

The Trolley Problem Just Got Digital

Ethical Dilemmas in Programming Autonomous Vehicles

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Selected Sources in English

Ex. 20:13

Thou shalt not murder.

Mishna Ohalot 7:6

One life is not set aside for another.

Pes. 25b

The governor of a city said, 'go and kill Ploni or you will be killed.' What do you do? Rabbah responds: You must give your own life rather than commit murder, for, in what way do you see that your blood is redder than his? Perhaps his blood is redder?

Tosafot (San. 74b)

Allow me to throw you onto a baby such that you will end up crushing him to death, one would not be demanded to sacrifice one's own life, for he did no action.

Baba Metz. 62a

Two people were walking [far from civilization] and only one of them has a canteen of water. If both drink, they will [both] die, but if only drinks, he can reach civilization. Ben Petora taught: It is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death. [And so it was] until R. Akiva came and taught: 'that your brother may live with you' (Lev.25:36) [means] your life takes precedence over his life.

Yerushalmi Terumot 8:5

A group of people were traveling and marauders chanced upon them saying, 'Hand over one of your group or we will kill you all.' Even if all will be killed, they may not hand over one soul. If they [i.e., the marauders] specified (yichduhu) an individual like Sheva Ben Bichri then they [i.e., the group] hand him over and are not killed. Resh Lakish said [that this permit applies only if the specified individual] is liable for the death penalty like Sheva Ben Bichri. R. Yohanan [disagreed and] said that [the permit is applied] even if [the specified individual] is not liable for death as Sheva Ben Bichri.

Chazon Ish, San 25

... It is possible that this case is unlike the [Marauders] case wherein one person is handed over to be killed; for there the act of handing over someone is a brutal act of killing and the salvation of the others is not an inherent part of this act but is rather the indirect cause of their salvation. Also, [another important distinction to be made here is that, while the act of handing over the individual can be viewed in isolation], the salvation of the group is, in fact, directly connected to handing over the individual to be killed. Diverting the missile from one side to another is, in its essence, an act of salvation

not connected in any way to killing the individual on the other side. It is merely incidental that there happens to be an individual there. Now, given that on one side the multitude will be killed and on the other side one will be killed, it is possible that we should strive to minimize losses as much as possible. Indeed, did not Lulianus and Papus who sacrificed themselves to save Israel, ... and of whom it is said [in great praise] that no creature can stand in their holy place in Heaven. However, here [in the Missile Case] it is weaker [than we have made it out to be], for one is killing with one's own hands. And we have found that only handing over an individual is allowed as was Sheva Ben Bichri.

Minchat Asher, Pes. 28

It seems we can make sense of the Hazon Ish's proposal to divert the missile if we assume it is diverted passively. That is, one may not actively bend the path of the missile to kill the individual as this would be considered one's own force (kocho), which is a clear violation of killing with one's own hands (hariga beyadayim) and prohibited even to save the many. However, one could conceivably place a "shield" over the multitude such that the missile would bounce off of it and land on the individual. Placing a shield would only indirectly cause the death of the individual and thus would not be considered one's own force (kocho). And all of this needs a lot of investigation.

Tzitz Eliezer 15:70

Rabbeinu Yona has laid down for us a critical general principle [to illuminate] the guiding principle that our sages have set for us in relating to questions of life and death, and that is to choose to be in a state of passivity (shev v'al taaseh). This is true regardless of which side of a scenario we find ourselves; one must remain passive when it is impossible to resolve whose blood is redder, being ever guided by the principle to refrain from doing any sin with our own hands.

In any case of certain killing, there is no distinction between the individual and the multitude, for we do not say that the multitude is to be favored.

Rav Kook, Mishpat Cohen 143

It is beyond our power to estimate the value of the whole world that is the individual versus the whole world that is the multitude.