

# The Trolley Car Dilemma

The Early Buddhist Answer and Resulting Insight<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to give a Buddhist answer to the Trolley Car Dilemma posed by Michael J. Sandel and also present an insight that I have discovered along the way.

### Introduction

“Michael J. Sandel (born March 5, 1953) is an American political philosopher and a professor at Harvard University. He is best known for the Harvard course ‘Justice’, which is available to view online ...” (“Michael J. Sandel”). His course starts with a question:

While a trolley car is running at full speed, its brakes fail. If the driver continues on the same track, the trolley car will kill 5 workers working on the track. But it is possible to change tracks, which, if done, will kill 1 worker on the other track. The dilemma here is: which is the right choice for the trolley car driver? To go on the same track or to change tracks? (Paraphrased from Sandel)

I have attempted, in this paper, to give a Buddhist answer to this dilemma, and discovered some insights along the way.

### The Concept to be Used

This will be an oft-quoted statement: *Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi* (AN III 415) (“It is intention that I call karma ...” (Gombrich, *What 7*)). It enables us to attribute different moral values to the same kind of action if the actor has different motives. But how many motives are possible there for the trolley driver? As follows:

1. The intention to kill,
2. The intention to abstain from killing,
3. The intention to save

Here I should note that (2) and (3) are actually different from a psychological perspective: the former is essentially the refusal to do something whereas the latter is to undergo some kind of activity. Any one of these three can be a motive for whatever choice the trolley driver makes. How?

## The Buddhist Answer

If the driver DOES NOT change tracks,

- It is an unwholesome deed if he intends to kill the five workers on the old track. Even though he happens to spare the one worker on the side track that he chooses not to move to, it does not count as a wholesome deed because he has no actual intention to save the latter, whose survival is only the side-effect of the former's choice.
- *Or* it is a wholesome deed, if he intends to save the one worker on the new track, or, to abstain from killing him. Even though he happens to kill the five workers on the old track that he is traveling on, it does not count as an unwholesome deed because he has no intention to kill them nor, for that matter, to save them.
- *Or* there will be both a wholesome deed and an unwholesome deed (coming after one another in any order) because, say, the five workers are the driver's enemies whom he wants dead whereas the one worker is his friend whom he wants to save. (I say "coming after one another in any order" because it is psychologically impossible to have one good intention and a bad one to arise at the same time.)
- *Or* the trolley driver is too frightened to do anything, so the trolley car just runs on resulting in the death of the five workers. In this case, he is free from moral responsibility; there is no wholesome nor unwholesome deed arising in this case.

If the driver changes tracks,

- It is an unwholesome deed if he intends to kill the single worker on the new track. Even though he happens to spare five workers on the old track that he was moving on, it does not count as a wholesome deed because he has no intention to save them.
- *Or* it is a wholesome deed if he intends to save the five workers on the old track, or, to abstain from killing them. Even though he happens to kill the single worker on the new track that he has moved to, it does not count as an unwholesome deed because the former has no intention to kill the latter nor, for that matter, to save the latter.
- *Or* there will be both a wholesome deed and an unwholesome deed (coming after one another in any order) because, say, the five workers are the driver's

friends whom he wants to save whereas the one worker is his enemy whom he wants dead.

## Insight

I would like to draw the readers's attention to what I call "the optionality of positive deeds." Gombrich hints at it when he writes:

"... the Buddha made ethics the foundation of his soteriology, but ... ethics is presented almost entirely in negative terms, as abstention from vice and from other misguided thoughts and behavior." (Gombrich, *What* 77)

Gombrich is right. Even though, for example, "Thou shall not kill" has been the first, and most well-known, precept (Harvey 271–275), the Buddha never said that one *must* save lives; saving lives (*jīvitadāna*) appears only as a recommended, not compulsory, deed. In the same way, if we consider each prescribed type of abstention, we can see that its counterpart positive act is always a suggested act. So Buddhist ethics becomes a system of "don't's" and "may-do's" instead of being one of "do's" and "don't's."

But why? Harvey writes:

While each precept is expressed in negative wording, as an abstention, one who keeps these 'rules of training' increasingly comes to express positive virtues. As the roots of unskillful action are weakened, the natural depth-purity of the mind can manifest itself. (277)

Of course, we cannot deny that one becomes more inclined towards positive values by abstaining from bad ones, but we still wonder why the Buddha does not prescribe some, if not all, positive values as compulsory. Clearly this situation is not satisfactory to Gombrich, who writes: "The positive values of kindness and unselfishness characterize Buddhism better than do the moral precepts for the laity, which are expressed negatively." (*Theravāda* 66).

However, after answering Sandel's dilemma, I think I can answer why the Buddha prescribed moral precepts for the laity, as well as many monastic rules, only as various types of abstention. To elaborate, even though intention is true karma, it is more practical to teach in terms of concrete acts, e.g., "Thou shall not kill, etc." And because a given type of abstention is nothing but a refusal to perform a certain act, we are wholly responsible in our success or failure in abstaining from some evil deed. Then it is only fair if we are asked to perform certain types of abstinence compulsorily.

On the other hand, it depends partly on external circumstances to perform a positive act successfully; we have seen in the trolley dilemma discussed in this paper,

for instance, that external circumstances have prevented the trolley driver, whatever his choice may be, from saving all the workers. It means we cannot be held wholly responsible for our success or failure in performing a positive deed. This is *the reason why* positive values are only recommended, not made compulsory, in Buddhist ethics, an important fact that modern scholars like Gombrich and Harvey have seemingly overlooked.

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