

Andrew Aberdein: Whedonian Trolleyology

The Trolley Problem is a famous thought experiment [1]. In each of two scenarios a runaway trolley threatens five oblivious workers whose lives you may save--either by switching the trolley to another track on which there is only one worker or by pushing a fat man in front of the trolley. Much moral theory treats the cases as indistinguishable, but most people say they would intervene the first way but not the second. Respondents are also susceptible to order effects: their responses to the scenarios are affected by the order in which they are presented [3]. Some analyses attribute the order effect to a lack of narrative detail in these scenarios [4]. Joss Whedon has used Trolley Problem-like dilemmas more than once [2]: e.g. Giles must decide whether to kill Ben in 'The Gift' (*BtVS* 5.22, 2001) and Dana must decide whether to kill Marty in 'The Cabin in the Woods' (dir. Drew Goddard, 2012). Both dilemmas are a variation on the 'fat man' scenario, whereby the whole world hangs on the choice. Nonetheless, although Giles and Dana chose differently, both choices are presented as justified within a richly detailed narrative. Thus, Whedon's viewers, whose sympathies have been fully engaged, may not exhibit the order effect. This paper reports on an empirical study testing this hypothesis.

[1] Philippa Foot. 1967. The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect. Reprinted in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

[2] J. Douglas Rabb & J. Michael Richardson. 2015. *Joss Whedon as Shakespearean Moralist* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland).

[3] Eric Schwitzgebel & Fiery Cushman. 2015. Philosophers' biased judgments persist despite training, expertise and reflection. *Cognition* 141:127–137.

[4] Jonathan Webber. 2016. Instilling virtue. In *From Personality to Virtue*, Alberto Masala & Jonathan Webber, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).