

Forum Digest for Lectures 1 and 2 (lecture release date was March 12th)

Why do we use hypothetical examples (thought experiments) in this class?

The basic idea is to isolate and highlight certain factors that influence moral judgment. For example: the trolley problem is designed to highlight the role of consequences, on the one hand, and the intrinsic character of certain kinds of actions (such as killing), on the other, in our individual moral judgments. The trolley problem highlights these two factors by constructing an artificial scenario in which other factors that might influence our moral judgment are held constant. For example: many people think that the morality of imposing a cost on someone (in the trolley problem, death) can depend upon whether or not the person consents. In the trolley case neither the five nor the one consent to dying, so the factor of consent can, by stipulation, not play a role in one's judgment as to whether the driver ought to turn the trolley or not.

In many ways thought experiments are for philosophical reasoning what laboratory experiments are for scientific research. In both cases, one has to hold many things fixed so as to test the role that one particular factor plays in the assessment of a problem. As many of you have noted, hypothetical examples (thought experiments) like the trolley problem deliberately constrain the options. This limitation of options is by design, so resist the impulse to "fight" the hypothetical scenario by making it more complex or less artificial by adding more facts or choices for the agent. For example: in real life, we may never be sure that the people on the track will die (one of the workers may jump out of the way at the last second) – however, for the purpose of exploring the hypothetical case, we *assume* that we know for sure that one worker or five will die.

What is the relation between the hypothetical scenarios and the moral theories or principles?

First, we recommend that you try to identify the principles/forms of reasoning that underlie your judgments of the hypothetical cases. For example: Is your judgment of the trolley case the result of categorical or consequentialist reasoning? (Recall that, while consequentialists think that the morality of an act is *purely* a function of its consequences, those who embrace categorical reasoning may accept that consequences matter but nevertheless insist that the intrinsic character of actions also has moral significance.)

Second, check to see whether it is always the same principle/form of reasoning or whether you use different principles/forms of reasoning when judging the various

hypothetical scenarios with which you are presented. For example: Do you use consequentialist reasoning in the original trolley case, but categorical reasoning in the fat man version of the trolley case. If you use different principles/forms of reasoning, then this may point to an internal tension in your moral outlook, which may require you to give up one of the principles/forms of reasoning and revise your judgment of a hypothetical case accordingly.

How do I provide a good argument for my view instead of merely asserting it?

Conversation I

Tom: It is obviously wrong to kill the cabin boy for food.

Mary: But, is it not better that one person is dead rather than four?

Tom: No, killing people for food is always wrong.

Mary: But, why is it always wrong?

Tom: It just is always wrong.

Mary: But, you have given me no reason why it is always wrong.

In conversation I, Tom simply asserts his view without providing any reasons for it. The result is that he does not engage Mary and is unlikely to persuade her of his view.

Conversation II

Tom: I think that it is wrong to kill the cabin boy for food.

Mary: But is it not better that one person is dead rather than four?

Tom: I agree that an outcome in which four people die is worse than an outcome in which one person dies. However, when it comes to judging the morality of an action, I think that the outcome isn't the *only* factor to consider. Sometimes we should accept a worse outcome if the alternative is to engage in an evil action, such as murdering an innocent person.

Mary: Are you saying that if it were truly necessary to murder one innocent person to save 3 billion innocent people, it would be wrong to do it?

Tom: No, remember that I said the outcome isn't the only factor to consider. I didn't say that the outcome is irrelevant. In the scenario you describe I think that the outcome would be sufficiently terrible to make it acceptable to engage in what would normally be a categorically wrong act.

Mary: I don't understand why you think it would be wrong to kill one to save three but OK to kill one to save three billion. The reason that it would be right to kill one to save three billion is that the lives of the three billion would collectively embody more goods than the life of the one person. I see that it's possible that the life of one person could conceivably embody more goods than the lives of three but this is sufficiently unlikely to make killing the innocent person the right action in both cases.

Tom: ...

In conversation II, both people try to give reasons for their respective view, trying to make the other person see why there is something to it, hoping to persuade the other person.

Why is it important to distinguish morality from legality?

The claim that an act is (il)legal is a claim that simply describes the actual laws in a country. The fact that an act is legally *permissible* (e.g. adultery in the US) does not necessarily imply that it is morally permissible, and the fact that an act is morally permissible (e.g. interracial marriage) does not automatically imply that it is legal (it was illegal in the US for a long time). Similarly, the fact that an act is legally obligatory (e.g. paying taxes, not taking certain drugs) does not necessarily imply that it is morally obligatory, and the fact that an act is morally obligatory (e.g. giving to charity if you are sufficiently rich) does not necessarily imply that it is (or even ought to be) legally obligatory.

What is the connection between claims about what people *actually* do (descriptive claims), *would* do (counterfactual claims), and *should* do (normative claims)?

What if someone (“Mary”) says that someone else (“Tom”) should do something (“act X”) that Mary herself *would not* do? Assuming that Mary truly believes that morality requires act X, then the fact that she would not do it, suggests that she would fail to live up to what she takes to be her moral obligation. Even if sometimes we fail to live up to our moral obligations (i.e. we are Mary), it’s still important to think about what we *should* ideally do. Hopefully, in time, it will make us live up to our moral obligations more often and more consistently.

Put slightly differently, the following claims seem to be true:

1. The fact that we actually do x or would do x under certain counterfactual conditions (i.e. conditions that do not actually hold but that are supposed/imagined to hold), does not imply that we should do x.
2. The fact that we should do x does not imply that we actually do x or would do x under certain counterfactual conditions (unless we are morally perfect).

If (1) is true, we can’t straightforwardly refute descriptive or counterfactual claims with normative claims. Similarly, if (2) is true, we can’t straightforwardly refute normative claims with descriptive or counterfactual claims. This means that if Jim says ‘it is wrong to steal’ and Jane says ‘you would steal if you were in my situation,’ Jane’s claim doesn’t necessarily contradict Jim’s claim, as it might simply imply that Jim would act wrongly if he were in Jane’s situation.