

# Out of the armchair and into the lab:

How cognitive psychology can help  
us answer philosophical questions

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## Science

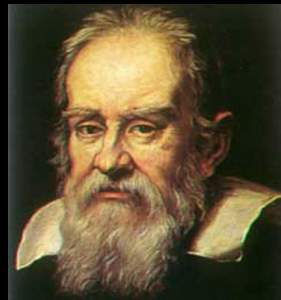


# Philosophy



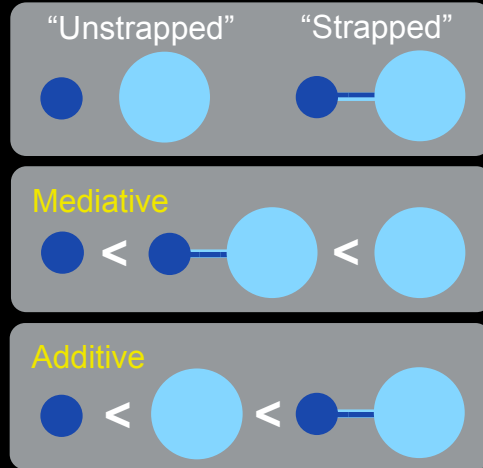
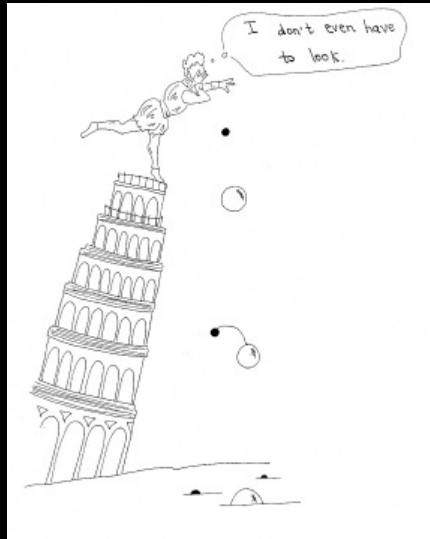
## The laboratory of the mind

- Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  - Mathematics
  - Theoretical arguments
  - Thought experiments



Galileo

# Thought experiments

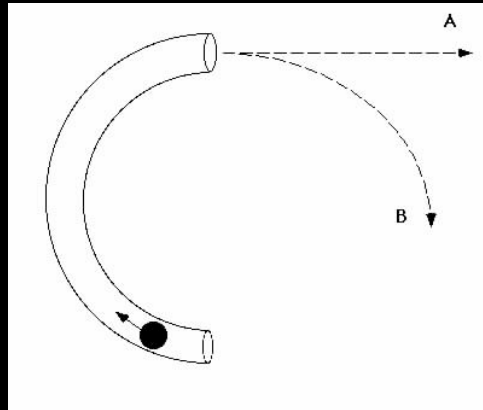


(SEP; Gendler, 1998)

## The laboratory of the mind

- Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  - Mathematics
  - Theoretical arguments
  - Thought experiments
- But sometimes we are led astray...

## Misconceptions about physics



(McCloskey)

## The laboratory of the mind

- Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  - Mathematics
  - Theoretical arguments
  - Thought experiments
- But sometimes we are led astray...
  - Misconceptions about the natural world
  - Misconceptions about our own minds
  - Misconceptions about our own concepts

## Philosophy + Science



## Experimental Philosophy



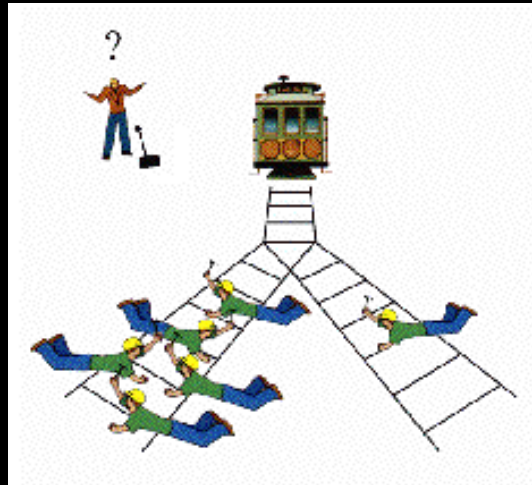
## Overview

- Answering philosophical questions with the laboratory of the mind
- Answering philosophical questions with the laboratory of cognitive psychology
  - Moral philosophy: moral permissibility
  - Metaphysics: causation
  - Philosophy of action: intentional action

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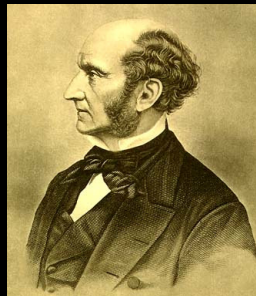
# Trolley Car Problems



(Images from <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene/>)

# Consequentialism

- The moral status of an action is determined by its *consequences*.



J.S. Mill



Peter Singer

# The Footbridge Problem



(Images from <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene/>)

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# Deontology

- The moral status of an action is determined by its relationship to rights, duties, and obligations.

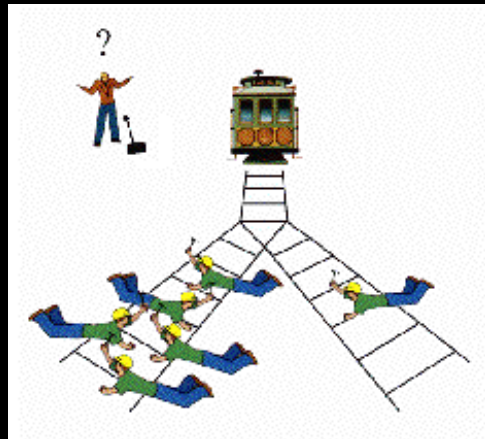


Immanuel Kant



J.J. Thomson

## What's the difference?



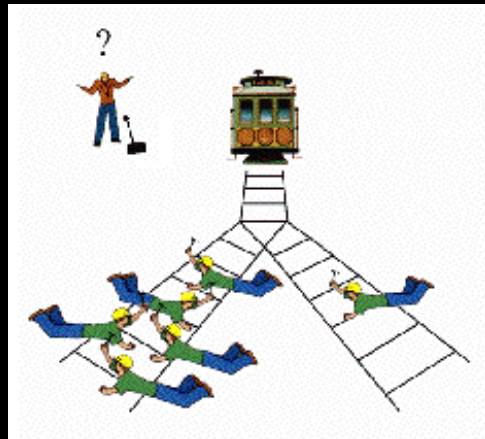
## Moral dumbfounding

- People have strongly held moral intuitions that they cannot justify.



(Haidt, 2001)

## What's the difference?



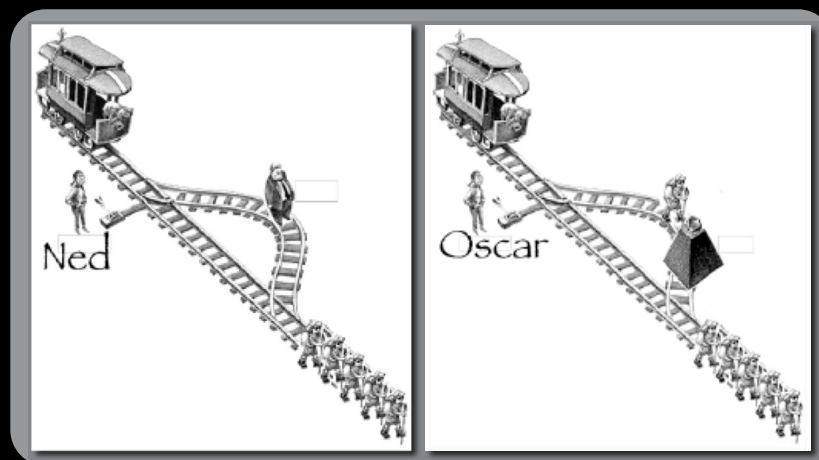
## Doctrine of Double Effect

- It is permissible to bring about harm as a (foreseen) *side effect* of a greater good, but not as a *means* to bringing about the greater good.



Thomas Aquinas

## Doctrine of Double Effect



(Hauser et al., 2007)

## Real-world examples

- **Money:** A hospital might decide to allocate \$\$ for equipment that will save 5 people/year rather than 1 person/year, but would never sacrifice 1 person to harvest organs for 5
- **War:** causing civilians to die
- **Euthanasia:** administration of morphine
- **Murder:** plot versus self-defense
- **Suicide:** to end life versus to save others

## The naturalistic fallacy

- The error of deriving “ought” from “is”
  - The DDE reflects our “natural” judgments.
  - Therefore, the DDE is a principle we ought to follow.
- Missing premise:
  - If something is natural, it is what we ought to do.
  - But this is often false!

## How psychology *can* inform moral philosophy

- (1) Sometimes psychological facts are relevant for determining what will generate the best consequences or satisfy our obligations.
  - E.g. Maximizing well-being.
- (2) Psychological facts can serve as a corrective by informing us when moral intuitions are driven by properties we consider morally irrelevant.
  - E.g. Fact that “footbridge” problem involves contact.

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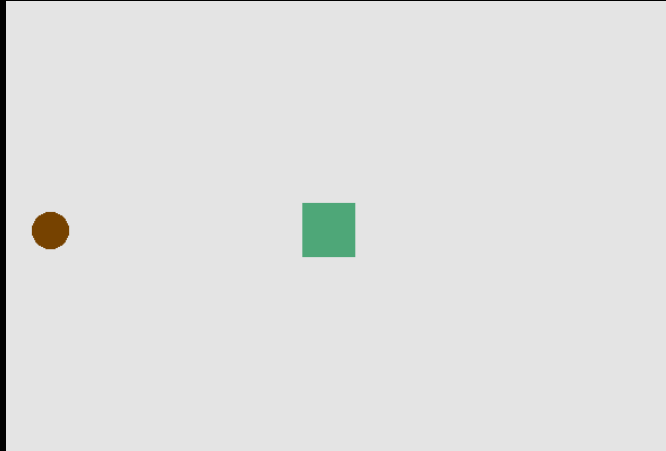
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## Key questions about causation

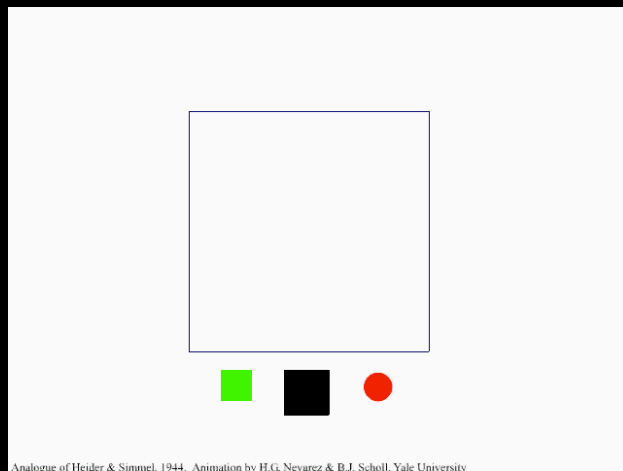
- What relationship must hold between two events, A and B, such that it's appropriate to claim that A caused B?
- Are there multiple kinds of causation? In particular, is there something special about psychological causation?

## Physical Causation



“The brown circle **caused** the green square to break.”

## Psychological Causation



Analogue of Heider & Simmel, 1944. Animation by H.G. Nevarez & B.J. Scholl, Yale University

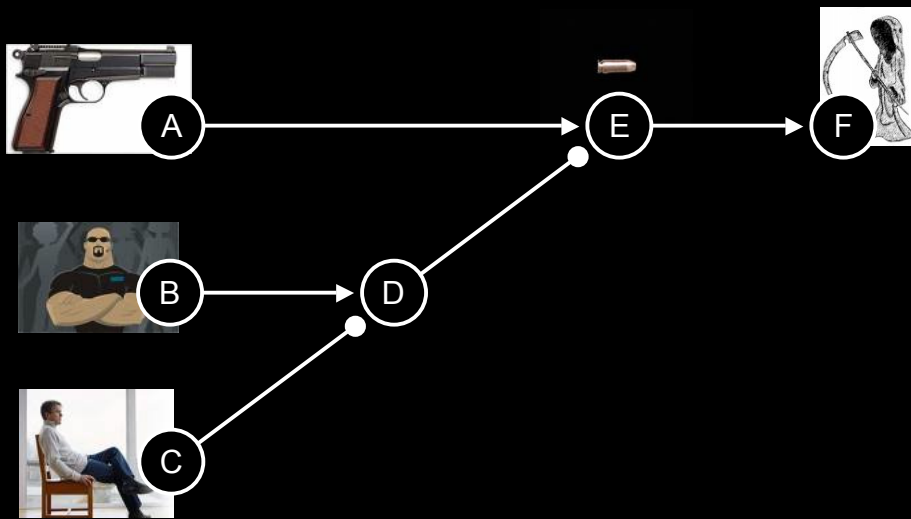
“The black square **caused** the red circle to flee.”

# Physical contact vs dependence

- Causation by omission
- Overdetermination

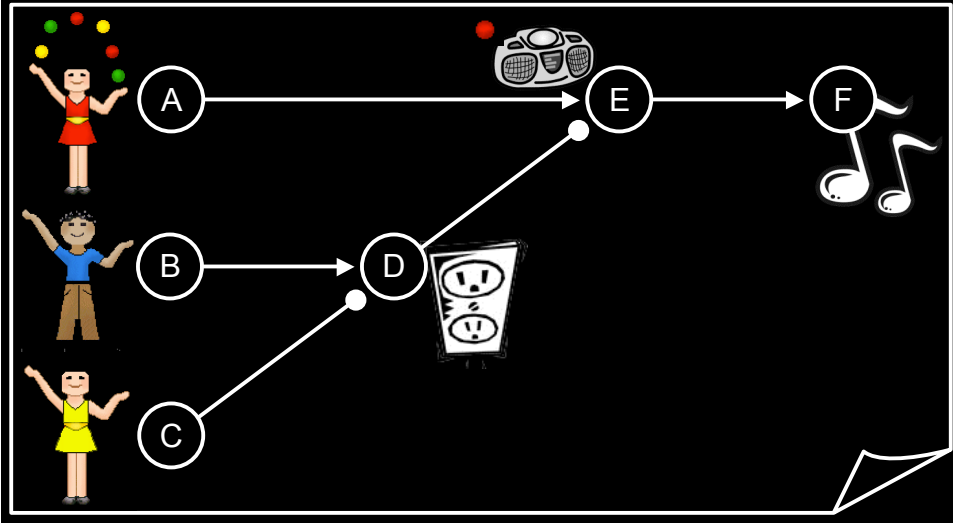


# Double prevention

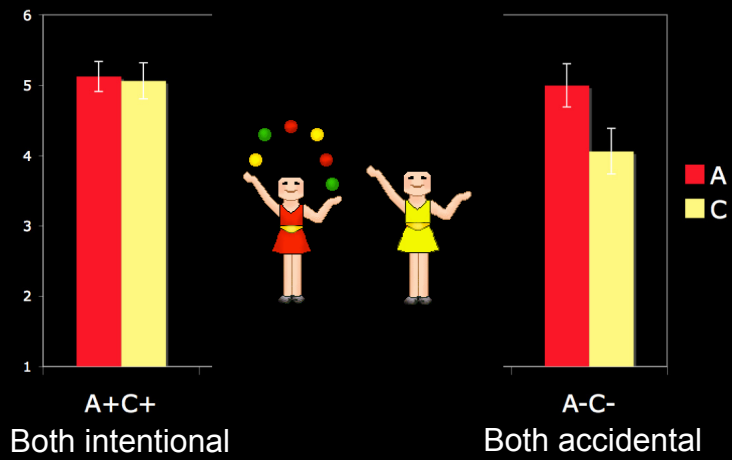




# Double prevention



*“Person caused outcome”?*



## Can psychology inform metaphysics?

- These data suggest that people evaluate causation differently depending on whether they construe an event *physically* or *psychologically*
- May help explain the difficulty of conceiving of the mind in scientific terms

## Some lessons

- A role for philosophical reflection:
  - Thought experiments can be valuable tools
  - But they can also mislead us!
- Progress in philosophy:
  - From divergence to convergence
  - Outsourcing questions

Thank you!



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