The Trolley Problem: 1 Page Essentials

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**Classic Version:** You see a trolley about to run over four workers tied to the ground. You can push a lever, redirect the trolley’s path to the sidetrack where there is only one person tied to the ground. Do you push the lever?

**Two Primary Theories of Morality:**

**Utilitarianism**: Concerns itself with the maximization of “utility”. Pain over pleasure. Strictly speaking, it would be better to save 4 and kill 1 than vice versa, so one would push the lever. However, two types of Utilitarians:

**Act Utilitarian:** Traditional utilitarian. Case by casis method of dealing with situations; utility calculated via specific scenarios – should you sleep in? depends on circumstances. In original trolley scenario, one would push the lever.

**Rule Utilitarian:** What is the overarching, general rule? Doesn’t concern itself with specifics of a situation. If general rule says sleeping in is wrong, no matter the circumstances, it is wrong to sleep in. In trolley scenario, if general rule is “it is not okay to sacrifice someone for reasons they do not share” then one would not push the lever.

**Kantianism:** Not focused with consequences; the “good-will” is all that matters. Duty behind action is most important. Accord with the Categorical Imperative, the “thing” that you must do at all times. **A Kantist** would not push the lever because the decision to kill another rational being is always immoral. You’re utilizing the worker’s life as a means to an end, a clear violaiton of his autonomy.

**Utilitarianism vs Kantianism:**  Consequentalist vs Deontological, utility vs duty – example: do you lie to a Nazi soldier that you are not hiding a Jewish family (when in fact you are) to save their lives? Under Utilitarian code, you do lie (to maximize utility, or safety in this case, of family). Under Kantianism, you don’t – it is always wrong to lie.

**Throwing Fat Guy Off Bridge Variation:** You see trolley rollicking through, about to run over five workers tied to ground. You are standing on bridge, next to you is a Fat Man who if you push over, would prevent the train from running over the workers but would die himself. Do you push the fat man?

Though problem numerically similar to classic version, most people who say yes to the classic version say no to pushing the fat man off the bridge. Act Utilitarian would still push fat man off bridge, but rule utilitarian can argue that there exists an overarching rule that is broken when man is pushed off bridge. Kantist would still not push man off bridge.