



University
of Glasgow

Organics Europe Youth Event

Joe Slater

1st September, 2022

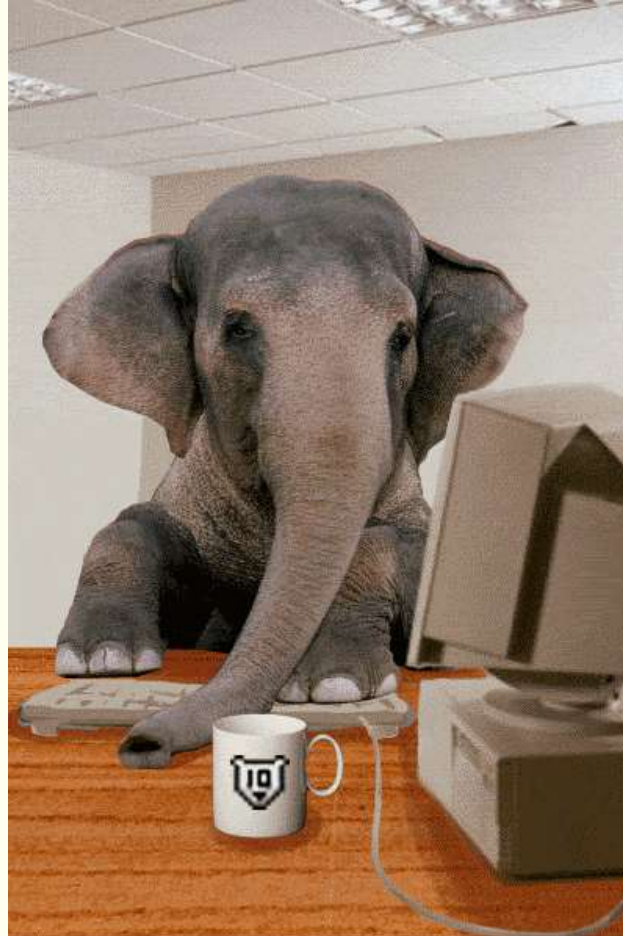
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Before We Begin...





Philosophy

- Philosophy – often seen as mysterious, elitist, and removed from everyday life.
- This is regrettable.
- Philosophy: constructing arguments – providing reasoning from premises to conclusions.
- And everyone does that!
- Professional philosophers – special emphasis on formal features of arguments.





Philosophers

- Philosophy can be about practically anything:
- Epistemological questions – “how do I know I’m really here?” “Could this all be a trick from some evil demon?”.
- Metaphysical questions – “is time real?”, “is there a God?”, “what is consciousness?”.
- Or questions in political philosophy, like “what makes the state justified?”, “is democracy intrinsically good?”, or “should we abolish prisons?”.
- I work on questions in ethics.





About me (The Narcissism Slide)

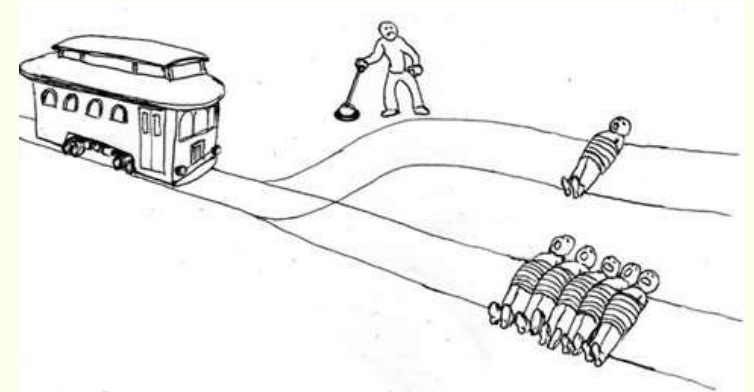
- As a graduate student I worked on moral theory and philosophy of law.
- More recently, I've been specialising in questions in applied ethics, including:
 - The use of juries in criminal trials.
 - The moral permissibility of abortion.
 - Victim-blaming.
 - Media ethics.
 - Duties of philanthropy.





Thought Experiments

- In their methodology, philosophers regularly employ thought experiments.
- These are imagined scenarios designed to test principles or elicit intuitions.
- You're likely to be familiar with trolley problems.
- [Originally utilised by Philippa Foot (1967) but term coined by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1976)]
- Many versions, intending to show different things.
- A typical take-away: Your role in causing a death matters – not just how many saved/killed.



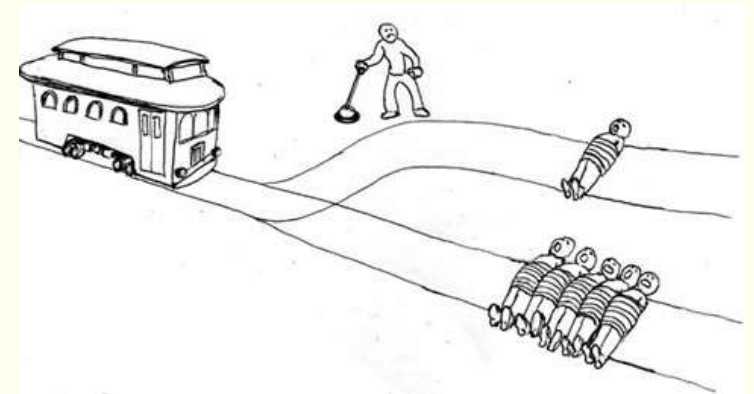


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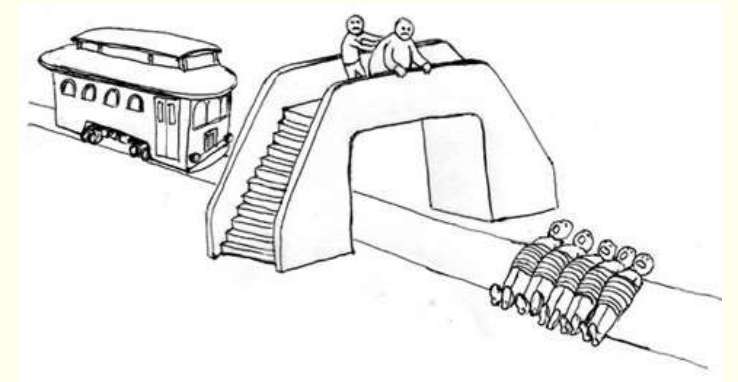
Incidentally...



**Trolley
Problems**



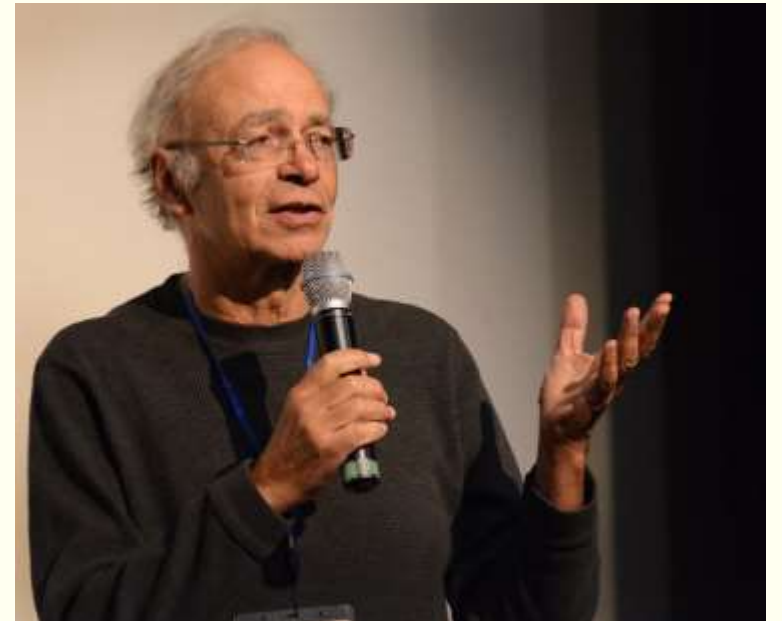
**Tram
Problems**





Thought Experiments 1: The Drowning Child

- Today, I'm going to describe two thought experiments, and how they have been used by philosophers.
- Afterwards, I'll speculate what implications these might have for farming.
- First: Peter Singer's 'Drowning Child' example.
- "if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing" (2014: 555).





Singer's Drowning Child

- If someone failed to save the child in this case, we would think them a moral monster.
- Singer uses this to support a moral principle:
- “If you can prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing something of comparable moral significance, you ought, morally, to do it” (Singer 1972).
- This principle would explain why we have a duty to act in the Drowning Child example – your shoes getting muddy just isn't nearly as important as the child's life.
- Singer then applies this principle to cases of extreme poverty.
- In parts of the world, people are dying because of lack of access to food, safe water, or medicine.



Applying the Principle

- So, when we consider the principle, it seems like we have an obligation to help those people, when we could do so cheaply.
- For Singer, this is a duty, not a supererogatory act.
- And this seems to lead to a radical conclusion, namely that we are morally required to forego luxury-goods, and instead donate the money we would spend to effective charities.
- Singer thinks that failing to donate, when doing so could save a life, is morally equivalent to watching the child drown.
- The differences between the cases (distance, number of potential helpers, seeing them) aren't morally relevant.





Drowning Child: Implications for Agriculture?

- Recall Singer's Principle: If you can prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, you ought, morally, to do it.
- If we did agree with Singer, i.e., we accepted this principle, what would that mean for farmers/those involved in agriculture?
- Not obvious...What bad things is it in your power to prevent? Could you prevent them without sacrificing something morally important?
- Obligations to prevent cruel treatment of animals?
- So, perhaps factory farmers have an obligation to cease factory farming?
- Many of the bad effects we can't, as individuals, prevent, so it's not clear how much Singer's principle requires of us, qua individuals.



Group Application?

- This principle looks like it could be more powerful if we consider those in agriculture as a group.
- Could the *farming industry* prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing something especially important?
- Here, the answer looks like a fairly obvious yes.
- Moving away from any farming methods that cause desertification or have a high carbon footprint could, in the long term, prevent a lot of suffering.
- Problem: Maybe less clear that Singer's Principle should be read this way / whether we can consider groups as moral agents.
- Problem 2: Even if we can, what should you as an individual do, if other people aren't complying?
– Then it looks like you *can't* prevent catastrophe.



Thought Experiment 2: The Broken World

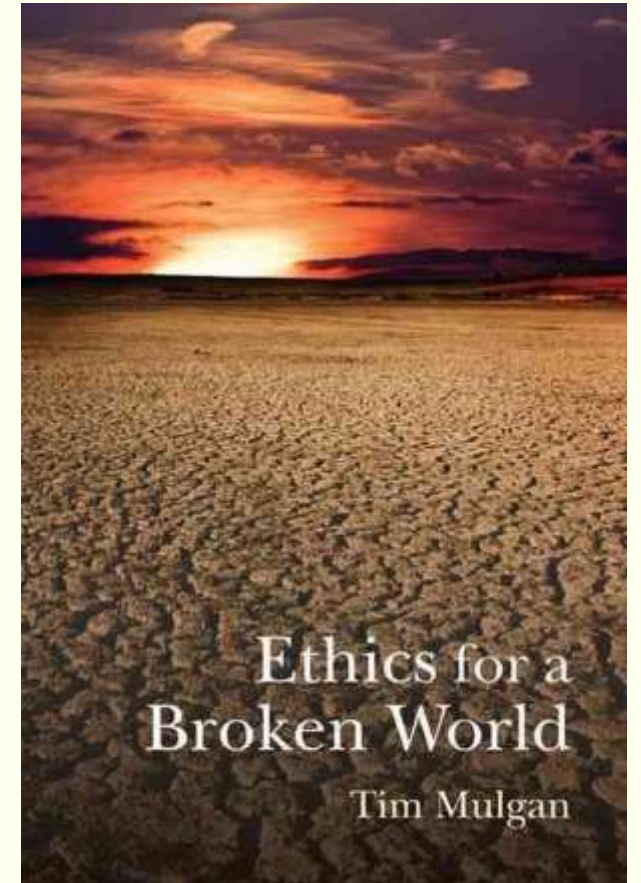
- The second thought experiment I want to discuss comes from a 2011 book by Tim Mulgan: *Ethics for a Broken World*.
- It's a work of fiction (kinda).
- Featuring a philosophy class in the future.
- It is set in a "broken world".
- The book consists of "transcripts from that imaginary future class" (2011: ix)
- A **broken world** is "a place where resources are insufficient to meet everyone's basic needs, where a chaotic climate makes life precarious, where each generation is worse-off than the last, and where our affluent way of life is no longer an option" (2015: 92).





Imagining the Broken World

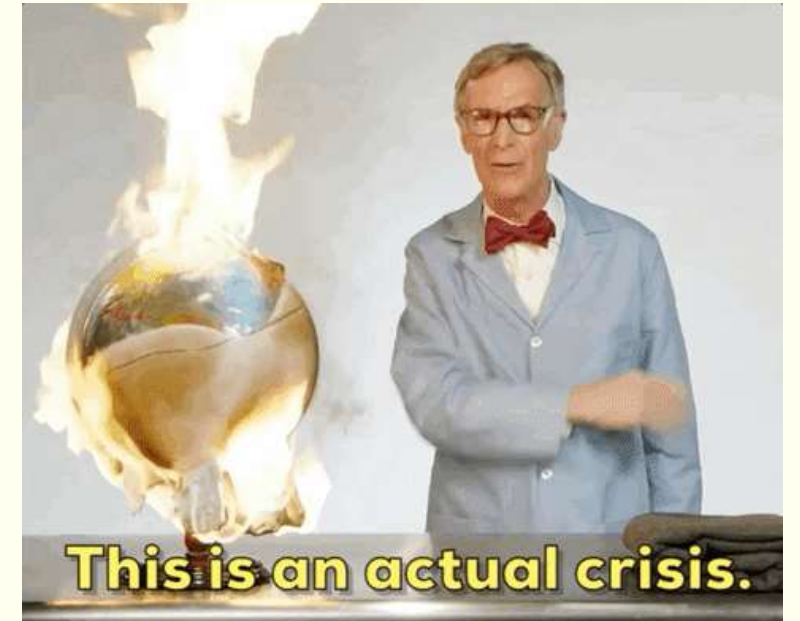
- Clearly, we can envisage broken worlds now.
- Mulgan doesn't think we're *definitely* going to create a broken world, but the book is set in a future where our efforts to prevent it have failed.
- He wants us to consider the relationship between us and the future people.
- In particular, how harshly they view us.
- “My fictional future students and their teacher are sometimes unsympathetic, perhaps even unfair. Their knowledge of our situation is, after all, very incomplete. Then again, if you broke somebody's world, how much sympathy would you expect?” (2011: xii)





Climate Change

- The broken world could come about in various ways.
- The most salient cause currently is climate change, given the scientific evidence we have, and how slowly the necessary changes are happening.
- (Mulgan says that “other routes include technological catastrophe, financial collapse” [2016: 534], but I’ll ignore those for present purposes.)
- An important feature of the world breaking through climate change is that it is (or at least *looks*) avoidable.
- It does seem possible for us to avoid making the future broken in this way.





Features of a Broken World

- The broken world has three systematic features that affect our moral thinking:
 1. It introduces the real prospect of conflicts between the interests of present and future people – thus forcing us to confront our obligations to distant future people.
 2. Imagining a future that is less prosperous than our affluent present forces us to re-evaluate our notion of what is essential to a flourishing human life.
 3. By suspending the assumption of favourable conditions – by imagining a world where not all basic needs can be met – the broken world forces us to deal with tragic conflicts where we must decide who lives and who dies.

(2015: 94)



Reflections from a Broken World

- The final lecture ends by criticising us Affluent thinkers.
- “The idea that we hold the resources of the earth in trust for future generations was a very powerful one for many affluent people. They could have applied it to their collective decision-making. Unfortunately for us, and for the future of our world, they did not” (2011: 220).
- Thinking about this type of world, might make us reflect seriously upon whether our notions of rights really deserve to be taken seriously.
- Perhaps, whichever broad moral theory we adopt, in the light of the potential broken world, should make us radically reconsider our notions of fairness and rights.
- Mulgan’s future people think we are obsessed with extravagant notions of rights – expansive property rights, reproductive rights, even rights to live – which, because of the way we live, are impossible to secure in their world.



Broken World Implications?

- The perspective-shift we come to appreciate from considering broken worlds might make us seriously revise many of our practices.
- For any of our actions that contribute to creating to a broken world, we might imagine those future people condemning us.
- And not unreasonably!
- I think this thought experiment can cast a new light upon how we think we should act, individually and as groups.
- As groups/society: what would someone in the broken future think of us, as people acting in these ways?
- As individuals: what would they think of *you* for your complicity? Or your lack of resistance?



Possible Specific Agricultural Implications

- I'd be interested to hear what you would think, confronted by this hypothetical person from the future judging our behaviours.
- Some things we *might* think, specifically re farming:
 - Collectively:
 - Rapidly reducing the carbon footprint of farming.
 - Ensuring farming methods are sustainable (not causing soil degradation).
 - Reducing the environmental damage caused by transportation of crops.
 - Individually:
 - Being socially active, resisting pernicious agricultural systems, e.g., attending protests, signing petitions, promoting progressive politicians.
 - Adopting a diet with minimal carbon footprint, e.g., avoiding dairy(?), eating local.
 - Professionally, working for eco-friendly companies, or making your workplace more eco-friendly.



Summary

- I've only mentioned a couple of thought experiments today.
- Both of these might change the way we see our obligations.
- Do you find either of these persuasive?
- Do the implications I've suggested look plausible?
- Are there other agricultural-related conclusions that you think follow from this?



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