

### **Transfer effects between moral dilemmas and its implication for the reliability of moral intuitions**

In the last two decades psychological (and related) research has discovered several principles and factors that influence our moral intuitions. Often these factors or principles coincide with normative moral principles. For example, people evaluate actions that result in (or involve) harming a person as harsher if harming the person constitutes a means to an end, as compared to the harm constituting a side-effect. This descriptive finding has its normative counterpart in the so called Principle of Double Effect. However, descriptive and normative principles do not always coincide. For instance, psychological research has found that our intuitions about what ought to be done in a moral dilemma can be strongly influenced by previously considered moral dilemmas.

A prominent example of such *transfer effects* involves two well-known trolley dilemmas, namely *Switch* (redirecting a runaway train away from five persons into one) and *Push* (pushing a heavy man from a bridge in front of a runaway train that would otherwise kill five persons). Usually, most people believe that performing the potential action in *Switch* (redirecting the runaway train) is permissible while it is forbidden to push the heavy man from the bridge. However, when people are asked to consider *Push* before they evaluate the potential action in *Switch* the number of people who find it permissible to redirect the runaway train decreases significantly. Interestingly, no such transfer effect is observed when people consider *Switch* before they evaluate the potential action in *Push*. In this constellation, most people still believe that killing the heavy man is wrong. This asymmetrical transfer effect between *Push* and *Switch* has been found in lay people as well as in professional philosophers.

There is no normative justification for transfer effects – what is considered morally right in a concrete situation should not depend on the situation one encountered before. If it does, our moral intuition seems to be misguided by a morally irrelevant factor. Hence, one might wonder whether the occurrence of transfer effects cast doubt on the general reliability of our moral intuition. Some (experimental) philosophers claim that such a finding actually shows that our moral intuitions are flawed and, therefore, should not be treated as strong evidence for or against a certain claim. Other philosophers deny such implications for various reasons.

An interesting question is whether having a psychological theory that describes the psychological mechanisms underlying transfer effects and states the situations in which transfer effects are likely to occur can help to decide the issue. For many findings that are taken as evidence against the reliability of our moral intuitions such a psychological theory is not available yet. For transfer effects, however, such a psychological theory has been proposed recently (Wiegmann & Waldmann, under review) and might help us to decide the question of whether the occurrence of transfer effects cast serious doubt on the reliability of our moral intuitions.