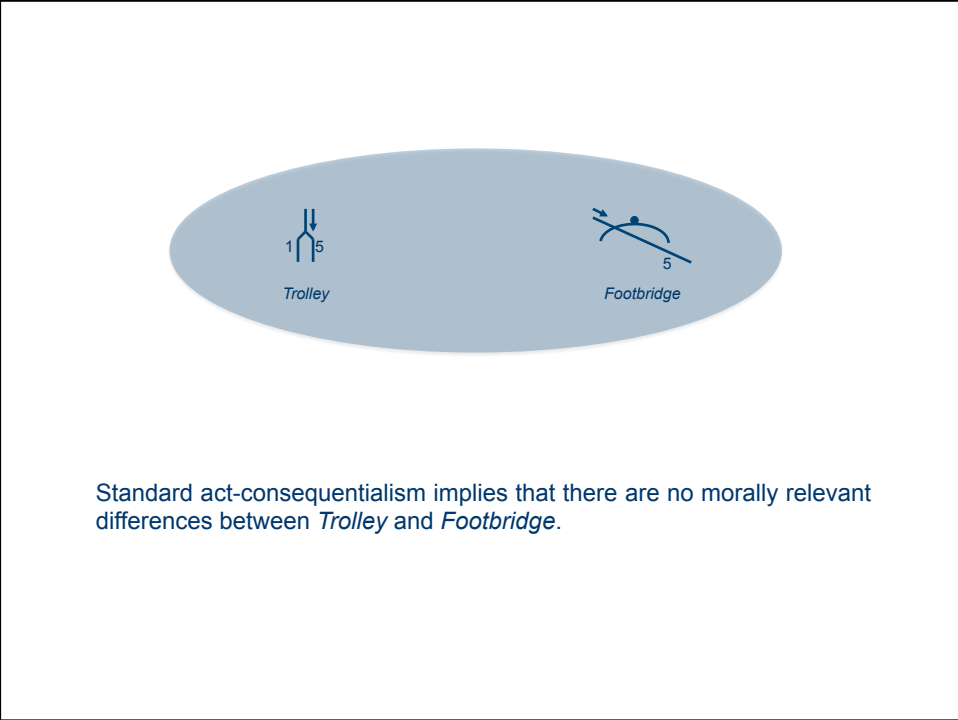# Moral Equivalences

Thomas Schmidt

Moral Equivalences:
Introducing the Idea

Trolley

Footbridge

Trolley

Footbridge

Standard act-consequentialism implies that there are no morally relevant differences between *Trolley* and *Footbridge*.
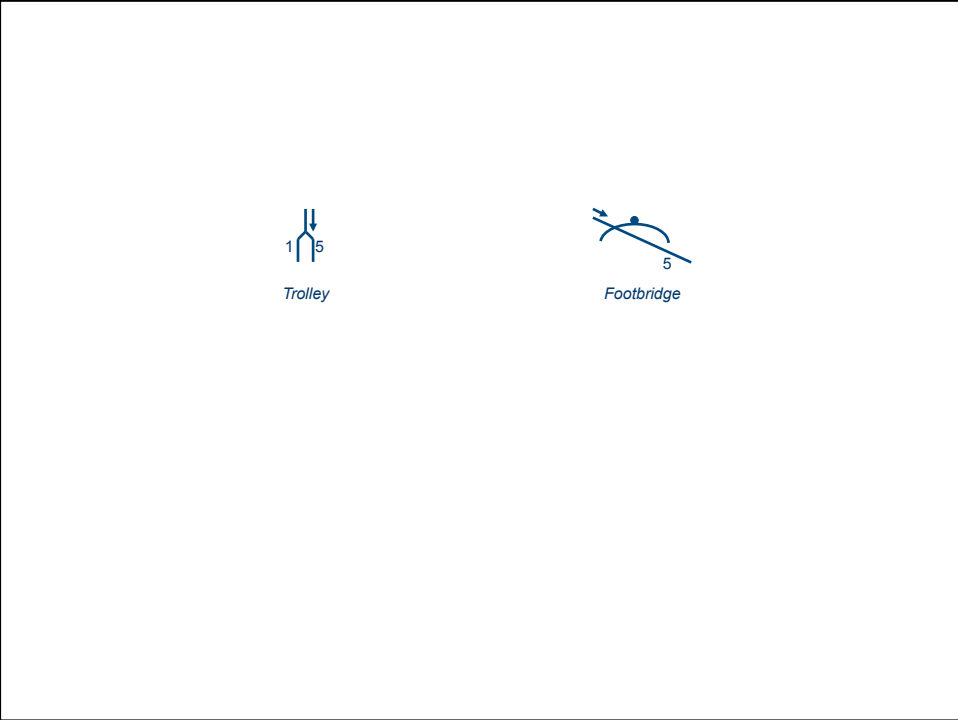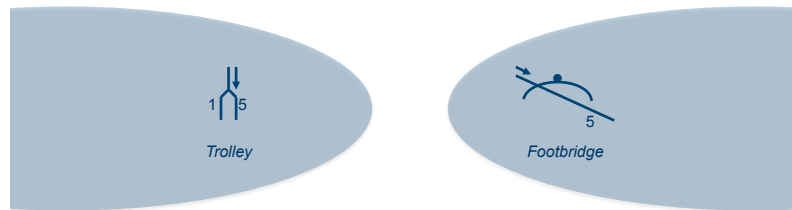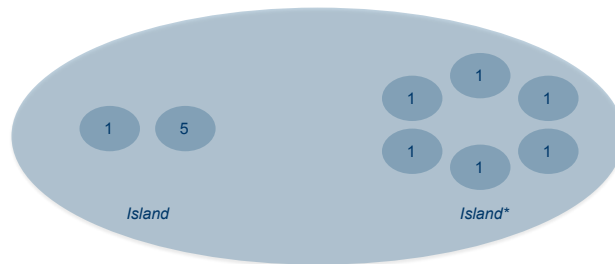
Standard deontological theories imply that there are morally relevant differences between *Trolley* and *Footbridge*.

Ethical theories imply that certain acts (and certain situations) are *morally equivalent*, i.e. such that there are no morally relevant differences between them.

Act-consequentialism: save the greater number.

Timmermann: fairness requires performing an 'individualist lottery'. Give every person an equal chance of being chosen, and additionally save whomever else is on the island of the chosen person.

This view implies that there is no morally relevant difference between *Island* and *Island**.

Next steps

Defining notions of morally equivalent acts and of morally equivalent situations

Representing ethical theories in terms of the moral equivalence classes they induce

Why doing so is interesting for matters in normative ethics and in moral epistemology

Morally Equivalent Acts and
Morally Equivalent Situations

The point of ethical theories under consideration here is to provide information about which acts are morally right (or wrong, or optional), and how they get to be so.

One way for an ethical theory to accomplish this is to provide a principle of the form

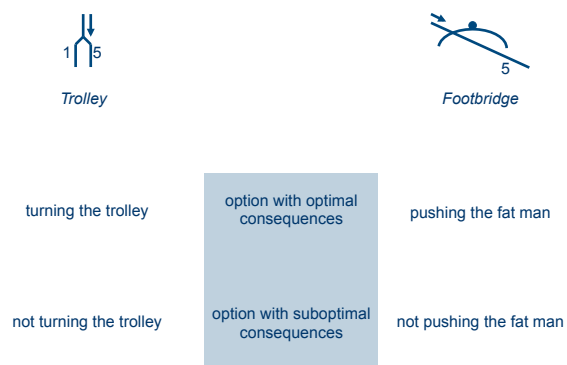an act A is morally right iff *and because* A has non-moral property F.

"A is morally right because A is F" is understood as "F is a moral reason decisively speaking in favour of A".

Two acts *a* and *a*' are *morally equivalent* iff$_{Def}$

(i)   *a* and *a*' have the same moral status (i.e. either both are morally right, or both are morally wrong, or both are optional), and

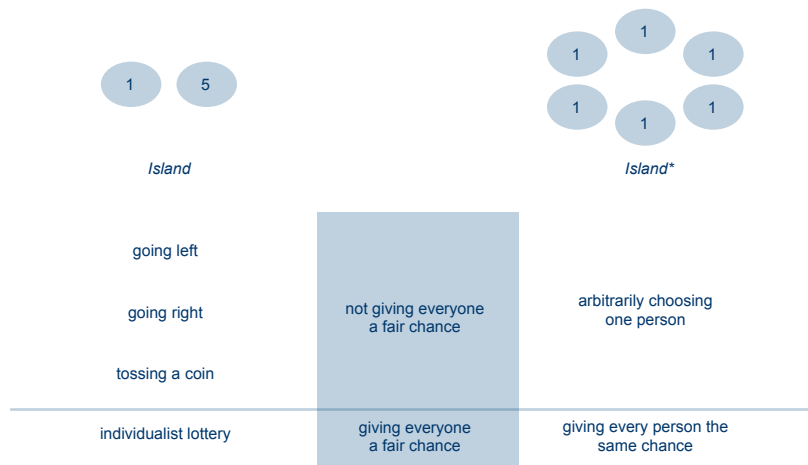(ii) *a* and *a*' are morally right or wrong or optional in virtue of the same (non-moral) facts.

Two situations *S* and *S'* are *morally equivalent* iff_{Def}

there are descriptions of the acts available in *S* and *S'*, respectively, such that, under these descriptions, there is a one-to-one-correspondence between the acts available in *S* and those available in *S'* such that mutually corresponding acts are morally equivalent.

Act-consequentialism and *Trolley* vs. *Footbridge*

Trolley

Footbridge

	option with optimal consequences	
turning the trolley		pushing the fat man
not turning the trolley	option with suboptimal consequences	not pushing the fat man

Two situations *S* and *S'* are *morally equivalent* iff

if the acts are described using descriptions which only refer to right- or wrong-making features, then identical descriptions cover the options both in *S* and *S'*.


Timmermann view and *Island* vs. *Island**

Island

Island*

going left

going right

not giving everyone
a fair chance

arbitrarily choosing
one person

tossing a coin

individualist lottery

giving everyone
a fair chance

giving every person the
same chance

Representing Ethical Theories in Terms of
Moral Equivalence Classes

A (complete) ethical theory induces a partitionings of the set of all possible acts and of the set of all possible situations into *moral equivalence classes* (MECs).

The normative content of an ethical theory can be represented by the theory's MEC partitioning and, for each set of morally equivalent acts, information about the moral status of its members.

set of possible acts
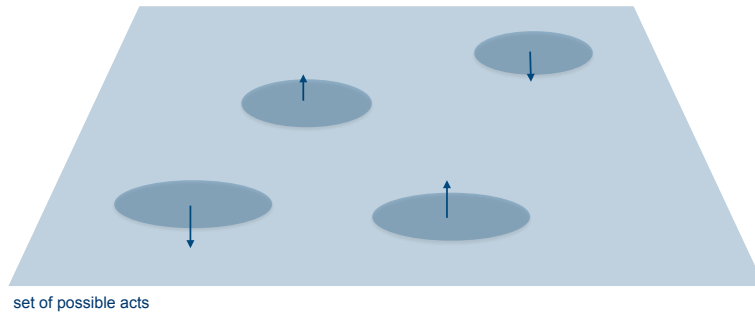
How do structural properties of an ethical theory relate to structural properties of its MEC partitioning?

Example

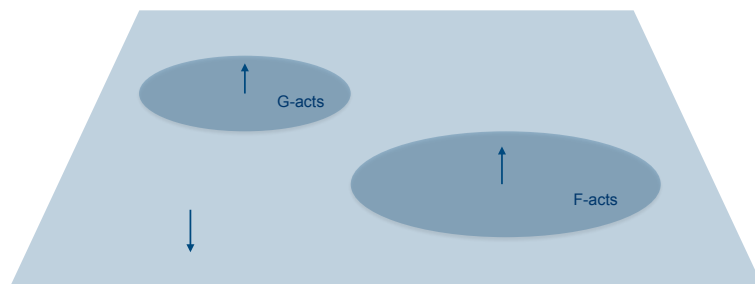An act is morally right if, and only if, it has the non-moral property F (e.g. act-consequentialism).
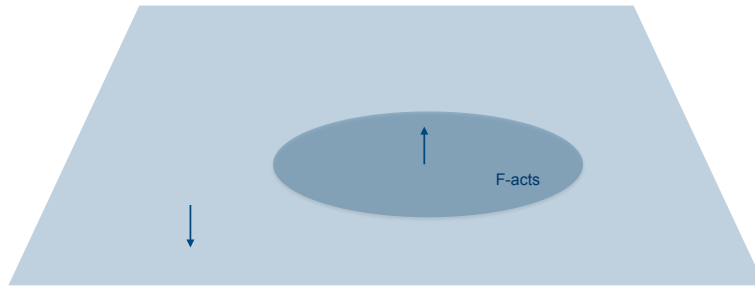
Example (pluralism)

An act is morally right if it has the non-moral property F ("one ought to help others").
An act is morally right if it has the non-moral property G ("one ought to keep one's promises").
Acts which are neither F nor G are morally wrong.

Example (Ross and prima facie-duties)

There is a moral reason to F ("there is a prima facie-duty to help others").

There is a moral reason not to G ("there is a prima facie-duty not to harm others").

If an act is F and not G, then you ought to do it (then, the act is right because of F).

If an act is G and not F, then you ought not to do it (then, the act is wrong because of G).

All acts which are neither F nor G are optional.

If an act is both F and G, then it depends on the context whether you ought to do it or whether you ought not to do it.

If the theory says that the context is only given by the moral reasons relevant in the situation, then it implies that there are principles stating the conditions under which F or G is to be given priority.
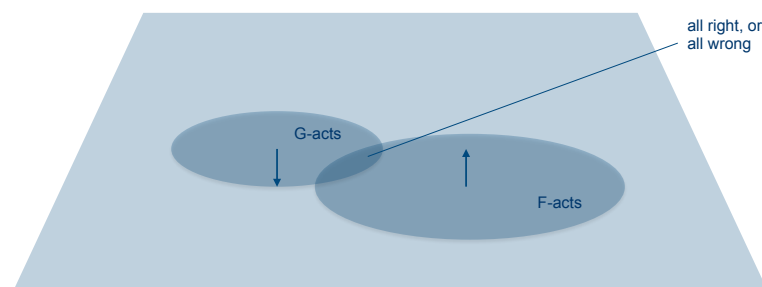
The extension of the MECs can be described in general non-moral terms.

Otherwise, the theory implies that there are no principles stating the conditions under which F or G is to be given priority.

some right, some wrong

G-acts

F-acts
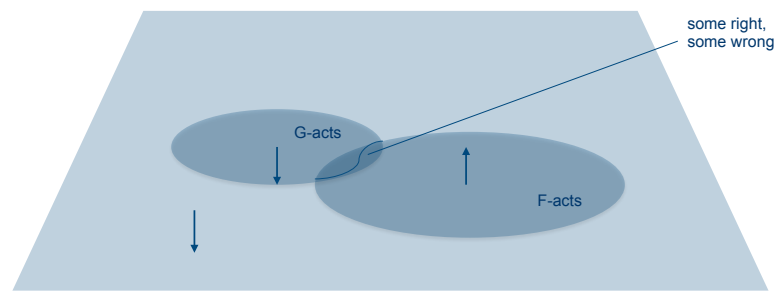
The extension of the MECs cannot be described in general non-moral terms.

Particularist views lead to structurally the same MEC partitionings.

Both Rossians and particularists can think about moral matters in general terms.

Ethical theories not aiming at stating which acts are morally right (or wrong) and why do not induce MECs (e.g., certain versions of Kantianism).

Moral Equivalence Classes, Normative Ethics, and Moral Epistemology

Thinking about ethical theories in terms of the moral equivalences they imply is interesting in a number of further ways.

Identifying differences between ethical theories

If two moral theories substantially differ in their normative content, then this should be reflected in differences in their respective MEC partitionings.

Timmermann vs. Kamm on lotteries

Making fully explicit the normative content of ethical theories

Stating the normative content of an ethical theory in terms of its MEC partitioning (and the associated deontic judgements) makes explicit the content of the theory in a maximally clear and comprehensive way.

Testing ethical theories against intuitions

Stating equivalences accepting which subscribing to an ethical theory commits one to helps in checking the extent to which the theory is counterintuitive.

From an MEC perspective, the difference between general and particular intuitions is not important. "Take it or leave it."

Moral reasoning

Moral reasoning and argument often proceeds by implicitly relying on the information contained in MEC partitionings.

In this respect, MEC-representations of ethical theories are different from, and more helpful than, other proposals for providing structurally unified representations of different ethical theories (e.g. conse-quentialising).