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An Argument for Thomson’s Paper “Turning the Trolley”

1. Introduction

In her paper “Turning the Trolley”, Thomson introduces two fundamental principles that underpin our moral decision-making in trolley problem scenarios. Her perspective suggests that if saving five lives requires the sacrifice of one, then we should choose to let the five die rather than actively taking the life of one. Thomson contends that letting die is a morally preferable choice to deliberately killing. However, I take issue with her position. This paper would like to challenge her arguments and explore potential objections to my perspective, ultimately arguing that letting die is not inherently morally superior to intentionally killing.

1. Thomson’s Argument

Thomson employs two illustrative cases in her paper in order to elucidate two principles. In the first case, known as “Judge's Two Options”, she presents a scenario where a judge faces a moral dilemma: either allow rioters to kill five innocent hostages or frame an innocent person for the crime, leading to their execution. She uses this case to illustrate the “Letting Five Die Vs. Killing One Principle”. According to this principle, if saving five requires killing one, then we must let five die (Thomson 360). This principle indicates that, in Thomson’s view, letting die is superior to actively killing, making the choice of letting five die more acceptable.

In the second case, “The Driver's Two Choices”, Thomson explores a scenario involving an out-of-control trolley, where the driver must decide whether to continue on a track that would kill five workers or switch to a track with only one worker. In this situation, Thomson thinks that most people would find the latter option morally acceptable. She uses this case to introduce the “Killing Five Vs. Killing One Principle”, which maintains that we must not kill five if we can instead kill one (Thomson 360).

By comparing the “letting five die” option in case one and the “killing five” option in case two, Thomson emphasizes the moral distinction between “letting die” and “killing”, which is central to her argument. This moral distinction explains why we find letting five die acceptable in case one but not actively killing five in case two. In case one, the choice is between letting die and actively killing, while in case two, the choice is between actively killing one or actively killing five. Thomson argues that if saving five requires sacrificing one, it is morally justifiable to choose to let five die instead of actively taking the life of one.

1. My objection against Thomson’s argument

I disagree with Thomson’s argument that letting die is morally superior to directly killing. In my view, when considering the “Judge's Two Options” case, and excluding external factors, the morally justifiable choice is invariably to sacrifice one life to save five. My disagreement centers on the fundamental observation that both letting die and actively killing ultimately lead to the same outcome — death. While these two choices differ in the process involved (letting die is passive, whereas killing is active), the identical result, which is the loss of life, overshadows these process differences. Consequently, we can effectively disregard the process distinctions and focus solely on the outcome.

Therefore, for the “Judge's Two Options” case, our primary ethical dilemma revolves around whether to save one life or save five lives. In this context, it is a moral imperative to prioritize the greater good, which aligns with the decision-making process in case two. Therefore, we must opt for the choice that maximizes the preservation of life, and that choice is to save five lives, even if it involves sacrificing one.

Moreover, even when considering these process differences, I still do not believe that letting die is morally superior to directly killing. Letting die implicitly assumes that we can provide assistance to prevent death, regardless of whether success is guaranteed or not. Consequently, choosing to let die amounts to an alternative form of killing, for which we should also bear responsibility. From this perspective, allowing death is not morally superior to causing death.

Furthermore, when evaluating the moral dimensions of these two behaviors from an objective and neutral bystander’s perspective, I maintain that there is no inherent moral superiority in letting die over directly killing. An observer’s primary concern is always whether to save one life or save five lives and to evaluate our choices based on the outcomes they produce. It is crucial to understand that an observer’s thoughts do not equate to making the choice themselves. For instance, if asked to assess Thomson’s decision not to sacrifice one’s life to save five, I would disapprove of her choice from an objective, rational standpoint. However, making the choice myself of sacrificing one person or letting five people die might be influenced by external factors, leading to the same decision.

External factors undeniably shape our choices. When making decisions for ourselves, we must take responsibility for our actions, often guided by legal regulations, longstanding habits, and the influence of our education. These factors can sway our judgment and affect our moral choices. However, when we assume the role of an observer, we are not responsible for the decisions made by others. This vantage point allows us to evaluate those choices from a more neutral and rational perspective, free from the influence of subjective factors. Thus, an observer’s viewpoint does not equate to them making the same choice themselves.

1. Objection and Response

One potential counterargument to my assertion that there is no essential difference between letting die and killing questions our responsibility for the consequences. If, as per my argument, there is no substantial difference between letting one die and actively killing one, then what about the scenario of donating to charity? If we have the means to save lives through charity but choose not to, are we responsible for those deaths? This seems similar to choosing the letting die option. Furthermore, even if we do donate, the amount is not sufficient to save everyone, does my argument suggest that we might still bear responsibility for those deaths?

My response is that refraining from donating may indeed carry a moral responsibility for the resulting deaths. However, this responsibility is distributed collectively across the global population, thereby diminishing individual moral culpability. It is through this collective sharing of responsibility that we often transform personal morality into a new collective moral code, emphasizing the importance of charitable actions. Additionally, it should be noticed that many individuals lack the means or capacity to donate due to various reasons such as financial constraints, familial obligations, or personal circumstances. Therefore, we cannot conclude that a person has chosen the letting die option simply because they do not donate to charity.

As for the second question about responsibility even when donating, it seems to diverge from the initial discussion. The process distinction between letting die and killing as I mentioned earlier pertains to the two distinct options, not the act of choosing itself. When we choose charity, we actively opt for saving lives, which negates the letting die option. If we were still held morally responsible for deaths due to insufficient donations, it would extend the ethical debate well beyond the scope of the Trolley Problem. To explore this further, we must consider the underlying assumptions, which might lead to different conclusions, even in Thomson’s examples.

1. Conclusion

In conclusion, I disagree with Thomson’s idea that if saving five lives requires the sacrifice of one, then we should choose to let the five die rather than actively taking the life of one. I refute her view by arguing that there is no essential difference between letting die and actively killing in order to deny her perspective that letting die is a morally preferable choice to deliberately killing. Besides, I also respond to one of my objections about whether we should respond by not donating to charity.

Reference

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Turning the trolley." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36.4 (2008): 359-374.