

# Research tests how people make moral decisions using classic dilemmas

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Credit: City University London

Is it acceptable and moral to sacrifice a few people's lives to save many others? An academic at City University London has developed a new model with colleagues to test in an unbiased way how people make such decisions using the classic trolley and footbridge dilemmas.

Such questions around the morality of actions loom large in the philosophy and psychology of ethics, with two main philosophies defining each side of the debate. The utilitarian point of view, introduced by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, states that it is acceptable to sacrifice a few people's lives to save a greater number because this results in greater utility (happiness) overall. In contrast, deontologists (e.g., Kant) argue that it is not acceptable, because living is a fundamental right for everyone, and no one has the right to take a life,

regardless of any benefits that may arise from doing so.

In Dr Kusev's study, the participants were given dilemmas with partial or full descriptions of the moral scenario and a question. The researchers found that when people are presented with the full implications of their actions, they are more likely to weigh their choices in a manner that is consistent with utilitarian ethics. The study has shown that accessibility of utilitarian outcomes through comprehensive information about moral actions and consequences boosted utility maximization in [moral](#) choices. The paper is published in the *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*.

Dr Kusev said:

"What we found is that different representations of identical utilitarian tasks and outcomes make some features of the decision situation more accessible and others less accessible, leading to systematically different decisions. Respondents who received full information took the least time to make their decision and were more likely to err towards utilitarian ethics and make a decision for the greater good, hence saving more people irrespective of whether the involvement was personal or impersonal."

**More information:** Petko Kusev et al. Judging the morality of utilitarian actions: How poor utilitarian accessibility makes judges irrational, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.3758/s13423-016-1029-2](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-016-1029-2)

Provided by City University London

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