The Trolley Problem

Some years ago, Philippa Foot drew attention to an extraordinarily interesting problem.\(^1\) Suppose you are the driver of a trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don’t work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, Mrs. Foot has arranged that there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?

Questions:

1. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Egoism school of thought.

2. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Utilitarianism school of thought.

3. What do you think is the morally permissible thing to do? Why?
Scenario 2  
Let us begin by looking at a case that is in some ways like Mrs. Foot’s story of the trolley driver. I will call her case *Trolley Driver*; let us now consider a case I will call *Bystander at the Switch*. In that case you have been strolling by the trolley track, and you can see the situation at a glance: The driver saw the five on the track ahead, he stamped on the brakes, the brakes failed, so he fainted. What to do? Well, here is the switch, which you can throw, thereby turning the trolley yourself. Of course you will kill one if you do. But I should think you may turn it all the same.5

Questions:

1. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Egoism school of thought.

2. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Utilitarianism school of thought.

3. What do you think is the morally permissible thing to do? Why?
Scenario 3

Now consider a second hypothetical case. This time you are to imagine yourself to be a surgeon, a truly great surgeon. Among other things you do, you transplant organs, and you are such a great surgeon that the organs you transplant always take. At the moment you have five patients who need organs. Two need one lung each, two need a kidney each, and the fifth needs a heart. If they do not get those organs today, they will all die; if you find organs for them today, you can transplant the organs and they will all live. But where to find the lungs, the kidneys, and the heart? The time is almost up when a report is brought to you that a young man who has just come into your clinic for his yearly check-up has exactly the right blood-type, and is in excellent health. Lo, you have a possible donor. All you need do is cut him up and distribute his parts among the five who need them. You ask, but he says, “Sorry. I deeply sympathize, but no.”

Would it be morally permissible for you to operate anyway? Everybody to whom I have put this second hypothetical case says, No, it would not be morally permissible for you to proceed.

Questions:

1. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Egoism school of thought.

2. Explain what the morally permissible thing to do is according to someone who ascribes to the Hedonistic Utilitarianism school of thought.

3. What do you think is the morally permissible thing to do? Why?

4. Is this scenario different than the first two? How?