

20 You Choose, You Lose

You notice five children playing on some railroad tracks. Absorbed in their play, they don't notice the train coming down the track towards them. But luckily, the track forks before them and you are standing right at the switch. By merely pressing the button you can divert the train and thereby spare the children. But then you notice that down the other track is a single child playing alone. To do nothing is to allow the train to kill the five children on the first track; to press the button is to save those five but send the solitary child to her destiny. What should you do?

To many people it's as obvious as it is unpleasant that you must press the button: the right thing to do is to kill the one in order to save the many.

But now consider a different scenario. You are a doctor in a pediatric emergency ward. Five children are about to die from

Different failing organs: heart, kidney, lung, etc. You notice that outside, playing in the hospital playground, is a single healthy child playing alone. You happen to know that she has the same blood type as all of the dying children. Technology has improved so much that it would be a relatively simple matter to snatch the playground child, harvest her organs, and transplant them into the respective dying children, thereby saving them all. For you to do nothing is to allow the five children to die; to give the word is to save those five but send the solitary child to her destiny. What should you do?

To many people it's now as unpleasant as it is obvious that you must not press the button: the right thing to do is to spare the one and kill the many.

But the two situations seem fundamentally analogous. So are people's moral beliefs deeply confused here? Or is it that morality itself, perhaps, is confused—that whichever way you choose, you lose?

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