‘Deconstructing the core ethical dilemmas of the trolley problem.’

The Trolley Problem

Deacon Griffiths

15 October 2026

Note

While this paper was originally intended for the Bible Institute of South Africa, it has been adapted to a shorter, more concise and less academic paper.

Introduction: Addressing Personal Bias Within the Realm of Ethics

When approaching any topic of vast public contention, one should strive to remove as much bias as possible from ones own mind in an attempt to remain objective and as intellectually honest as possible. This is what I will be striving to do in this paper on the Trolley Problem – it is of note that while there is no excessive mention of Philippa Foot, her work is greatly appreciated in the introduction and creation of this hypothetical.
The main question for this paper is quite simple; which result of the Trolley Problem is Biblically Ethical?

The Hypothetical: Setting the stage

The trolley problem is a very common ethical dilemma and is layed out below:
A trolley(part of a train, sometimes called a runaway train) is traveling along a train track toward two groups of people who are tied down onto the track. If the trains course is left unaltered, the train will barrel forward over a group of two or more persons lying on the main track. However, if the observer pulls a lever, the train is diverted onto a side track, on which is tied just one person, unable to move.
In both situations the persons death is inevitable; there is no possible alternative solution to the dilemma.

What are the main sub-parts of this hypothetical? I would propose a laying out of just two sub-parts of this dilemma as listed below.
First, the problem of action vs. inaction; is a person liable for the lives of those they had a chance to save, even if they did not directly influence the situation, but rather refrained from action?
Second, the problem of value of human life; what determines the value of human life? Quantity, quality, social contribution or something else?

Action vs Inaction:

Is someone morally liable for inaction as well as action? If so, to what level are they held morally liable? And at what point do they become morally liable?

Let us consider a completely separate hypothetical to that posed in the beginning of this paper; one in which there is a child about to get molested or kidnapped, with you as the sole witness.

Interfering and stopping this evil act from occurring is quite simple and does not necessarily result in any bodily harm for you, however it requires action. The alternative, inaction, would be to just walk away and never look back.

To the vast majority of people, they would find the prior to be morally right, and the latter scenario to be morally evil. As well as that, in James 4:17 (ESV), James writes;

"17 So whoever knows the right thing
to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

From this verse, it appears that inaction in this situation (under the assumption that the person who has found themselves in this scenario knows what act is morally right) is morally wrong.

This provides a satisfactory answer to the first question of Inactivity vs Activity, which is that inactivity in a scenario in which there is a clear morally 'good' action, or at least a morally 'better' action is wrong.(Wayne Grudem speaks widely on the topic of morally *better* decisions without them being necessarily right in an isolated scenario in 'Christian Ethics' p. 182-204).

Value of Human Life: How Do We Measure It?

Is it ethical to choose between two groups of persons in any circumstance, considering that all humans are generally believed to have equal intrinsic value in Christian circles? If so – or if forced to – what should we judge/choose based upon?

Today's culture is one in which all judgment against any group of people is regarded as inherently morally evil and is heavily condemned, especially in liberal circles. This has led the world into a dangerous place; it is now generally regarded as morally wrong to judge someone based on their skin color and cross the road to avoid danger, even though statistics show that this action is fully justified due to the fact that over 50% of homicides in the United States are committed by members of the black racial group (accounting for 15% of the population). This is a fairly unrelated example, however I believe it to demonstrate the principle fairly adequately: we SHOULD be judging others, which leads to several other questions of relevance such as, what criteria should we be judging others on?

Before beginning to answer the afore stated question, it is important to address biblical concerns that some might raise, the most popular verse on the topic of judgment being Matthew 7:1-2(ESV), reading as follows:

> *"Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment*
> *you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure*
> *you use it will be measured to you."*

This is by far the most popular bible verse on the topic, however when considering the context of this statement from the mouth of Christ, it is important to note that He is talking about being a hypocrite, clearly shown in the verse after, in which Christ makes a case for not disregarding the 'plank' in ones own eye while evaluating the 'speck of dust' in your brothers eye. This is an analogy for not judging someone else based on a moral set which you yourself do not strive to follow. This is a very helpful sentiment, however it does not mean that we should never judge in general.

In light of this, what criteria should we judge others upon? Obviously, there are many fields of judgment and many individual ethical concerns within these different fields of judgment. As a result, this paper will only consider the sort of judgment applicable to the hypothetical posed at the beginning of this paper.

The first consideration that we should contemplate is that of the Biblical definition of value for human individuals. Firstly, the Book is clear on what we should *not* judge others based upon, that being Appearance (John 7:24), however it is also clear on what *is* permitted for us to judge based upon, which is 'their fruits' (Matthew 7:15–16 – this talks specifically about false prophets, but it is assumed that it is permitted elsewhere and this is not a mere exception). Since this criteria is not relevant due to the sudden and isolated nature of the hypothetical, any person in this scenario is forced to judge on quantity of human life saved, resulting in judgment based upon consequences, on which Scripture is less clear than other matters. This topic breaches into the topic of utilitarianism, which is defined below according to Stanford:

> "*A moral theory is a form of consequentialism if and only if it assesses acts and/or character traits, practices, and institutions solely in terms of the goodness of the consequences. Historically, utilitarianism has been the best-known form of consequentialism. Utilitarianism assesses acts and/or character traits, practices, and institutions solely in terms of overall net benefit. Overall net benefit is often referred to as aggregate well-being or welfare. Aggregate welfare is calculated by counting a benefit or harm to any one individual the same as the same size benefit or harm to any other individual, and then adding all the benefits and harms together to reach an aggregate sum. There is considerable dispute among consequentialists about what the best account of welfare is."*
> (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism-rule/, accessed 15 October 2026)

If we examine the Law in the Book(The Ten Commandments), we see that the action of switching the track to kill the one human would be strictly sinful, since it directly results in the death of another human being intentionally, fitting the definition of murder (prohibited in the 6th

commandment). This is where the argument for rule-consequentialism is helpful, since it argues for the authority and applicability of Scriptural rules and God's perfect law, while still allowing for exceptions to this norm under certain restrictive circumstances. This would include the afore-stated hypothetical, in which a single act of moral unrighteousness would result in the greater moral good.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the biblical final decision for the Trolley Problem is to divert the train to kill the single human individual due to the validity that can be found in the rule-consequentialist argument, thereby stating that a single immoral act – killing a single human - leading to the greater good/consequence – saving two or more humans – is in reality regarded as a morally better act, leading to the action of killing the single human as a result of switching the train lines.

Bibliography

Grudem, W. (2024) '*Christian Ethics: living a life that is pleasing to God*'. Crossway: Wheaton, Illinois.

Hooker, Brad, '*Rule Consequentialism*' (Spring 2023 Edition). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.),
URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/consequentialism-rule. (Accessed: 15 October 2026)

Paper modified 13 November 2026.

AI Declaration:
No AI was used in the writing of the content of this paper.