

# IMAGINE . . .

Fifty-Nine Thought Experiments  
That Tell You What You Think

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## INTRODUCTION

Thought experiments are almost limitless in their diversity and range. They are in the toolkits of many scientists and philosophers. Einstein found them helpful in developing his theories of special and general relativity. Military strategists employ them in what they call war games. Law school and medical school exams are replete with hypothetical cases — thought experiments in which students are presented with a set of facts and asked, *Imagine that you are the judge (or the doctor). How would you rule? (What would you prescribe?)* We all conduct thought experiments without realizing it, often as simple as “What if it rains?” The British philosopher Derek Parfit (1942 - 2017) was particularly keen on them. One of his celebrated ones is the model for thought experiment #44 in this book.

A thought experiment I’ve come upon a number of times is the trolley problem, which has been postulated in various forms. A version I remember asks you to imagine that you are standing next to a switch that can be used to redirect a trolley onto an alternate route. A trolley is coming along. *Horrors:* it’s on a route such that, if it keeps going, it will kill three people who are on the tracks beyond the switch. Fortunately, you can save them by turning the switch and redirecting the trolley on the alternate route. Unfortunately, if you do that, the trolley will kill a person who is on the tracks on that route.

*What will you do? You have seconds to decide. Pull the switch, and you will have directly caused someone’s death. But if you don’t pull the switch, three people, instead of one, will die because of your inaction.*

In one version of the trolley problem, in order to save three people, instead of pulling a switch that will result in the trolley killing one person, you have to push a person onto the tracks. Aversion to making physical contact in such circumstances tends to be stronger than acting remotely even though both actions produce the same result. Philosophical inquiries can’t ignore human emotions.

In his book *Life is Hard* (2022), the philosopher Kieran Setiya asks, “Would you choose to save one person from an hour of torment, or to relieve a multitude from mild

headaches?” In this experiment, unlike in the trolley problem, no one dies, and the facts are more nebulous. What is meant by “torment,” and how many is a “multitude”? It would be futile to try to be precise, and there is no right or wrong answer. Setiya, who suffers from chronic pain, tells of agonies he has endured. His personal experience with pain, rather than philosophical reasoning, may have formed his view that it would be worse for one person to suffer torment for an hour than for a multitude to have a mild headache.

One could argue that all novels, movies, and plays are thought experiments or series of thought experiments. They depict imagined characters, imagined situations, and imagined actions. This is taken to an extra dimension in the movie *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray. If you’ve seen it, you probably remember that Murray’s character, Phil Connors, is a crude cynical guy who wakes up the day after Groundhog Day and finds that it’s Groundhog Day all over again, and this keeps happening day after day. Connor’s successive Groundhog Days are like a series of thought experiments, exploring the consequences of acting different ways in the same circumstances without affecting his real life (in this case his real life in the movie).

This process is immensely frustrating but instructive for Phil Connors. He learns what otherwise might never have been possible: how to stop being a jerk. A Groundhog Day comes when he behaves in a reasonably sensitive and civilized way. The young woman he has been pursuing, who was repulsed by his conduct on previous Groundhog days, gets a version of him she finds appealing. His succession of Groundhog Days ends.

Real life choices are rarely, if ever, so bizarre as the trolley problem, or so incommensurable as the torment and mild headaches problem, or so fantastical as the Groundhog Day problem. Nonetheless, constructing hypothetical situations and thinking about what would happen in various contingencies can expand your thinking and give you a window into your psychic state.

In the thought experiments presented in this book, I describe a situation and ask what you would think or do in these circumstances. Then, in most cases, to supply another perspective, I say what I would think or do.

Almost without exception, I don’t claim to be giving the right answer to these questions. Few of them have right or wrong answers. The thought experiments in this book aren’t intended to tell you what you *should* think; rather, they ask

you to consider *what* you think. This can be useful: Becoming aware of what I think and of the consequences of failing to think have freed me from insularity and improved my chances that when the road ahead of me diverges, I'll know which way to go.