

# Thought experiments as a tool in philosophy



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Critically assess the claim that thought experiments are a useful philosophical tool.

Danish physicist and philosopher Hans Christian Ørsted coined the term “thought experiment” first in 1811. (Stöltzner[\*]M, Pg. 1 2018) The term thought experiments are defined as “ devices of the imagination used to investigate the nature of things.” (Brown, J, R Fehige, Y 2017.) I will argue that a model based record of thought experimentation offers the best clarification of how thought experiments can be effectively used as a philosophical tool. Thought experiments that refer to exactly sound circumstances are better ready to fit in with a model based record of thought experimentation and ought to in this manner, just interest to real world situations.

As mentioned above I have defined what a thought experiment is. I will talk about the distinctive elements of thought experiments and inspect the philosophical records of thought experiments. I will then investigate some key complaints to the utilization of thought experiments in philosophical argument, and in moral arguments specifically. My decision will be that thought experiments which have already been conducted. They offer the best clarification of how they can be used to demonstrate philosophical arguments and more importantly, are clear as they can be used as a tool to solve problems. It is critical to understand what a thought experiment is since their uses and intentions is essential for the explanation of their authenticity as philosophical tools. If there is without a doubt a definition that satisfactorily covers a wide range of philosophical thought studies, it will

be less demanding to decide when a precedent ought to be legitimately delegated as an experiment.

Thought experiments are used in a variety of academic fields for example, physics, philosophy and maths. They are usually portrayed in diagrams and considered as problems which ought to be solved or just questioned. In terms of thought experiment's being used as a philosophical tool many academics use to support a desired intuitive response to an experiment. I will now below give examples of thought experiments and briefly describe each one and evaluate its usefulness on how it can be used as a philosophical tool. The examples which I have decided to use are one from ethics and one from science. They all have one thing in common which is they are all used as a philosophical tool. I will then discover the way in which these thought experiments are featured and used as a thought experiment.

#### Example one: Trolley Problem

The Trolley problem is a thought experiment whereby a train is moving towards five people who are tied on a track, you are standing next to a lever that navigates the main switch. If the lever is pulled the train gets re directed to the next track and the five people are saved. However, one person remains on the track. The main ethical problem here is should you pull the lever either way? This is a thought experiment which focuses on the ethical aspects of the outcome as the consequences are the same for each scenario. There are two schools of thought which have commented on this thought experiment however, it is highlighted that there is tension between two schools of moral thought. Utilitarianism notes that the most appropriate

action is the one that achieves “ the greatest good for the greatest number” (Probe Ministries, 2018) Meanwhile, the deontological perspective asserts that murdering an innocent individual – is simply wrong, regardless of whether they have a good outcomes. This is because Deontology is focused upon the duty of one’s action – “ an action is right if it accords with a moral rule, moral rules are based on the ultimate principle of duty.” (KASHER, N 1978 P. g 1) Therefore, in regards to the trolley problem deontologists would be completely against it. There is clear tension between the two schools of thought of the trolley problem above, utilitarian’s say you should sacrifice one to save five, while deontologists say you should not. Moral psychologists who argue the trolley problem say it is exceedingly unlikely, making it impossible to uncover anything imperative about genuine ethical problems, be that as it may. The recent rise of self-driving vehicles means the predicament may be more applicable than any other time in recent history. For instance, should a self-driving car secure the life of its travellers, even to the detriment of a more noteworthy number of people on foot? Here as well, our instincts are inconsistent: we need other individuals’ autos to expand the number of lives spared – however, figure our very own vehicle ought to ensure our own no matter what. As our advances turn out to be progressively fit for settling on good choices, understanding our own ethical instincts turns into something even more important.

Example two: Brain in a vat

The brain-in-a-vat (BIV) is a thought experiment which intends to draw out certain human concepts such as consciousness, reality, knowledge, truth,

meaning and the mind. Rene Descartes, first outlined this experiment in his evil demon experiment. (P. Hickey, 2018)

The argument essentially outlines a scenario whereby a scientist, machine or any other entity might remove a person's brain from the body, suspend in a vat of life-sustaining liquid and then connect its neurons through wires to a supercomputer which would then provide electrical impulses identical to those the brain normally receives. This argument is a helpful thought experiment because it's unreal however, it's well explained in terms of its methodology. Although, there are several philosophical debates which surround the credibility of the thought experiment. If these debates include that thought experiments are implausible, a possible consequence would be that we are no closer to truth, knowledge, consciousness ect, than we were prior to the experiment. An argument against the BIV thought experiment is from the likelihood that the BIV isn't and can't be naturally similar to that of an encapsulated brain (that is, a mind found in a man). Since the BIV is free, it seeks after that it doesn't have an equivalent science to that of an exemplified mind. That is, the BIV misses the mark on the relationship from the body to the mind, which renders the BIV neither neuroanatomically nor neurophysiologically like that of an exemplified brain. If this is the circumstance, we can't express that it is even functional for the BIV to have practically identical experiences to the encapsulated personality, since the brains are not proportional.

In conclusion, as discussed above, I have indicated instances of thought experiments. I found that the most logical method for portraying a thought experiment is to list what their fundamental segments are and their work as

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an apparatus in moral arguments specifically. All together for thought experiments to be a real methodological apparatus in philosophical arguments they should have the capacity to satisfy their functions which are of course the main components which demonstrates their uses.

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