Imagining the Ring of Gyges. The Dual Rationality of Thought-Experimenting

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In her already classical criticism of thought-experimenting, Kathy Wilkes points to superficialities in the most famous moral-political thought-experiments, taking the Ring of Gyges as her central example. Her critics defend the Ring by discussing possible variations in the scenario(s) imagined. I propose here that the debate points to a significant dual structure of thought experiments. Their initial presentation(s) mobilize the immediate, cognitively not very impressive imaginative and reflective efforts both of the proponent and the listener of the proposal. The further debate, like the one exemplified by Wilkes's criticisms and some of the answers, appeals to a deeper, more rational variety of imagination and reasoning. I suggest that this duality is typical for moral and political thought experimenting in general, conjecture that it might be extended to the whole area of thought experimenting.

Keywords: Thought experiment; rationality; imagination; Kathleen Wilkes.

1. *Introduction*

Since the paper is intended as an homage to Kathleen Wilkes, let me start with some memories from Dubrovnik where I met her for the first time and continued hanging around with her each year when I visited Dubrovnik. On each occasion, the two of us have been coming together, endlessly discussing philosophy and enjoying each other's company. In the paper, I shall refer to her as to "Kathy", as we all have been calling her at home in Croatia.

Kathy was the chairman of the executive committee of the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik since the mid-eighties, contributing

enormously to the intellectual life in Croatia. Her contribution to analytic philosophy in Croatia and neighboring countries was crucial for the local philosophical development.

But here I want to stress Kathy's incredible wartime solidarity, most clearly manifested in the time of the Serbian army's constant shelling of the town that started in October 1991, culminated a few months later and lasted until May the following year. Kathy was living in Dubrovnik all the time. I remember her from when I came in April 1992, seeing her dressed in Croatian camouflage uniform and passionately commenting on the military situation around Dubrovnik. And she stayed in Dubrovnik after the war ended, helping rebuild Croatian intellectual life. Even later, when I visited her at St. Hilde's college, when her health way deteriorating, she was still dressed in the camouflage uniform, and her favorite topics were her memories from the time of war.

The present paper is dedicated to Kathy's philosophical work, focusing upon the topic to which she dedicated a whole book, her *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments*, Oxford University Press from 1988. Among other topics, Kathy gives and discusses one example from moral philosophy and this discussion will be the topic of this presentation. But our target is Kathy's criticism of TEs, and we shall be taking her Ring of Gyges example as central.

We first present her stark criticism of this thought experiment and next a defense, due to Cora Diamond (2002), taking her criticism as a paradigm of sophisticated and potentially successful problematizing of intuitions generated by a typical thought experiment (I shall shorten the expression as "TE"). This brings us to the general issue of the source of such debates. We then sketch a general answer, a more systematic sketch, relying on a dual-process account of imagining and reasoning but going further in systematizing the approach specifically in regard to TEs in ethics and political philosophy. Connection with imagination is crucial for our account. We develop the proposal here in two directions: first, connecting issues of imagination to the picture of stages of TE, and second, applying it very briefly to TEs in practical, moral and political philosophy.

2. *The Ring of Gyges – for and against*

As mentioned above, in her (1988) book, Kathy discusses one example from moral philosophy, which will be the topic of this paper. So, here we concentrate on chapter One of her *Real People* book, where the Ring of Gyges TE is presented and criticized.

Here is her announcement:

Examples from philosophy

We can begin with an example from moral philosophy. As all know, there are several theories about the basis of morality— that it is ultimately for self-interested reasons that we are moral; or that morality derives from

natural emotions of love, fellow-feeling, generosity, pity, etc.; or that it is based upon rationality; or that it is the result of a fictional social contract; or that it is inevitable, given what we know about sociology and human psychology. (4–5)

And the Ring of Gyges, as presented in Plato's *Republic*, gets in:

One test suggested to discover the fundamentality of morality is to ask 'what if we all had a Gyges' ring to make us invisible at will?' As we know, no humans are actually invisible, so we cannot try the experiment and see. So we imagine a possible world in which people have such rings, but which is in other respects just like ours. If it seems that in such circumstances nobody would remain moral (i.e. if we think that when we could guarantee getting away with it, we would not bother with moral standards), then, crudely, it looks as though morality is based rather on self-interest than on anything grander. The imaginary state of affairs is the invisibility; one conclusion *may* be that morality must be based ultimately on self-interest. (5)

But then, a few pages later, Kathy offers a harsh criticism of the Ring of Gyges TE, and this will be our focus.[1]

So, let me remind the reader of the basic story of the TE. The story, as told by Glaucon, tells us that the shepherd Gyges discovered one day a big hole in the earth, where he saw surprising things:

He saw, along with other quite wonderful things about which they tell tales, a hollow bronze horse. It had windows; peeping in, he saw there was a corpse inside that looked larger than human size. It had nothing on except a gold ring on its hand; he slipped it off and went out. When there was the usual gathering of the shepherds to make the monthly report to the king about the flocks, he too came, wearing the Ring. (*The Republic* 359–360, Plato 1991: 37).

And then, a strange thing happened. While he was sitting with the others, Gyges chanced to tum the collet of the Ring to himself, toward the inside of his hand; and when he did this, he became invisible to those sitting by him, and they discussed him as though he were away. He wondered at this, and, fingering the Ring again, he twisted the collet toward the outside; when he had twisted it, he became visible. He tested whether the Ring had this power, and the result was positive. "Aware of this, he immediately contrived to be one of the messengers to the king," the story continues. "When he arrived, he committed adultery with the king's wife and, along with her, set upon the king and killed him. And so he took over the rule" (360 b, 37–8).

Glaucon famously develops the story, turning it into a proper philosophical TE. He invites the reader to imagine that there were two such rings and that the just man would put one on, and the unjust man the other. The result of the imagining is quite shocking "(…) no one, as it would seem, would be so adamant as to stick by justice and bring himself to keep away from what belongs to others and not lay hold of it, although he had license to take what he wanted from the market with-

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[1] I hope to address her criticism of personal identity TEs on some other occasion; here we stay with her reading of the Gyges story.

out fear, and to go into houses and have intercourse with whomever he wanted, and to slay or release from bonds whomever he wanted, and to do other things as an equal to a god among humans" (360 b). In so doing, Glaucon continues, one would act no differently from the other, but both would go the same way. "And yet, someone could say that this is a great proof (*mega tekmerion*) that no one is willingly just (*hoti oudeis hekon dikaios*), but only when compelled to be so" (360 b). And he concludes that there is no deep difference between the just and the unjust man; in real life people act justly merely because of fear of punishment; "it looks as though morality is based rather on self-interest than on anything grander," as Kathy puts it (5) This is what the TE clearly suggests.[2]

Now, the main point of Kathy's criticism is that the TE is superficial; and she develops her accusation of superficiality in a most interesting way. This will be our topic here, so we shall start by quoting her extensively:

> Consider ...Gyges' Ring: before we can make sense of this thought experiment, several points press to be answered— there are relevant background conditions that need to be known before we can draw any conclusion(s) from the imagined phenomenon. We need more information than we yet have about this 'possible world'. (11)

And now Kathy comes up with her main line of criticism. What exactly can Gyges do, we are invited to ask.

> For instance, is the owner of the Ring to be intangible as well as invisible? That makes a substantial difference to the issue at issue: if he is not intangible, he might by mistake bump up against, and get arrested by, a policeman, or get his hand slammed shut the till-drawer. Thus, a potential criminal may yet have self-interested reasons for staying within the bounds of morality. (11)

Things get worse for Glaucon. Here is her further criticism:

> Is there anything that would count as 'punishment' for an invisible and intangible agent? If so, what—and how unpleasant would it be? If you are both invisible and intangible, could prison walls hold you? And if they could not, could you hold a gun, or a caseful of banknotes? Again, would others know that one owned such a ring? If so, then there might be extra reasons for remaining moral: viz., that unsolved crimes might otherwise be ascribed to you. The point is that the purpose of the thought experiment cannot be met unless such questions are answered: they are deeply relevant. The background is inadequately described, and the results therefore inconclusive. (11)

The criticism is quite sharp, and it leaves for us no morals of the TE. No wonder, critics reacted. Here we shall concentrate of the answer offered by Cora Diamond in her (2002) paper. Talking of Gyges she says: "The objection seems to me to miss its mark" (231). She usefully summarizes

Kathy's methodology. According to her reading the underlying idea of the criticism is that, if thought-experiments can be fruitful in philosophy, their fruitfulness will be dependent on their having a determinate outcome, "like thought-experiments in physics, (…) which have an outcome determined jointly by the conditions described together with background conditions" (231). In such successful experiments, we know what factors are being juggled; "for the rest of the natural world as we know it is in place and has to be for the experiment really to have a determinate result, for it to be fruitful and able properly to convince us of something" (231).

However, this demand is irrelevant for Glaucon's argument. All he needs "is a thinking away of the probabilities large and small of discover that might attend unjust action. He does not have to provide the details of the imagined natural laws of a world in which some individuals would be able to perform unjust actions with confidence in not being discovered" (232). This, she says, offers us an idealized version of something we know to happen, namely that confidence in not being discovered is frequently an element in people's deciding to act in ways considered unjust.

This brings us to the question that will take us to the central issues to be discussed here. Where does the conflict between the two versions, Kathy's and Diamond's, come from? It looks like the discussion offers a two-stage scenario:

First, the crucial, immediate stage and the kind of imagining that accompanies it, that is the first, spontaneous reaction and answer: If I were sure I cannot be discovered, I would steel, and murder and rape! And this supports an immediate general stance: confidence in not being discovered is crucial in one's decision to act unjustly.

Second: the stance is taken by the interlocutor to open space for a deeper philosophical discussion, of the kind quite different from the quick presentation starting the dialogue.

We shall be looking at this structure throughout the rest of the paper. Note that the phenomenon clearly generalizes to other theories mentioned by Kathy in the text. For instance, to the whole wide and crucial important genus of contractualist political TEs, mentioned by Kathy. She notes that, as all know, there are several theories about the basis of morality, and one option she mentions is "that it is the result of a fictional social contract" (6). Take the version proposed by Habermas:

> Each of us must be able to put themselves into the position of all those who would be affected by the performance of a problematic action or the adoption of a questionable norm. (1993: 49)

What is assumed are the willingness to communicate, rationality and full information on the side of the interlocutor. But then, at a late, reflective stage of the TE, a counterpart of Kathy can come problematize the assumption: What if the agent is not willing to communicate? Does she lose her moral status?

Similarly with other idealizations assumed by contractualist philosophers. For instance, Scanlon famously talks about reasonableness. For him, it is the ability of perspective taking that is crucial: I have to think of reasons that the person I am interacting with cannot reasonably reject ("...an act is right if and only if it is justifiable to others on terms they could not reasonably reject" 1998: 189).

The discussion of such a quasi-idealization does not belong to the immediate, non-reflexive imagining; our hypothesis is that it is a matter of later, reflexive stages. The same with other TEs in practical philosophy.

Take the Original Position TE due to Rawls. The reader is asked to imagine s/he is free of envy, and this is crucial for the TE. But can one really do it? Can I be happy with the imagined situation where my neighbor is ten times more talented and three times richer than I am? Well, it's just idealization! But is it an acceptable one, Kathy's counterpart would ask.

So, let me generalize. The standard form of debate in practical philosophy (also wider) concerning TEs, from Plato on: the proponent, says Plato, presents a simple scenario (like in Kathy's example the Ring of Gyges). He raises one or two crucial questions, and presses the interlocutor for an answer. The interlocutor reflects very briefly, and comes with a short answer. The answer is normally taken by the proponent to suggest a view, even a philosophical one, and the proponent develops it into a sketch of a theory.

Typically, a further discussion starts and continues, for instance, with the Ring of Gyges, for two millennia and a half. In the discussion, the critics point to holes in the original story, suggest accounts alternative to the originally proposed one, and the debate goes on, endlessly.

3. *The dual structure of thought-experiments*

Here is then the crucial question: what is it about TEs that supports the endless number of cases like the ones mentioned? This is our main question to be discussed in the sequel. Let me illustrate it in a bit more detail, going back to Gyges and his Ring. First, imaginative reasoning. Remember the proponent suggesting a scenario and raising his question: "Imagine yourself being invisible. And facing a large quantity of money. What would you do?" The interlocutor replies that, of course, he would take it and run away. "What about attractive young women around?" and so on. And the general conclusion follows.

What would a cognitive psychologist say? She would ask us to note that the subject didn't think of further alternatives. He is invisible, but he remains tangible; otherwise he could not take money, or harass the attractive young women in the story. She would point to us that we imagined and reasoned on the basis of information directly available, ignoring the slightly more distant option. This is called availability heuristics (see Tversky and Kahneman 1973).

When you are challenged, you might start thinking of the other option. But this then is not quick heuristics, but a more reflective imagining and reasoning. The contrast is nicely captured by Michael T. Stuart who actually proposed the two terms in his (2021) paper. He writes:

Call "imagination$_1$" the unconscious, uncontrolled, effortless cognitive interaction with objects not currently present to sensory experience.
Call "imagination$_2$" the controlled, effortful and conscious cognitive interaction with objects not currently present to sensory experience, again. (1337)

Applied to reasoning, we have reasoning$_1$ (imaginative or otherwise) and reasoning$_2$ (imaginative or otherwise).

Using Stuart's terminology, the psychologist can then suggest that the initial reasoning, with the proponent asking the interlocutor to imagine oneself being invisible and facing a large quantity of money involves imaginative reasoning$_1$. Now, the issues that come up after some reflection, like whether the person is also intangible, and if yes, she can do nothing with her hands, so they don't interact with objects in her surrounding, demand imaginative reasoning$_2$. Glaucon exemplifies imaginative reasoning$_1$, while Kathy and Diamond exemplify imaginative reasoning$_2$. This brings us to a more general cognitive account.

Our topic is now the contrast between immediate reactions (like in Glaucon and his intended reader) and the protracted later debate (Kathy and Diamond style). What kinds of imagining and reasoning are involved? We suggested the contrast between two kinds of imagination, borrowing from Stuart the contrast between imagination$_1$ and imagination$_2$. Cognitive psychologists talk about system-1 and system-2 functioning.

Let us apply the distinction to ethical TEs. Think in terms of stages. The standard form of debate in practical philosophy (also wider) concerning TEs, from Plato on suggests the following stages:

First, the stages of the use of imagination$_1$: The presentation of the scenario to the experimental subject (either the author of the scenario herself, or an interlocutor), the (typically imaginative) contemplation of the scenario and some, let us say minimal, piece of reasoning, and finally the decision ("intuition") concerning the thesis/theory to be tested. The proponent presents a simple scenario. He raises one or two crucial questions and presses the interlocutor for an answer.

The interlocutor reflects very briefly and comes up with a short answer. The proponent takes typically the answer to suggest a view, a philosophical one, and the proponent develops it into a sketch of a theory.

Next, the stages that demand more sophisticated discussion. When one is challenged, one might start thinking of options not mentioned in the initial scenario. But this thinking is not following quick heuristics, but a more reflective imagining and reasoning, the one we marked as reasoning$_2$ and imagination$_2$. Typically, in successful cases, such a further discussion starts and continues, for instance, with the Ring of Gyges, for two millennia and a half. In the discussion, the critics point to

holes in the original story, suggest accounts alternative to the originally proposed one, and the debate goes on, endlessly. Often, the scenario is varied, and subject is invited to draw the conclusion from a series of answers to a series of varied scenarios; one can use the term "intuitive induction" for this procedure. Normally, the conclusion is then compared and possibly contrasted to the dominant views in the field, from commonsensical to theoretical, scientific or philosophical ones. If all goes well a reflective equilibrium is reached. So much about TEs of the sort we mentioned, from Gyges to contractualism.

A lot of work should be done to generalize it further.

Now, what is it about TEs that supports the endless number of such cases? This is our question here. In more recent literature, some dispersed fragments of an answer have been given, by prominent theoreticians in the field, like Stuart (2021), Goldman and Jordan (2013) and Saunders (2009)

Goldman and Jordan (2013) focus on one aspect, mindreading, and one method, simulation (in the Gyges example this would apply to Gyges' understanding of the king, the queen, the guards and so on). They also distinguish two levels:

1. Low-level simulational mindreading, e.g. emotion *mirroring,* and
2. High-level simulational mindreading (Goldman and Jordan 2013: Sections 3 and 4).

Several other authors are reflecting in the similar direction. For instance Saunders in his 2009 paper with a telling title "Reason and intuition in the moral life: A dual-process account of moral justification" suggests that understanding of moral intuitions "requires appealing to a dual-process view of moral judgement that regards moral intuitions and moral theories as belonging to different mental systems" (2009: 335).[3] And he points to the connection with duality of cognitive systems: "We can think of moral intuitions, like any other kind of intuition, as System 1 judgments, and consciously and explicitly developed moral theories can be thought of as the outcomes of System 2 processes" (2009: 340).

We suggest that this duality should be applied to the understanding of TEs in practical philosophy, i.e. to moral and political TEs. A lot of work should be done to fully generalize it.

Back to the imagination in philosophy. Here is a further illustration, this time not a contractualist one. Here is the famous "Trolley problem" due to Philippa Foot and formulated in 1967. We shall quote the simple formulation due to Judith Jarvis Thompson, who made a significant contribution to the discussion of the TE:

> Suppose you are the driver of a trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five

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[3] See also the section Two systems and the possibility of reflective equilibrium.

men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don't work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. (1985: 1395)

Here are the stages: We begin with stage one, the question being asked. Stage two, the question is understood by the subject. Stage three offers the tentative conscious production, say building the picture of the two tracks with workers, all done at a conscious level. Stage three brings additional unconscious production and is probably controlled by the relevant competence at the unconscious level (some geometry and commonsense physics might be needed to imagine the scenario in sufficient detail). At stage four, the subject arrives at the immediate, spontaneous verdict, often non-conscious, for instance, "Yes, I would turn the lever and save the five men." One might think of an additional stage of subpersonal empirical theorizing by Central Processing Unit. (I, the reader, might imagine workers from abroad, say Mexicans, I might imagine young and healthy workers, or older and tired ones, and so on, all motivated by my views on the working class and the like.) At stage 5 comes the immediate spontaneous answer (intuition): "Yes, I would turn the lever and save the five men." At stage six we have varying and generalizing, intuitive induction at both conscious and unconscious levels. For instance, it seems to me in the trolley case, that I would turn the lever and thus save five by sacrificing two; but what if the two are (a) small children, (b) very talented artists, (c) my friends? Stage seven offers the general belief, for instance that I would turn the lever no matter what.

We might think of a further stage in which I wonder how the result, the general belief, fits with my other considered judgments (intuitions), with theories I believe in and so on? For instance, I would turn the lever since I think five lives are more valuable than two, no matter whose lives the latter are. But why do you believe this? Why don't you give additional weight to children, since they have more time left to enjoy their lives? Because I think the value of each life is the same as of any other. And so on. If I arrive at a satisfactory view of the whole, this will yield a "reflective equilibrium" at conscious level in which my views form an equilibrated structure.

But what about reasoning with imagination (see Myers 2021)? In TEs reasoning goes with imagination. What is specific for it? My proposal is the following: to each kind of imagination we should join the corresponding kind of reasoning:

$$\text{imagination}_1 \rightarrow \text{reasoning}_1 = \text{imaginative reasoning}_1$$
$$\text{imagination}_2 \rightarrow \text{reasoning}_2 = \text{imaginative reasoning}_2$$

The picture is crucially important for evaluating the rationality of TE-ing and its normative status, say in terms of epistemic virtue vs. epistemic vice.

Similar features of System1 processing and of imagination$_1$ are easily recognizable in everyday reasoning. These days, in times of Ukrainian war, you ask an ordinary person: Would you accept refugees? The typical interlocutor can think of two contrasting pictures in his mind, depicting Ukrainian vs. Arab refugees. The Ukrainians are women, Christian, attractive (in the case of my country, Croatia, they also speak a rather similar language). Arabs are typically imagined as men, they are Muslims, mostly young ones (and they speak an incomprehensible language). Here, the heuristics of stereotyping is powerful and omnipresent; the fact that many Arab refugees are women is simply forgotten, and so on; stereotyping insists on contrast:

- Stereotyping
  Ukrainian vs. Arab

And imagination$_1$ works intensely, accompanied by the reasoning of the same kind. The conclusion is clear: "Ukrainian refugees are highly acceptable, Arabs should be rejected in any case," says our interlocutor.

One can talk of minimal rationality in the case of the use of imagination$_1$. And of fuller rationality of the use of imagination$_2$. Similarly, one can note a minimally virtuous status of the use of imagination$_1$ and epistemically virtuous status of the use of imagination$_2$. The contrast has been studied by various authors, psychologists and philosophers (see e.g. Kung 2016).

4. *Conclusion*

We noted that Kathy Wilkes has been pointing to superficialities in the most famous moral-political TEs, taking the Ring of Gyges as her central example. Her critics defend the Ring, by discussing possible variations in the scenario(s) imagined. I have been arguing in the paper that the debate points to a significant dual structure of TEs, of the kind anticipated by Stuart (2021). The central TEs in practical philosophy requires a several-stage work by interlocutors: most importantly, an early stage culminating in an intuitive answer, crucial for the TE, and later stages of doubts, debate and reflective equilibrating.

The initial presentation(s) mobilize the immediate, cognitively not very impressive imaginative$_1$ and reflective$_1$ efforts both of the proponent and the listener of the proposal. The further debate, like the one exemplified by Wilkes's criticisms and some of the answers, appeals to a deeper, more rational variety of imagination and reasoning, imagining$_2$ and reasoning$_2$. The pessimists, most prominently Kathy Wilkes, famously concentrate on weaknesses of the intuitive answer, suggesting that no further elaboration can help with them.

I suggest that this duality is typical for moral and political thought experimenting in general, and conjecture that it might be extended to the whole area of thought experimenting. And I suggest that there is a rationale for a more optimistic reading of practical TEs, grounded on the standard cognitive account of ordinary imagination-and-reasoning.

The picture is crucially important for evaluating the rationality of TE-ing, and of its normative status: epistemic virtue vs. epistemic vice. One can talk of minimal rationality of the use of imagination$_1$ and fuller rationality of the use of imagination$_2$. Similarly, with minimally virtuous status of the use of imagination$_1$ and epistemically virtuous status of the use of imagination$_2$.

The division between early, intuitional, and later, reflective stages, thus mirrors the dual nature of normal human processes of imagining and reasoning. This has been noted in the literature but without a clear connection with the duality of stages, sometimes noted, but not made explicit. We argued that the early stages/later stages division roughly corresponds to the division between system 1 and system 2 imagining-reasoning.

How should the friends of imagination reply? We need mechanisms for self-improvement, in order to have workable TEs, they can note. The attention to imagination can help solve some recurring problems in the debate (and in the meta-theory) of TEs, as we have argued above. Kathy's criticisms suggest the direction to take. The weaknesses of the early intuitional stages are natural consequence of the limited rationality of system-1 cognition, and are routinely ameliorated in the later stages, exhibiting system-2 reflection.

The optimist wins: the job of philosophy is to guide us from the spontaneous but superficial system-1 reasoning and imagining to reflective, system-2, epistemically virtuous elaborations. And TEs are natural, almost ideal means for achieving this. This also explains their omnipresence in philosophy and the rich and varied millennial history of their most famous instances.

No wonder Kathy dedicated so much attention to them, and we should follow her in this! So, let this paper be a homage to Kathy and to her philosophical insight!

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