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The Trolley Car Dilemma: The Early Buddhist Answer and Resulting Insights¹

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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 insights that I have discovered along the way.

Introduction

Michael J. Sandel's Harvard course "Justice" 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 five workers working on the track. But it is possible to change tracks, which, if done, will kill one worker

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on the other track. The question 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)

This question presents a dilemma to me, for:

- (1) I have already proved that Buddhist ethics is one of absolute values (Pandita), and I have yet to see any significant argument to the contrary,
- (2) Buddhist ethics says “Thou shall not kill” unequivocally without providing any exception and,
- (3) Whatever choice the trolley driver makes in this scenario will end in one or five people getting killed.

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

Let us begin with 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 depending on the actor’s motives. But how many motives are possible for the trolley driver?

First, I will assume that the driver has enough time, and a cool head, to consider all the pros and cons of his possible choices before he makes his decision. Psychologically, he will focus on either the workers that will be saved or those that will get killed.

If he focuses on the workers that will be saved, his intention will be:

- (1) Either to abstain from killing them,
- (2) Or to save them.

Here I should note that (1) and (2) 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.

On the other hand, if his focus is on those that will be killed, his intention will be:

- (3) To accept the inevitable with equanimity,³
- (4) Or to wish the workers dead because he somehow bears an ill-will towards them.

Out of those four intentions, the last is unwholesome and evil whereas the first three are wholesome.

The Buddhist Answer

If the driver does NOT change tracks:

It is an *unwholesome* deed if he intends to have the five workers on the old track killed. Even though he happens to spare the one worker on the sidetrack to which he chooses not to move, his action does not count

³ As the witness to the looming death of one or more workers, the trolley driver would naturally think of them with compassion (*karuṇā*). But given that he cannot help them, that compassionate feeling may quickly turn into grief, which is unwholesome and accordingly termed “the close enemy of compassion” (Vism 319; *Ñāṇamoḷi* 311). The weapon against the rising of grief in such a case is “equanimity as a divine abode” (*brahmavihārupekkhā*), “the mode of neutrality towards beings” (Vism 160; *Ñāṇamoḷi* 156). Equanimity will enable the trolley driver to accept the fate of certain people with neither grief nor malevolence.

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, or to accept the inevitable fate of the five workers on the old track with equanimity. Although he happens to kill the five workers on the old track on which he is traveling, 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 each other 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 there is *neither* a wholesome nor unwholesome deed arising in this case if the trolley driver is too frightened to do anything, allowing the trolley car to run on, resulting in the death of the five workers. In this case, he is free from moral responsibility.

If the driver CHANGES tracks:

It is an *unwholesome* deed if he intends to have the single worker killed on the new track. Even though he happens to spare five workers on the old track on which he was moving, 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, or to accept the inevitable fate of the single worker on the new track with equanimity. Even though he happens to kill the single worker on the new track to which he has

moved, 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.

Insights

As Gombrich says, when the Buddha defines karma as nothing but intention:

He ethicized it completely, made morality intrinsic, and so denied all soteriological value to ritual and all ultimate value to social distinctions. In place of a highly particularistic view of duty he propounded a simple and universal ethical dualism of right and wrong. (*Theravāda* 68)

But the Buddha has done even more, I must say. As we have seen very clearly from the Buddhist answer to the Trolley Dilemma, Buddhism assigns different moral values to the same act when it is driven by different mental states. This is what I call a complete *psychologization of ethics*.

Furthermore, let us suppose that the Buddha had made a moral precept saying one *must* save lives. It would have been impossible to observe such a rule in this scenario, which fact has led me to consider 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. (*What* 77)

Gombrich is right. Even though, for example, “Thou shall not kill” has been the first 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 is always a suggested act. So Buddhist ethics becomes a system of “don’ts” and “may-do’s” instead of one of “do’s” and “don’ts.” 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 unskilful 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 did 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 “Trolley Dilemma,” I think I can answer why the Buddha prescribes moral precepts for the laity, as well as for many monastic rules, only as various types of abstention. To elaborate, even though intention is true *karma*, it is more practical to teach abstinence in terms of concrete acts that one should avoid, 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, even though the Buddha had to teach positive deeds in terms of concrete acts, e.g., “You should give donations,” etc., he could not ignore the fact that 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.

Abbreviations

AN *Āṅguttara-Nikāya*

Vism *The Visuddhi-Magga of Buddhaghosa*

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