
What Is Human Life Worth? The Dilemma of Whom to Save in Philosophy and Literature

Wolfgang G. Müller

Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany

1. The Ethical Potential of Carneades' Thought Experiment

The lecture starts from a thought experiment attributed to the Greek philosopher Carneades and recorded by Cicero and the church father Lactantius. Two shipwrecked sailors have to rely on a plank in the sea which can only support one person. Salvation for one of them would only be possible at the cost of the life of the other one.¹ Although this scenario and its variations, which I will call the dilemma of whom to save or the survival dilemma, seem to be no more than an intellectual game, it has serious juridical and ethical implications. In fact, the thought experiment has a much richer ethical potential than its original purely logical or philosophical form may suggest. Instead of two sailors of roughly equal rank, persons of different intellectual endowment and social position may be involved – one may be a president or king – or persons of different sex or age or health. The two persons concerned may be closely related, for instance in matrimony, love, kinship or friendship. A variation of this dilemma is constituted by a situation in which the capacity for salvation in an emergency situation is limited and a choice must be made whom to save among a group of people threatened by death. Part of the saving dilemma may be the feelings of guilt the survivor may have to cope with. Philosophers, especially Leibnitz, have focussed on some of these problems, but literature in particular is the domain to deal with the ethical problems of what I wish to call the survival dilemma.

Before going into my investigation of the history of the thought experiment in philosophy and literature, I would like to mention that the problem has numerous real-life equivalents, the most spectacular being the situation on the raft during the shipwreck of the *Medusa* in 1816, which involved fighting, killing, and cannibalism, and the wreck of the *Titanic* in 1912 with, as statistics show, the number of survivors being graded according to class, age, sex etc. This is, of

1. Such thought experiments come up ever and again, for instance the prisoner's dilemma in game theory. There is an allusion to Carneades' plank dilemma at the end of the *Titanic* movie, when Jack does not get on the raft with Rose.
Michael Hampe, *Die Lehren der Philosophie. Eine Kritik*. 2014 ["The Doctrines of Philosophy. A Critique"],
Gottfried Gabriel, *Erkenntnis* ["Cognition"] 2015.

course, a scandal. Here the question arises “What Is Life Worth”, which makes the title of Kenneth Feinberg’s 2005 book dealing with his work as the head of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. A case, which looks different, but essentially entails the same problem, is to be found in the case of Dr. Anna Pou who was together with her medical colleagues forced to leave a number of LifeCare patients in her hospital in New Orleans, when it was flooded during the hurricane in 2005. Just as in the Titanic tragedy people were saved in the order of their status. It is interesting that the love story in the Titanic film ends with an allusion to Carneadis’ thought-experiment. There is a raft which has room only for one person. The lover sacrifices his life for the woman he loves. The number of comparable cases is inexhaustible. Think of two children about to get drowned and there is only one person who can rescue them, or think of the selection of the members of a death squad or think of persons asked or commanded to risk their lives for their country or for an idea.

2. The Transmission of Carneades’ Thought Experiment in Classical Times

Cicero’s *De Officiis* (Of Duties) contains the first extant version of the thought experiment in question (III. 23), but does not mention Carneades as its originator. At a point in his argument Cicero asks, “Supposing a man had to throw part of his cargo overboard in a storm, should he prefer to sacrifice a high-priced horse or a cheap and worthless slave?” In this case property interest (*res familiaris*) inclines him one way, human feeling (*humanitas*) the other. The ethical problem is raised, but left undecided.

At this point the criterion of the worth of a man – I of what a man is worth – is introduced. Subsequently the argument is developed to a kind of ethical aporia. What is to be done if the persons involved are of equal value. The answer is that in such a case there will be no contest, but one will take the place of the other, as if the point were decided by lot or at a game of odd and even. (*quasi sorte micando victus alteri cedet alter*)

An important step in the transmission of the plank exemplum occurs in the *Institutiones Divinae* (“The Divine Institutes”) of the Church Father Lactantius (c. 250 – c. 325), who Christianizes the argument in question. Lactantius is the first to mention Carneades in the context of his reflections on justice. He praises him for having denied that there is “natural justice”. According to Lactantius Carneades had argued “that all animals defended their own interests by the guidance of nature itself, and therefore that justice, if it promotes the advantages of others and neglects its own, is to be called foolishness.” (p. 371) In this context he takes up the question of a man who “shall incur danger of his life, so that it shall be necessary for him either to kill another or to die, what will he do?” At this point he takes up Carneades’ exemplum:

It may happen that, having suffered shipwreck, he find some feeble person clinging to a plank, will he thrust him from the plank in order to be able to escape? If he shall wish to be just, he will not do it; but he will also be judged foolish, who in sparing the life of

another shall lose his own. (p. 372)

It can be noted that the candidate for death in this case physically disadvantaged, “a feeble person” clinging to a plank. This detail may imply an appeal to mercy, which belongs to Christian ethics. But basically the opposition of the earlier version of the exemplum between a “foolish” concern for another person and a “wise” care for one’s own person remains, until in the next step of the argument a look at the meaning of the central words is taken. Lactantius points out that justice may be similar to foolishness, yet be not foolishness, and malice may look like wisdom, but is not wisdom. These semantic reflections then focus on the term “wisdom”, which includes justice and excludes foolishness. The result is a redefinition of the alternative of caring for the other: “He is not then a foolish person who has not thrust off a shipwrecked man from a plank, because he has abstained from injury, which is a sin; and is the part of the wise man to avoid sin.” (p. 372) The plank exemplum is here transplanted into a Christian context.

3. The Survival Exemplum in Philosophy

The philosopher who is most intensively occupied with the dilemma of whom to save is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, however without ever mentioning the name of Carneades. He does so in his early writings on the philosophy of natural law. He goes back to the original version of the thought experiment, but his theocentric position has an affinity with Lactantius. Actually I believe that Leibniz had read and was influenced by Lactantius. A clue for is the fact that the word foolish (“stultus”), is, analogous to the church father’s procedure, applied to such a person who incurs a disadvantage for the benefit of another person, who in an extreme case gives up his life for that of another human. As far as the Christian basis of Leibniz’ philosophy is concerned, in extreme cases, in which the harmony of the world is jeopardised, the highest authority is God. Here is just one pertinent quotation: “All that is just represents, if one assumes the existence of God, simultaneously a duty of equity, and this is, assuming the existence of God, equally a demand of piety.” [Aeqvitatibus autem est, quidquid justum est si DEUS esset, idem posito DEUM esse est pietatis.” (p. 156)] In my argumentative context Leibniz is of special importance because he goes through an incredible amount of varieties and possibilities of the survival dilemma. First, it is remarkable that Leibniz does not just focus on the two participants of the survival dilemma, but takes a position of a decision-maker outside the emergency situation:

Supposing the case that two humans are threatened to get drowned and the two cannot both be saved, but only one, is it then within my pure arbitration to support one and to desert the other. And does the person who has been forsaken, if he is saved by chance, have a cause to charge me in court. (p. 128/130)

Leibniz argues that none of the two persons threatened by death can claim a right in court except that both had been left to their fate.

My father, my brother or my friend floating in water in danger of drowning, is it all right to pull him out and surrender the other one instead?

Or is a good man to be preferred to a bad man or a wise man to an illiterate?

Is it just to prefer a man who has many children, who would perish without his help, to a childless person or to a loungeur, or a sovereign of the state to my father etc.

He also refers to the numerical argument, for instance the case that one, to whom I am under obligation in one way or another, can only be saved at the cost of the lives several persons. Or are two to be preferred to a father or only ten or hundred. He also constructs the case that my father may commit treason. Is he to be spared, if he causes the death of thousands of people etc.

To make it a little more concrete, I give you an example of my own. Imagine the situation if you can save only one of the following two persons, the president of the United States of America or a professor of ethics from the university of Shanghai or Tokyo

Many of these examples, Leibniz argues, are difficult to solve, and he refrains from fixing rules. As far as justice is concerned, a just decision is a decision which can be defended before the forum of the mankind as a whole, if one imputes that this is a wise forum. Or a just decision is what finds the approval of God. Within our context Leibniz' discussion of the varieties in which the survival dilemma emerges presents itself as a fascinating collection of examples and their ethical implications, waiting to be elaborated.

After Leibniz the survival exemplum occurs sparsely in philosophy, but it is still present. In his treatise *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* David Hume conceives a society that has fallen into an extreme distress, so that the laws of justice are suspended:

I can only very briefly touch on the shipwreck exemplum in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Section III "Of Justice", part i. Hume makes a restriction. In emergency such as a shipwreck people may provide for themselves "by all the means, which prudence can dictate, or humanity permit." In an extreme emergency criminal acts may be condoned for self-preservation, but the laws of humanity have to be respected. Immanuel Kant is stricter in this context. For him an emergency law, *Notrecht* (*ius in casu necessitatis*), is an absurdity.

His interpretation of the shipwreck exemplum occurs within his discussion of a conflict of duties. He makes a distinction between unconditional and conditional duty. To such a conflict

of duties he opposes a crystal clear explication of our thought experiment in its original form. He rejects the judgement that the action of a man who pushes another man from a plank may be justified by the duty of self-preservation. To preserve my life is only a conditional duty, if it can be done without committing a crime, while not to take the life of another, who has in no way harmed me and does not even get me into the danger of losing my life, is an unconditional duty.

Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*. Band 11, Frankfurt am Main 1977, II. Vom Verhältnis der Theorie zur Praxis im Staatsrecht. Annotation No. 11 [p.- 155] **prüfen**

To pass from Kant's comment on the survival exemplum to William Godwin's treatment of a similar case in *An Enquiring Political Justice* (1793) can cause a shock. Godwin creates a new image, the notorious fire exemplum. He assumes the case that in the chateau of Fénelon, the bishop of Cambrai, a fire broke out just when he conceived his immortal work *Télémaque*. Only he or his chambermaid could have been saved from the room. For Godwin it is a matter of course that the bishop would have precedence in the rescue. According to Godwin's concept of "first-order impartiality" only the worth or value of a human does count,² the fact that he has greater importance for the welfare of the community at large than a person with limited sphere of activity. This forms a sharp contrast to Kant's view that a man does not have a worth or value, but a dignity. According to Godwin "the illustrious archbishop of Cambrai was of more worth than his chambermaid". (*Enquiry*. S.53)

It is interesting that the survival dilemma is used to express markedly contrasting positions in Kant and Godwin. For Kant a human has a dignity which cannot be exchanged, while Godwin as a utilitarian philosopher looks at humans in terms of their value for the society as a whole. Thus according to Kant an individual cannot be sacrificed in an emergency situation, while Godwin makes the individual's worth for society the decisive criterion. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany begins with a quotation from Kant: "The dignity of man is untouchable."

4. The Survival Exemplum in Literature

While philosophical discussions of the survival exemplum seem to have disappeared by the end of the 18th century, the topic gained new life in literature. I wish to start my discussion of literary texts by looking at the second canto, the so-called Shipwreck Canto, of Lord Byron's satiric epic poem *Don Juan* (1817-1823). After an affair in his hometown Seville young Don Juan is sent away to travel. During the voyage from Cadiz the ship is sunk by a storm in the Aegean. The crew escape in a boat. Having run out of food, lots are cast to choose who is to be eaten. Byron was probably influenced by the above-mentioned the event of the wreck of the French frigate *Méduse* in 1916, from which 147 persons escaped on a raft, where in need of food they resorted to cannibalism. The situation on the raft became the object of the famous painting of Théodore Géricault of 1818-

2. Godwin. *Enquiry* (wie Anm. 12). "Introduction", S.xi.

1819, which was shown in London in 1820. In Byron's epic the shipwrecked people on the raft are criticised for not economising with their supply of victuals. Forced by "hunger's rage" (Canto II, Stanza 70) they first kill Juan's spaniel in spite of his master's initial resistance, and Juan partakes of the parts of the animal's body albeit with remorse. Byron's wit is shown in the fact that to Juan is offered the animal's most delicate part, the fore-paws, to compensate for the sacrifice he made. Then the crew draw lots, a measure that was suggested in the tradition of the thought-experiment by Cicero and Leibnitz for undecidable cases. The ill luck comes to Juan's tutor Pedrillo. To give an example of Byron's vivid narration in which the terrible tends to pass into the grotesque, here is the stanza which follows upon Pedro's being bled to death:

The surgeon, as there was no other fee,
 Had his first choice of morsels for his pains;
 But being thirstiest at the moment, he
 Preferr'd a draught from the fast-flowing veins:
 Part was divided, part thrown in the sea,
 And such things as the entrails and the brains
 Regaled two sharks, who follow' o'er the billow –
 The sailors ate the rest of poor Pedrillo. (Canto II, Stanza 87)

The juxtaposition between the sailors eating the man's body and the sharks devouring the uneatable parts such as entrails and brains produces a grotesque company. Men and animals are shown to be alike. In this context it is significant that even in the "extremity of their disaster" (Stanza 88) Juan refrains from eating human flesh. The epic's protagonist is thus ethically raised to a higher level. Also Juan's conduct turns out for the best. While the sailors, who have eaten from the victim's body, are seized by deadly madness, Juan ultimately is the only of the shipwrecked people to survive. In fact the shipwreck episode is, as the construction of the plot is concerned, a kind of prelude to the protagonist's meeting Haydée, who saves him on the shore of a Greek island and becomes his lover.

My next example is Henrik Ibsen's verse play *Peer Gynt* (1867), which as the Ibsen scholar Knut Brynhildsvoll has shown, though set in a Norwegian world of peasants and landholders and fairies and trolls, negotiates central questions of identity and of attempts at self-realization and the experience of self-loss in the nineteenth century.³ There is a shipwreck scene in this play, set at the beginning of Act V, in which the survival dilemma emerges in a way which sheds light on one aspect the protagonist's multi-faceted identity problem. Peer, now an old man, has returned from Marocco, where he was engaged in dubious business and lost almost all his money and even spent

3. See his latest pertinent publication "The concept of «I» in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* — Viewed in the light of new neuropsychological research and with a special regard to Robert Musil's Theory of Potentiality". *Ibsen and the Modern Self*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip, Open University of Hong Kong Press, 2010, 1-16.

a time in a lunatic asylum. On his way home his ship is threatened to sink before the Norwegian coast. Before the accident there is a significant episode. Peer Gynt promises the Captain of the ship to do something for the crew, who, he says are, are really hard up. As he hears that the sailors will return to their happy family lives with wives and children – a conspicuous detail is that the lamps will be lit for their return – he withdraws his promise abruptly:

I'm damned if I do it!
 Do you think I'm mad? Do you really expect me
 To fork out for other people's kids?
 I've slaved enough to earn what I've got!
 Nobody's waiting for old Peer Gynt.⁴

He rather vows to get the sailors drunk, so that on their return the expected happy family reunion will be entirely ruined. We see two contradictory images of the protagonist in this scene, two different identities. He vacillates between a good and a wrong self, which seem entirely unconnected. This contradiction is intensified when the ship is threatened to sink. There is a wreck nearby with three persons in highest danger on it. Peer presses the crew of his boat to rescue them: “You dogs! Cowards! Don't you realize / They're men with wives and children at home / ...” (p. 126) After a confrontation with a ghost-passenger, who asks Peer for his corpse for scientific research in case of his death in the storm, he reverts his earlier decision, not to help the cook: “Captain! / It was all nonsense, only a joke – / Of course I'm willing to help the cook.” (p. 130) When it actually comes to their ship sinking, there is a situation like in the classic survival dilemma, with only place for the cook and the protagonist on a boat. Peer cries for help referring to the Christian ethic (“as the prayer-book has it”) and the cook prays for help “for my children's sake”. With both clinging to the keel, there is a fight, which is accompanied by vehement mutual appeals, the right of survival on the part of the childless man and the appeal to mercy on the side of the family man. The cook goes under and Peer swings himself on the board. It seems cynical that at the moment of the cook's dying Peer holds the drowning man up by the hair, so that he can say the Lord's prayer. Also it is significant that when safely at land again Peer attends a funeral, probably the cook's funeral, but does not give evidence of any remorse. From the priest's speech he retrieves the maxim, to protect one's identity, “to be your unshakeable self”. (p. 137)

I will now come to one of the great novels of world literature, Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900). The main event of this novel is a variation of the thought-experiment of Carneades. A British ship, *Patna*, with 800 Arab pilgrims on board threatens to sink shortly. The captain and the officers decide to abandon the ship. Jim, who is about to take measures for the safety of the passengers, in an apparently perilous moment inadvertently jumps into the deserters' boat. When they reach the

4. Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt. A Dramatic Poem*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 124-125.

port, they learn that the *Patna* has not sunk and that its passengers have been saved by a French gunboat. Jim is the only one to remain to be present at the inquiry. He loses his licence to sail.

In the course of the novel action Jim takes on minor jobs, but leaves abruptly, whenever the name of the *Patna* is mentioned. The novel deals with the survival dilemma in a way which transcends any juridical or philosophical considerations and opens a view on the complexities of human life and motivations. The psychological issues with which Jim has to grapple are, as the narrator remarks,

beyond the competency of a court of inquiry [...] It was a subtle and momentous quarrel as to the true essence of life, and did not want a judge. He wanted an ally, a helper, an accomplice. (75)

The protagonist's error is not condoned, but presented as the tragic hamartia of an essentially decent and good-willed person and shown within a network of factors such as family background, education, reading, character traits and personal illusions and aspirations. And it is, of course, put in perspective by the way the story is told by the narrator and various witnesses.

While the survival dilemma represents the starting point in Conrad's novel, in William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* (1976) the narration of such a dilemma – the most terrible of all of imaginable dilemmas of this kind – forms the novel's final climax. In the course of the novel the titular heroine's fate in the holocaust is revealed step by step as a fight for the survival of her personal life and the life of her two children, a son and a daughter. Her heaviest and most aggrieving secret, which she reveals at the novel's end, is that at Auschwitz, a camp doctor confronted her with the choice which of her two children would be killed by gassing and which would continue to live. Of her two children, Sophie chose to sacrifice her seven-year-old daughter, Eva, in a heartrending decision that filled her with guilt for the whole of her life. The novel may with its treatment of the holocaust be controversial, but the survival dilemma is here sharpened into a most heinous deed, the sin committed by the camp doctor of forcing a mother to make an unnatural decision.

5. Philosophy and Literature as Complementary Kinds of Cognition

In the course of our discussion we could notice that in philosophy the survival dilemma had been a topic from ancient times until the end of the 18th century. From the beginning of the 19th century literature took over, producing a great number of works in which the dilemma of whom to save in an emergency situation came up, when on account of limited resources not all of the persons threatened by death could be saved. Philosophy and literature turned out to have different approaches to the problem in question and, more broadly speaking, offer different kinds

of cognition.⁵ In philosophy cognition is the result of reasoning, i.e. of argument and deduction, while in literary works cognition is the result of representation in terms of human action, i.e. to put something before the eyes (*ante oculos ponere*). Our investigation has made it necessary to expand the meaning of the term cognition or insight – German “Erkenntnis” – to include literature as a provider of insight or cognition. A more elaborate definition would determine cognition in philosophy as intellectual cognition, which subjects the world and its issues to intellectual and argumentative scrutiny in order to find out fundamental ideas and judgments, and cognition in literature as the result of representation emerging in literary-fictional renditions of life and experience, which include emotional states and processes and existential situations of life, frequently inviting readers to empathize. While a philosopher may try to define, on the level of abstraction, qualities such as fear or guilt or love or abstract concepts like justice, the literary artist represents such feelings or notions on the level of concretization as they affect invented characters, within carefully constructed plots.

To apply this distinction to ethics, there is an opposition between the theoretical discussion of ethical principles and problems in philosophy and the representation of ethical matters and issues in literature, as they arise or could arise in concrete situations in life. Literature opens a wide field of experience and brings to our minds and souls the complexities of life. To return to one of our examples, while a philosopher may explain the paradox of the plank and may weigh alternative options of action from an ethical and juridical viewpoint, a dramatist like Ibsen represents the analogous dilemma situation in a dramatic situation, in which characters are involved as part of a plot, inviting the reader or spectator to empathize and reflect and, perhaps, pass his or her judgment. Or in Conrad’s *Lord Jim* the ship’s desertion is itself represented as an ambiguous action on the part of the protagonist and it imposes a permanent sense of guilt on him. These are aspects that are usually inaccessible to the philosophical approach, though it must be emphasized that, as far as ethics is concerned, philosophy and literature are twins and their interdependence may be fruitful. The reason for this kinship is obvious. As distinct from moral philosophy, ethics as a philosophical discipline does not really establish and emphasize moral norms and values, but investigates into the problematic nature of ethical terms and concepts. Analogously literature, that deserves its name, does not simply proclaim truths and emphasize binding values, but stimulates its readers to engage in thinking and to form an idea of the complexities of life and ethical decisions and, in sum, to become aware of the problematic condition of human beings (*condicio humana*).

5. I owe this idea to Gottfried Gabriel, *Erkenntnis*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015)