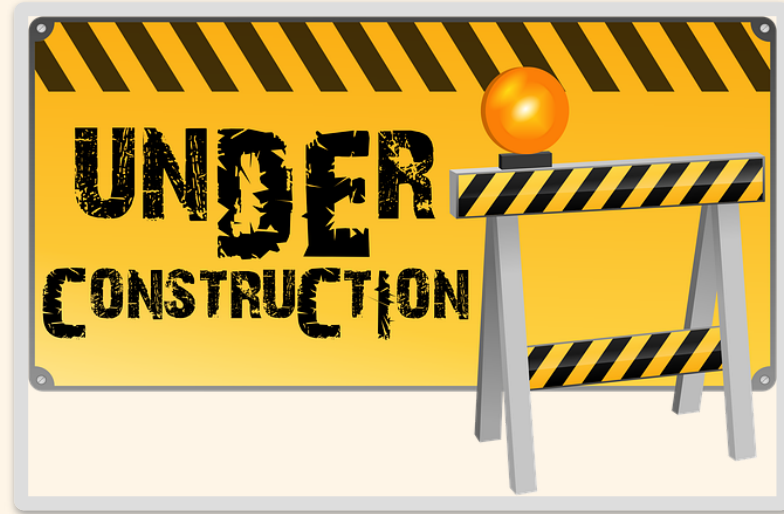# Philosophical Ethics

debating right and wrong

George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

A Moral Dilemma

A Moral Dilemma

the runaway trolley

You are standing near a switch next a railroad track when you notice a runaway trolley coming down the tracks in your direction. There are five children playing on the track below too far away to hear you. There is one worker on the other track where the trolley would go if you threw the switch.

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- **WHY?**

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- The principle that seems obviously relevant here is:

> ❗ *If you are faced with a situation in which it looks certain that someone will end up hurt, you should do whatever you can to minimize the number of victims.*

But what about another case like this...

A Moral Dilemma

another runaway trolley

You are standing on a bridge over a railroad track railroad when you notice a runaway trolley coming down the tracks in your direction. There are five children playing on the track below too far away to hear you. There is a rather large person next to you and if you push him in front of the trolley it will stop the trolley but kill him.

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- In this case most people would say that they would *not* push the large person into the tracks, and even that it would be *wrong* do do this.

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- Why is this when the results are the same in both cases?

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> ❗ *Don't directly cause harm to someone even if it seems like the outcome will be good.*

- But then how can both of our principles be true and what exactly is "directly" causing harm anyway?

Philosophical ethics attempts to answer questions like these and figure out what ethics is all about.

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- Scientists also look at ethics from this perspective, for example, when neuroscientists try to determine what parts of the brain are active when we face different versions of dilemmas like the trolley problem.

Philosophical Ethics

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meta-ethics

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- Meta-ethical questions are about the *status* of ethical claims as compared with other ways of thinking and speaking, and are an important part of the philosophical approach since they concern our basic assumptions about ethics.

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normative ethics

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- The third branch of philosophical ethics is normative or prescripive ethics which jumps right into debates about right and wrong and takes a position principles and particular cases.

- This approach is unique to philosophy since philosophy is not always just a neutral analysis of ideas, but also involves stating a position and defending it. This is the side f philosophy that is actively engaged with its subject matter and not just looking on from the sidelines.

Cultural Relativism

Ruth Benedict
1887-1948

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- Ruth Benedict was an American anthrpologist whose encounters with indigeous peoples convinced her that there was no universally valid set of moral principles.

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- Relativism is a "meta-ethical" claim about the nature of moral thinking and *not* an attempt to justify any particular moral principles.

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The argument from cultural differences

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- This theory is popular among those who see religion as providing an authoritative set of moral principles.

- It offers an account of the meaning of moral principles -- they are to be understood as commands issued by a supreme being.

Find out more

Garry Winogrand "Flip"

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