Throw Big Bob in front of the train. Or not

ANTHONY SKELTON

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EXPERIMENTS IN ETHICS

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

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You are out for a brisk walk. You happen upon a railway crossing. Hurtling along the tracks in front of you is a runaway trolley without a driver. If it continues as it is, it will hit and kill five workers standing on the tracks some distance away, whom you cannot warn. Fortunately, you're standing at a switch. If you throw it, you will divert the trolley away from, and therefore save, the five workers. However, you will divert the trolley onto another set of tracks on which stands a lone worker who will certainly be killed.

What should you do? It seems simple, right? You should throw the switch, because on the face of it, it seems far worse to let five people die than to kill one.

But now consider another, similar situation. You are out for a brisk walk. You're crossing over a set of tracks on a bridge where Big Bob likes to do his trainspotting. Again, you see an unmanned runaway trolley hurtling along the tracks. If the

trolley continues as is, it will kill five maintenance people working on the tracks. There is nothing you can do to warn them. But, wait, you know that Big Bob might supply precisely the thing you need to save the workers, his body. You know that if you throw Big Bob onto the tracks below, you'll be able to derail the train and save the five. Big Bob, however, will be no more.

What should you do? This also seems simple, right? You should not throw Big Bob onto the tracks. But hold on, why not? By killing Big Bob, you save more lives. What is so special about Big Bob? Why is saving more lives a conclusive reason to redirect the trolley in the first case, but not to throw Big Bob onto the tracks?

Moral philosophers, like me, spend a lot of time trying to answer these kinds of questions. We rely on a special tool, a tool so essential to the job that it would be impossible without it. This tool is our intuition, our prereflective judgments about the right, the wrong, the good, the evil and the ideal. Not to worry, you have them, too. Just find a comfy chair, think about the example and presto, you, too, will have some intuitions.

Indeed, ethics has long been dealt with by moral philosophers, for the most part, in a purely armchair fashion. But now social psychologists and a group of scientifically minded "experimental philosophers" are entering the fray in the hopes of shedding light on these and similar problems and our intuitions about them.

Interestingly, researchers have found that, among other things, we are more likely to think it is permissible to give Big Bob the heave-ho if we have just finished watching a humorous comedy, and that in the first scenario, we use the part of the brain linked to reason, while in the second, we use a part of the brain associated more with emotion.

But where does this leave us? Some authors of these studies argue that they provide us with the route to the right answers to the above quandaries. But others

are not so sure. This is certainly true of Kwame Anthony Appiah. In his sensible, informed and highly readable new book, *Experiments in Ethics*, the Princeton philosophy professor aims to engage these and other matters in an effort to "bring economics, psychology and philosophy back together ... to reconstitute the 'moral sciences.' " The result is illuminating and important. The book is a model for how to do empirically informed moral philosophy.

Appiah does not think that research in psychology and related disciplines overthrows or replaces moral philosophy; instead, he holds that moral philosophers should welcome them. By doing so, they return to what was once a fine philosophical tradition - found in Hume, Descartes, Plato, Aristotle and J. S. Mill - of blending philosophical thinking with empirical inquiries into the nature of the human being, a tradition that disappeared during the 20th century when philosophers were putatively concerned only with something called "conceptual analysis."

But some of the results are important. According to Appiah, empirical research on the role of character in moral behaviour impugns the Aristotelian idea that the ideal, and therefore flourishing, moral agent possesses a set of firm and enduring traits of character from which moral action reliably flows. It turns out that one's character plays far less of a role in one doing the right thing than do features of the situation in which one finds oneself. If a person drops a set of papers outside a phone booth that I am using, I am much more likely to help him or her if I have just had the good fortune to find coins in the phone's change dispenser. The upshot is that if we want people to do the right thing, we need to work more on their environments than on their characters.

In his discussion of the trolley cases, Appiah maintains that the studies on our decisions as to whether to employ Big Bob as a train stopper do not lead us to the right answers or to an account of how to reason about moral questions. Rather, this research provides us with insight into how our moral capacities evolved and

about what we take to be important in deciding what we ought to do.

In addition, the research reminds us that we are susceptible to serious moral error, and that we need to be chary of relying too much on our intuitions. But whatever they do tell us is of limited value, Appiah argues, since the examples (often by design) leave out much of what is important to and in our moral lives. Indeed, discussion of them is far from relevant to what he contends is the most important preoccupation of moral philosophy, namely, an account of what makes for "a good life."

One of the main aims of this book is to relate moral philosophy and the empirical study of morality "to the concerns of the ordinary, thoughtful person, trying to live a decent life." It is surprising, then, to find that Appiah says nothing much about the recent and voluminous literature on the science of happiness.

Psychologists have found, among other things, that to live well I do not need to be rich or to possess a large house or to frequent fancy restaurants. Instead, I need my basic needs satisfied: close personal relationships, a short commute, control over my environment, and a quiet, secure community in which to reside. If this is correct, one can, it seems - without much loss and even some gain to one's happiness - devote the cash spent on consumer items to those living impoverished or blighted lives. We might find then that psychology helps us to see how we might live a decent form of life while, at the same time, living decently.

Anthony Skelton is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Western Ontario, where his armchair receives a good workout.

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