

“A LOVELY, NASTY DIFFICULTY”

What’s Funny about Killing Fat Men?

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Abstract: Anthropologists have criticized thought experiments for the lack of context and depth that they provide. But are they context-free? In this article, I take an ethnographic approach to the development of trolley problems in the 1960s and 1970s, examining the culture of humor in which they were crafted and the gendered political contexts in which they were employed. I argue that, for female philosophers writing about abortion, macabre humor provided a way of cutting through the overblown and the sentimental. Historical and cultural contextualization of trolley problems reveals the work that stylized ethical dilemmas performed. In a highly politicized and gendered context, the “thinness” of examples of “fat” men was methodologically and rhetorically powerful.

Keywords: cultural contextualization, culture of humor, dark humor, gendered politics, trolley problems

In 1967, the “grande dame of philosophy” (O’Grady 2010), Philippa Foot (1967), published her article “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect.” In it, she argued that “negative duties,” like the duty not to kill, have a greater hold over our moral responses than “positive duties,” like the duty to save lives. Foot developed what would later be named by Judith Jarvis Thomson as “the trolley problem”: An out-of-control tram is speeding towards five workers. The driver has the ability to pull a lever and change the tram’s path, so it hits just one person (1967: 2). Foot compared the out-of-control tram with a scenario in which a mob threatens to kill five hostages unless a judge fits up an innocent person and executes them. She argued that, intuitively, it is morally impermissible for the judge to cause the death of the one to save the five, while it is morally permissible for the driver to do so. In so doing, she unpicked the implications of the doctrine of the double effect, which



distinguishes between the intentions behind an action and consequences foreseen but not desired. She argued that some harms are permissible as the unintended consequences of acts aiming at a greater good.

Foot's intervention was intentionally funny. She embellishes her 1967 discussion by saying that steering a tram toward the one is not the same as aiming at his death, and we cannot be certain that he would die, providing that "the driver of the tram does *not* then leap off and brain him with a crowbar" (1967: 5). And she introduces as "light relief" a party of cave divers who have been trapped in a cave by the heft of a "fat man" getting wedged in the entrance while floodwaters rise. Is it morally acceptable for the divers to blast their overweight leader out of the mouth of the cave with dynamite? For Foot, this scenario reveals how ridiculous one version of the doctrine of the double effect is because it holds that the death of the leader might be taken as merely a foreseen consequence of the act of blowing him up. As she says: "We didn't want to kill him . . . only to blow him into small pieces" (1967: 2). She sums up her use of thought experiments by emphasizing that "the levity of the examples is not meant to offend" (1967: 5).

In her rejoinder to Foot, Judith Jarvis Thomson describes Foot's trolley problem as "a lovely, nasty difficulty" (the quote from my title) in her similarly humorous consideration of the difference between killing and letting die (1976: 206). Thomson dug into the moral complexities of her grisly subject matter using a series of more and more convoluted variants: you are a bystander, the track is a loop, theft is involved, the alternative track is occupied by a convalescent picknicker . . . who has the personal assurance of the mayor that the track is a trolley-free zone. She famously developed the footbridge / fat man variant (1976: 207–208):

George is on a footbridge over the trolley tracks. An out-of-control trolley is fast approaching five people. George knows that the only way to stop an out-of-control trolley is to drop a very heavy weight into its path. But the only available, sufficiently heavy weight is a fat man, also watching the trolley from the footbridge. George can shove the fat man onto the track in the path of the trolley, killing the fat man; or he can refrain from doing this, letting the five die.

Thomson ups the ante: it is no longer the driver pulling a switch, but you, on a bridge, pushing a man to his death. Her humor is particularly gleeful in its gruesomeness.

Anthropologists have criticized thought experiments for the lack of context and depth that they provide. In contrast to anthropology's commitment to "thick" description, trolley problems, and thought experiments like them, are decidedly thin (see Keane 2015: 7). The bare bones of the thought experiment are intended to cut away extraneous details to get at knotty moral distinctions.

But are they context-free? In this article, I respond to the provocation of this special section to consider the appeal of thought experiments by taking an ethnographic approach to the development of trolley problems. Examining the culture of humor in which they were crafted and the gendered political contexts in which they were employed, I argue that, for female philosophers writing about abortion in the 1960s and 1970s, macabre humor provided a way of cutting through the overblown and the sentimental. Historical and cultural contextualization of trolley problems reveals the work that stylized ethical dilemmas performed. In a highly politicized and gendered context, the "thinness" of examples of "fat" men was methodologically and rhetorically powerful.

Why So Funny? The Culture of a Joke

Foot's humorous examples are characteristic of Oxford philosophy in the post-war years. The use of prosaic yet odd scenarios acted as a leveler, puncturing some of the seriousness of philosophical debate and allowing for more pragmatic exploration of philosophical complexities. While some philosophers were constitutionally serious (Hare, for example, was deadly earnest [Lipscomb 2021: 192]), others, such as Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin, were committed to levity as a characteristic of their work. As Nikhil Krishnan writes: "Jokiness stands in one sense against seriousness; in another, it represents only a rejection of the characteristic postures of seriousness, of which humourless-ness is surely the most obvious" (2023: 304). Oxford philosophy of the time subverted "some of the traditional rhetoric of seriousness in the inherited tradition to find room for another, more playful, more ambiguous, vision of what philosophy might be" (2023: 304). This was a rejection of gravity as a sign of imposture. Everyday but surreal examples, laced with humor, punctured pomposity and challenged those who would take themselves, rather than the debates on the table, too seriously.

Foot's breakthrough articles were characterized by a light tone and precision. Much of her writing is not about big pictures of reality, but rather attends to the subtleties of language—it is painstaking, intelligent, and funny. For example, in her famous critique of R. M. Hare, Foot (1958) illustrates her argument that moral judgments depend on human concerns with the whimsical example of looking at hedgehogs in the moonlight.¹ One of the things that Foot was commended for in her critique of Hare's emotivism was her cleverness—not the substance of the argument, per se, but the combination of insight, wit, and perspicacity with which she delivered it. Being clever was a term of high praise in 1950s Oxford: it encompassed facility with concepts, dialectical skill, and wit (Lipscomb 2021: 192). Humor enabled the serious work of philosophy to be done.

Why So Dark? Metaphysics and Abortion

Female philosophers had a significant influence on the philosophy of the time (Krishnan 2023; Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2023). Mary Midgley, Elisabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch were contemporaries who shared intense and at times complicated friendships. They would meet in Foot's Park Street kitchen in Oxford, unified in their rejection of emotivism in the work of A. J. Ayer and Hare as intellectual descendants of Hume. They protested the idea that nothing "mattered" in ethics (see Hare 1972), the separation of fact and value, and the dismissal of metaphysics. In a later memoir, Mary Midgley described the mood in Foot's kitchen as a resounding "No!" to such ideas (Krishnan 2023: 1911; see also Midgley 2005).

But the humor in Foot's article about abortion is strikingly dark. She is no longer conjuring hedgehogs in the moonlight but is instead exploding spelunkers and braining bystanders. The article was published in 1967, the year in which an act of Parliament legalized and regulated abortion in the United Kingdom (except for Northern Ireland). Abortion was a topic of intense public interest at the time, and the article itself had notable impact, contributing to a lively debate about the morality of an unsettled and unsettling issue, whether unborn children ought to receive the same rights as adults and children. Philosophical intervention on the subject was a necessarily gendered issue, and Foot's use of black humor was simultaneously stylistic and methodological: it both signaled a commitment to philosophical distance from a subject about which she might have been assumed to be sentimental and enabled the distance necessary for the development of the position itself. As a "metaphysical animal," Foot was committedly neither an emotivist nor a sentimental subject (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2023).

Similarly, writing in America, Thomson reserved her most macabre and extended thought experiment for her article "A Defense of Abortion" (1971), published two years before *Roe vs. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court. In it, Thomson argues that a fetus's right to life does not override the pregnant person's right to jurisdiction over their body:

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. [If he is unplugged from you now, he will die; but in nine months] he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you. (Thomson 1971: 48)

As scenarios go, it is a fairly elaborate way to illustrate that the right to life does not include the right to use another person's body. It is perhaps no accident that Thomson reserves her darkest humor for an article about the rights of the foetus—again, a potentially emotive issue in which a female philosopher is staking her claim through wickedly dark comedy. As Andre Breton argues, dark humor "is the mortal enemy of sentimentality" (1997: xix; see also Barr 2021). Both Foot's and Thomson's interventions in the abortion debate were laced with macabre humor. This was simultaneously a rhetorically powerful and methodologically useful technique for contributing to a topic about which there was a social expectation that women might be sentimental.

Though the trolley problem is often co-opted as the archetypal utilitarian decision-making puzzle, Foot herself was a pioneer of virtue ethics and she attacked subjectivism and utilitarianism throughout her career (O'Grady 2010). Foot's focus shifted in the 1950s, along with Anscombe's, from thinking about what makes an isolated action good or bad, to an Aristotelian interest in what makes a person good or bad in the long term. She argued that morality is not so much a series of logically consistent, well-calculated decisions, but is about how to live, how to become the sort of person who habitually and happily does virtuous things. She used the trolley problem not to draw out the utilitarian win of saving the five by sacrificing the one, but to pinpoint fine distinctions in moral permissibility where an action has both good and bad results. In developing the bystander variant and the footbridge variant, Judith Jarvis Thomson's argument was that there is a difference between personal and impersonal moral violations or responses to harm. People are less likely to push a man than pull a lever even though in both cases the action results in a death. What the footbridge enabled Thomson to do was consider physical proximity on the one hand and the distinction between killing and letting die on the other, and to think about the value of gut feelings in moral decision-making.

What's So Funny? The Life Course of a Joke

The humor of Foot's and Thomson's thought experiments rests on a flirtation with a kind of "moral emergency" in which we have the chance to hypothesize (and generalize) about mortal actions we might take (pulling levers, pushing men) and the grisly effects that they might have on the external world (squishing picknickers, killing violinists) at a distance from the character-forming effects that such actions would have. This abstraction only becomes more immorally tantalizing (and funny?) once we are given contextual details (the five knew the risks when they signed up for the job, the one never uses her indicators when turning) or the relationship between moral decisions and intentions (the five are bringing my party dress, the one is a convalescent

picnicker). Humor cuts through seriousness and trivializes what would be a complex and violent experience, from which we remain psychologically distant. If we really had to cause the deaths of innocent people (no matter how obliquely), it would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

But humor has its seasons. Since Foot's and Thomson's interventions, the limits of permissible speech in the academy have shifted and humor today more frequently reflects the cultural valorization of embodiment, subjectivity, and identity. Students still giggle at the grisly details of thought experiments but frequently find problematic the fact that the man on the bridge or the cave diver are fat. The humor of an earlier generation now codes as body shaming and more than a little cruel. "How does *he* feel about it?" was not a relevant question when Foot suggested that we might explode a spelunker. But, although comedic tastes have changed, we should remember that, a generation ago, black humor was doing important work. Teasing out the culture of philosophy and gendered politics that informed the development of the trolley problem reveals its appeal as a form of moral reflection. While thought experiments are often read as the antithesis of the qualitative thickness of anthropological work, attending to the context of the trolley problem with an anthropological eye reveals that thinness (and fatness) performed culturally important roles in politically charged philosophical arguments.

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Note

1. "If people happened to insist that no one should run round trees left handed, or look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon, this might count as a basic moral principle about which nothing more need be said" (Foot 1958: 512). Foot argues that we need to know what something is for in order to use the word

“good” in an intelligible way. Building on Aristotle and Aquinas, she argues that ethics necessitates an understanding of what makes human lives go well or badly; otherwise, rules might be taken up as universal and therefore moral that, of themselves, are completely pointless.

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