



Exploring Philosophy - Audio

Thought experiments

Winifred

Hello. Welcome to the audio for Book One of Exploring Philosophy, which is all about the self. First of all we are going to hear about a philosophical device called a “thought experiment”. I’m with Nigel Warburton, who is the author of Book One, and with Julian Baggini, who is Editor of “The Philosopher” magazine.

Nigel, to start with then. Could you give me an example of a thought experiment

Nigel Warburton

I want you to imagine that you’re witnessing a trolley that’s just like a railway carriage that’s unmanned, rolling out of control towards a set of points where the track divides. So it stands this trolley is going to hit five people and kill them. They can’t get out of the way in time. But luckily you are standing next to the switch point so you could change it and make the trolley move on to another track where it will just kill one person. What do you do?

Winifred

I suppose I would kill one person

Nigel Warburton

Like most people. I think it might be quite tough to make that decision but you haven’t got long to think about it. So you do that. Okay. Now imagine this situation. Same kind of situation. There’s a trolley out of control. You are on a bridge this time. It’s hurtling towards these five people and next to you there’s a very large, very fat person who you could push over the bridge and he’s actually large enough to stop the train – trolley. Would you be happy to push that person over the bridge to save the five people?

Winifred

I don’t think I would be. That feels a more active choice to destroy the life of the big person who could stop the trolley than simply switching the points.

Nigel Warburton

Yes, that’s exactly what most people would say.

Winifred

Julian, you've written a book about thought experiments - The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten. Could you explain then what's going on here, what is being tested?

Julian

Well I think it's very helpful to begin by trying to think about what a standard experiment is like. Let's say you're trying to discover how air pressure makes a difference to the boiling point of liquid. Well in a scientific experiment what you try and do is you try and identify the thing that you're trying to measure and then you try and separate out all the other factors. So it's what scientists call "trying to isolate the variables". Now in a thought experiment in a way you're trying to do the same thing. Obviously they're not the kind of things that can be tested. You can't actually go and put people in front of runaway trolleys and get them to flick switches and so forth so you have to do it all in your imagination. But within those constraints you do try to control as much as possible. So if we go back to the first version of the trolley problem which Nigel described, really what's that trying to do is it's trying to see what difference it makes whether or not deaths occur because you failed to do something or because you choose to do something and whether that makes an important difference because although as Nigel said, a lot of people, most people do actually say they would flick the switch. A significant number of people wouldn't want to do that. They think even flicking a switch means that I'm causing a death whereas okay more people die if I let it go but I'm not causing it. So you then ask well okay – you brought out that difference and you then try and explore whether there is really anything underlying it. In the second case though with the fat man what you're trying to do is you're trying to see what kind of difference it makes when you have a more physical, visceral proximity to the event. You're trying to see how much emotion gets in the way here.

Winifred

So to return to my question. What are we testing here with these experiments?

Julian

In terms of what you're testing a lot of people would say all you are testing is intuition. Now by intuition we don't mean anything mystical or supernatural you know kind of mind reading. What we really mean is our pre-reflective judgements, the kind of judgements we make of our situation before we perhaps have thought through rationally and so forth.

Nigel Warburton

Would you say they're the same as prejudices?

Julian

I think what's interesting is that having brought them out you then try and see whether they are just prejudices and then you're saying ah we've got them out in the open now in this experiment. Let's have a look at them and see if they really do have any moral significance. Well in this case it's moral significance and in other thought experiments it might be another kind of significance.

Winifred

What else might you want to test? I know your book is busting with them. You've got a hundred or more examples. Tell me some more.

Julian

Well, one very interesting one, which is about the logic of identity, is a puzzle around what's called The Ship of Theseus and this comes from Thomas Hobbes. So see what you make of this one. The idea here is that a ship is put into dry dock for some repairs. Now what happens is that they remove parts from the ship and replace them with new ones. And they put all the old parts to one side. Now actually as they keep repairing the ship they keep finding new things that need replacing so that by the end of it they've actually replaced every single part of this ship. No bit is the same. And it's done and it goes back into the sea. The guy who's been collecting all the old parts decides well don't want to waste them all. Puts them back together again and creates another ship. Now the question here is which of those ships is the ship of Theseus, the person whose ship it was in the first place

Winifred

I think it's the one made of the old parts.

Julian

Okay. And why do you think that?

Winifred

I suppose because I think the old parts are more authentic than the new parts

Julian

Yeah – it's an interesting answer. I mean if you ask which is the original ship a natural answer is "it depends". It depends why you are interested in the ship. From the legal point of view it's the repaired one I guess. From the point of view of someone who is interested in finding forensic evidence for a murder that occurred on the ship it's the old one. So you could say the thought experiment at least invites a suggestion that there is no simple fact of the matter here. It's not that you know one answer is always right and one answer is always wrong. You've always got to ask what is at stake? What kind of identity are you trying to find?

And this actually has a very important .. for ourselves because as we know the human body is changing the molecules that make it up all the time. We can have transplants. So it is not just purely a theoretical question about ships it actually relates very closely to questions about personal identity.

Winifred

Is there a right or a wrong answer? When you're asked to do the thought experiment in most other disciplines there would be a right or a wrong answer or a clever or less clever answer, an obvious or less obvious answer. I find myself quite disappointed when I give my answer – I see Nigel's nodding away - I feel I've given the most obvious, least clever answer.

Julian

There may ultimately be a right answer. I mean it's not the case that in philosophy there is never any such thing as a right answer. But you're right. You're looking for a well argued answer for sure and you're looking for argues – you're looking for an answer which is better justified than alternatives and so forth.

Winifred

Give me another example

Julian

Well another example which I think is quite a neat one was put forward by Antony Flew a long time ago. He asked you to imagine that you have a friend who is convinced there is a bit of land, it's in the middle of the jungle somewhere you come across it. And he is convinced it's being tended to by a gardener because it just seems so well ordered. Everything is growing so well. And so what you do is – you're not so sure – so you agree you're going to sit and your going to observe this clearing for say a week. So you both sit there for a week and at the end of the week you haven't seen any sign of a gardener at all. So you turn round to your friend and you say, "well there you go. It seems to be pretty conclusive. There is no gardener." In reply your friend says, "well I think there still is a gardener. I mean there must be. It's so neat and tidy and well organised. It just must be an invisible gardener." Okay? So what Flew is trying to suggest there is that's the kind of thinking that informs a lot of religion. That, you know, there is no evidence that a particular god exists. but people are so convinced by the orderliness of the world in some way that they just insist there is a gardener there even though one can never be observed. Now again, I don't think the thought experiment proves anything by itself. But it's a good way of kind of issuing a challenge to the religious believer, to the theist, which is, if in this case the person who insists on the invisible gardener, is clearly being irrational, which most people would say he was, why is it different in the case of god?

Winifred

Okay Julian. You have written a book about it. I have a thought experiment for you. Imagine philosophy without the thought experiment. What would we be missing? What would be the great milestones of philosophy that we would be missing without the thought experiment?

Julian

It's hard to imagine the history of philosophy with all its thought experiments taken out. If you take virtually any great work of philosophy there is a thought experiment in there somewhere of some kind. Plato's cave, Descartes and his evil demon, John Locke and his talking parrots, David Hume and the person who is never seen. It's full of them. You couldn't do it. But there's one way in which it might be slightly beneficial which is that there is an argument that we are bit too enamoured of thought experiments in philosophy and that there is no point in bringing out a full experiment when there is actually a real life case which can make issues even clearer. And to give a simple example we might engage in fanciful thought experiments about the importance of memory for identity and a sense of self but you know we have people who have accidents, suffer from dementia and lose their memory and perhaps we are better off actually looking at those real life cases than the thought experiments.

Winifred

Is there a particular thought experiment that has really changed the way you think?

Julian

Oh I had a revelatory one you know. I mean I remember when I was an undergraduate I came across Derek Parfitt's famous teletransporter thought experiment –

Winifred

Tell me about that.

Julian

Well this is simply the idea you have a teletransporter, which will take you to Mars, but the important thing is it explains how it works. It works by destroying your brain and body on earth transferring the information to Mars and reconstructing one out of completely new matter. And it seems that the person who wakes up on Mars would have – be exactly like you, would think he was you and he describes it in such a way that you know you have someone who has done this on many occasions and so you know doesn't see any problem with it. And I thought that was so wonderful. There were complications and variations that follow. For example when the machine goes wrong and produces two of you but this really opened up a whole area of thinking about personal identity which has fascinated me every since and I'm still thinking and writing about it.

Winifred

Is there one that you?

Nigel Warburton

For me actually it's the experience machine. The idea that you could be put into a machine that satisfies all your desires, gives you the illusion that you were doing all the things you really want to do and doing them fantastically well. So you could – you could be a brilliant musician and have all the adulation of the – of the crowd and so on. And the point is once you are in the machine for ten minutes you don't know you're in a machine. Would you get into the machine? And most people say, "well - maybe for a few hours. But if I never get out of it I wouldn't do it", which to me reveals very clearly that there are things that we want which are much more than just a fulfilment of desires, more than just having the blissful mental states as it were. We want to be in touch with reality as it is not a simulation of reality.