

Directions: Read and annotate this famous “Thought Experiment”. Your goal is to have a “discussion on paper”. You can respond directly to the text OR to other annotations and questions that other students have posed.

1. Smoke Signals and a Letter from UNICEF

You’ve spent years saving up for a new iPad Pro. You’ve worked countless hours, and now you get to spend time using it to work on your art.

One day, you take a solo hiking trip to the remote forest of Washington. Your goal is to do some nature sketches of insects that are rarely seen on your new iPad. Suddenly, you hear someone yelling for help. You find a teenager who has fallen into a rocky ravine. His leg is stuck, and he’s bleeding badly. He’s conscious, but you can tell he needs help fast.

There’s no cell signal on the trail. You try 911—no service. You try to move the rocks from his leg, but they’re too large. You can only think of one option: your iPad. If you smash it open and disconnect the internal battery, you could use the exposed lithium battery to start a small fire and signal for help. But doing that would completely destroy the iPad.

You look at the dying teen and then at the iPad you saved years to buy. You know you probably won’t be able to replace it anytime soon. Still, you break the iPad, set up the signal fire, and luckily rescuers spot the smoke within minutes. You saved him.

Later that week, you receive a letter in the mail from UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) asking you to help children who are suffering from starvation in Ukraine. The ad says that a \$50 dollar donation could save the lives of around 20 children as Ukraine struggles to defend itself.

You think about the teenager you saved. You think about the children in Ukraine. You think about all the money you’ll have to save for a new iPad.

What would you do? Why would you do it?

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2. Lifeboat Ethics

Imagine the joy of being on a cruise to Alaska.

Now, imagine the terror of knowing the boat is sinking.

Unfortunately, your cruise ship is sinking and you have to man the lifeboats. You and 50 others load onto the life boat and safely float into the water. Sadly, you see there are many people who did not make it into a life boat. The water here is dangerously cold. They won’t survive long in the water.

You realize that if you really squeeze, you could fit around 10 more people in your boat. In fact, as you look around, you see that there are dozens and dozens of people swimming toward your boat. They are all calling for help, splashing, and struggling to stay afloat.

If you try to take everyone in, the boat will sink, and everyone will die. If you take just a few, you’ll have to decide who gets saved and who doesn’t. If you take no one, those in the water will drown, but the people already in the boat will survive.

What would you do? Why would you make those choices?

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3. Time Travel to Stop a Dictator

Imagine you wake up in a future where time travel has been invented. Scientists have confirmed that you can go back in time and change one event in history. You’re offered a mission: travel back to 1889, when a baby named Adolf Hitler has just been born. You know for certain that, if he grows up, he will lead a war and genocide that causes millions of deaths.

You’re told that you can prevent all that suffering by killing him as an infant. No one would ever know, and the timeline would reset. But standing over the crib, you’re faced with a baby—innocent, crying, unaware of the future.

What would you do? Why would you do it?

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4. Self-Defense Or Murder?

You are a judge in a murder trial. The prosecution argues that John Garrison killed his coworker, Tye Williams. The defense claims John acted in self-defense.

Here is what happened:

On October 29th, John and Tye were working late at a remote construction site when a storm caused a tree to collapse onto their truck, trapping and knocking them unconscious. When they woke up, the truck was smoking and beginning to burn. Both men were injured and panicked.

The only way out was a narrow opening through the back window—just big enough for one person to escape before the fire spread. Investigators recovered footage from a ranger’s bodycam showing both men struggling toward the opening. Tye reached it first. John tried to climb out after him.

According to the footage, the two argued. Then John grabbed Tye and pushed him away from the window. John escaped. Tye was unable to reach the opening again, and he died in the fire.

The prosecution says John chose to kill Tye to save himself. The defense argues John faced immediate death and acted in self-defense.

As the judge, how would you rule? Murder or self-defense?

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5. The Shopping Cart Theory

You were recently in the car with your uncle, and he was listening to a podcast about current events, pop culture, and the news.

The host brought up a viral internet debate about shopping carts. It went something like this:

“Have you all seen this viral image? Okay, so basically, it’s a Walmart shopping cart that is clearly just left in the middle of the parking lot. The cart return is like 30 feet away and still this person didn’t return it! *That’s crazy. People are the absolute worst.*”

“Look folks, all I’m saying is that this is the real test of whether you’re a good person or not. I mean come on, *really?* Good people just don’t do this stuff. And look, I get it: There’s no rule that says you *must* take the cart back. There’s really no *punishment* if you just leave it randomly, but think about it, if everyone did this, it would be pure chaos! We have to have some principles that we all follow just for the sake of doing the right thing. Is that so hard? I just can’t believe it. All I’m saying is this: If you’re the type of person who is leaving your shopping cart, I’m putting you in the “bad person” category, plain and simple.”

Your Uncle laughed all through this topic from the host. “He is speaking the truth,” he replies with a chuckle. “That’s just wrong. I see it every day, and I can’t even believe it. But that’s human nature. People won’t choose to do ‘good’ unless they are forced to.”

All this time, you’ve been thoughtfully considering this issue of “the shopping cart”, and you want to discuss your opinion. Do you agree or disagree with your Uncle? What is your position about this “shopping cart theory”? How much does this tell us about someone’s moral compass?

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6. Tullock’s Spike

Vehicle accidents are one of the most tragic occurrences in our country. In 2024 there were 39,345 traffic fatalities. Many people, like Gordon Tullock, believe that we should be doing a lot more to prevent these tragic accidents.

Tullock came up with an idea:

Imagine every car on the road was installed with a sharp metal spike sticking out from the middle of the steering wheel, pointing directly at the driver’s chest. That sounds terrifying—but this is Tullock’s whole idea: People should be scared.

Tullock argues that if people truly feared getting hurt in an accident, they would drive far more carefully. With a deadly spike in front of them, drivers would stop tailgating, slow down, and avoid distractions. In an ironic way, this “deadly spike” could make roads *safer overall*.

Just think about all the protection we have in cars: airbags, reinforced steel frames, safety glass—the list goes on and on. We’ve spent millions of dollars making vehicles so safe. Tullock’s perspective is that many people feel *too safe* and they don’t actually think about the dangers of driving. Now, with his spike system, he believes people will think twice before they drive aggressively, cut people off, or drink and drive.

What do you think? Would a system like this actually change people’s behavior? Even if it might work, would it be morally okay to install these devices? Where do you stand?

Adapted from “The Organization of Inquiry” by Gordon Tullock published in 1966