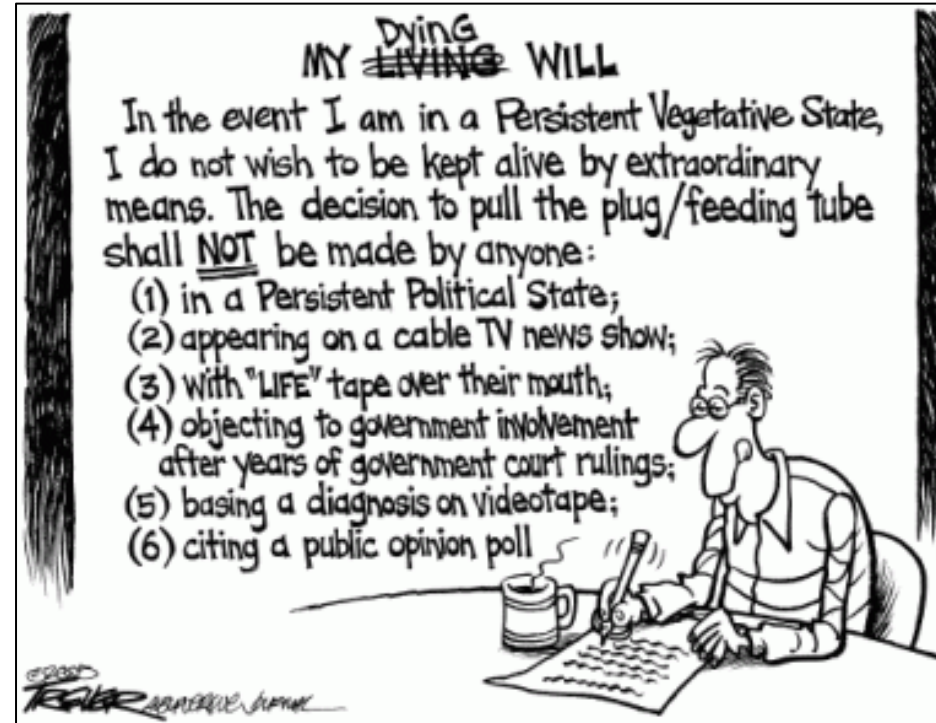


Thomson is interested in the moral comparison of **killing vs. letting die.**

- She writes,
  - “**Morally speaking it may matter a great deal *how* a death comes about,**
  - whether from natural causes, or at the hands of another, for example.

*Does it matter whether a man was killed or only let die?*

- A great **many people think it *does*:**
  - they typically think that **killing is worse than letting die,**
  - And they draw conclusions from this for abortion, euthanasia, and the distribution of scarce medical resources.” (204)



...But “others think it doesn’t” matter

whether someone is killed or let die: **both are equally bad.**

- “and they think this is shown [when]...we construct a pair of cases which are [nearly identical], except that
  - in the one case the agent kills, and in the other he only lets die.

➤ E.g., those who think they are equally bad ask us to compare:

- (1) Alfred hates his wife and wants her dead. He puts cleaning fluid in her coffee, thereby killing her,
- (2) Bert hates his wife and wants her dead. She puts cleaning fluid in her coffee (being muddled, thinking it’s cream). Bert happens to have the antidote to cleaning fluid, but he does not give it to her; he lets her die.<sup>1</sup>

- “Alfred **kills his wife** out of a desire for her death;
- Bert **lets his wife die** out of a desire for her death.

- But what Bert does is *surely every bit as bad* as what Alfred does.
- So [they think] **killing *isn’t worse than letting die.***” (204)

» They *seem to be following consequentialism*, in judging that these cases are morally equivalent since their *outcomes are the same*<sub>5</sub>





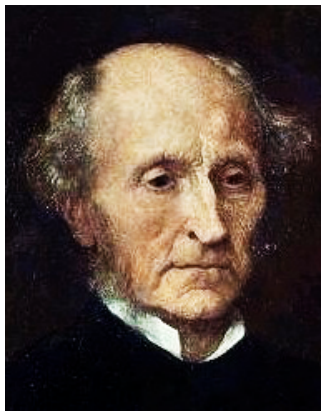


## Thomson generally agrees with those who think killing is worse than letting die.

- This *seems like a deontological viewpoint*, since it says that what matters is not just an action's consequences, but also how it is done.

...*But she argues that this does not mean that:*

- “for every pair of acts, actual or possible, one of which is a letting die, the other of which is a killing, but which are so far as possible in all other respects alike,
- the second [killing] is worse than the first [letting die].” (206)
  - If they did so, they would be following a strict deontological principle that it is *never* morally permissible to kill.



- She uses *thought experiments* to show that **people do *not* believe killing is *always* worse than letting die.**
  - Responses to ethical dilemmas show that **people sometimes resort to utilitarian reasoning to justify cases in which letting die is actually worse than killing.**

In the following scenario (*Transplant*),

(4) David is a great transplant surgeon. Five of his patients need new parts—one needs a heart, the others need, respectively, liver, stomach, spleen, and spinal cord—but all are of the same, relatively rare, blood-type. By chance, David learns of a healthy specimen with that very blood-type. David can take the healthy specimen's parts, killing him, and install them in his patients, saving them. Or he can refrain from taking the healthy specimen's parts, letting his patients die.

- it seems obvious that **David cannot kill one person to save five lives.**
  - The better option is to let five people die.



But consider this "*Trolley Problem*":

(5) Edward is the driver of a trolley, whose brakes have just failed. On the track ahead of him are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right, and Edward can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately there is one person on the right-hand track. Edward can turn the trolley, killing the one; or he can refrain from turning the trolley, killing the five.

- ...here it seems *permissible* for Edward to turn the trolley,
- killing one person rather than letting five people die.



Thomson asks, “*why* is it that Edward *may* turn the trolley to save his five, but David *may not* cut up his healthy specimen to save his five?”

➤ **Philippa Foot gives an explanation for the apparent difference between the two cases:**

- “We must accept that **our ‘negative duties’**, such as the duty to refrain from killing,
- **are more stringent than our ‘positive duties’**, such as the duty to save lives.”

- » **positive duties** = duties *to do* something (e.g., give to charity)
- » **negative duties** = duties not to do something (e.g., not steal)

- “If *David* [the transplant surgeon] does nothing,
  - he violates a positive duty to save five lives;
- if he cuts up the healthy specimen,
  - he violates a negative duty to refrain from killing one.” (206)

➤ Foot reasons that it is **better to obey the negative duty not to kill, and violate the positive duty to save the five,**

- » since we are *more* obligated *not to kill* than we are obligated to save lives.



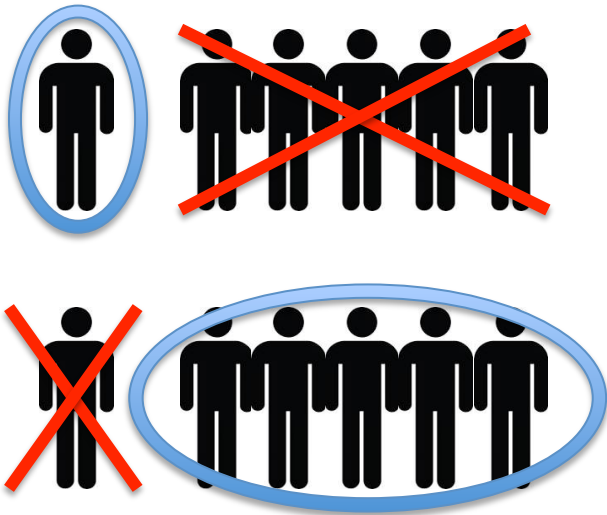
- Foot continues: *Edward* [the trolley driver] faces “a conflict between a negative duty to refrain from killing five & a negative duty to refrain from killing one.
  - ...So Edward may, indeed must, turn that trolley” (206):
    - it is **better to violate the negative duty not to kill once, instead of violating the same negative duty repeatedly by killing five.**
- But to challenge Foot’s explanation, Thomson asks us to **consider the case of Frank, a trolley passenger** (video: [bit.ly/1GLcXp3](http://bit.ly/1GLcXp3)):



(6) Frank is a passenger on a trolley whose driver has just shouted that the trolley’s brakes have failed, and who then died of the shock. On the track ahead are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right, and Frank can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately there is one person on the right-hand track. Frank can turn the trolley, killing the one; or he can refrain from turning the trolley, letting the five die.

- “...by Mrs. Foot’s principles,
  - *the conflict for Frank* is between the negative duty to refrain from killing one, and the positive duty to save five, *just as it was for David.*” (207)
    - **But Foot’s explanation must be off, because *unlike* in David’s case** (where it seems right to let five die, rather than kill one),
      - **it seems permissible for Frank to kill one to save five.**

- So why do people tend to think it is:
  - **not ok** for David [transplant surgeon] **to kill one** healthy person **to save five** patients' lives,
  - but **ok** for Frank [trolley passenger] **to kill the one** person on the side track **to save five** people on the main track?

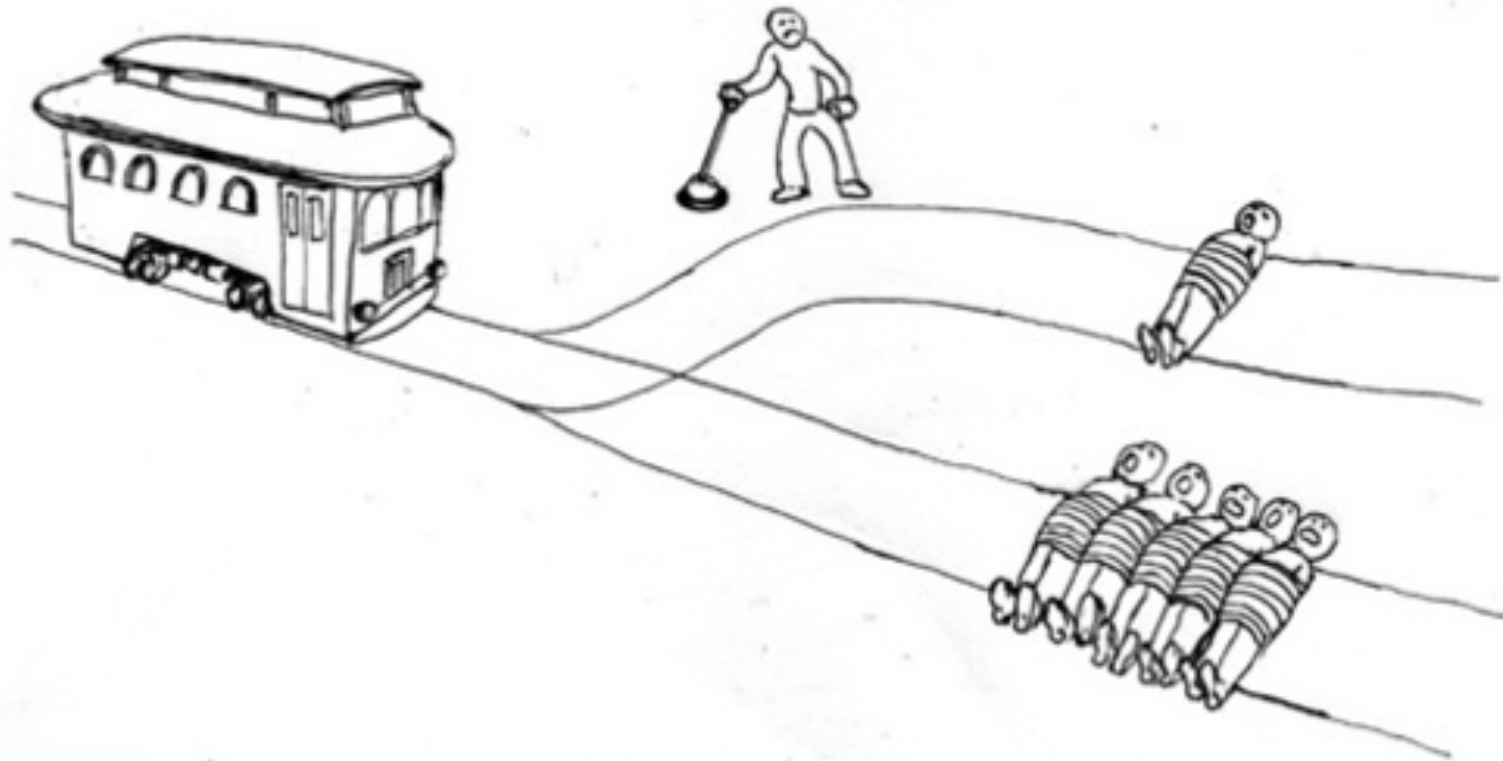


- In both cases, one person is killed in order to save five lives.
- They have the same consequences – so a utilitarian should consider them morally equivalent (i.e., equally *permissible*)
- But they both involve violating the Kantian maxim not to kill – so a Kantian should consider them morally equivalent as well (equally *impermissible*)
  - People must be thinking like a Kantian about one case, and like a utilitarian about the other.

- Thomson brings out the **fundamental difference between these two cases**, by drawing an analogy between David & Frank's situations & two versions of the *Trolley Problem*<sub>10</sub>

## Trolley Problem #1: *Bystander*

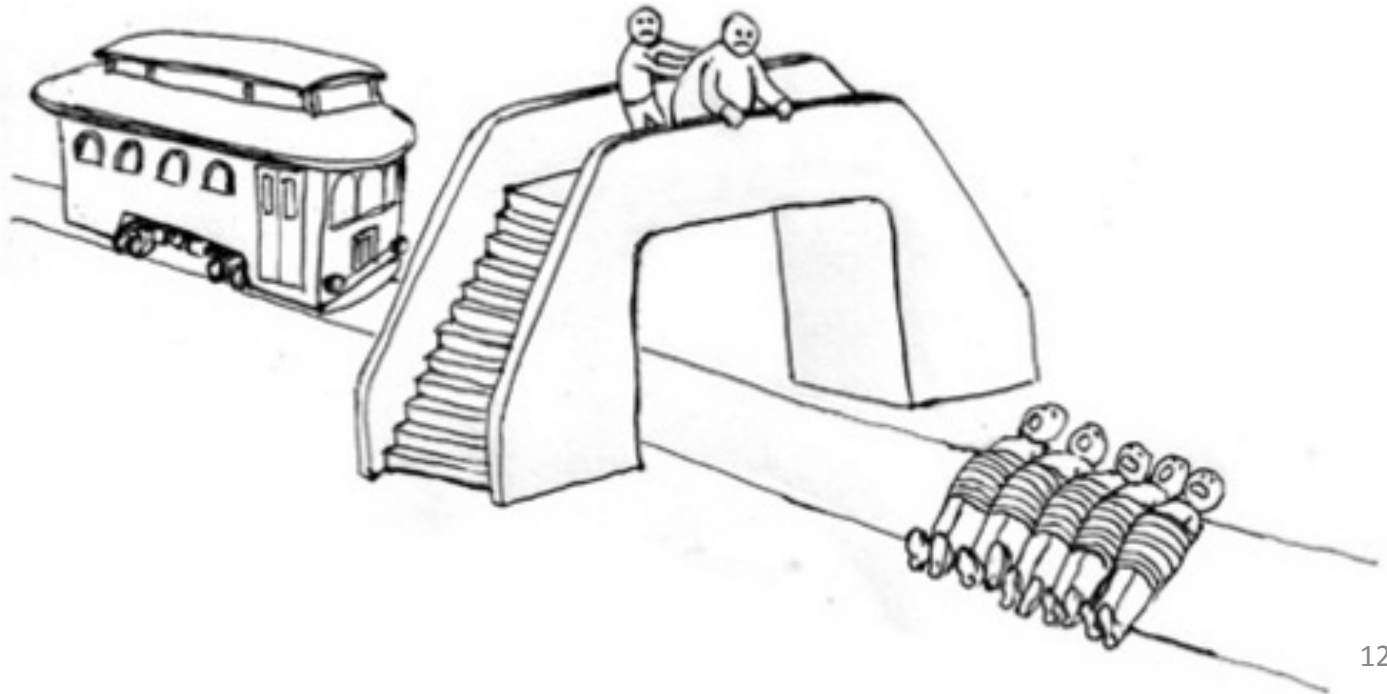
- like Frank's case, except the agent is not a passenger on the train, but rather is a bystander who can flip a switch on the side of the tracks to divert the train from the main track (5 people in danger) to the side-track (1 person in danger).
  - **video:** [bit.ly/1tsejtq](http://bit.ly/1tsejtq)



## Trolley Problem #2: *Footbridge*

**video:** [bit.ly/1vDIbpT](http://bit.ly/1vDIbpT)

- (7) George is on a footbridge over the trolley tracks. He knows trolleys, and can see that the one approaching the bridge is out of control. On the track back of the bridge there are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. George knows that the only way to stop an out-of-control trolley is to drop a very heavy weight into its path. But the only available, sufficiently heavy weight is a fat man, also watching the trolley from the footbridge. George can shove the fat man onto the track in the path of the trolley, killing the fat man; or he can refrain from doing this, letting the five die.



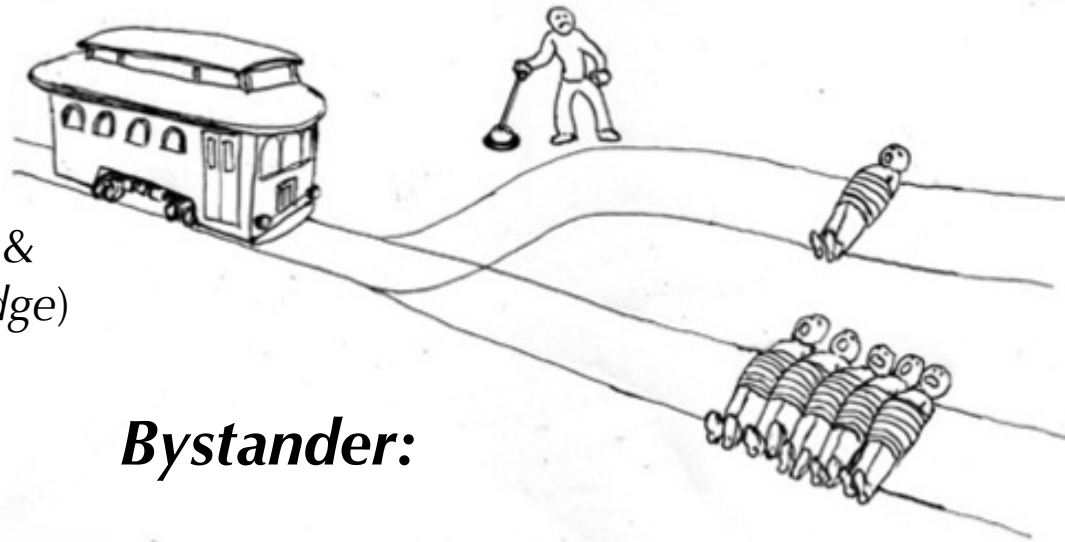
**Video:** [bit.ly/1uWyC1H](http://bit.ly/1uWyC1H)

- Flipping the switch (in *Bystander*) & pushing the large man (in *Footbridge*) have the **same outcome**:
  - one person is killed in order to save five others.

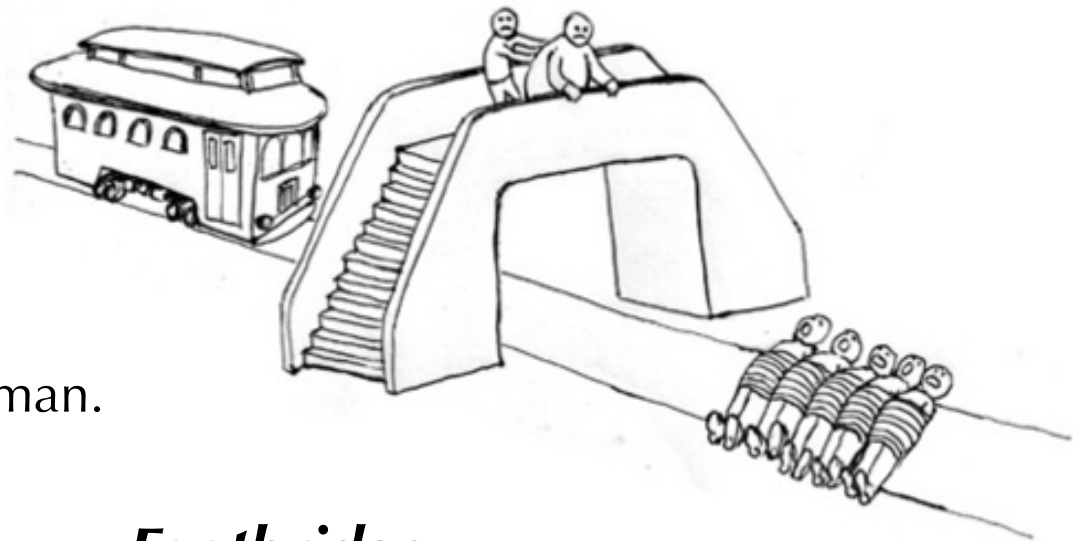
...but people tend to think:

- it is **OK** to flip the switch,
- but **not OK** to push the large man.

➤ *What gives?*



***Bystander:***



***Footbridge:***



In other words, **people who think killing one to save five is:**

- **morally acceptable in *Bystander*,**
- **but morally wrong in *Footbridge***



- ...**follow a *consequentialist* principle** when they say one *should* kill one to save five in *Bystander*,
  - » [This achieves the greatest good for the greatest number of people, following the Greatest Happiness Principle]



- ...**but follow a *deontological* principle** when they say one *should not* kill to save five in *Footbridge*.
  - » [This follows the Categorical Imperative not to treat the large man as a mere means to saving the others]
  - *Maybe this suggests that neither ethical theory prescribes exactly the right action in all situations,*
  - *or that most people actually hold a hybrid view of morality which combines elements or both consequentialism & deontology.*

Thomson explains people's discrepant reactions to these cases by drawing attention to *the agent's role in the chain of events*.

- **In both cases, the harm of the trolley's impact is distributed to one person instead of to five.**
  - But the **passenger or bystander who pulls the switch *indirectly* kills one person** by causing the train to hit one person instead of five,
    - All that agent does is to force the trolley to turn onto the side track;
    - the death is a result of the trolley's action.
  - ....while the **person on the footbridge kills one person *directly***, by pushing the large man to his death.
    - That agent is the immediate cause of the death.
- Thomson surmises that “**what matters in these cases** in which a threat is to be distributed is:
  - » **whether the agent distributes it by doing something to it,**
  - » **or whether he distributes it by doing something to a person.”** (216)

## **Thomson's explanation makes sense of why people it *isn't* ok for David [the transplant surgeon] to kill the healthy person to save five others.**

(4) David is a great transplant surgeon. Five of his patients need new parts—one needs a heart, the others need, respectively, liver, stomach, spleen, and spinal cord—but all are of the same, relatively rare, blood-type. By chance, David learns of a healthy specimen with that very blood-type. David can take the healthy specimen's parts, killing him, and install them in his patients, saving them. Or he can refrain from taking the healthy specimen's parts, letting his patients die.

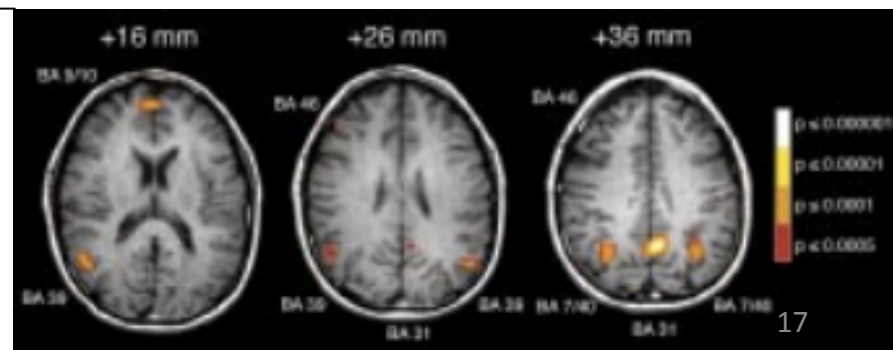
- If David took the healthy specimen's parts,
    - he would be the direct cause of that individual's death,
      - and it is impermissible to directly cause a death.
  - ...whereas if David doesn't harvest the organs from the healthy specimen,
    - his five patients would die, but as a result of their diseases
      - *not* as a direct result of David's actions.
      - so it is permissible for David to let the patients die.
- **However, if Thomson's explanation is correct,**
- » **we ought to think it is permissible for David to *indirectly* cause the healthy person's death...** in order to harvest the organs needed to save his five patients.
    - *Do you think this is permissible?*

Thomson's explanation appeals to the *reasoning* people go through in responding to the two cases.

- **An alternative explanation** for people's discrepant reactions **has to do with our *emotional responses*** to Bystander vs. Footbridge.
- Joshua Greene et al.'s (2001) moral psychology study suggests:
  - “the **crucial difference** between the [Bystander] trolley dilemma and the footbridge dilemma lies in the **latter's tendency to engage people's emotions in a way that the former does not.**
  - The thought of pushing someone to his death is, we propose, ***more emotionally salient*** than the thought of hitting a switch that will cause a trolley to produce similar consequences,
  - and it is **this emotional response** that **accounts for people's tendency to treat these cases differently.**” (2106)

## An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment

Joshua D. Greene,<sup>1,2\*</sup> R. Brian Sommerville,<sup>1</sup> Leigh E. Nystrom,<sup>1,3</sup>  
John M. Darley,<sup>3</sup> Jonathan D. Cohen<sup>1,3,4</sup>



Greene et al.'s results are intriguing,

- because they suggest that **the *deontological* answer to *Footbridge*** (that one should not kill one person, even if it saves five lives)
  - **is *not* really guided by *reasoning*,**
    - as Kant believed all moral decision-making should be,
  - **but rather is based upon our *negative emotional response*** to the prospect of killing another human being.
- On the other hand, **the *utilitarian* answer to *Bystander or Passenger*** (that one should kill one in order to save five)
  - **seems to be guided by *reasoning*** about which outcome leads to the greatest possible happiness.

Greene et al. suspect that

- **the degree to which an action strikes us as morally wrong may reflect to degree which that action *incites negative emotions*** (like guilt, shame, disgust) toward that act.
  - This is a *sentimentalist* explanation of our moral judgments of actions,
  - whereas a *rationalist* explanation of our moral judgments would say that we use reasons/principles to determine what is wrong.



Thomson concludes by revisiting her initial question,

- ***“Is killing worse than letting die?”***

- I suppose that what those who say it is have in mind may well be true.
- More generally, I suspect that **Mrs. Foot and others may be right to say that *negative duties are more stringent than positive duties.***

- But we [won't] be able to decide until we get clearer what these things come to,"
  - i.e., what it is that we really are morally obligated to do or not to do.

- Meanwhile, ...**the thesis that killing is worse than letting die cannot be used in any simple, mechanical way,**

- in order to yield conclusions about abortion, euthanasia and the distribution of scarce medical resources.

- *The cases have to be looked at individually.*

- If nothing else comes out of the preceding discussion, it may anyway serve as a reminder of this:

- that **there are circumstances in which – even if it is true that killing is worse than letting die – one may choose to kill instead of letting die.”** (217)

