

# Thought Experiments: Thin Cases

*By Mary Knutson, RN*



# Teaching Moral Concepts

- ▶ *It is challenging to convey difficult and abstract concepts of moral philosophy*
- ▶ *Thought experiments are commonly used in physics, mathematics and philosophy*
- ▶ *They require students to consider the logical consequences of their own intuitive moral judgments and competing theoretical frameworks.*



# Effective Teaching Strategy

- ▶ *Students are asked to imagine a scenario which is intentionally schematic and devoid of detail (thin cases)*
- ▶ *They are asked to suggest action alternatives for the characters*
- ▶ *They are asked to justify their moral judgments*



# Why are Thin Cases Used?

- ▶ *They are a fun and exciting way to teach important theoretical considerations*
- ▶ *The ethical issues surface again when the instructor moves on to discuss real-life situations (thick cases) or case studies*
- ▶ *Thin cases are not meant to resolve issues, but are exercises/teaching strategies*



# An Example:

- ▶ *A runaway train is rapidly bearing down on five unsuspecting individuals who are hiking along the tracks. Between the people and the train there is a switching device, which, when manually activated, would divert the train on to a secondary track. Standing near the switch is a fellow named Bloggs. He sees the train heading for the hikers and quickly realizes that he can save the five hikers from certain death simply by pulling the switch.*



# What Should He Do?



The two most apparent alternatives are to take no action, which would allow the people to be hit by the train, or to pull the switch.

- ▶ **At this stage in the thin case, the right answer seems obvious- to pull the switch**
- ▶ **The student is asked to justify their answer**
- ▶ **The instructor then adds moral complexity to the scenario...**



**Dilemma: Bloggs sees a person standing on the secondary track. What should he do?**

▶ *Typical responses:*

▶ *Bloggs should save the five hikers instead of the one*

▶ *Perform no action that would cause death to the one person, no matter the consequences*

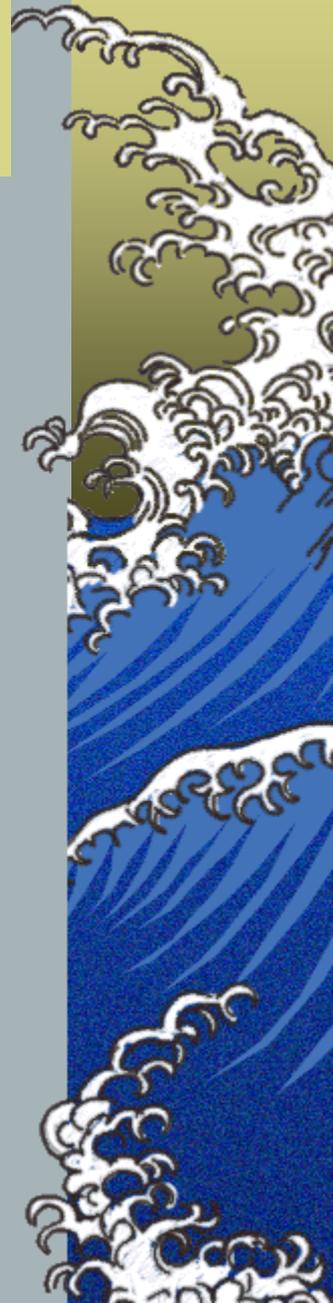
▶ *Do nothing-no obligation to assist*

▶ **Responses represent moral theory:**

▶ **Utilitarianism**

▶ **Deontological**

▶ **Doing/allowing distinction (allowing death is not causing death)**

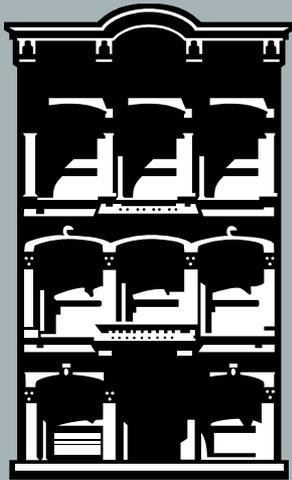


He sees that the lone person on the track is his mother! What should he do now?

- ▶ *Many students change their moral judgment to save the mother*
- ▶ *A lively discussion could follow when justifying saving one life instead of the five*
- ▶ *How are we to weigh the good of particular others against the general good?*



# Moral Distress Is Experienced

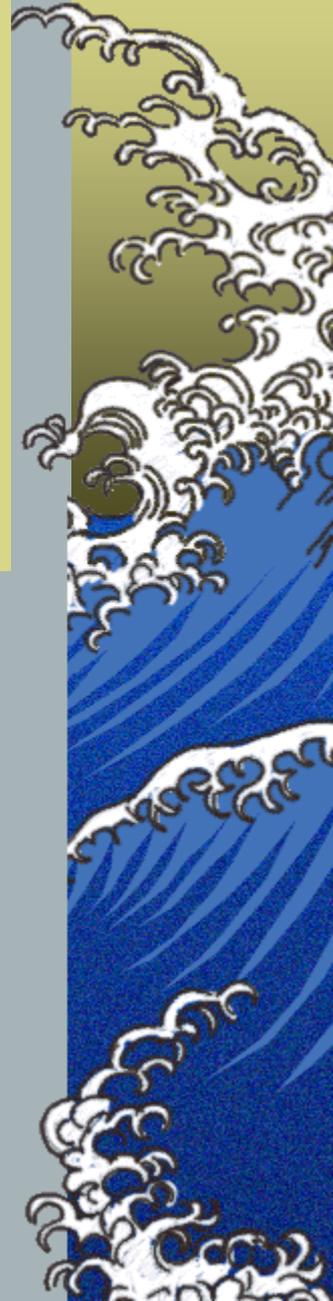


- ▶ *What role should personal relationships have in our moral decision-making?*
- ▶ *Steadfast utilitarians insist that Bloggs should still pull the switch and save the five people*
- ▶ *Another thought experiment can be used to push their thinking further...*



A lone hermit goes to the hospital for routine treatment. She is a perfect match for five patients desperately awaiting organ transplant. She has no relatives, and could be painlessly anesthetized. Would the hospital be morally justified in killing her to save the others in need?

- ★ *This situation may seem absurd, but to those who insisted that the good of many should outweigh the good of one is a direct challenge to articulate the morally relevant differences between the cases*



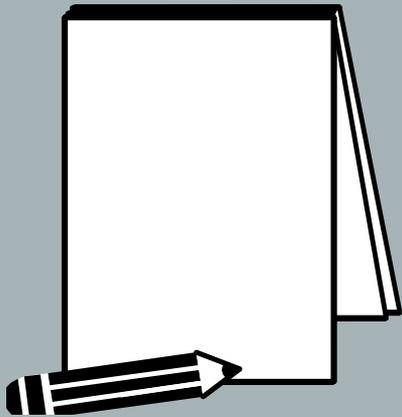
# Benefits of Using Thin Cases

- ▶ *Students make moral judgments regarding difficult cases and feel the tension of a moral dilemma*
- ▶ *They move from intuitive level responses to more reflective judgments and test the coherence of their views*

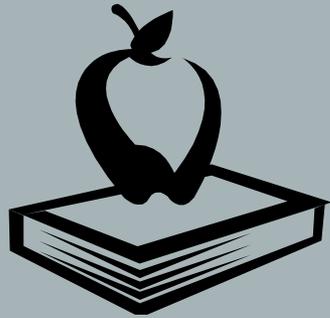


# More Benefits

- ▶ *Students uncover the important role consequences, action, and special relationships play in moral decision-making*
- ▶ *They examine similarities and differences in cases, and better understand moral theories*



# Limitations of Thin Cases



- ▶ *According to J. Hubert (personal communication, September 19, 2002), they should be used sparingly*
- ▶ *Best if used only for concept introduction*
- ▶ *They are not a substitute for real-life cases, which are introduced when basic concepts and analytical skills are mastered*



# References

- ▶ *Hubert, J. (1999). The thought experiment as a pedagogical device in nursing ethics education. Journal of Nursing Education. 38, 374-376.*
- ▶ *Sorensen, R. (1992), Thought Experiments. New York: Oxford University Press.*

