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PLATONIC RESOLUTION TO THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

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Synopsis:

This is a study of the trolley industry, which pledges no allegiance to the fast growing tradition of producing trolley cases after trolley cases. It seeks to illustrate Plato's (or Platonic) response to the problem.

Platonic Resolution of the Trolley Problem*

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1 Introduction

The trolley problem, or rather the trolley industry all began with Philippa Foot's publication of "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect" (1967). It's attracted many attempts to solve it, to resolve it, and to absolve it. These include Joshua Greene's recent publication of *Moral Tribes*, promising a way of solving the problem from an experimental philosopher.¹

The difficulty in answering/resolving/absolving the trolley problem lies in the fact that this: two alternative courses of action which result in an equal amount of pleasure over pain *should* guarantee impartial preference between the two, but it fails to do so. Everyday moral judgments do seem to prefer some courses of action over others. The trolley problem brings this question to the fore of ethical persuasions.

This presentation pledges no allegiance to the tradition; instead, we seek advice from an ancient philosopher, Plato. We shall try to illustrate Plato's (or Platonic) response to the problem.

2 The Trolley Problem

Judith Jarvis Thomson, who credited Foot for introducing the trolley problem, provided the following cases in her "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Prob-

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¹A typical progress is made when one explains the psychological difference between any two seemingly equal courses of action, and when another pair of the cases where the initial explanation fails.

lem" (1976):

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.

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.

Both **Edward** and **David** result in an equal amount of pleasure over pain. They rescued 5 people, while sacrificing a person. Most of "us" would agree with what the poor **Edward** did, but would disagree with what the no-good **David** did. The situation both Edward and David found themselves was surely unfortunate, and it was certainly a dilemma that they had to face: one way or another a person or five people were going to die. It seems certain that saving five people is "better" than being able to save just a person over five people, and that's exactly what they have done. Now, why do we bear (and sympathize) with Edward? What about our impatience with David? What exactly explains the difference between our forbearance with **Edward**, while condemning **David**? This is the core question to be answered in the trolley problem.

3 The Doctrine of the Double Effect

Foot had employed the so-called the 'doctrine of the double effect' in her attempt to answer the trolley question. She suggested:

[The doctrine of the double effect suggests] that it is sometimes permissible to bring about oblique intention what one may not directly

intend.²

The doctrine then can be used to explain our allegiance to **Edward** (and the like), and our parting company with **David** (and the like) as follows: **Edward** didn't intend the poor person to die, while **David** intentionally killed the poor (healthy) patient. That is why most of us pity **Edward**, and the same can't be said of **David**.

Foot's above answer to (and so her explanation of the difference between the two cases of) the trolley problem seems to assume the following principle. That is, the success of Foot's answer to the problem rests on it. She says that:

[T]he distinction between what one does and what one allow to happen is not the same as that between direct and oblique intention.³

So for Foot's solution to the trolley problem to work, there has got to be a way to clearly distinguish a direct intent from an oblique intent, but also a way to distinguish to do something and to just allow something. The doctrine of the double effect, noted just above, seems inadequate to provide the required distinction between such pairs of sweeping significance. On the other hand, even if we allow the distinction between 'killing' and 'letting die',⁴ there would still remain other questions to be answered.

Suppose then given the allowance:

Killing is worse than letting die.

Substituting 'killing' with 'killing one person,' 'letting die' with 'letting die one person,' with some maneuvers, we get:

Killing one person to save one person is bad.

Most of us would choose not to kill. Now suppose further:

Killing one person is worse than letting die five people.

If one agrees that killing is worse than letting die, then one should also agree to the above about one to five people as well. This should mean that 'killing one person to save *five* people is bad (as well),' provided that killing is worse than letting die. Nevertheless, Foot would have us believe that:

²Foot 1967,###

³Foot 1967,###

⁴This should remind us of Unger, Peter. (1996). *Living High & Letting Die*, Oxford Univ. Press

Killing one person to save five people is acceptable (as long as it was not directly intended.)

Foot says that “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.”⁵ This solution fails to account for the difference between **David** and the following:

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.

George didn’t (directly) intend to killing the poor fat man, and according to the doctrine of the double effect should be excused from being morally responsible. Most of us, nonetheless, would shun **George**. **David** and **George** illustrate the doctrine’s inability to explain the most fundamental ethical difference between **Edward** and **David**. In other words, the doctrine fails to provide a way to solve the trolley problem.

4 Evils v. Goods

Most of us would not have pushed the fat man over the bridge as **George** did. Perhaps we’d have let 5 people die. The doctrine of the double effect would excuse us to have pushed the man off the bridge, and this is precisely the reason why the doctrine fails.

“[W]e may be helped if we turn from evils to goods,” suggested Thomson.⁶ She also added that a claim to a certain way of doing things has to be honored. Given that “[t]he trolley is an evil to the living men” in the trolley cases, it

⁵Foot 1967, ###

⁶Thomson 1985, ###

is right to pull the switch to change the lane on which the trolley is. **Edward** might also have had the claim to do so.

One wonders, on the one hand, whether or not it is “to goods” to pull the switch: the death of one innocent person ensues. Had **Edward** not pulled the switch, then he would not have acted to the end result of five people dying: he would have done nothing and five deaths follow.⁷ On the other hand, had **Edward** pulled the switch, then he would have acted to the end result of one person dying: he would have saved five people, counting as one of its victims, the intuition of killing being worse than letting die.

The situation awaits some noble solution to the trolley problem. This is even more pressing, especially when the trolley morphs into so many different scenarios: to mention a few, what if those five saved people were the trolley repairmen, whose job was to keep it in operational condition?; what if they were paid to work knowingly under somewhat dangerous yet unavoidable circumstances?; what if the one sacrificed person was a kid, collecting rocks?; what if the kid knowingly ignored the warnings?; and so on, and so forth.

5 Plato & the Trolley Problem

Thomson’s solution to the trolley problem would leave most of us on our own device in determining case by case the right thing to do, without the guidance of what appears to be obviously true, viz. killing is worse than letting die. Neither Foot’s solution, nor Thomson’s seem helpful in answering the trolley problem as it is posed. We now consider how Plato would have responded to the problem, given what he says in *The Republic*.

It’s a mistake to think that Plato would reject any of the three cases to be a catastrophe: **Edward**, **David**, and **George** had to face the choice of allowing more people to live, while sacrificing a person. Whether or not they were happy with the choice that they had to make *for us* seems irrelevant to the ethics of what they did. This appearance notwithstanding, *for Plato*, ‘being able to bear with oneself’ is one of the key operating notions in *The Republic*. This notion of ‘being in harmony,’ we think, allows us a gateway to Plato’s solution to the problem.

On the one hand, all three of them acted for the greater good. In this, Plato would not have objected to pulling the switch, nor to killing the healthy pa-

⁷For symmetry between ‘doing something’ and ‘doing nothing,’ see Sartorio 2005 & 2009.

tient, nor to pushing the fat man. Plato's ideal state is to be built so that:

I think we'll discover what to say if we follow the same path as before. We'll say that it wouldn't be surprising if these people were happiest just as they are, but that, in establishing our city, we aren't aiming to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so, as far as possible. We thought that we'd find justice most easily in such a city and injustice, by contrast, in the one that is governed worst and that, by observing both cities, we'd be able to judge the question we've been inquiring into for so long. We take ourselves, then, to be fashioning the happy city, not picking out a few happy people and putting them in it, but making the whole city happy.⁸

This consequentialist looking ideal doesn't seem to allow us to distinguish among **Edward**, **David**, and **George**. On the other hand, these three could be suited to do other things. That is, they could have been trained to bear different 'levels of stress' about the decisions that they have to make. Plato says that:

[I]f an offspring of the guardians is inferior, he must be sent off to join the other citizens and that, if the others have an able offspring, he must join the guardians. This was meant to make clear that each of the other citizens is to be directed to what he is naturally suited for, so that, doing the one work that is his own, *he will become not many but one*, and the whole city will itself be naturally one not many.⁹

It is of importance to keep in mind that for Plato we aren't all guardian material. Very few of us are indeed, and still smaller number of those few makes it to be guardians of the state. It would seem reasonable then for us to feel differently about **Edward** and **David**, while it would be absurd for guardians to feel differently about them. So, it is the difference in what one is capable and is trained to bear that would allow Plato to explain the difference (or lack of difference) in **Edward**, **David**, and **George**. Today's standard demands all of us to be guardians, and as such we would consider all three of them, and what they did in the scenarios the same. More importantly, we'd know how to make peace with what we'd do in those situations.

⁸Plato, *The Republic*, ###

⁹Plato, *The Republic*, 423c-d, emphasis added

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