Thought Experiments

Thought experiments are hypothetical situations that test our intuitions in ways that challenge us to examine the adequacy of our habitual beliefs. Thought experiments can help reveal inconsistencies and a lack of clarity in our thinking by triggering counter examples and by raising questions in new and creative ways. They also force us out of our comfort zone and allow us to explore possibilities we may have previously rejected. They can also be an effective way to introduce a topic or philosopher. All in all, thought experiments are a great way to stimulate classroom discussions.

Not only do thought experiments improve our critical reasoning ability, but if done thoughtfully, they can bring to light unexamined assumptions, implicit biases, and harmful stereotypes in our thinking. See the excellent article by Elizabeth Lanphier and Amy McKiernan, "Thinking about Thought Experiments in Ethics" in ***Teaching Ethics*** 19:1 (Spring 2020). When using thought experiments, it is important to respond to students' resistance to "just playing along" as an opportunity to dig deeper into the buried assumptions of the hypothetical situation. Students' reluctance to answer the questions within the thought experiment can also lead to a productive discussion of what information is needed and relevant to moral decision-making. This can also be a great teaching moment to pivot to a conversation about racial, gender, class and other stereotypes, and how they affect moral reasoning.

When teaching with thought experiments, it is important to have prepared in advance questions you will use to initiate, maintain, and close the discussion. Be aware that how you frame the questions and the order in which you ask them will affect the students' responses. You may want to split the class into smaller groups, where you conduct the thought experiment using a different framing and order of questions to examine different outcomes and then discuss the divergent outcomes in your large class debrief.

Here is a simple lesson plan using thought experiments to teach the difference between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care from the work of Carol Gilligan.

Learning Objective:

To examine the distinction Carol Gilligan makes between an ethics of justice, which frames moral issues as conflicts of interests with winners and losers as determined by logical appeal to universal principles, and an ethics of care, which frames moral issues as shared problems requiring cooperation through communication to find mutually beneficial outcomes. An additional learning objective could be to examine how gender and racial stereotypes affect how students view the hypothetical situation, when you change the race or gender of the persons in the thought experiment.

Activity:

Begin by sharing the Aesop's fable, The Porcupine and the Moles, to initiate a discussion of how to see (frame) moral issues.

THE PORCUPINE AND THE MOLES (Aesop Fable)

It was growing cold and a porcupine was looking for a good home. At last he found a little sheltered cave, where lived a family of moles. He asked them to let him share the cave with them, and the generous moles kindly consented.

The moles soon wished they had not given him permission to stay. His sharp quills pricked them at every turn. The moles endured this discomfort as long as they could. Then at last they politely asked him to leave.

"Oh no! I am very well satisfied, thank you," said the Porcupine. "I intend to stay right here. If you moles are dissatisfied, I suggest that you leave!"

1. An obvious initial question to ask is, "How would you resolve the problem between the porcupine and the mole family and why?" (The initial answers will often reflect the issue as a conflict of interest between the porcupine and the mole family with the stronger claim being that of the mole family, so the porcupine must go!)
2. Follow-up question: What might be some other solutions or even ways of seeing the issue? (Inevitably a student will suggest a compromise or cooperative solution where the

mole family helps the porcupine find or build another home, or they work together to expand the mole home to make more room for them all.)

3. More follow-up questions: What are the similarities and differences between these two ways of seeing and solving the issue? What are the different values prioritized by these two different approaches?

Now the students are primed to discuss the Heinz Dilemma.

HEINZ DILEMMA

A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. (From ***In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*** by Carol Gilligan, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982)

1. An obvious initial question to ask is, "Should Heinz have broken into the store to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?" You can play with the two different responses the students gave in the Aesop's fable, where some see this as another conflict of interest requiring agonistic moral reasoning and others as a shared problem requiring communication and cooperation.
2. Follow-up question: Do you agree with Carol Gilligan that these two responses indicate two different ethics or moral psychologies in solving moral issues: one more typical of men and the other of women? Why or why not?
3. More follow-up questions: Here's where you can examine the effect of stereotypes and social dynamics by changing up the race and/or gender of the persons in the situation.

Carol Gilligan herself recognized how changing the race of the participants would change how we see the dilemma, as quoted in Lanphier and McKiernan. For example, you could ask: “How would your thinking about the situation change if Heinz were a black man? Or, “How would your thinking change if Heinz were the wife and the sick spouse were the husband?” You might also explore the relative importance of information in moral decision-making. “What is the most relevant information in the situation as stated? What is not relevant? What information would you need to feel confident in arriving at the best moral response?

4. You may want to split the class into two or more groups and give the different groups different versions of the thought experiment. For example, one where Heinz is a black man and another where he is white; or one where Heinz is the wife and another where Heinz is the husband. Of course, other variations are possible.
5. Wrap-up Discussion: We explored how moral issues may be framed as either a conflict of interest or as a shared problem. What are some other ways we might frame moral issues? We saw how Gilligan argues that men tend to see moral issues as a conflict of interest and women tend to see them as a shared problem. Do you agree or disagree with this? In what ways do you think gender and even race affect moral reasoning?

Below are a few famous and effective ethical thought experiments you can use in your class.

The Ring of Gyges

Gyges a poor shepherd is tending his flock when there is an earthquake. A huge crack opens in the earth to expose a sarcophagus. Gyges reaches in and takes the ring that has drawn his attention. Later, when he is talking among friends, he notices that he becomes invisible when he turns the ring in toward himself. He tries this out a few times and then forms his plans. Invisible, he gains entry to the king's castle and rapes the queen. Drawing her into his nefarious plan, they kill the king and take over the kingdom. Gyges marries the queen and becomes ruler of a large and wealthy kingdom. Somehow it doesn't seem fit to say that he lives "happily ever after." But, since he is never caught, it doesn't follow that his ill-gotten gain has made him miserable.

Before finding his ring, Gyges was, at least outwardly, a well-behaved, just citizen. But the combination of vast power and no accountability drew Gyges over to the dark side. Does the human character, like that of Gyges, dissolve in the face of temptation and lack of

accountability? Is the threat of punishment necessary to keep individuals moral? Is visibility and the threat of punishment all that stands between an individual and a life of injustice?
(Plato's Republic II, S359)

Nozick's Experience Machine

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? [...] Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening [...] Would you plug in? (From Nozick's ***Anarchy, State, and Utopia***.)

Thomson's Violinist

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you--we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says. "Tough luck. I agree. but now you've got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever be unplugged from him?"

(From Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion.")

Rachel's Smith and Jones at the Bathtub

In the first, Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. One evening while the child is taking his bath, Smith sneaks into the bathroom and drowns the child, and then arranges things so that it will look like an accident.

In the second, Jones also stands to gain if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. Like Smith, Jones sneaks in planning to drown the child in his bath. However, just as he enters the bathroom Jones sees the child slip and hit his head, and fall face down in the water. Jones is delighted; he stands by, ready to push the child's head back under if it is necessary, but it is not necessary. With only a little thrashing about, the child drowns all by himself, "accidentally," as Jones watches and does nothing. Now Smith killed the child, whereas Jones "merely" let the child die. That is the only difference between them. Did either man behave better, from a moral point of view?

(From Rachel's "Active and Passive Euthanasia.")

"Is it bad to be unlucky?"

Two friends, Bell and Haig, spend the evening together in the pub. At closing time, a pint or two over the limit, both tatter to their cars to drive home. Bell gets home without alarm, as he has dozens of times before, slumps into bed, and wakes up the next morning with nothing worse than a mild hangover. Haig—just as experienced and adept at driving after a few drinks—makes sedate progress homewards until his journey is interrupted by a young man suddenly flinging himself into the road in front of him. No time to stop, and the man is killed instantly. Haig is thrown in jail and wakes up the next morning with a mild hangover and the certainty of spending years in prison. What is the difference between Bell's and Haig's behavior? What does this say about the way we assess moral behavior?

(From Ben Dupre's ***50 Philosophy Ideas***.)

Next Steps:

Choose a thought experiment and consider how you might use it to introduce or teach a concept or ethical idea.

1. Ethical concept or idea or philosopher to be examined:
2. What questions could you ask to initiate discussion?
3. What questions could you ask to maintain a meaningful discussion?
4. If the students resist the situation as given, what questions could you ask to dig deeper into their concerns about needed information or relevant context, implicit assumptions and/or stereotypes buried in the details of the thought experiment?
5. What questions could you ask to bring the discussion to a satisfactory conclusion?

For an excellent resource of philosophical thought experiments see: Peg Tilly's ***What If…Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy***. London: Routledge, 2016.