

The Trolley Problem and its Consequences

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Abstract: Originally being one of the core fields of Moral Philosophy, moral dilemmas are gaining new attention in the field of artificial intelligence. For instance, when wanting to develop and deploy autonomous cars one is ultimately confronted with the so called trolley problem. This paper introduces the trolley problem and its theoretical and practical consequences. First, the trolley problem will be examined from a philosophical perspective, treating it as a thought experiment and formulating some resulting ethical principles. Second, it will be argued that thinking about how to deal with the trolley dilemma is of great practical importance in order to not only keep traffic as safe as it is, but even increase its safety. In spite of the fact that the *ideal* trolley problem rarely occurs, some variation of it – the so-called *statistical* trolley problem – is of high relevance for autonomous vehicles, regardless if applied to an implicit or explicit moral agent. Third, recent empirical studies on the “public morality” of the trolley problem – such as the moral machine experiment - and the resulting social dilemmas will be examined. The methodology of the experiment itself bears the risk of social subjectivism as well as cultural relativism. Consequently, it will be argued, empirical studies on public morality cannot substitute a democratic debate and a democratic decision making about what factors to include in the deployment and regulation of ethical autonomous vehicles.

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