Analogies in moral philosophy.

Analogies are tools that help us understand novel concepts by leveraging their parallels to existing knowledge. These devices, in the form of thought experiments, are essential to the field of moral philosophy, where they allow us to reason about ethical dilemmas without having to experience them ourselves. Three of these, the Tunnel Problem, the Violinist, and the Utility Monster, illuminate the role of analogies in the philosophy of ethics.

The Trolley Problem is a classic thought experiment, where you must decide between causing the death of one or many. The Tunnel Problem is an updated version of this, except that you are asked to consider a course of action not for yourself, but for a self-driving car. In it, the car must either hit and kill a child, or crash, killing you, the passenger. The Tunnel Problem is an analogy twice over. It modifies an existing experiment with which many are already familiar, and it builds direct applications to self-driving cars and the increasingly automated world in which we live.

In another famous thought experiment, written by Judith Thomson, a famous violinist suffers kidney failure. One day, you wake to find that the Society of Music Lovers has kidnapped you and connected your circulatory system to the violinist’s until she is healed in nine months. Although the innocent violinist has a right to life, Thomson argues that she does not have the right to the use of your body. This analogy is effective because it presents a situation parallel to abortion while removing biases from the highly-charged emotions often associated with the controversial topic.

The third thought experiment is the Utility Monster, a hypothetical creature for whom the utility of any object is multiplied in comparison to a normal person. It creates a scenario in which the most utilitarian action would be to ignore the needs of others, instead providing resources to the monster. This thought experiment is interesting not just for its criticism of utilitarianism, but its ability to bring to the forefront the issue of whether it is possible to objectively compare one’s happiness or suffering to another’s.

Philosophers use analogies to shed new light on reality using our imaginations. Thought experiments such as the Tunnel Problem, the Violinist, and the Utility Monster are not merely entertaining vignettes, they are heuristic devices designed to make us think differently about the moral way to act within our world.
Works Cited


