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David Edmonds

**WOULD
YOU
KILL
THE
FAT
MAN?**



The Trolley Problem
and What Your Answer Tells Us
about Right and Wrong

"A tour de force."—Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of *The Honor Code*

Would You Kill the Fat Man?

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The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us about Right and Wrong

David Edmond

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Princeton and Oxford

To Liz, Isaac, and Saul

(an indiscriminating fan of wheels, trains, and trolleys)

“Clang, clang, clang” went the trolle
“Ding, ding, ding” went the be
“Zing, zing, zing” went my heartstring
From the moment I saw him I fel

—*Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, “The Trolley Song,” 1942*
(sung by *Judy Garland* in *Meet Me in St. Louis*)

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The levity of the examples is not meant to offend

—*Philippa Foot*

THIS BOOK IS GOING TO LEAVE in its wake a litter of corpses and a trail of blood. Only one animal will suffer within its pages, but many humans will die. They will be mostly blameless victims caught up in bizarre circumstances. A heavyside man may or may not topple from a footbridge.

Fortunately, almost all these fatalities are fictional. However, the thought experiments are designed to test our moral intuitions, to help us develop moral principles and thus to be of some practical use in a world in which real choices have to be made, and real people get hurt. The point of any thought experiment in ethics is to exclude irrelevant considerations that might cloud our judgment in real cases. But the experiment has to have some structural similarities with real cases to be of use. And so, in the forthcoming pages, you will also read about a few episodes involving genuine matters of life and death. Making cameo appearances, for example, will be Winston Churchill, the twenty-fourth president of the United States, a German kidnapper, and a nineteenth-century sailor accused of cannibalism.

Thought experiments don't exist until they have been thought up. Books covering philosophy tend, rightly, to focus on ideas, not people. But ideas do not emerge from a vacuum; they are the product of time and place, of upbringing and personality. Perhaps they have been conceived as a rebuttal to other ideas, or as a reflection of the concerns of the moment. Perhaps they reflect a thinker's particular preoccupation. In any case, intellectual history is fascinating, and I wanted to weave in the stories of one or two of those responsible for the ideas on which this book is based.

There is a reason why the crime at the heart of this book, the killing of the fat man, has never been fully solved, philosophically: it is complicated ... really complicated. Questions that, at first glance, appear straightforward—such as “When you pushed the fat man, did you *intend* to kill him?”—turn out to be multi-dimensional. A book that attempted to address every aspect of all the fraught issues raised by the killing would be ten times the length of this one. In any case, although some of the intricacies can't be avoided—indeed, they provide much of the scholarly excitement—my aim was to write a book that did not require readers to hold a philosophy PhD.

When I first came across the trolley problem I was an undergraduate. When the fat man was introduced to philosophy I was a postgraduate. That was a long time ago. Since then, though, what has reignited my interest has been the perspective brought to bear on the problem from several other

disciplines.

~~— My hope is that the text that follows will give some insight into why philosophers and no~~
philosophers alike have found the fat man's imaginary death so fascinating.

THIS IS A DULL BIT FOR THE READER, but a welcome opportunity for the author—to acknowledge debts. And I have a trolley load of people to thank.

First, to numerous philosophers: I've conducted many interviews or had many meetings with academic philosophers about the book, and have also drawn on relevant material gathered through my work with the BBC, *Prospect*, and especially *Philosophy Bites* (www.philosophybites.com). The philosophers include Anthony Appiah, Fiery Cushman, Jonathan Haidt, Rom Harré, Anthony Kenny, Joshua Knobe, Sabina Lovibond, Mary Midgley, Adrian Moore, Mike Otsuka, Nick Phillipson, Jan Radcliffe Richards, Philip Schofield, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Quentin Skinner.

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Fifth, to the team at Princeton University Press: Hannah Paul and Al Bertrand were patient and encouraging throughout the writing process—people always express similar sentiments about the editors in the acknowledgment section, but this time it's really true. Copyeditor Karen Verdine, illustrator Dimitri Karetnikov, and press officer Caroline Priday made up an excellent team. Hannah Edmonds, as usual, played the role of proofreading long-stop, brilliantly catching grammatical and spelling infelicities that had slipped through others.

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Finally, several friends merit a special mention. For the past six years, Nigel Warburton has been my partner-in-crime on the *Philosophy Bites* podcast. As of May 2012, our interviews have had 18 million downloads: more important, the series has been tremendous fun and has given me a wonderfully broad philosophical education. I also want to acknowledge two non-philosophers. John Eidinow (with whom I've written three books) and David Franklin, a law scholar, are very clever chaps indeed. Both read the entire manuscript and made countless invaluable comments.

The book is dedicated to Liz, for her loving kindness and her gentle toleration; to Saul, who has trumped my trolley preoccupations with his toy-train obsession; and to Isaac, the most delightful way stations, born some time between [chapters 7](#) and [8](#).

Philosophy and the Trolle

Churchill's Dilemma

AT 4:13 A.M. ON JUNE 13, 1944, there was an explosion in a lettuce patch twenty-five miles south-east of London.

Britain had been at war for five years, but this marked the beginning of a new torment for the inhabitants of the capital, one that would last several months and cost thousands of lives. The Germans called their flying bomb *Vergeltungswaffe*—retaliation weapon. The first V1 merely destroyed edible plants, but there were nine other missiles of vengeance that night, and they had more deadly effect.

Londoners prided themselves on—and had to some extent mythologized—their fortitude during the Blitz. Yet, by the summer of '44, reservoirs of optimism and morale were running dry, even though D-day had occurred on June 6 and the Nazis were already on the retreat on the Eastern front.

The V1s were a terrifying sight. The two tons of steel hurtled through the sky, with a flaming orange-red tail. But it was the sound that most deeply imprinted itself on witnesses. The rockets would buzz like a deranged bee and then go eerily quiet. Silence signaled that they had run out of fuel and were falling. On contact with the ground they would cause a deafening explosion that could flatten several buildings. Londoners tempered their fear by giving the bombs a name of childlike innocence: doodlebugs. (The Germans called them “hell hounds” or “fire dragons.”) Only an exceptional few citizens could be as phlegmatic as the poet Edith Sitwell, who was in the middle of a reading when a doodlebug was heard above. She “merely lifted her eyes to the ceiling for a moment and, giving her voice a little more volume to counter the racket in the sky, read on.”¹

Because the missiles were not piloted, they could be dispatched across the Channel day or night, rain or shine. That they were unmanned made them more, not less, menacing. “No enemy was risking his life up there,” wrote Evelyn Waugh, “it was as impersonal as a plague, as though the city was infested with enormous, venomous insects.”²

The doodlebugs were aimed at the heart of the capital, which was both densely populated and contained the institutions of government and power. Some doodlebugs reached the targeted zone. One smashed windows in Buckingham Palace and damaged George VI's tennis court. More seriously, on June 18, 1944, a V1 landed on the Guards Chapel, near the Palace, in the midst of a morning service attended by both civilians and soldiers: 121 people were killed.

The skylight of nearby Number 5, Seaforth Place, would have been shaken by this explosion, too. Number 5 was an attic flat overrun by mice and volumes of poetry: there were so many books that additional shelves had had to be installed in what had originally been a bread oven, set into the wall. There was a crack in the roof, through which could be heard the intermittent growl of planes, and there were cracks in the floor as well, through which could be heard the near constant roar of the London Underground. The flat was home to two young women, who shared shoes (they had three pairs between

them) and a lover. Iris was working in the Treasury, and secretly feeding information back to the Communist Party; Philippa was researching how American money could revitalize European economies once the war was over. Both Iris Murdoch and Philippa Bonsanquet would go on to become outstanding philosophers, though Iris would always be better known as a novelist.

Iris's biographer, Peter Conradi, says the women became used to walking to work in the morning to discover various buildings had disappeared during the night. Back at the flat, during intense bombing raids, they would climb into the bathtub under the stairs for comfort and protection.

They weren't aware of it at the time, but matters could have been worse. The Nazis faced two problems. First, despite the near miss to Buckingham Palace, and the terrible toll at the Guards Chapel, most of the V1 bombs actually fell a few miles south of the center. Second, this was a fact which the Nazis were ignorant.

An ingenious plan presented itself in Whitehall. If the Germans could be deceived into believing that the doodlebugs were hitting their mark—or, better still, missing their mark by falling north—then they would not readjust the trajectory of the bombs, and perhaps even alter it so that they fell still farther south. That could save lives.

The details of this deception were intricately plotted by the secret service and involved several double agents, including two of the most colorful, ZigZag³ and Garbo.⁴ Both ZigZag and Garbo were on the Nazi payroll but working for the Allies. The Nazis requested eyewitness information about where the bombs were exploding—and for a month they swallowed up the regular and misleading information that ZigZag and Garbo provided.

The military immediately recognized the benefits of this ruse and supported the operation. But for the politicians it had been a tougher call. There was an impassioned debate between the minister for Home Security, Herbert Morrison, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It would be too crude to characterize it as a class conflict, but Morrison, who was the son of a policeman from south London and who represented a desperately poor constituency in east London, perhaps felt more keenly than did Churchill the burden that the operation would impose on the working-class areas south of the center. And he was uneasy at the thought of “playing God,” of politicians determining who was to live and who to die. Churchill, as usual, prevailed.

The success of the operation is contested by historians. The British intelligence agency, MI6, destroyed the false reports dispatched by Garbo and ZigZag, recognizing that, were they ever to come to light, the residents of south London might not take kindly to being used in this way. However, the Nazis never improved their aim. And a scientific adviser with a stiff upper lip, who promoted the operation even though his parents and his old school were in south London (“I knew that neither my parents nor the school would have had it otherwise”), estimated it may have saved as many as 10,000 lives.⁵

By the end of August 1944, the danger from V1s had receded. The British got better at shooting down the doodlebugs from both air and ground. More important, the V1 launching pads in Northern France were overrun by the advancing Allied forces. On September 7, 1944, the British government announced that the war against the flying bomb was over.⁶ The V1s had killed around six thousand people. Areas of south London—Croydon, Penge, Beckenham, Dulwich, Streatham, and Lewisham—had been rocked and pounded: 57,000 houses had been damaged in Croydon alone.

Nonetheless, it's possible that without the double-agent subterfuge, many more buildings would have been destroyed—and many more lives lost. Churchill probably didn't lose too much sleep over the decision. He faced excruciating moral dilemmas on an almost daily basis. But this one was significant for capturing the structure of a famous philosophical puzzle.

That puzzle is the subject of this book.

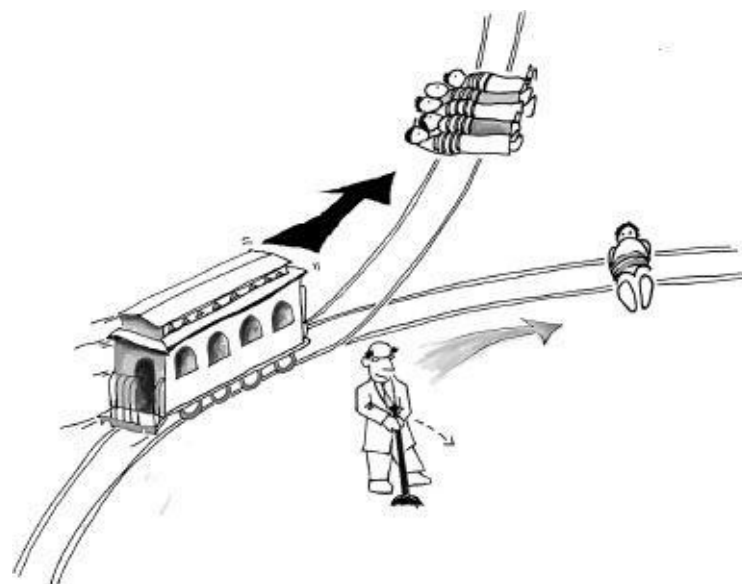
Spur of the Moment

How are they free from sin who . . .
have taken a human life

—*Saint Augustine*

A MAN IS STANDING BY THE SIDE OF A TRACK when he sees a runaway train hurtling toward him: clearly the brakes have failed. Ahead are five people, tied to the track. If the man does nothing, the five will be run over and killed. Luckily he is next to a signal switch: turning this switch will send the out-of-control train down a side track, a spur, just ahead of him. Alas, there's a snag: on the spur, he spots one person tied to the track: changing direction will inevitably result in this person being killed. What should he do?

From now on this dilemma will be referred to as Spur. Spur is not identical to Winston Churchill's conundrum, of course, but there are similarities. The British government faced a choice: it could do nothing or it could try to change the trajectory of the doodlebugs—through a campaign of misinformation—and so save lives. Different people and fewer people would die as a result. Switching the direction of the train would likewise save lives, though one different person would die as a result.



[Figure 1](#). *Spur*. You're standing by the side of a track when you see a runaway train hurtling

toward you: clearly the brakes have failed. Ahead are five people, tied to the track. If you do nothing the five will be run over and killed. Luckily you are next to a signal switch: turning this switch will send the out-of-control train down a side track, a spur, just ahead of you. Alas, there's a snag: on the spur you spot one person tied to the track: changing direction will inevitably result in this person being killed. What should you do?

Most people seem to believe that not only is it permissible to turn the train down the spur, it's actually required—morally obligatory.

A version of Spur appeared for the first time in the *Oxford Review*, in 1967. The example was later reprinted in a book of essays of which the dedication reads “To The Memory of Iris Murdoch.” It was the author of those essays who had shared a flat with Iris Murdoch during World War II and was covered in the bath at Seaforth Place as the British government was confronted with an analogous problem.² Philippa Bonsanquet (later Philippa Foot) could never have guessed that her puzzle, published in a fourteen-page article in an esoteric periodical, would spawn a mini-academic industry and signal the start of a debate that continues to the present day.

It's a debate that draws on the most important moral thinkers in the philosophical canon—from Aquinas to Kant, from Hume to Bentham—and captures fundamental tensions in our moral outlook. To test our moral intuitions, philosophers have come up with ever more surreal scenarios involving runaway trains and often bizarre props: trap doors, giant revolving plates, tractors, and drawbridges. The train is usually racing toward five unfortunates and the reader is presented with various means to rescue them, although at the cost of another life.

The five who are threatened with death are, in most scenarios, innocent: they don't deserve to be in their perilous circumstances. The one person who could be killed to save the five is also, in most scenarios, entirely innocent. There's generally no link between the one and the five: they're not friends or members of the same family: the only connection between them is that they happen to be caught up in the same disastrous situation.

Soon we will meet the Fat Man. The central mystery about how we should treat him has baffled philosophers for nearly half a century. There have now been so many articles linked to the topic that it's a joke neologism for it has stuck: “trolleyology.”³

As an indication of how trolleyology has entered popular consciousness, a version of it was even put to a British prime minister. In front of a live TED audience in July 2009, an interviewer threw Gordon Brown the following curveball. “You're on vacation on a nice beach. Word comes through that there's been a massive earthquake and that a tsunami is advancing on the beach. At one end of the beach there is a house containing a family of five Nigerians. And at the other end of the beach there is a single Brit. You have time to alert just one house. What do you do?” Amidst audience tittering, Mr. Brown, ever the politician, deftly dodged the premise: “Modern communications. Alert both.”⁴

But sometimes you can't alert both. Sometimes you can't save everyone. Politicians do have to make decisions that are a matter of life and death. So do health officials. Health resources are not limitless. Whenever a health body is faced with a choice between funding a drug that is estimated to save X lives, and funding another that would save Y, they are, in effect, confronted with a variation of the trolley problem, though these are dilemmas that don't involve killing anybody.⁵

As we'll see, trolleyology has bred subtle and important distinctions: for example, between the choice to save one or to save five on the one hand, and to kill one to save five on the other. At the U.

Military Academy at West Point, in upper New York State, where future officers come to train, all the cadets are exposed to trolleyology as part of a compulsory course in philosophy and “Just War” theory. It helps underline the difference, the tutors say, between how the United States wages war and the tactics of al-Qaeda: between targeting a military installation knowing that some civilians will inevitably be caught up in the attack and deliberately aiming at civilians.

Philosophers dispute whether or not the trolley scenarios do indeed encapsulate such a distinction. But trolleyology, which was devised by armchair philosophers, is no longer exclusively their preserve. A noticeable trend in philosophy in the past decade is how permeable it has become to the influence and insights from other fields. Nothing illustrates this better than trolleyology. In the past decade this sub-branch of ethics has embraced many disciplines—including psychology, law, linguistics, anthropology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. And the most fashionable branch of philosophy, experimental philosophy, has also jumped on the tramwagon. Trolley-related studies have been carried out from Israel to India to Iran.

Some of the trolleyology literature is so fiendishly complex that, in the words of one exasperated philosopher, it “makes the Talmud look like *Cliffs Notes*” (referring to a set of student study guides).⁶ Indeed, to an outsider, the curious incidents of the trains on the track may seem like harmless fun—crossword puzzles for long-stay occupants of the Ivory Tower. But at heart, they’re about what’s right and wrong, and how we should behave. And what could be more important than that?

The Founding Mother

I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb

—*President Harry S. Truman, August 9, 1945, the day Fat Man is dropped on Nagasaki*

PHILIPPA (PIP TO HER FRIENDS) Foot, the George Stephenson of trolleyology, believed there was a right answer (and so, logically, also a wrong one) to her train dilemma.

Foot was born in 1920 and, like so many of her contemporaries, her ethical outlook was molded by the violence of World War II. But when she began to teach philosophy at Oxford University in 1947, “subjectivism” still had a lingering and, to her mind, pernicious hold on academia.

Subjectivism maintains that there are no objective moral truths. Before World War II it had been given intellectual ballast by a group of mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers from the Austrian capital. They were known as the Vienna Circle. The Vienna Circle developed “logical positivism,” which claimed that for a proposition to have meaning it must fulfill one of two criteria. Either it must be true in virtue of the meaning of its terms (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$ or “All trains are vehicles”) or it must be in principle verifiable through experimentation (e.g., “the moon is made of cheese,” “five men ahead are roped to the track”). All other statements were literally meaningless.

These meaningless propositions would include bald moral assertions, such as “The Nazis were wrong to gas Jews,” or “The British were justified in using subterfuge to alter the trajectory of the doodlebugs.” On the face of it this is an odd claim: these propositions sound as if they make sense and at least the first seems self-evidently true. They’re not like the jumble of words, “Trajectory doodlebugs subterfuge British alter justified,” which is patently gibberish. How then ought we interpret ethical statements? One answer was supplied by the English philosopher A. J. Ayer, who attended sessions of the Vienna Circle.¹ Later he would say of logical positivism that “the most important of [its] defects was that nearly all of it was false,”² but for a time he was entirely under its spell. Ayer developed what is pejoratively called the boo-hooray theory.³ If I say, “The Nazis were wrong to gas the Jews,” that’s best translated as, “The Nazis gassed the Jews: boo, hiss.” Likewise “The British were justified in using subterfuge to alter the trajectory of the doodlebugs” is roughly translatable as “The British used subterfuge to alter the trajectory of the doodlebugs: hoorah, hoorah.”

At the onset of Philippa Foot’s career, the full horrors perpetrated in the concentration camps of World War II were still being exposed and would haunt her. The notion that ethical claims could be reduced to opinion and to personal preferences, to “I approve,” or “I disapprove,” to “hooray-boo-

was to her anathema.

—But not only was Foot radically out of step with ethical emotivism, she also had little time for an alternative approach to philosophy which for a period in the 1950s and 1960s dominated the discipline in Oxford and beyond—“ordinary language” philosophy. The ordinary language movement believed that, before philosophical problems could be resolved, one had to attend to the subtleties of how language is deployed in everyday speech. Philosophers would spend their time deconstructing fine distinctions between our uses of, for example, “by mistake” and “by accident.”⁴ A student who spoke up in a lecture or tutorial would invariably hear the question boomerang back: “what exactly do you mean when you say XYZ?” Pupils of Foot recall her dutifully teaching this approach, but haltingly and heartedly, and only so that they could pass exams.

Foot was not a natural teacher. She was solicitous, encouraging, but intimidating. She had a long, patrician face and a plummy voice, sounding according to one student “like a Grande Dame.” The first impression, that she came from an aristocratic English family, would have captured a half of the truth. Her parents were married in Westminster Abbey in one of the social events of the year. Her father, Captain William Sydney Bence Bosanquet, a World War I war hero, was from what Foot herself described as the hunting, fishing, and shooting set. Foot was brought up in an imposing country house and given almost no formal schooling, though she was surrounded by governesses. It was not a culture in which it was deemed advisable or worthwhile to educate girls (Foot’s spelling was always atrocious). When to everyone’s surprise Pip was offered a place at Oxford to read Politics, Philosophy and Economics, a friend of the family consoled the parents with the thought that “at least she doesn’t look clever.”⁶

Foot never objected to intellectual snobbery, but university liberated her from the social snootiness at home. She neither flaunted nor hid her privileged background. Her studies began a month after Britain had declared war on Germany: during the war, while most of the female undergraduates stitched their own skirts out of blackout material, Philippa’s clothes were fashionable and always “conspicuously not home-made.”⁷ She became the focus of particular attention from her economics tutor, Tommy (later Lord) Balogh, a brainy, bullying, and philandering Jewish-Hungarian émigré, who became an adviser to Harold Wilson—an enthralling character though an “emotionally unstable fascist.”⁸ Balogh had many affairs: according to Foot’s tutorial partner, Pip endured a sustained courtship campaign, refusing his proposals—made in a thick accent—of marriage.⁹

But only half of Philippa Foot’s pedigree was posh-English: her mother could claim more illustrious lineage still. Esther was born in 1893, in the White House. She was the daughter of the twenty-second president and the twenty-fourth president of the United States. This sounds like a logical teaser, since no woman has ever held that office. But the descriptions, “22nd President” and “24th President,” have, as philosophers might put it, the same reference. The Democrat, Grover Cleveland, Foot’s grandfather, was the only president ever to serve in two nonconsecutive terms.

Foot was fascinated by her grandfather’s life (and knew her grandmother reasonably well), but it wasn’t the “done” thing to boast about such a connection. In public she was far more likely to refer to a link with a relative on her father’s side: Bernard Bosanquet—the cricketer credited with inventing the game’s most devious delivery, the googly.

Ménage à quatre

After the war, Philippa Foot persuaded her college, Somerville, then an all-women college, to take on a second philosopher, Elizabeth Anscombe, who has an indirect but vital role in trolleyology. Like Foot, Anscombe never took a PhD: in those days a doctorate was a stigma, a sign that you weren't considered worthy of an immediate academic post. Anscombe had studied Classics [Greats] and received a First Class degree despite, it is said, answering "no" in her viva to the question, "is there any fact about the period you are supposed to have studied which you would like to tell us?"¹⁰ She cut her hair short, smoked cigars, drank tea from the saucer, and wore a monocle and trousers—one pair was leopard skin. She had a mellifluous voice, like a clarinet, which she occasionally deployed to be eye-wateringly rude.

For many years Foot and Anscombe were confidantes as well as colleagues, united in a visceral aversion to subjectivism. Former students recall the two Somerville tutors retreating to the common room after lunch, sitting on either side of the fireplace and engaging in protracted philosophical discussions.¹¹ Foot always said she owed a great deal to Anscombe and thought she was one of the best philosophers of her generation. Respect was mutual: when a young Tony Kenny arrived in town as a graduate, Anscombe told him that Foot was the only Oxford moral philosopher worth heeding.

In the late 1940s it was still rare for women to enter academic philosophy, and Oxford was a bastion of male chauvinism. That one generation could produce not only Anscombe and Foot, but Iris Murdoch too—who with Foot's encouragement had applied for and been offered a job at nearby St Anne's College—was remarkable. The gifted have a tendency to cluster, so it was less than remarkable that their academic and personal lives were so closely intertwined. There would be falling-outs and falling-ins, demonstrations of loyalty and acts of betrayal, philosophical consensus on some matters and bitter divisions on others. When Pip and Iris were flatmates in London, one of Murdoch's numerous lovers was M.R.D. Foot. M.R.D. Foot became a distinguished historian of the Special Operations Executive, the clandestine organization that operated behind enemy lines in World War II. But in the war, he himself was a daring agent, parachuting into alien territory. He regarded parachuting as "a tremendous, sensual thrill—nothing but love-making with the right companion can touch it."¹²

The thrill was bound up with the danger. Foot was captured and almost killed in 1944, by which stage Murdoch had ditched him, rather callously, in exchange for Tommy Balogh. Murdoch later grew to hate Balogh, calling him Satan and a "horribly clever Jew."¹³ But the episode had left M.R.D. Foot feeling ravaged.¹⁴ Looking back, Murdoch wrote that Philippa "most successfully salvaged what was left after my behavior"¹⁵ by marrying M.R.D. Foot herself, in 1945. The complications from the partner-swapping strained relations between the two women for many years. "Losing you & losing you *in that way* was one of the worst things that ever happened to me,"¹⁶ Murdoch wrote to Foot.

After the war, the Foots settled down to domestic life in north Oxford. It seems to have been a relatively happy arrangement to begin with at least, though M.R.D. Foot was devastated when he wasn't awarded a First Class degree in PPE (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics). Pip broke the news to him, and he spent the rest of his life adding to a list he kept of distinguished people who had suffered a similar calamity. Then in the late fifties, quite unexpectedly to Philippa, and with a devastating emotional impact, her marriage broke up. In his memoirs, M.R.D. Foot explains it in two lines. "I remained passionately interested in having children; she turned out not to be able to have any. Feeling a fearsome cad, I walked out on her."¹⁷

At least it led to a thaw between Foot and Murdoch, so much so that they connected almost every corner of the love quadrangle and had a brief affair themselves. Meanwhile, the relationship between Foot and Anscombe itself grew tense. Foot was an atheist, Anscombe a devout Roman Catholic.

Catholic. This chasm in their worldview would eventually become too vast to be bridged by any shared philosophical interests.

And they did share interests as well as an approach to philosophy. In addition to their common assault on hooray-boo meta-ethics, Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch were preoccupied with the “virtues.” In answer to the question, “How should I behave?” in any particular moral dilemma, one approach emphasizes moral obligations and duties: for example, the duty never to lie. An alternative response, utilitarianism, states that what matters are the consequences of an action, whether for example the action saves the most lives, or produces the most happiness. (Anscombe is credited with introducing the word “consequentialism” into philosophy, for her a term of disdain.) But Foot, Anscombe, and Murdoch were attracted by a third way of thinking, which had been almost entirely abandoned, at least in Oxford. Inspired by the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, they stressed the importance of character.¹⁸ An action was good insofar as it exhibited the behavior of a virtuous person. A truly virtuous person will exhibit many virtues. The virtues include pride, temperance, generosity, bravery, and kindness. Foot was said to prize “honesty” as supreme among the virtues.¹⁹

Aristotle and Aquinas were not the only points of common reference. A more recent and more divisive character was also a powerfully felt presence. Born in Vienna in 1889, Ludwig Wittgenstein died in Cambridge in 1951. His genius, beguiling prose, and mesmerizing charisma combined to make him the most influential philosopher in the Anglo-American world.

Anscombe was the most deeply transformed by the Austrian. During the war she had moved to Cambridge to take up a research fellowship. Wittgenstein spent the war working first as a hospital porter and later a laboratory technician in Newcastle, but he returned to Cambridge to lecture. Anscombe attended these lectures and spent hours in conversation with him: he referred to her, with affection, as “old man.” Far too idiosyncratic to be a disciple—Wittgenstein had no shortage of those—Anscombe’s work was nonetheless indelibly stamped by his style. When others expressed what she took to be a profound thought, she would ruthlessly expose their latent nonsense for patent nonsense. Arguing with Anscombe was likened to having your skin ripped off.

Like so many of those who came into contact with Wittgenstein, she began to adopt some of his traits, such as disquieting silences as she paused for thought in seminars and tutorials, the vise-like holding of her head with her hands, and the agonized expression during intense philosophical debate. She’s even said to have developed a hint of an Austrian accent. Some people detected an inauthenticity in her earnestness, but she certainly took philosophy very seriously. Wittgenstein persuaded many of his most talented students to abandon the discipline: fortunately for philosophy, Elizabeth Anscombe stuck to her vocation, though she told her friend, then plain Tony Kenny, “I don’t have a thought in my head that wasn’t put there by Wittgenstein”. “I sometimes think,” added S. Anthony Kenny, “that I don’t have a single thought in my head that wasn’t put there by Elizabeth.”²⁰

Anscombe spread the Wittgensteinian gospel to Foot. During her lifetime Foot published several collections of articles, but only one work conceived as a book, *Natural Goodness*. The opening page begins with Wittgenstein and one of only two talks he delivered in Oxford. As Foot recalled:

Wittgenstein interrupted a speaker who had realized that he was about to say something that, although it seemed compelling, was clearly ridiculous, and was trying ... to say something sensible instead. “No,” said Wittgenstein. “Say what you *want* to say. Be *crude* and then we shall get on.” The suggestion that in doing philosophy one should not try to banish or tidy up a ludicrously crude but troubling thought, but rather give it its day, its week, its month, in court seems to me very helpful.²¹

Wittgenstein believed that philosophical puzzles were natural, easy to make, and yet arose out of conceptual confusion, and so dissolvable by an analysis of language. The aim of philosophy was “show the fly the way out of the flybottle.”²² And Foot interpreted this as essentially an oral approach involving two people in therapeutic talk, one trying to express some deep truth, the other pulling back the veil to expose its shallowness. Perhaps, in those daily postprandial debates at Oxford, she imagined herself acting out the role of trapped fly, with Anscombe helpfully pointing to the exit.

It’s not easy to conceive of any aspect of philosophy that would be more alien to Wittgenstein than trolleyology. For one thing, Wittgenstein was skeptical that philosophy had anything to contribute to ethics. More important, the focus on the minutiae of a hypothetical puzzle, endlessly reexamined through a myriad of subtly distinct scenarios, ran quite contrary to his style—which he grappled with the most fundamental questions in logic and language. This gives us a clue as to what Foot herself must have thought about the burgeoning subdiscipline she had inadvertently instigated.

The President’s Degree

Our philosophers had something else in common. For them moral philosophy was not merely an abstract exercise, to be confined within the manicured quads and courts of mediaeval universities. It mattered. They engaged with what was happening in the world, and believed they had a duty to do something about it. It wasn’t a special duty that accrued to moral philosophers: it was a general duty that derived from being human.

Foot was one of a small group of people who set up a committee for famine relief back in the 1940s. She had initially responded to a newspaper advertisement seeking volunteers to sort out donations to a charity shop on Broad Street in the center of Oxford. The shop took whatever people could give, and then resold it. In the early days there were gifts of false teeth and a live donkey.²³ Now the organization has grown somewhat. Oxfam operates in around one hundred countries and has fifteen thousand shops.

Politics was conducted, of course, from within the framework of the Cold War, and Foot was active in supporting dissidents and émigrés from eastern Europe, especially from Hungary after the 1956 uprising. In 1975, she and Tony Kenny were invited to lecture in Yugoslavia. They’d heard a rumor that a local philosopher, Mihailo Marcović, had been arrested before their arrival, and drew up a trenchant protest document for distribution, hiding it in their luggage. As they smuggled the contraband through customs, both Brits were anxious about being caught. On this occasion their efforts proved unnecessary—Dr. Marcović was in the welcoming party to greet them.

Anscombe, too, was stirred into action by politics and current affairs. Two examples are relevant here. In 1956 there was a proposal to give Harry S. Truman, the thirty-third president of the United States (1945–1953), an honorary degree at Oxford University. Western Europe had much to be grateful to Truman for. After succeeding Franklin Roosevelt in 1945, he had overseen the final months of World War II. In the years following the end of the war, the Berlin Airlift broke the Soviet blockade on the Western part of this city, while the Marshall Plan pumped vast sums of money into the region to rebuild its shattered economies and NATO was established, providing West European countries with a security umbrella.

The voting on any offer for an honorary doctorate would normally have been a routine affair.

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