HOW TO ANALYSE A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT IN PHILOSOPHY

It is impossible to study philosophy without encountering a thought experiment. You're likely familiar with thought experiments like the trolley problem, the Chinese room, and the Experience Machine. Despite their frequent use, many students struggle to know how to analyse a thought experiment in philosophy. Even students at university often struggle to analyse a thought experiment in philosophy well!

INTRODUCTION

What is a thought experiment?

Thought experiments are 'intuition pumps'. Thought experiments present a contrived scenario with key features of a real world scenario, then ask what our intuitions about this scenario are.

For example, in the trolley scenario, we are invited to imagine that a runaway trolley is rumbling towards five people who have been tied to the tracks. You are standing next to a lever that can redirect the trolley to a side track. This will save the five people. However, there is a single person tied to the side track. Here you are faced with two choices: (1) Do nothing and allow the trolley to kill the five or (2) Pull the lever, saving the five but killing the one.

The point is **not** to test what we think we should do in literal runaway trolley scenarios. The likelihood of such a contrived scenario happening is very slim. What thought experiments aim to do is test our intuitions about the **moral principles** the scenario invokes.

What moral principles are invoked in trolley scenarios?

Suppose your philosophy teacher asks you "Would you pull the lever? Why or why not?" You reply that you wouldn't pull the lever. You don't want to actively participate in the death of the one man on the side track.

Here, you endorse a principle like "All things equal, it is morally worse to actively participate in someone's death than to let someone die".

If this is how you feel, to be morally consistent, you must apply the principle you have endorsed here to real-world scenarios in your own life.

ANALYSING A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

To explain how to best analyse a thought experiment in Philosophy, let's have a look at Singer's famous pond thought experiment that appears on the VCE Philosophy curriculum.

Singer's pond argument

The pond thought experiment goes something like this: Suppose you are out for a walk when you happen upon a child drowning in a pond. No one else is around to help the child. You could wade in to save the child's life, but this would mean ruining your fancy shoes. Should you save the child's life or should you preference your fancy shoes? Most have the intuition that you should save the child's life.

Singer argues that this is an endorsement of the principle "If we can do something very important (saving the child's life) while sacrificing nothing of comparable moral worth (just our sweet shoes), we ought, morally, to do so".

Singer then examines what the real-world implications of endorsing this principle are. He argues that, much like we can save the drowning child, we can prevent suffering and death, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth, by giving to aid organisations. Therefore, we are morally obligated to give to charitable organisations.

So, how do you analyse a thought experiment like this?

Firstly, do not get caught up in the literal details of the thought experiment or try to change the details of the thought experiment to produce your desired outcome.

Secondly, ask yourself how *accurately* the scenario in the thought experiment represents the real world. Singer intends for us to see the real world as being like the drowning child scenario in important ways - otherwise our intuitions about the drowning child scenario would not be applicable to our real-world obligations to the poor.

With this in mind, there are two key questions to ask yourself:

1. *"Are there differences between the thought experiment scenario and the real world?"*
   For instance, Singer provides no causal reason for why the child is drowning - they just *are*. However, in the case of global poverty, there *are* causal factors responsible for poverty.

2. *"Do these differences matter?"*
   We then should examine whether these differences **are morally relevant**. In the case of Singer, we might argue that the different causal factors between the two scenarios **are morally significant and change what our obligations are**. For example, we might argue that the fact that we should save the child drowning says very little about what our obligations to the

global poor are because, in the case of global poverty, there are actors and institutions who have 'pushed' the poor into the 'pond'.