Off the Rails

Thin Moral Thinking and Stylized Ethical Dilemmas

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Abstract: This introduction situates the trolley problem and other such dilemmas in anthropological debates about contextualization and abstraction both within and beyond the realm of the moral. We highlight some of the criticisms anthropologists have made of the "thinness" of ethical thought experiments while also suggesting some ways in which philosophers might wish to defend them. We also point to a growing interest on the part of a range of anthropologists in formalized, stylized, and abbreviated modes of ethical reasoning, and emphasize the importance of attending to such forms of reasoning, even though they may conflict with our disciplinary preference for the "thick" and the contextualized.

Keywords: contextualization, ethics, philosophy, thought experiments, trolley problems

In a recent essay, Liana Chua and colleagues (2021: 370) provocatively ask: "In an era of mass extinction, who gets a life jacket, who is left to drown or swim—and on what basis?" Posed in this form, the question evidently seeks to spotlight a moral concern and to suggest that there might be an anthropological frame for addressing it. Yet it also clearly alludes to something else, a tradition of moral problematizing or argumentation that is usually rather foreign to anthropological analysis and description: the thought experiment, or, more specifically, the stylized ethical dilemma. Deployed most recognizably by moral philosophers but recycled in other kinds of academic fields and popular debates, the stylized ethical dilemma is perhaps best known through the series of philosophical exercises often collectively termed "the trolley problem" (see Lillehammer 2023). In its most basic form, the trolley problem poses the moral dilemma faced by the driver of (or bystander to) an out-of-control tram that

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will either kill one person or five, depending on the choice made. While it is sometimes assumed that the "problem" consists in the choice faced in this dilemma (kill or let one person die in order to save five, or do not do so), in fact the point of the original versions (in Foot 1967, or Thomson 1971, say) is to compare one's intuitive answer to this dilemma with the answer one provides to a comparable but slightly different dilemma, and ask why our intuitions differ, if indeed they do.

While the trolley problem is the most well-known instance of a stylized ethical dilemma, other speculative scenarios are also familiar. In this case, it is the problem of who gets to wear a life jacket (and who does not) or, in an alternative framing, who gets a place on the lifeboat (perhaps the best-known philosophical treatment of the lifeboat problem is offered by Tom Regan [(1983) 2004] in *The Case for Animal Rights* [see Hardin 1974]). Such stylized ethical dilemmas usually ask their reader to decide between two or more choices, each of which has outcomes for the life chances of others and serious moral consequences for the chooser. Indeed, the circumstances are invariably extreme or even fantastical, as they very often are in philosophical thought experiments more broadly. There is a large family of such thought experiments both within and beyond the field of ethics, from Zeno's Paradox to Schrödinger's Cat, and though we largely confine ourselves here to discussing ethics (though see Heywood, this volume), the features of stylization we identify are shared by many members of this family.

The circumstances involved in these dilemmas are not only often extreme and fantastical, they are also, as anthropologists like to point out, heavily decontextualized. In a typical thought experiment, the characters are thinly drawn; we are usually told nothing about their background or the basis of the relations between them. In fact, the characters and the scenario that they operate within are drawn in both abstract and abbreviated terms. When considered as a literary genre, the stylized ethical dilemma seems to exist without cultural reference points and sociality seems not to matter. For these reasons and others, anthropologists have conventionally been rather suspicious of stylized ethical dilemmas such as the trolley problem (on trolley problems specifically, see, e.g., Beckett 2019; Eyal 2020; Keane 2015, 2021; cf. Wentzer 2018). Their typical response has either been to try to glean context within the problem, for instance the context of Euro-American traditions of individualism, or, say, the context of a certain neoliberal ethics; or, alternatively, to propose that what anthropology can substitute for such "thin" thinking is precisely thickness or layers of context for understanding moral problems. This critical impulse toward stylization and abstraction in philosophical ethics is arguably a foundation stone of the anthropology of ethics, which, as Michael Lambek put it in one programmatic text, "speaks to the urgency and immediacy yet ordinariness of the ethical rather than reverting to hypothetical instances and

ultimately to reified abstractions" (2010: 4). More recently—and in keeping with an extensive body of work, much of which has been in critical dialogue with philosophy's tendency toward abstraction—Veena Das has attacked what she calls "as if" philosophical engagements and their inability to capture what Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond term "inordinate knowledge," or experiences of life that exceed argumentation and can only be conveyed through examples (2022: 23).

Such excess is exactly what Chua and colleagues (2021) go on to provide. In a very recognizable form, the authors address the question they initially set by giving us shifting ethnographic and historical frames for appreciating the problem of "who gets a life jacket." The scenario we are invited to consider more concretely is the practice of orangutan conservation, sponsored by Global North NGOs but carried out in rescue and rehabilitation centers in both Borneo and Sumatra (2021: 371). In classic form, the essay begins with a vignette, which we are told is sourced from the fieldnotes of Viola Schreer. In fact, it is this vignette that also provides the prompt for their original question, since Schreer describes part of the process of orangutan release in Indonesian Borneo, which sees individual orangutans loaded onto separate boats and their cages each protected by floats before a trip upriver. The fieldnotes go on to quote a villager named Bapa Dini, who witnesses this preparation but observes that only the orangutans appear to be given a life jacket. "Whether local people die or drown," Bapa Dini is quoted as commenting, "doesn't seem to matter" (2021: 370). While not itself a stylized ethical dilemma (the reader is not directly invited to decide who should get a life jacket), it is increasingly clear that we are to be asked to reflect upon this problem by considering cultural perspectives with diverse stakes in the issue of orangutan conservation. Indeed, Chua and colleagues take us through varyingly commensurate and incommensurate "regimes of responsibility, ownership, legitimacy and rights" (2021: 370), from the interests and agency of local people, conservation organizations, national governments, and orangutans themselves. By the end, we are asked to return to the opening vignette and to ask again "who/what gets life jackets, who/what makes these decisions (and on what grounds), who/what manages these processes, and who/what is left to drown or swim" (2021: 381).

In the last pages, Chua and colleagues displace the moral concept of responsibility and instead propose an "ethics of responsivity" (2021: 381), which we are told the authors have learned from "the NGO workers and villagers that . . . [they] encountered." While the detail of that ethical proposition is not relevant for our purposes, the caution that accompanies it certainly is. For Chua and colleagues advise that this ethics "should not simply be a thought experiment or matter of creative, broad-brush speculation" (2021: 381). Instead, it should remain open to "seeking new connections and lifelines . . . across its shifting, uncommon terrains." As the authors conclude, "the question of who gets a

life jacket is historically and politically charged, with concrete implications for both present and future" (2021: 381).

Their concluding observations are useful because they speak to a wider sense of what anthropologists tend to find convincing in terms of moral argumentation or moral insight. Indeed, the authors' observations exemplify a certain kind of normative moral suasion within contemporary sociocultural anthropology, which relies not just upon appeal to context but also to interconnection and to systemic or structural explanations for understanding individual action and decision-making. The power of such moral insight renders thought experiments such as stylized ethical dilemmas even more suspicious to the general anthropological reader.

This sort of position on stylized ethical dilemmas is perhaps best exemplified in one of the most influential and important recent works on ethics in anthropology, Webb Keane's *Ethical Life* (2015). Keane argues that trolley problems are artificial and lacking real-world relevance; that their results aim at generalization but are in fact based on assumptions about "educated . . . urbanized, industrialized societies" (2015: 7); and, most importantly, that "the time frame is narrow, the social focus is on the individual actor, and the basic contrast is between rational and irrational decisions. Some aspects of ethical life are like this, but much is not" (2015: 7; and see Fried 2012 for comparable objections from within philosophy itself).

Such objections are eminently reasonable, and, targeted as they are at the sins of abstraction and decontextualization, they also share features with anthropological objections to an array of other things too (economic models, scientific theories, the language of human rights, etc). Yet at least in this case, they may risk missing something, insofar as they ignore the fact that stylization—in the sense of crafting something to fit a particular form—is precisely the point of stylized ethical dilemmas (see Colburn, this volume). They are—often, at least—supposed to be abbreviated, abstract, reductive, lacking context, and formulaic. Anthropologists are habituated to applying such adjectives to bad ethnography, but we should surely be wary of imagining that every engagement with ethical life and moral reasoning aims at ethnographic virtuosity (cf. Clarke 2012 for a comparable argument about the importance of rules).

Indeed, while a vast array of empirical work in moral psychology over the last two decades or so has sought to demonstrate the relevance of what is sometimes called "trolleyology" to real-world problems ranging from driverless cars to the COVID-19 pandemic (see, e.g., Di Nucci 2023; Nyholm 2023), one of the most well-known proponents of this research is quite explicit in arguing that trolley problems "were never intended to serve as stand-ins for real-life transportation emergencies" (Greene 2023: 164). Their purpose, instead, both in this empirical work and in their original philosophical formulations, was to function precisely as "special cases" that reveal what might otherwise be

surprising things about moral intuitions. That is, they are supposed to tell us something relevant and interesting about ethics—famously, about how we might think about abortion, for example, in the first deployment of the trolley problem (Foot 1967)—not by representing or substituting for "real-life" ethics but by formulating hypothetical scenarios whose specific purpose is—often—to examine the consistency of our moral intuitions or map their structure. That such scenarios are hypothetical does not in and of itself render them irrelevant to real life, of course: as the same moral psychologist asks rhetorically: "Would you vote for a politician who said that they would nuclear-bomb millions of foreigners if, hypothetically, this could save one co-national's life?" (Greene 2023: 162).

Just as stylization need not imply irrelevance to the complexities of everyday life, neither need it imply simplicity. While the original formulations of the trolley problem involved the kind of stark and binary choices Keane rightly complains of, as well as assuming certain foreknowledge of consequences, there are now a myriad of highly complex variations on these originals, which are often designed to pick up on the fact that seemingly minor variations have large effects on responses and which more recently have involved intricate mathematical calculations of risk and uncertainty (see, e.g., Greene 2023: 162; Kamm 2007).

Nor are the "results" of stylized ethical dilemmas always assumed to be general, either in application to "all humans," as Keane suggests (2015: 7), or in the kinds of ethical conclusions they generate. On the former question, there is now a large—if in many ways still flawed from an anthropological perspective—body of literature on cross-cultural variation in responses to the trolley problem, including some research on what are called "small-scale societies" that are said to place less value on individualism than our own (see, e.g., Gold 2023; Gold et al. 2014). On the latter, far from being fundamentally consequentialist in their assumption that the ideal choice is always to save more lives, the original trolley problem "*assumes* that utilitarianism is false" (Kahane and Everett 2023: 136; italics in original); if it did not, there would be no problem at all. The problem emerges precisely because in two scenarios, both of which involve sacrificing one life to save five, the subject—it is alleged—makes entirely different choices based on factors other than consequences.

Nor does the original trolley problem make any mention of Kant or deontological ethics:

> Foot and Thomson, and those moral philosophers who have followed in their footsteps, typically approach this puzzle not by applying to it some sweeping ethical theory but in a bottom-up manner. The goal is to map a complex local moral terrain without artificially imposing on it any rigid, overarching theoretical structure. The assumption is that each moral domain needs to be explored separately, often using distinctive thought

> experiments that bring out what might be puzzling in *that* moral context. (Kahane and Everett 2023: 135; italics in original)

Indeed, there are now even interpretations of the trolley problem from anthropology's preferred school of philosophical reflection on moral reasoning, namely virtue ethics (see, e.g., Van Zyl 2023).

All that said, our aim in this special section is not to praise stylized ethical dilemmas like trolley problems, just as it is not to bury them. Rather, it is to take some initial steps in seeking to account for their appeal as a form of moral reflection both in social scientific disciplines adjacent to anthropology and indeed in everyday ethical life. No matter how easily they are dismissed by anthropologists, the fact that many of our colleagues in philosophy, psychology, law, and economics find stylized ethical dilemmas useful is hard to ignore. Even harder to ignore should be the fact that reasoning from stylized hypothetical thought experiments ("What would I do if . . . ?") is far from being the exclusive preserve of arcane academic philosophy: as Bernard Williams (1976) and others have argued, life can involve making tragic choices with no perfectly ideal outcome, and a basic consequence of this is that consideration of how one might make such choices is often imagined to be a virtuous exercise.[1] More prosaically, it is clear that a number of philosophical thought experiments—including the trolley problem, but also the prisoners' dilemma, the ticking time bomb, and lifeboat ethics—have themselves become part of popular culture; this includes featuring as material for endless BuzzFeed quizzes and YouTube videos. Given all this, it is surely incumbent upon ethnographers of ethical life to be able to say more about such ways of thinking about morality than that they are wrong. How might we account for such apparently "thin" moral thinking in our own characteristically "thickly" descriptive fashion?

Moreover, if indeed there is something to be learned from the existence of stylized moral reasoning in both the academy and ordinary life, what can it tell anthropologists about our preferential assumptions about abbreviation, abstraction, and decontextualization? Is the distinction between ethnographic examples and thought experiments one of degree or kind? Is contextualization a scale, and ethnography thus legible as a "bloated" form of stylization? What are the qualities and capacities of stylization as a form of reasoning?

Part of our aim in raising these latter set of questions is to connect the issues of stylization and abbreviation in moral reasoning with a wider family of ethnographic practices—many still within the ambit of ethics—in which stylization and abbreviation are also important, and which have been the subject of productive ethnographic exploration and theorization. Aside from classic forms of abbreviation such as the Weberian ideal type, or the Manchester School's extended case, in a recent special issue Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak (2015) have explored the "power of the example" in a range of contexts, and have

noted the ways in which exemplification is both an inescapable aspect of anthropological writing and also rarely the object of explicit reflection—indeed it is often instead one of suspicion or contempt (cf. Flyvbjerg 2001 on suspicion directed at "case studies"; but on examples, see Humphrey 1997; Needham 1985; and more recently Robbins 2018). In his contribution to that issue, for example, Bandak (2015) examines the ways in which the form of the sermon in Christian churches in Damascus serves to frame the lives of saints in particular ways, ways which are designed to allow them to be drawn on for moral and ethical edification. We ourselves, in turn, have recently described the ways in which exemplarity is deployed in and around fascist and far-right political movements with similar intent (Heywood 2022; Reed 2022). One might imagine parables as comparable stylistic forms, "scripts," in Naomi Haynes's formulation, with roles that people "can play in hopes of replicating the original results" (2014: 359), as well as hagiographies, which, in the case of Thai Buddhism, Joanna Cook (2009) has shown are similarly reliant on certain narrative conventions to convey ethical values. What all these forms share with the trolley problem, and the family of ethical thought experiments more broadly, are the qualities of stylization and simplification: they share, to some extent or another, certain conventional features that establish them as particular forms, and to fit such forms they are necessarily and intentionally simplified.

For many good and laudable reasons, it may be hard for anthropologists to see virtue in the abbreviated, the simplified, and the abstract (Heywood 2018, 2023; Heywood and Candea 2023; Reed 2006). Ethnographic virtuosity as a craft tends to involve complexity, fine-grained detail, and nuance. Yet as sociologist Kieran Healy (2017) has recently noted in a piece entitled "Fuck Nuance," there are several drawbacks to identifying nuance as a social scientific virtue, *tout court*. Among such reasons is the fact that doing so tempts one to imagine that the addition of details and particulars to an argument or idea is necessarily a good thing, even where they have been withdrawn for a reason in the first place, whether because no argument can be both useful and capacious enough to incorporate all of our preferred particulars ("class, institutions, emotions, structure, culture, interaction" are Healy's sociological examples, but it is not hard to imagine anthropological equivalents) or because the model has been designed to be reductive in the first place, as in the case of trolley problems and other thought experiments.

This is not the place to address the disciplinary consequences of our anti-abbreviative prejudices (though see Heywood, this volume). Our point for now is that it would be a shame for such prejudices to hinder our ability to understand how others (be they philosophers, animal rights activists, or Mormon transcendentalists) engage in stylized and abbreviated modes of ethical reasoning.

What follows are, appropriately, a range of abbreviated explorations of these and other questions, beginning with an account from a philosopher of why

anthropologists might be interested not only in trolley-problem-style thinking, but also in why people might reject such thinking (and see Lillehammer 2023), and going on to explore in a range of ways how anthropologists might experiment—ethnographically and theoretically—with stylized ethical dilemmas, writing with, rather than just against, the spirit of the trolley problem.

In the three opening articles, readers are introduced to the formal philosophical tradition of stylized ethical dilemma-making and especially to the tradition around trolley problems. In the first and second articles, we hear from two philosophers (Lillehammer and Colburn), each concerned to excavate the tradition of trolley problems as a matter of philosophical thought and practice. In the third instance, we are introduced to a sense of that tradition in history and real-world context from the perspective of one anthropologist (Cook) concerned to re-evaluate our understanding of both the rationale and ethos behind philosophical exercises such as the trolley problem. In the case of the contributions from Lillehammer and Colburn, there is a conscious effort to anticipate possible lines of anthropological criticism and where necessary to provide a defense but also to speculate on where anthropological inquiry might most productively locate itself. In the case of Cook, there is an invitation to anthropologists to look again at what they think they know about the way trolley problems work and to contextualize their emergence, and especially to reappraise the role of humor within them (a theme that resurfaces in the tone and expression of many articles across this special section).

In the next four articles, anthropologists begin to investigate stylized ethical dilemma-making as an object of ethnographic inquiry. This is done in several directions at once. On the one hand, Cook's contextualization of trolley problems in history is extended into a consideration of what happens to stylized ethical dilemmas when they leave the control of formal philosophizing and become invoked and taken up elsewhere, for instance in other traditions of practice or in moral debate within popular culture. Here, examples include the uptake and reappraisal of the lifeboat problem, familiar to the philosophy of animal rights, within wider UK animal activism (Reed) and the embracing and retooling of certain moves conventional to the trolley problem such as abbreviation and decontextualization within a community or pub philosophy group in Liverpool (Venkatesan). On the other hand, we also get reflections born of analogy-making. Kuan, for instance, invites us to consider points of similarity between certain exercises carried out in a family therapy institute in metropolitan China and the methodology of philosophical thought experiments like the trolley problem. Likewise, Bialecki draws productive analogies between a specific hypothetical moral dilemma within the US-based Mormon Transhumanist Association and the shape and terms of the trolley problem.

Finally, the idea and practice of thought experiments gets broader and more direct treatment in the article by Heywood. Indeed, this last contributor seeks

to do so by offering us a thought experiment of his own, which involves an envisaged encounter between two historical figures, one drawn from academic philosophy and the other from the foundation of social anthropology. The article plays with the conventional invitation, central to both ethnography and thought experiments, to imaginatively engage with the scenario proposed. It also brings us back to a recurring question across the articles, namely the connection or tension between abstraction (or perhaps stylization or decontextualization) and "reality." But this time, instead of proceeding as if there really is a sort of distinction between the abstract and real life, Heywood leaves us with a sense of that continuum as entirely blurred.

Of course, other intriguing strands get picked up and developed between articles. One important subtheme of the special section is clearly the connections and differences between philosophizing inside and outside the academy. In the article by Venkatesan, for instance, we have a live distinction invoked between teaching philosophy and "doing" philosophy. And in the essay by Reed, activists' sense of a dependent but also external relationship to formal philosophizing around animal rights and animal liberation is key. Some of these concerns also recur in reverse. Our two contributors who teach philosophy, for instance, are concerned to communicate rationales for stylized ethical dilemma-making to non-philosophers, although this time the assumption is that the addressees are professional anthropologists.

We have already mentioned the subtheme of humor, first introduced by Cook, and the theme of analogy-making, which emerges both as methodological preference in articles by Kuan and Bialecki and also as an action worthy of ethnographic or philosophical inquiry for several other authors such as Reed and Heywood. Specific qualities of stylized ethical dilemmas have further joined the concerns of articles together. Both Venkatesan and Kuan are concerned to closely examine the action of decontextualization, for instance. Colburn and Reed each focus on the literary qualities of these dilemmas, and especially the action of simplification and the question of the relationship between ethics and style. And Lillehammer, Cook, and Bialecki all dwell on the either/or dynamic of choice-making, as well as the issues of extreme circumstances and exceptionality.

However, we would like to close this introduction by highlighting another equally important theme across many of the articles: the act of comparison. For, in many cases, insights drawn depend upon the observation that trolley problems and other stylized ethical dilemmas, both inside and beyond formal philosophizing, work through comparison. Whether this is the comparison explicitly or sometimes implicitly made between a stylized scenario and a formal philosophical point of defense, or the comparison between a series of variants in that narrated scenario and the unfolding logic of philosophical argument, or indeed the comparison between the stylized ethical dilemma and its

envisaged "real-world" counterpart, is in some ways beside the point. For there seems to be something about the abstracted, decontextualized, simplified, and stylized attributes of dilemmas like the trolley problem that encourages or enables comparison to work. The observation was one of several prompts given to Candea, who kindly agreed to read this collection and contribute an afterword.

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Note

1. A distinguished tradition of anthropological literature partly, but not exclusively, inspired by Foucault's work on biopolitics, has of course also examined situations in which such tragic choices are forced upon people. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), for example, describes moral thinking in a Brazilian shantytown as a kind of "lifeboat ethics"—with specific reference to the lifeboat problem described by Reed in this volume—in which a morality of triage operates and requires decisions about whom to save and whom to let die.

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