

*collection:*

*thought experiments  
of the day*



## The Ring



“Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust.”

## The Phone Booths



Suppose you can select a lawmaking body by randomly selecting names from one of two white pages: in the first booth, there is a Harvard faculty directly; in the other, a City of Cambridge directory.

Which booth should you choose?



## The State of Nature



"In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." What reason do you have to leave this state?






# The Island

You find yourself on an island with scarce resources. Is it rational to attack individuals who starting to wash ashore? Does your reaction change if the scarcity becomes extreme, e.g., you are rivals for an anecdote for a snakebite?



## The Fire



Suppose there is a conflagration outside the classroom.  
Are you free to leave, on your conception of freedom? On Hobbes' account?



## The Dice



Suppose a society selected public policy choices by rolling many-faced dice.

Would the process be fair? Would it be wise?



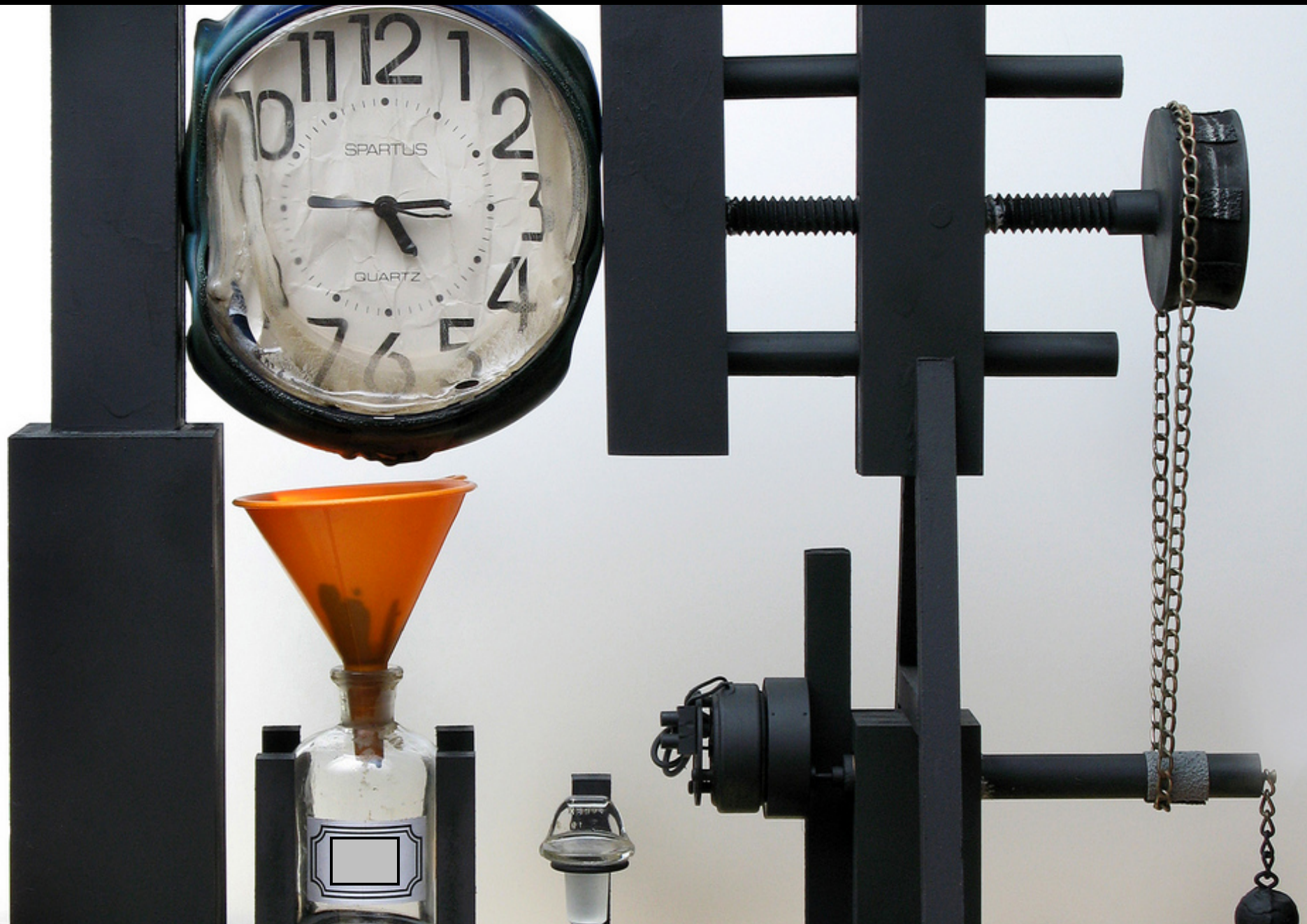
## The Coin



Suppose you flip one coin weighted to favor heads. Now you flip several weighted coins. Now millions of such coins. Would the confidence that you invest in an aggregated heads increase as the number of coins increases?



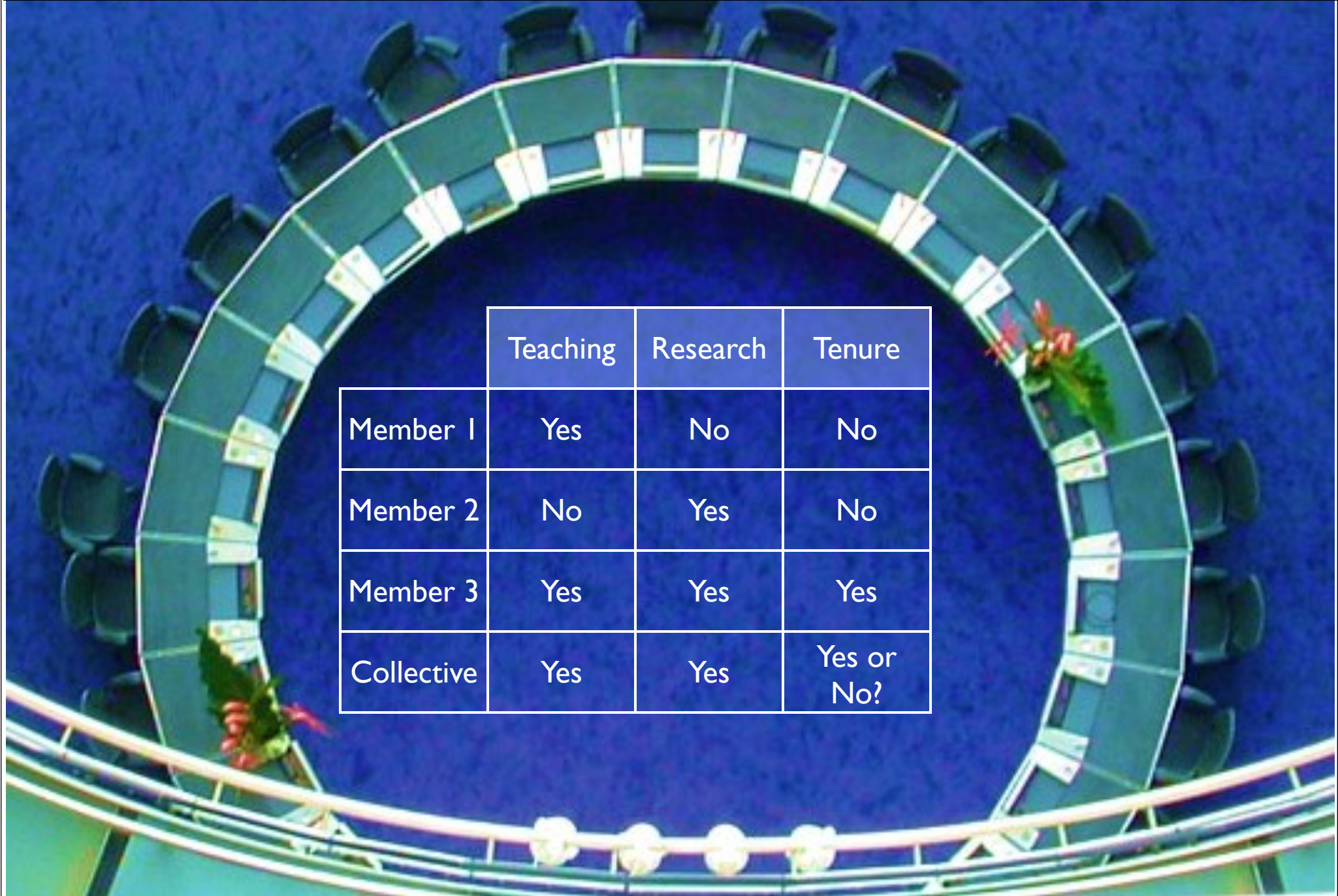
## The Democratic Machine



Imagine there is a certain machine that aggregates the choices of individual voters according to the pre-established rule or method, and so comes up with what may be called a 'choice' of our own. The question now arises: What is the authority of the choice expressed by the machine?



## The Democratic Dilemma



A circular table with chairs, viewed from above, with a table overlay. The table is circular and has several chairs around it. The overlay is a table with four columns and four rows. The columns are labeled 'Teaching', 'Research', and 'Tenure'. The rows are labeled 'Member 1', 'Member 2', 'Member 3', and 'Collective'.

	Teaching	Research	Tenure
Member 1	Yes	No	No
Member 2	No	Yes	No
Member 3	Yes	Yes	Yes
Collective	Yes	Yes	Yes or No?

Is it more democratic to tenure the faculty member? Or deny the faculty member tenure? Why?



## The Model-T



Suppose several people push a Model-T onto an unwitting victim. Suppose that none of them made a difference in the pushing – their contribution wasn't strictly necessary for the vehicle to inflict harm. Can any one individual claim moral innocence, on the grounds that they made no difference?

How should moral responsibility be divided up among these pushers?

## The Lapel Pin



Suppose you lived in a political society where one might be ostracized for not wearing a pin celebrating one's commitments – religious or political. What is the moral difference between this informal political intolerance and coercively-backed intolerance?



## The Ticket



By hypothesis, these tickets say what a person's freedoms (and, consequently, her unfreedoms) are. But a sum of money is, in effect, a highly generalized form of such a ticket. – G.A. Cohen, "Freedom and Money"

## The Survival Lottery



Let us suppose that organ transplant procedures have been perfected; . Whenever doctors have two or more dying patients who could be saved by transplants, and no suitable organs have come to hand through 'natural' deaths, they can ask a central computer to supply a suitable donor. The computer will then pick the number of a suitable donor at random; he will be killed so that the lives of two or more others may be saved. – John Harris, “The Survival Lottery”



## The Original Position



“...no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.” Behind this veil, what principles of distribution would you choose? –

## The Disease



Suppose that ten percent of the population -- distributed randomly over other significant groups -- were the bearers of a gene that expressed itself in an incurable degenerative condition appearing between the ages of thirty and forty, that killed the victim within five years. Even if the gene were detectable early on, would justice demand some compensatory social policy to make up to these people for their tragically shortened lifespans? And if the effects of the gene could be slowed down, but only at very great cost, would it be unjust of the society not to provide such treatment at public expense? – Thomas Nagel, “Justice and Nature”



## The Two Children



Imagine you have two children. One is “quite happy” while the other “suffers from a painful handicap.” If the family were to move to the city the disabled child would benefit from medical and educational opportunities that are unavailable in the suburbs, but the healthy child would flourish less. Does a theory of distributive justice bear upon your choice? – from Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority?”

## Wilt



We start by supposing that holdings are distributed in accordance with some patterned conception of justice—let's say the conception of equality, so that everyone has exactly equal holdings. Now suppose that several basketball teams would like to have Wilt Chamberlain playing for them. He signs a special contract with one, stipulating that he gets twenty-five cents from the price of every home game ticket. The fans are happy to pay the surcharge; the excitement of seeing Chamberlain play is worth it to them. One million people attend during the season, so that Chamberlain winds up with \$250,000, far more than anyone else in the society. Where's the injustice? – Robert Nozick



## The Shallow Pond



“If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing. The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed.”

– Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, Morality”

## Bob's Bugatti



Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. The Bugatti is his pride and joy. In addition to the pleasure he gets from driving and caring for his car, Bob knows that its rising market value means that he will always be able to sell it and live comfortably after retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can't stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed -- but the train will destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed. For many years to come, Bob enjoys owning his Bugatti and the financial security it represents. Bob's conduct, most of us will immediately respond, was gravely wrong. Unger agrees. But then he reminds us that we, too, have opportunities to save the lives of children. – Singer on Peter Unger's *Living High and Letting Die*



## The Authoritarian Regime



"Imagine an authoritarian regime in a society in which historically the predominant political beliefs are not democratic. Citing the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a modernizing insurgency fighting for democratic reforms calls upon the international community for military and financial help. The question is whether this fact argues against interference to help the reforms and, if so,

## The Two Bombers



The terrorist bomber intends to bring about civilian deaths to weaken the resolve of the enemy. The strategic bomber intends at military targets while foreseeing that bombing such targets will lead to civilian deaths. When her bombs kill civilians, this result is foreseen but unintended. Is the former morally forbidden, but the latter permissible? Why?



## The Shack and Castle



He (Hegel) is “like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by.” – S. Kierkegaard



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