

History of Ideas

The Trolley Problem, COVID-19, and the ethics of murder

Muhammad Hamzah Shafiq

S2020-021

Jeremy Bentham once said *"It is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong."* It was later stated more succinctly by Leonard Nimoy's Spock in Star Trek II - The Wrath of Khan as *"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."* Both statements, of

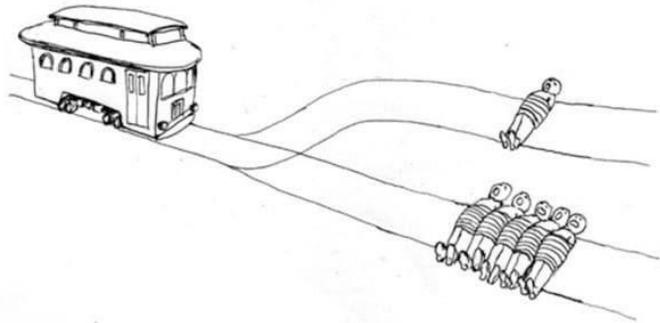


course, espouse the necessity of prioritizing the needs of the majority at the expense of the minority. But in the context of real world events and situations, things tend to get more complicated, especially when the very lives of said people are contingent on your decisions.

We are not quite halfway through the year 2020 at this point, and to put it briefly, it has been *a lot*. Between devastating wildfires, threats of World War III, a pandemic on a scale hardly believed possible before now, and now a

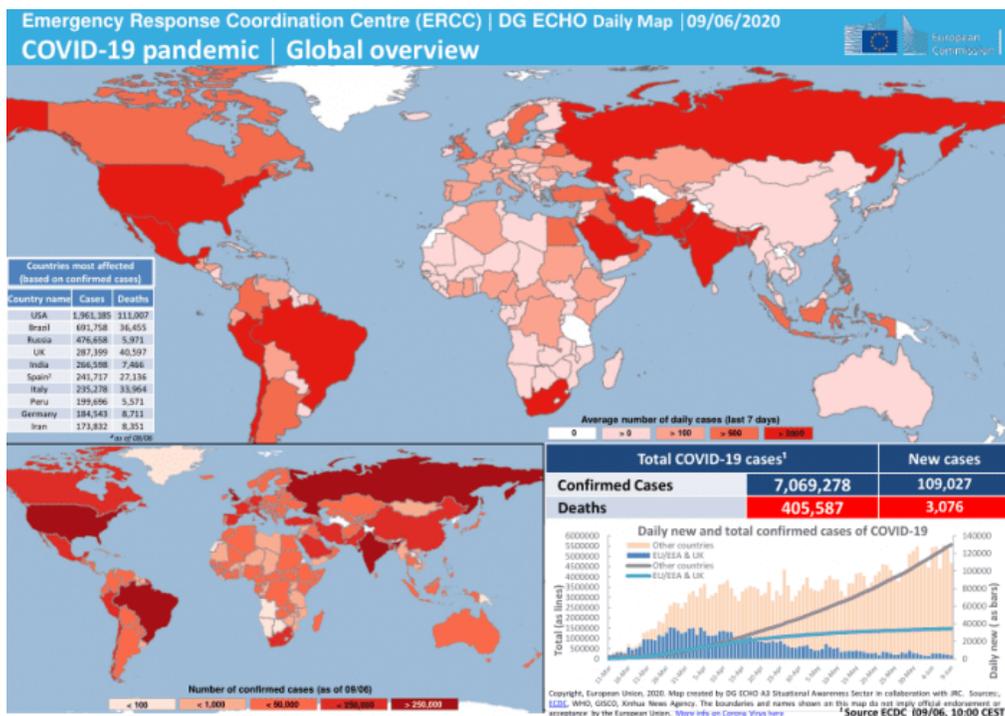
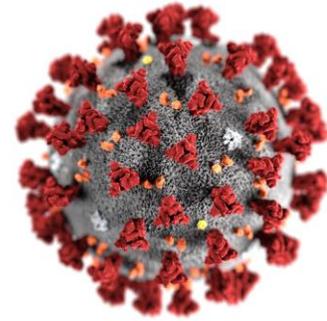
passionate and violent worldwide movement against police oppression and brutality. Each instance has endangered and outright taken lives, and each has brought forth a different facet to the question “when is it justified to take a life?” It would be interesting to examine these situations through the lens of one of the more popular ethical dilemmas known to us: the trolley problem.

The situation is simple; a trolley is on course to run over and kill five people who are tied to the tracks. It cannot be stopped, but you can pull a lever to divert the trolley onto another track, on which only



one person is tied. On first glance it is a no brainer to divert the trolley and save those five people instead of the one, but what if the situation is slightly different? What if there is a rioting mob and the only way to quell them is to frame an innocent man and have him put to death? Or what if for that same trolley, we have to stop it by physically pushing a man onto the tracks instead of pulling a lever. The clarity of our decision recedes the closer we get to the actual action of the murder. But would not pulling the lever mean we killed those five people? Or does not interfering excludes us from any culpability? This problem has long been used to argue Utilitarianism vs Deontological Ethics.

Back to the time at hand, 2020 saw the arrival of SARS-CoV-2, a novel Coronavirus that effectively changed the world as we knew it, and brought forth the global pandemic that epidemiologists (and Bill Gates) have been dreading for years. This is a pandemic by and for the Internet age, for this level of infection and proliferation would not have been possible in any other period of time, and yet combating and surviving it without society breaking down completely may not have been possible in any other time either. Electricity, Internet and rigorous supply chains have kept the world going, but with varying success country by country. SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes has no vaccine as of yet, and the primary means of prevention and control is social distancing, and self-imposed quarantine. Naturally this threw a massive wrench in the gears of modern



society, with mass unemployment and uncertainty, and entire industries like airlines, private restaurants and oil going bankrupt and shutting down within weeks. Of course the other option was to let the disease run its course, ravage the population and kill an unimaginable number of people. The survivors, now with herd immunity, would move on.

Many developed countries of the world successfully implemented and maintained these new guidelines. They absorbed the financial punches and provided for their population while they were confined to their homes. But in a country like Pakistan the answer was less obvious. A large number of people live below the poverty line, are paycheck to paycheck, or otherwise incapable of sustaining themselves in prolonged isolation. And herein came the difficult decision: who do you let die? Those who would succumb to the ravages of the pandemic, or those who would starve due to a collapsed economy?

The utilitarian approach in this case may be to approach the problem with brutal pragmatism, weigh the benefits of risking people's lives versus risking their livelihoods. That question alone is sticky and hard to answer, but governments aren't expected to be coldly



pragmatic, they're expected to be compassionate and caring, and to as much as

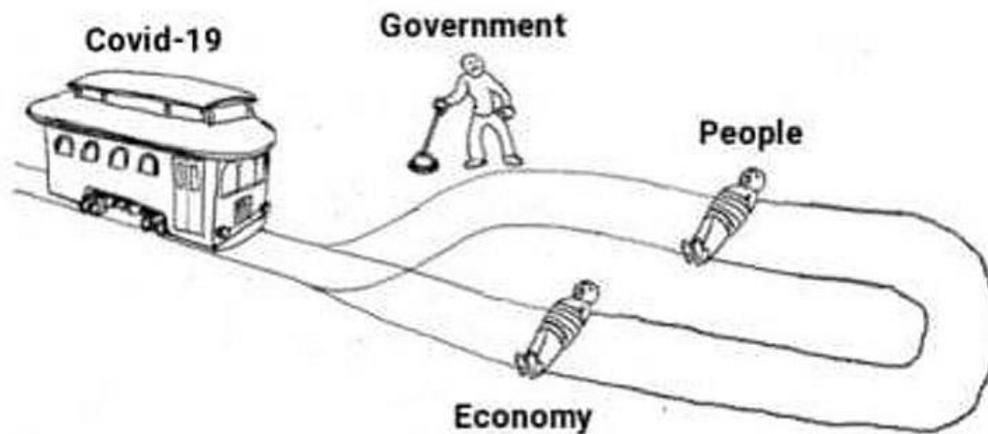
possible, protect its people's lives, or at least their wealth. Indeed much of the anti-lockdown rhetoric was motivated by a base need to protect the interests of the wealthy rather than the livelihoods of the poor (which are, of course, inextricably linked). The timeline of the responses of Pakistan and the U.S. have been amusing mirrors of each other. Leaders of both countries are helplessly beholden to their financial benefactors, and as such dismissed any suggestion of closing down their countries, only changing course when the inevitable, catastrophic consequences of inaction showed themselves in China and Europe.



In Pakistan though, the most critical aspect of this choice has manifested itself, and that is decisiveness, and the lack of it. Prime Minister Imran Khan has famously been referred to as the P.M of u-turns, and has proven true to the title here, with endless hesitation. Refusal to lock down and derision of provincial governments, to full national lockdown, to a premature lifting of the lockdown owing to financial woes of the people, and now musings of a second lockdown. In indecision, one ends up with the worst of both worlds. In this case, a dying economy, and a death toll that is just now ramping up to its horrifying heights.

What many of these world events have proven is that the job of a leader is to make the hardest decisions, and often these choices will condemn someone to get run over by that trolley. However, once the decision has been made to pull that lever, second guessing ceases to be an option, and one must commit to their decision, else the consequences become something that is best expressed by the absurdness of an internet meme.

The trolley problem



Bibliography

1. 'The History of Utilitarianism'
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>
2. <https://theconversation.com/the-trolley-dilemma-would-you-kill-one-person-to-save-five-57111>
3. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2238724/1-live-pakistan-reports-100-deaths-last-24-hours-nationwide-tally-crosses-108317/?amp=1>
4. <https://starecat.com/the-trolley-problem-covid-19-government-people-vs-economy-multi-track-drifting/>