

Philosophy & Ethics: The “Trolley Problem” in the Real World

Most of us are unlikely ever to have to decide what to do about people chained to railroad tracks and a fast-approaching trolley. Therefore, below is an example of an ethical conundrum you might actually encounter in the real world.

Step 1: Scenario

You are a university student. You have an exam coming up in a class in which you are really struggling. You see your instructor from afar at the university library the night before the test. You notice that she is making some copies at one of the public copy machines in the library, but you don't think about this any further. Your instructor does not notice you. She probably doesn't know who you are anyway, since it is a very large lecture class with around 300 students. You proceed to a study area to study for the test with other people who are also in the course, including some friends of yours. Everybody in your study group is very nervous about this test and afraid they may fail it. You all agree that this instructor is just too hard and that her tests are unreasonable and unfair.

Later on that night, you need to make some copies for another course. When you open the copier, you realize that it is the same machine your instructor used earlier, and that she forgot to remove the original copy of the test, including the answer key. It is way past midnight (the test is not until the coming afternoon) and your instructor is nowhere to be found. There is no way she would know that *you* took her original of the exam. She probably won't come back to look for it tonight, and for all she knows, library staff will have thrown the original of the test into the recycling bin. Or she may never even realize that she has left the test in the copier.

Step 2: What do you need to take into consideration?

In groups, discuss what would be the right thing to do in this situation and why. In your discussion, you must consider several different factors, including, but not limited to:

1. What would be in your own best interest? Why?
2. What would be in the best interest of your friends in the class? Why?
3. What would be in the best interest of all the students in the class? Why?
4. What would be in the instructor's best interest? Why?
5. What would be the most practical solution? Why?
6. What would be the safest solution for you? Why?
7. What would be the safest solution for your friends? Why?

- 8. What would be the safest solution for all the students in the class? Why?
- 9. What would be the ethical thing to do? Why?
- 10. What would be the moral thing to do? Why?

Step 3: What do you do and why do you do it?

Once you have had your discussion, you need to pick one of the options below or come up with your own suggestion about what to do (You can also combine some of the options below to come up with your own solution.), and explain why you have chosen this way forward. How and why is it the safest and the most universally beneficial, practical, ethical, and moral option? Or have you chosen to focus just on some of these considerations at the expense of some of the others? If so, why?

- a) **You give the test to the library staff to shred without looking at it any further and you go study without telling anyone else about it.**

This is the right thing to do because:

- b) **You do as in a), but you also email your instructor, explaining the situation and assuring her that you did not look at it.**

This is the right thing to do because:

- c) **You tell your study buddies that you are not feeling well, take the test home/to your room with you; you study with it, and ace the exam the next day.**

This is the right thing to do because:

d) You take the test and bring it to your study group, so you can *all* do well on the test.

This is the right thing to do because:

e) You scan it, and you anonymously email it to everybody in class, so everybody can do well.

This is the right thing to do because:

f) Since you have a copy of the test, you decide to go out instead of studying and study tomorrow, because the test is not until the afternoon. You don't tell the others in the group.

This is the right thing to do because:

g) You leave the test in the copier and walk away, not telling anyone anything, and you go study with your group.

This is the right thing to do because:

h) You...

This is the right thing to do because:

Extra space for writing:
