

Why philosophy

Business



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I'd like to begin with a story. Suppose you are a trolley car driver, and you're heading down a straight track at 50 mph.

Up ahead you see five people at the end of the track, working on it, and completely oblivious to the fact that you're heading straight for them. So, your reflexes kick in and you stomp on the brakes ; however, your brakes don't work. You start panicking because you don't seem to be able to stop this impending calamity, until you see a side track off to your right. At the end of the side track is one worker, working on the track. Now, you can make the decision to turn your wheel to the right, onto the sidetrack, killing the one worker, and sparing the five workers on the main track. Think about this for a second.

What would you do? Now let's turn to a second situation. This one is similar, but quite different at the same time. Rather than being the trolley car driver, you are now standing on a pedestrian bridge overlooking the main track. (For this second situation there is no side track.) So, you see the trolley car coming down the track at 50 mph, soon to kill the five workers working on the track. You begin to panic, but you're a bystander.

There seems to be nothing that you can do to stop this, until you see a fat man leaning over the bridge...off to your right! Now, you can make the decision to push the fat man off of the bridge and onto the track in order to stop the trolley car from careening into the five workers. This action would result in the death of the fat man, but the five workers on the track would be saved! Think about this for a second.

What would you do? OK. So I'm sure by now you're wondering why I'm telling you this story. It is highly unlikely that any of us would ever find ourselves in a situation similar to these, so what's the value in deciding how we would act if we were to find ourselves in these situations? Well, this experiment was first introduced in 1967 by a woman named Philippa Foot, and it's all about ethics and the way we make decisions. This story has been told in a variety of ways, but each one comes to the same conclusion. The significance of this hypothetical is that about 90% of people choose to turn their wheel to the right in the first situation ; however, about 90% of people also choose not to push the fat man over the bridge in the second situation. This conclusion requires a bit of examination.

In the first situation most of us chose to turn our wheel to the right in order to spare five lives, even at the price of one. We did this based on the concept of utility. John Stuart Mill wrote that “ actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness”. Rather that five should live and one should die, because five people are more valuable than a single person, and therefore the happiness of those five people will outweigh the devastation of the poor soul on the side track. This principle is based on a cost-benefit analysis of the consequences of each decision. Now in the second situation, most of us completely abandoned our utilitarian logic.

This time we were concerned with our morals. We felt that it was morally wrong to push the fat man over the bridge, even if doing so would result in a promotion of happiness. Immanuel Kant wrote that we should “ always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.” In this situation we weren't concerned with consequences anymore ; we were concerned

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with universal human rights. The fat man has dignity, because he is another human being on this earth, just like the rest of us. Therefore, it is not morally permissible to use his life as a means towards society's ends.

Basically what we're asking ourselves here with this hypothetical situation is : how do we make our decisions as human beings everyday, and what type of moral framework are we going to base our decisions off of? Are we going to listen to J. S. Mill, Kant, another dead philosopher, or create our own separate framework? This is philosophy. What we've just done is the project of philosophy. We've analyzed the way we make decisions, and we're trying to figure out how we ought to make decisions in a better way.

Overall we're asking ourselves, is what we're doing right now the best way we could be doing things? Philosophy requires a critical examination of ourselves and society at large. It is a project that begins with the desire to understand the world that we live in, and ends with an always present open-mindedness. Doing philosophy is no small task ; it requires a hell of a lot of effort. Nevertheless, once one begins this project it is never ending, and they are always the better because of it. Socrates, the father of western philosophy, compared the true philosopher to a gadfly.

Now, a gadfly is a fantastic insect that comes along when you are sleeping, bites you, and instantly wakes you up. If you're in a room with a gadfly you won't be able to doze off even for a second. Seems pretty annoying right? That is why this insect is the perfect metaphor for the modern philosopher. The gadfly was first mentioned in The Apology, written by Plato, which is the greatest piece of literature ever written in defense of the project of

philosophy. It describes Socrates's final speech in front of the Athenian people in which he attempts to defend his life as a philosopher : I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.

And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me. Social gadflies, like Socrates, tend to come off as incredibly infuriating people. They don't allow their peers to succumb to conventional wisdom, or accumulate opinions based on one specific world view. They force people to really think and reflect on life's most important questions, and open them up to the possibility that they may be wrong about certain things. For this reason, social gadflies get a really bad reputation. Most people don't want someone around them that is constantly forcing them to explain and second guess their convictions — that's exhausting.

Most people would rather go about their lives never second guessing the certainty of their views, because it allows them to escape a sense of insecurity. Martin Luther King Jr. objected to this state of mental laziness, and in the infamous Letter From Birmingham Jail, he spoke about the vital importance of social gadflies in the civil rights movement, which is worth quoting at length : Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. Dr. King understood that the apprehension to be skeptical and the fear of <https://assignbuster.com/why-philosophy/>

destroying social norms, is not a path that leads to human flourishing. It is a path that leads to poverty, social injustice and civil unrest.

The conventional wisdom that was omnipresent during the civil rights movement, allowed whole groups of people to find justification for denying a whole race the rights and blessings they deserved. It is a wisdom that prevents challenges to the dominant culture. It is a wisdom that keeps men and women in bondage, either literally or metaphorically. It is a wisdom that allows any act against humanity to be committed, and to go unanswered. Dr. King, and many people like him, had the courage to challenge that conventional wisdom, and ask Americans to ask themselves whether or not this wisdom was utterly wrong. This conventional wisdom is still present today, and it will always be present, whether we like it or not. To ensure that we never again become slaves to this conventional wisdom, there will always be a need for courageous men and women to catch us in our faults, put us back on the correct path, and allow us to truly progress as a civil society. This is what makes social gadflies so valuable. If we can create a world full of social gadflies, through the study of philosophy, a world abound of true human flourishing can be one we all know very well.