

## Reading Guide The Trolley Problem

Readings for 24 February 2011 (updated)

### READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”

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### Background

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929- ) taught Philosophy at MIT for nearly four decades. She is best known for her influential work in ethics and metaphysics.

“The Trolley Problem,” which was first published in the *Yale Law Journal* in 1985, is one of her most widely-read articles in contemporary ethics. It has provoked an enormous literature, including an empirical research program that shows up several times in our class (including today).

The Trolley Problem is also the topic of a widely-circulated satire by Michael Patton, which can be found (complete with a “nonphilosopher’s explanation” at:

<http://www.mindspatton.com/~mfpatton/Tissues.htm>.)

### Terms, Concepts, and Examples

Be sure that you understand how Thomson is using the following terms, concepts and examples:

*Terms and Concepts:* killing vs. letting die [*passim*], “rights trump utilities” [1404]

*Examples:* *Trolley Driver* [1395], *Transplant* [1396], *Bystander at the Switch* [1397], *Loop Variant* [1402], *Hospital/Hospital\**[1407], *Fat Man* [1409], *Mayor at the Switch* [1411]

### Reading Questions

As you read through the essay, pay special attention to the following issues and questions:

- (1) What is Foot’s suggestion explanation for the difference in our reactions to *Trolley Driver* and *Transplant*? Why does Thomson consider this explanation to be inadequate? (Sections I & II)

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- (2) What is the “Trolley Problem”? Why might someone prefer to call it the “Transplant Problem”? (Section III)
- (3) What (according to Thomson) is the Kantian solution to the Trolley Problem? (In thinking about this question, you should pay attention to Thomson’s explanation of what it is to use someone “as a means.”) (Section IV)
- (4) Why does Thomson think that the Kantian solution to the Trolley Problem is inadequate? (Pay special attention to the last paragraph of Section IV.)
- (5) What role does the notion of a *right* play in Thomson’s own solution to the Trolley Problem? Do you think it is adequate to do the work Thomson wants it to do? Why or why not? (Sections V-VIII)
- (6) What additional complications do the examples introduced in Sections IX and X raise?
- (7) Do you think it is morally illuminating to think about trolley cases? Why or why not?

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