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ON THE MORAL TRACKS: HOW ECONOMICS AND LAW STUDENTS APPROACH THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

Abstract

Background: The impact of education *sensu largo* on moral development is well-documented, but research on how academic curricula shape students' ethical decision-making remains limited. This study examines whether studying law or economics influences students' choices in the Trolley Problem – a famous moral dilemma that requires a sacrificial choice, eliciting reflection on fundamental moral principles.

Research purpose: We investigate whether economics students, who are taught to seek efficiency under scarce resources, are more likely to take an active ('utilitarian') approach that maximizes the number of human lives saved in a collision with a speeding train, while law students, guided by adherence to norms, are more inclined to refrain from interfering in the situation, thus opting for a passive ('deontological') choice that aligns with the fundamental moral principle of 'do not kill'. We also assess whether these tendencies intensify with academic progression in economics and law studies.

Methods: A total of 784 students from two Polish universities completed the Trolley Problem survey, and their responses were analyzed to identify differences between Law and Economics & Business students, as well as variations across study levels. The research was conducted in two waves, in 2020 and 2024.

Conclusions: While Law and Economics & Business students' choices in the Trolley Problem showed some differences in the expected direction, these differences were statistically insignificant. As anticipated, advanced Law students were more likely to choose the passive option. However, more advanced Economics & Business students did not exhibit a stronger 'utilitarian' tendency

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compared to their first-year colleagues, suggesting a more nuanced effect of academic training on moral choices.

Keywords: academic education, moral choices, sacrificial dilemmas, learning effect.

JEL classification: A22, A23, D91, Z13

1. Introduction

Education undeniably shapes norms and moral attitudes. The role of this factor is highlighted by moral development theory,¹ Durkheim's socialization theory,² as well as contemporary neuroscientific findings.³ However, much of this research has primarily focused on informal, outside-the-classroom education or primary education occurring at the early stages of human life. The impact of academic teaching on students' morality remains a less frequently explored and recognized issue. When addressed, it typically appears in two distinct contexts: first, in the literature examining the effectiveness of ethics courses in fostering norms of professional ethics,⁴ and second, in critical statements highlighting the potentially harmful influence of higher education on students' moral values, both in general⁵ and within specific fields of study, such as economics and business.⁶

¹ **J. Piaget**, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1932; **L. Kohlberg**, **R. Kramer**, *Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development*, *Human Development* 1969/2, pp. 93–120; **L. Kohlberg**, *Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental approach*, in: **T. Lickona** (ed.), *Moral development and behavior: Theory and Research and Social Issues*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York 1976, pp. 31–53.

² **E. Durkheim**, *Moral Education. A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, The Free Press, New York 1973.

³ **J. Decety**, **J.M. Cowell**, *The complex relation between morality and empathy*, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2014/7, pp. 337–339.

⁴ Cf. **B.A. Ritter**, *Can Business Ethics be Trained? A Study of the Ethical Decision-making Process in Business Students*, *Journal of Business Ethics* 2006/68, pp. 153–164; **M. Drumwright**, **R. Prentice**, **C. Biasucci**, *Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making*, *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education* 2015/13, pp. 431–458; **B.R. Warnick**, **S.K. Silverman**, *A Framework for Professional Ethics Courses in Teacher Education*, *Journal of Teacher Education* 2011/3, pp. 273–285.

⁵ **A. Bloom**, *The Closing of the American Mind. How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1987.

⁶ Cf. **R.H. Frank**, **T. Gilovich**, **D.T. Regan**, *Does studying economics inhibit cooperation?* *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1993/2, pp. 159–171; **A. Etzioni**, *The moral effects of economic teaching*, *Sociological Forum* 2015/30/1, pp. 228–233; **K. Raworth**, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*, Random House, London 2017.

Our research aims to shed some light on the relationship between academic education and students' ethical values by examining whether academic curricula in law and economics correlate with students' decisions in the Trolley Problem – a classic sacrificial dilemma that engages fundamental moral principles.⁷ In this thought experiment, respondents are asked to imagine a scenario where they witness a dramatic situation of an oncoming, speeding train approaching a group of five people. They must choose whether to pull the lever, redirecting the train onto a sidetrack where it would kill one person, or leave the lever untouched, allowing the train to stay on its course and take the lives of five people. The choice to act, i.e., to interfere in the situation, pull the lever and sacrifice one person in order to save five is often seen as motivated by consequentialist/utilitarian ethics, which prioritizes the maximization of overall well-being. In contrast, opting for the passive approach is typically interpreted as deontological, i.e., refraining from violating the do-not-kill moral principle.⁸

Considering students of economics and business are trained to 'think like an economist' and seek the most efficient solutions under conditions of scarcity,⁹ whereas law students are taught to adhere to legal norms and to apply them to concrete cases, we hypothesized that there is a significant difference between these groups' choices in the Trolley Problem. We expected Economics & Business students to be more inclined toward an active approach compared to Law students. Additionally, we anticipated that more advanced Economics & Business students would demonstrate even more 'utilitarian' choices than their first-year colleagues, while more advanced Law students would be even more inclined toward the passive, 'deontological' option than their counterparts who have just begun their legal studies.

The data collected from two major Polish universities – the University of Lodz and the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (N = 784) – indicate that

⁷ **P. Foot**, *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect*, Oxford Review 1967/5, pp. 5–15; **J.J. Thomson**, *Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem*, The Monist 1976/2, pp. 204–217; **J.J. Thomson**, *The Trolley Problem*, The Yale Law Journal 1985/6, pp. 1395–1415.

⁸ Cf. **J.D. Greene et al.**, *The Neural Bases of Cognitive Conflict and Control in Moral Judgement*, Neuron 2004/44, pp. 389–400; **A. Lanteri, C. Chelini, S. Rizzello**, *An experimental investigation of emotions and reasoning in the Trolley Problem*, Journal of Business Ethics 2008/83, pp. 789–804; **B. Bago, M. Kovacs, J. Protzko**, *Situational factors shape moral judgements in the trolley dilemma in Eastern, Southern and Western countries in a culturally diverse sample*, Nature Human Behaviour 2022/6, pp. 880–895.

⁹ **G.N. Mankiw**, *Principles of Microeconomics*, Cengage Learning 2011, pp. 21–48; **R.H. Frank**, *Microeconomics and Behaviour*, McGraw Hill, London 2016, pp. 3–22.

while differences exist between economics and law students, they are statistically insignificant, contrary to our initial expectations. Furthermore, although more advanced law students exhibit a stronger propensity to ‘deontological’ choices, as anticipated, economics and business students do not show a corresponding increase for active, ‘utilitarian’ decisions in the Trolley Problem. These findings suggest that the influence of academic education on students’ moral choices is intricate. While economic training can shape students’ decision-making in contexts involving resource allocation,¹⁰ this influence does not necessarily extend to life-and-death moral dilemmas.

The paper is organized as follows. It begins with a literature review that outlines the main points in the discussion on the Trolley Problem and the role of economic and law education in students’ attitudes and values formation. The following sections are dedicated to our empirical research – its design, data collection procedures and empirical findings. Then, the results are analyzed in relation to previous studies, with the last section concluding the paper.

2. The Trolley Problem. Research on academic education influence on students’ morality

The cornerstone of philosophical debates on sacrificial ethical dilemmas was Philippa Foot’s article *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect*,¹¹ where the ethicist explored whether sacrificing a child’s life to save a pregnant mother might be morally justified. Among other examples, she introduced the case of a runaway tram, in which the driver must choose between steering onto a track where five workers are present or another where only one would be killed. This scenario was later transformed into the famous Trolley Problem by Judith J. Thomson,¹² who contrasted several cases where identical outcomes resulted from deliberate action taken to cause it or neglect to act. She demonstrated that while people accept sacrificing one life in some frameworks,

¹⁰ **D. Kahneman, J.L. Knetsch, R.H. Thaler**, *Fairness and the Assumptions of Economics*, *Journal of Business* 1986/59, pp. S285-S300; **B.S. Frey, W.W. Pommerehne, B. Gygi**, *Economics indoctrination or selection? Some empirical results*, *The Journal of Economic Education* 1993/24, pp. 271–281; **B. Süßmuth, B. Gawellek, F. Koenings**, *Economics Education Childhood Socialization, and the Transmission of Allocation Preferences*, *International Review of Economics Education* 2021/38, 100224, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iree.2021.100224>

¹¹ **P. Foot**, *The Problem of Abortion...*

¹² **J.J. Thomson**, *Killing, Letting Die...; eadem, The Trolley Problem...*

they strongly reject it in others, highlighting the role of narrative and context in moral judgment.

This perspective found empirical support in studies by Greene et al.,¹³ which analyzed brain activity in moral dilemmas. Their findings revealed that respondents asked to imagine direct, physical interventions triggered emotional responses, leading to a preference for passive ('deontological') choices. In contrast, impersonal scenarios, like the standard Trolley Problem, triggered reasoning-based decisions, and a greater tendency toward active ('utilitarian') choices.

Beyond narratives, factors such as culture,¹⁴ personality traits,¹⁵ prior experiences,¹⁶ and health conditions¹⁷ have been shown to influence moral choices in the sacrificial ethical dilemmas. The role of academic education in general, and economic and law studies in particular, remains underexplored.

It must be indicated, however, that the impact of academic education on students' morality has gained attention only recently, and scientific discussions revolved around two main paths of influence: the *cognitive hypothesis*, suggesting that abstract reasoning enhances ethical understanding and liberal values,¹⁸ and the *socialization hypothesis*, arguing that exposure to progressive

¹³ **J.D. Greene et al.**, *An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment*, *Science* 2001/293, pp. 2105–2108; **eidem**, *The Neural Bases of Cognitive Conflict and Control in Moral Judgement*, *Neuron* 2004/44, pp. 389–400.

¹⁴ **H. Ahlenius, T. Tännsjö**, *Chinese and Westerners respond differently to the trolley dilemmas*, *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 2012/3–4, pp. 195–201; **B. Bago, M. Kovacs, J. Protzko**, *Situational factors...*; **S.N. Rehman, J. Dzionek-Kozłowska**, *The Chinese and American Students and the Trolley Problem: A Cross-cultural Study*, *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 2020/20, pp. 31–41; **X. Xu et al.**, *An Eastern Look at a Western Dilemma: Cross-Cultural Differences in Action-Balanced Trolley Dilemmas*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506241289459>

¹⁵ **J. Nasello et al.**, *Does empathy predict decision-making in everyday trolley-like problems?*, *Current Psychology* 2023/42, pp. 2966–2979, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01566-1>; **J. Nasello et al.**, *Moral Decision-Making in Trolley Problems and Variants: How Do Participants' Perspectives, Borderline Personality Traits, and Empathy Predict Choices?*, *Journal of Psychology* 2023/5, pp. 318–338.

¹⁶ **G. Andrade et al.**, *Cat ownership, psychotic experiences and moral decision-making in sacrificial dilemmas: A study in the United Arab Emirates*, *Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 2024/2, pp. 270–283.

¹⁷ **M. Koenigs et al.**, *Damage to the prefrontal cortex increases utilitarian moral judgements*, *Nature* 2007/446, pp. 908–911.

¹⁸ **T.W. Adorno et al.**, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Harpers, Oxford UK 1950; **J.T. Jost et al.**, *Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition*, *Psychological Bulletin* 2003/3, pp. 339–375.

academic environments shifts students' moral outlook towards relativism.¹⁹ However, empirical research has primarily focused on sociopolitical effects rather than ethics. The exception is Bročić and Miles, who worked with a broad sample of academic disciplines and found that humanities and social sciences foster moral concern but, unexpectedly, reinforce moral absolutism rather than relativism.²⁰

In contrast, the alleged negative impact of economic and business education on students' morality has attracted significantly more attention. The empirical research gained momentum with Maxwell and Ames' (1981) study, which found that economics graduates contributed less in the Public Good Game than other 'players'.²¹ This finding was interpreted either as evidence of self-selection of less prosocial persons to economic studies or, alternatively, as a sign of the antisocial influence of economic teaching. As a result of some support for the so-called indoctrination hypothesis, the economics and business curricula were criticized for emphasizing profit maximization, fostering calculatedness, egoism, and insensitivity.²² Subsequent research confirmed that economists behave differently not only in the Public Good Game, but also in the Ultimatum, Dictator and Trust games, both in the lab and in the classroom.²³ Nonetheless, findings from surveys and field experiments remain inconclusive.²⁴

¹⁹ **F.D. Weil**, *The Variable Effects of Education on Liberal Attitudes: A Comparative-Historical Analysis of Anti-Semitism Using Public Opinion Survey Data*, *American Sociological Review* 1985/4, pp. 458–474; **J. Sidanius et al.**, *Social Hierarchy Maintenance and Assortment into Social Roles: A Social Dominance Perspective*, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 2003/4, pp. 333–352.

²⁰ **M. Bročić, A. Miles**, *College and the "Culture War": Assessing Higher Education's Influence on Moral Attitudes*, *American Sociological Review* 2021/5, pp. 856–895.

²¹ **G. Marwell, R. Ames**, *Economists free ride. Does anyone else? Experiments on the provision of public goods, IV*, *Journal of Public Economics* 1981/15, pp. 295–310.

²² **R.H. Frank, T. Gilovich, D.T. Regan**, *Does studying economics...?*; **B. Frey, S. Meier**, *Selfish and Indoctrinated Economists?*, *European Journal of Law and Economics* 2005/2, pp. 165–171; **Y. Bauman, E. Rose**, *Selection or indoctrination: Why do economics students donate less than the rest?*, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 2011/3, pp. 318–327.

²³ **J.R. Carter, M.D. Irons**, *Are economists different, and if so, why?*, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1991/5, pp. 171–177; **P. Gerlach**, *The games economists play: Why economics students behave more selfishly than other students*, *PLoS ONE* 2017/9, e0183814, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183814>

²⁴ Cf. **D.O. Neubaum et al.**, *Business education and its relationship to student personal moral philosophies and attitudes toward profits: An empirical response to critics*, *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 2009/1, pp. 9–24; **J. Dzionek-Kozłowska, S.N. Rehman**, *Indoctrination, preselection or culture? Economic education and attitudes towards*

For the purpose of the present study, empirical studies comparing economic and business students with their law counterparts are of particular importance.

Working with a sample of criminal justice and business students from two American universities (N = 409), Segal et al. found that when faced with 25 dilemmas opposing personal profit vs adhering to moral principles, business students were more inclined to prioritize profits over ethical considerations. However, surprisingly, they also exhibited a greater willingness to accept profit reductions if the money could go to charity.²⁵

Mertins and Warning in a one-shot gift-exchange game experiment involving German law and business students (N = 359), reported a slightly lower level of reciprocity of business students compared to their colleagues in law studies. Mertins and Warning, however, did not find differences between the first-year and the more advanced students of business. Thus, the discrepancy was explained by the self-selection of both curricula and not the learning effect.²⁶

Further, Rosengart et al., who also worked with a German sample, demonstrated that more advanced business students consistently applied private-sector logic across ethical dilemmas, even when making decisions in public-sector contexts. In contrast, senior law students were less aligned with such a profit-maximizing approach, emphasizing alternative considerations. Certain differences occurred between the beginners and more advanced students as well, thus, Rosengart et al. (2020) found partial support for both self-selection and the learning hypotheses. The authors concluded that business students developed a distinct decision-making framework that extends beyond private-sector environments.²⁷

Lastly, Miragaya-Casillas et al. compared answers collected from Spanish law and business students (N = 498). Respondents evaluated their (dis)

cooperation, *Gospodarka Narodowa*. The Polish Journal of Economics 2017/6, pp. 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.33119/GN/100739>

²⁵ L. Segal, L. Gideon, M.R. Haberfeld, *Comparing the Ethical Attitudes of Business and Criminal Justice Students*, *Social Science Quarterly* 2011/4, pp. 1021–1043, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2011.00801.x>

²⁶ V. Mertins, S. Warning, *Greedy and selfish? Differences in fairness preferences of prospective lawyers and managers*, *Zeitschrift für Personalforschung* 2014/4, pp. 410–431, <https://doi.org/10.1688/ZfP-2014-04-Mertins>

²⁷ T. Rosengart, B. Hirsch, Ch. Nitzl, *The effects of legal versus business education on decision making in public administrations with a Weberian tradition*, *Business Research* 2019/12, pp. 455–478, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-018-0081-3>; eidem, *Self-selection and socialisation effects of business and legal studies*, *Journal of Business Economics* 2020/90, pp. 1127–1145, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11573-020-00973-3>

agreement with several statements related to self- and other-interest at two points in time – at the beginning and at the end of the academic term during which business students attended a course in microeconomics. No statistically significant differences were found in business students' responses before and after taking the course, providing no evidence for the learning effect. However, the researchers identified significant differences between both samples, i.e., law and business students, in their evaluations of self-interest statements. As expected, law students exhibited lower levels of acceptance of self-interest than their business studies counterparts, supporting the self-selection hypothesis.²⁸

Compared to research on the influence of economic education on students' values, fewer studies have examined how academic disciplines shape responses to the Trolley Problem. Trolley Problem scenarios have been used mainly to study medical²⁹ and nurse specialist students;³⁰ however, rather than comparing disciplines, these studies focused on how mortality salience influenced medical students and how nurse specialists responded to standard versus vaccine-related sacrificial dilemmas. Christen et al. also found no significant differences between Air Force cadets and civilian students in three military-themed Trolley-like simulations.³¹

Studies comparing economics and sociology students' replies to the Trolley Problem scenarios were conducted by Dzionek-Kozłowska and Rehman³² and Dzionek-Kozłowska et al.³³ The first study reported that sociology students were more reluctant than economists to take an active, 'utilitarian' approach in one of the scenarios, though no difference between those two samples appeared in the standard Trolley Problem case. In turn, Dzionek-Kozłowska et al. (2024a)

²⁸ **C. Miragaya-Casillas, R. Aguayo-Estremera, A. Ruiz-Villaverde**, *Are Business Students More Self-Interested Than Law Students? A Longitudinal Study*, *Kyklos* 2025/1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/kykl.12451>

²⁹ **G. Andrade, M.C. Redondo, D. Razdan**, *Mortality Salience and the Trolley Problem in Medical Students*, *Romanian Journal of Applied Psychology* 2018/2, pp. 45–48.

³⁰ **G. Oftedal, I.H. Ravn, F.A. Dahl**, *No Correlation Between Ethical Judgment in Trolley Dilemmas and Vaccine Scenarios for Nurse Specialist Students*, *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 2020/4, pp. 292–297.

³¹ **M. Christen et al.**, *Trolley dilemma in the sky: Context matters when civilians and cadets make remotely piloted aircraft decisions*, *PLoS ONE* 2021/3, e0247273, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247273>

³² **J. Dzionek-Kozłowska, S.N. Rehman**, *Career Choices and Moral Choices. Changing Tracks in the Trolley Problem*, *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric* 2019/1, pp. 177–189.

³³ **J. Dzionek-Kozłowska et al.**, *Does Economic Education Spoil Students' Morality?, Economists and the Trolley Problem*, *Economics & Sociology* 2024/2, pp. 103–125.

found first-year economics students more likely to adopt an active approach than sociology students, but this difference disappeared among advanced, i.e., second- and third-year students in both programs.

An interesting point of reference is also provided by the study of Zaleśkiewicz et al. (2020).³⁴ Without referring directly to the respondents' academic degree, this team of researchers investigated whether activating a 'market mindset' influences moral choices in trolley dilemmas. They demonstrated that even simple priming with images depicting market exchange resulted in an increased percentage of 'utilitarian' choices in sacrificial ethical dilemmas.

3. Research design

To contribute to the issue of academic education's influence on students' moral choices, our research investigates the relationship between the program of studies and decisions in sacrificial moral dilemmas by comparing law and economics students' choices in the standard version of the Trolley Problem.

Data were collected in two distinct timeframes: October 2020 and May–June 2024 at the University of Lodz and the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, spanning various years of study within the Economics and Law programs. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the October 2020 survey was administered entirely online, whereas the 2024 survey was conducted both in academic settings (in and outside classrooms) and through secure online platforms for those unable or unwilling to complete a paper version.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines – ensuring informed consent, the right to withdraw at any time, the confidentiality of responses, and no collection of personally identifiable information. There was no time limit for survey completion, and participants were not compensated for their involvement.

Considering the utility/profit maximization assumption inherent in neoclassical economics, we expected that economic education would foster the calculating 'market' mindset, leading Economics & Business students to favor

³⁴ T. Zaleśkiewicz et al., *Market mindset impacts moral decisions: The exposure to market relationship makes moral choices more utilitarian by means of proportional thinking*, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 2020/50, pp. 1500–1522, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2701>

active, ‘utilitarian’ choices in the trolley dilemma compared to Law students. This allowed us to formulate the first hypothesis:

H1: Economics & Business students are more likely to adopt an active (utilitarian) approach compared to Law students.

Drawing on findings of Zaleśkiewicz et al. (2020),³⁵ we expected that prolonged exposure to economic teaching would not only activate but also ingrain the ‘market mindset’ in students of Economics & Business, resulting in a higher percentage of ‘utilitarian’ choices of more advanced students compared to their first-year colleagues. Conversely, given the Law curriculum’s emphasis on adherence to norms, more advanced Law students were anticipated to lean towards passive, ‘deontological’ responses.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H2a: Within the Economics & Business programs, students with longer academic exposure demonstrate a higher prevalence of active (utilitarian) judgments than their less advanced peers.

H2b: Within the Law program, students with greater academic experience more frequently exhibit a passive (deontological) approach compared to their less advanced counterparts.

4. Results

A total of 784 participants were included in the study. Regarding gender, 448 of the respondents were female (57.14%), 333 were male (42.47%), and three identified as non-binary (0.38%). Due to the very small number of non-binary responses, these cases were excluded from further analyses.

The total number of participants in the study was divided into two main academic groups: Law, and Economics & Business. The law group consisted of 234 students, representing 29.8% of the total sample. The Economics & Business group comprised 550 students, accounting for 70.2% of the total sample. Within this group, Economics students formed the majority, with 394 participants (71.6%), followed by Management in Economy with 97 students (17.6%), and Finance & International Business with 59 students (10.7%).

The study sample was further categorized based on student seniority, distinguishing between first-year and more advanced students across the Economics & Business and Law groups (Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown).

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

TABLE 1: *Distribution of participants by gender and program of studies*

	No. of Participants	Participants (%)
Female	448	57.14
Male	333	42.47
Non-binary	3	0.38
Law	234	29.85
1st year	128	54.70
2nd and subsequent years of study	106	45.30
Economics & Business	550	70.15
1st year	219	39.82
2nd and subsequent years of study	331	60.18
<i>Economics</i>	394	71.64
<i>Finance & Int. Business</i>	59	10.73
<i>Management in Economy</i>	97	17.64
Total	784	100.00

Source: Own work.

The first hypothesis, H1, examined whether Economics & Business students are more inclined toward an active ('utilitarian') approach compared to Law students. The results indicate that 62.55% of Economics & Business students and 59.83% of Law students adopted an active ethical approach, while 37.45% of Economics & Business students and 40.17% of Law students exhibited a passive ('deontological') stance. The chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 0.513$, $p = 0.474$) suggests that this difference is statistically insignificant, indicating that the type of academic curriculum does not significantly influence ethical decision-making approaches (Table 2). Thus, H1 is falsified, although the difference is observed in the expected direction.

TABLE 2: *H1: Distribution of participants by attitude and group*

Group	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Economics & Business	344 (62.55%)	206 (37.45%)	$\chi^2 = 0.5128$ $p = 0.474$
Law	140 (59.83%)	94 (40.17%)	

Source: Own work.

The second hypothesis traced the learning effect. The H2a, assessed whether students in the Economics & Business program with greater academic experience are more likely to adopt an active (utilitarian) approach. Among first-year Economics & Business students, 66.21% favored the active approach, compared to 60.12% of second- and subsequent years of study students. This pattern does not support the hypothesis, as first-year students exhibited a slightly stronger tendency toward utilitarian decision-making. Additionally, the chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 2.086$, $p = 0.149$) indicates that the observed difference is not statistically significant (Table 3). H2a is clearly falsified.

TABLE 3: *H2a: Distribution of participants by attitude in Economics & Business group*

Group/Academic Experience	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Economics & Business	344 (62.55%)	206 (37.45%)	$\chi^2 = 2.086$ $p = 0.149$
1st year	145 (66.21%)	206 (33.79%)	
2nd and subsequent years of study	199 (60.12%)	132 (39.88%)	

Source: Own work.

The H2b hypothesis explored whether more experienced Law students are more inclined toward a passive ('deontological') approach than their first-year colleagues. The results indicate that 35.16% of first-year law students adhered to a passive ('deontological') approach, compared to 46.23% of more advanced students. This trend aligns with the hypothesis, suggesting that increased academic exposure to Law may be associated with a greater tendency toward 'deontological' reasoning. Notably, the chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 2.957$, $p = 0.086$) indicates weak but statistically significant evidence supporting this relationship, highlighting a potential shift in ethical reasoning with academic experience (Table 4).

TABLE 4: *H2b: Distribution of participants by attitude in Law group*

Group/Academic Experience	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Law	140 (59.83%)	94 (40.17%)	$\chi^2 = 2.957$ $p = 0.08$
1st year	83 (64.84%)	45 (35.16%)	
2nd and subsequent years of study	57 (53.77%)	49 (46.23%)	

Source: Own work.

Additionally, we investigated whether ethical decision-making approaches differ by gender. Among female participants, 59.15% adopted an active approach, while 40.85% preferred a passive approach. In contrast, 64.86% of male participants followed an active approach, with 35.14% adhering to a passive choice. While these results suggest that males might be slightly more inclined toward a ‘utilitarian’ perspective than females, the chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 2.635$, $p = 0.105$) provides weak but statistically significant support for a gender-based difference in ethical approaches (Table 5).

TABLE 5: *Distribution of participants by attitude and gender*

Gender	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Female	265 (59.15%)	183 (40.85%)	$\chi^2 = 2.634$ $p = 0.10$
Male	216 (64.86%)	117 (35.14%)	

Source: Own work.

When treated separately, within the Economics & Business programs, 60.60% of female students adopted an active (‘utilitarian’) approach, while 39.40% exhibited a passive (‘deontological’) approach. In comparison, 65.26% of male students followed an active approach, while 34.74% adhered to a passive stance. While these figures suggest a slight tendency for male students to favor utilitarian reasoning more than their female counterparts, the chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 1.206$, $p = 0.272$) indicates this difference is not statistically significant (Table 6).

TABLE 6: *Distribution of participants by attitude and gender in the Economics & Business group*

Group/Gender	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Economics & Business	342 (62.41%)	206 (37.59%)	$\chi^2 = 1.205$ $p = 0.27$
Female	203 (60.60%)	132 (39.40%)	
Male	139 (65.26%)	74 (34.74%)	

Source: Own work.

Within the law program, only 54.87% of female law students adopted an active approach, while a larger share (45.13%) opted for a passive (deontological) approach. In contrast, male law students consistently preferred the active approach, with 64.17% adopting it and 35.83% adhering to a passive stance.

Although the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.091$, $p = 0.148$) indicates weak statistical evidence of a gender-based difference in ethical decision-making (Table 7).

TABLE 7: *Distribution of participants by attitude and gender in the Law group*

Group/Gender	Active	Passive	Test Statistics
Law	139 (59.66%)	94 (40.34%)	$\chi^2 = 2.091$ $p = 0.15$
Female	62 (54.87%)	51 (45.13%)	
Male	77 (64.17%)	43 (35.83%)	

Source: Own work.

5. Discussion

Our data do not confirm the existence of fundamental differences in the distribution of decisions made in the moral dilemma by Law and Economics & Business students reported in the previous research, i.e., the greater tendency of Business students to prioritize profits over ethical considerations, their preference for the market allocation mechanism over other methods of resource distribution of in both private- and public-sector contexts, and their greater acceptance of self-interest,³⁶ as well as findings of Zaleśkiewicz et al. (2020)³⁷ on effectiveness of ‘market mindset’ priming in shifting peoples’ choices in sacrificial ethical dilemmas towards ‘utilitarianism’, the lack of a statistically significant difference between decisions made by Law and Economics & Business students in the Trolley Problem could be seen as surprising.

Regardless of our initial expectations, we regard this finding as an indication that, apparently, the emphasis on the principle of utility maximization in economic teaching does not automatically translate into choices in ethical dilemmas that involve life-and-death decisions that invoke fundamental ethical principles. This interpretation is further reinforced when we consider the changes in the distribution of responses between students who were just beginning their economics education and those in later years of study. The data contradict the initial assumption that economic education would increase the

³⁶ **A. Rubinstein**, *A Sceptic’s Comment on the Study of Economics*, *Economic Journal* 2006/116, pp. C1–C9; **V. Mertins**, **S. Warning**, *Greedy and selfish? Differences...*; **T. Rosengart**, **B. Hirsch**, **Ch. Nitzl**, *The effects of legal...*; **eidem**, *Self-selection and socialisation...*; **C. Miragaya-Casillas**, **R. Aguayo-Estremera**, **A. Ruiz-Villaverde**, *Are Business Students...*

³⁷ **T. Zaleśkiewicz et al.**, *Market mindset...*

percentage of ‘utilitarian’ choices, aligning instead with findings from a study by Dzionek-Kozłowska et al. (2024), who also reported a higher percentage of passive (‘deontological’) choices in the second- and third-year economics students than in the first-year sample, reaching 56.2% and 69.9% respectively. Results of this and the present study suggest that studying economics does not reinforce ‘utilitarian’ tendencies but may even weaken them. This suggests that while the ‘market mindset’ can be temporarily activated through priming, it may not reflect the more complex and long-term effects of Economics & Business education.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that the observed effect is unrelated to the content of economics education itself. The difference in the distribution of responses between first-year students and those in later years may instead be a consequence of changes associated with entering a new stage of education and transitioning into adulthood. Although the study by Hauser et al. (2007) did not confirm a relationship between age and a greater tendency toward ‘deontological’ choices,³⁸ exploring the potential influence of simply beginning higher education, regardless of the field of study, on moral decision-making appears to be a promising direction for future research.

Turning to the results obtained from Law students and the statistically significant difference observed in their case between the responses of first-year and more advanced students, showing an increasing share of ‘utilitarian’ choices, it is reasonable to cautiously suggest that the observed relationship may not be causal but rather a result of two overlapping effects: legal education and general cognitive maturation.

Although decisions made in the Trolley Problem do not directly correspond to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, i.e., an increasing share of either ‘deontological’ or ‘utilitarian’ responses cannot be interpreted as indicative of progression through the stages of moral reasoning, further insight could be gained by collecting and examining the justifications students offer for their choices. Analyzing the reasoning provided by Law and Economics & Business students would make it possible to explore the moral frameworks they draw upon and how these may evolve during their formative academic years. Such qualitative data could offer a more nuanced understanding of moral development, beyond what can be inferred from categorical response patterns alone, and as such it opens a promising direction for further research.

³⁸ M. Hauser et al., *A Dissociation Between Moral Judgments and Justifications*, *Mind & Language* 2007/22, pp. 1–21.

Lastly, in contrast to Hauser et al. (2007) and Rehman and Dzionek-Kozłowska (2018) studies,³⁹ our data suggest that gender may play a role in shaping ethical decision-making tendencies, though the effect remains relatively small. Overall, the findings indicate that gender may interact with academic field in influencing ethical preferences. An interesting pattern emerges: among female students, the direction of ethical choice appears to vary by program. In Economics & Business, female students tend to favor the active approach, whereas in Law, a shift occurs, with a relatively higher proportion opting for the passive approach. Conversely, male students consistently prefer the active ('utilitarian') approach across both fields of study. While only weakly statistically significant, these observations suggest that the academic context may influence gender-related differences in moral reasoning.

6. Conclusions

While prior research demonstrates that economics and business students' decisions in ethical problems differ from the choices of law students, our findings indicate that these tendencies do not straightforwardly extend to life-and-death moral dilemmas. Although law students exhibit a slightly stronger preference for passive choices in the Trolley Problem, the differences between the groups remain statistically insignificant.

The revealed differences between the first-year and the upper-years students indicate the influence of academic education on students' moral choices is nuanced and complex. On the one hand, the percentage of law students who opt for the passive ('deontological') decision in the Trolley Problem is greater than their first-year colleagues, which could have been recognized as triggered by their training in adherence to principles. On the other hand, the distribution of active and passive decisions of the first-year and the upper-years economics & business students differs insignificantly.

Moreover, gender differences introduce an additional layer of complexity. While male students across both disciplines favor active, utilitarian decisions, female students' choices appear more influenced by their field of study leaning toward active choices in business and passive choices in law. Although these differences are only weakly significant, they hint at the interplay between

³⁹ **M. Hauser et al.**, *A Dissociation Between Moral Judgments and Justifications ...*; **S.N. Rehman, J. Dzionek-Kozłowska**, *The Trolley Problem Revisited. An Exploratory Study*, *Annales. Ethics in Economic Life* 2018/21, pp. 23–32, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1899-2226.21.3.02>

disciplinary training and gender in shaping ethical decision-making. Future research could explore how these patterns evolve with experience and whether targeted ethics education can reinforce a more balanced moral perspective among students.

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NA ETYCZNYCH KOLEINACH: W JAKI SPOŚÓB STUDENCI EKONOMII I PRAWA PODCHODZĄ DO PROBLEMU WAGONIKA (THE TROLLEY PROBLEM)

Abstrakt

Przedmiot badań: Fakt, że edukacja *sensu largo* odgrywa istotną rolę w kształtowaniu ludzkiej moralności, nie podlega dyskusji. Natomiast kwestia wpływu edukacji akademickiej na postawy etyczne studentów jest rozpoznana zdecydowanie słabiej. Badanie stanowi wkład w dyskusję nad tym problemem poprzez ustalenie czy studiowanie prawa lub ekonomii wpływa na wybory studentów w Problemie Wagonika – słynnym dylemacie moralnym, którego rozstrzygnięcie skłania do refleksji nad podstawowymi zasadami moralnymi.

Cel badawczy: Badanie ma na celu ustalenie, czy studenci ekonomii, którzy podczas zajęć akademickich nieustannie stykają się z poszukiwaniem jak najbardziej efektywnych metod alokowania ograniczonych zasobów, stojąc przed Dylematem Wagonika, są bardziej skłonni do przyjęcia aktywnego („utilitarnego”) podejścia prowadzącego do uratowania większej liczby istnień ludzkich, podczas gdy studenci prawa, kierując się przestrzeganiem norm, są bardziej skłonni do pasywnego („deontologicznego”) wyboru, które wprowadzie nie maksymalizuje liczby uratowanych osób, ale pozwala zachować zgodność z podstawową zasadą moralną „nie zabijaj”. Ponadto przedmiotem dociekań jest również ustalenie, czy wskazana rozbieżność pomiędzy studentami ekonomii i prawa pogłębia się wraz z wydłużeniem edukacji akademickiej na obu kierunkach.

Metoda badawcza: Materiał empiryczny będący podstawą do wnioskowania został zgromadzony w latach 2020 i 2024 na dwu polskich uczelniach i objął łącznie 784 studentów. Ich odpowiedzi zostały poddane analizie w celu zidentyfikowania różnic między studentami prawa i ekonomii, a także różnic między osobami, które rozpoczynały edukację akademicką i studentami wyższych lat studiów.

Wyniki: Różnice pomiędzy rozkładem aktywnych i pasywnych decyzji w Dylemacie Wagonika, jakie pojawiły się wśród studentów prawa i ekonomii, były zgodne z przypuszczeniami, ale skala tych różnic nie dała podstaw do wykazania istotności statystycznej pomiędzy nimi. Zgodnie

z przewidywaniami bardziej zaawansowani studenci prawa byli bardziej skłonni do wyboru opcji pasywnej. Jednak bardziej zaawansowani studenci ekonomii nie wykazywali silniejszych tendencji „użytkowych” w porównaniu z ich kolegami z pierwszego roku. Wynik ten wskazuje, że wpływ edukacji akademickiej na wybory moralne jest bardziej złożony, co jednocześnie stanowi przesłankę na rzecz dalszych badań.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja akademicka, wybory moralne, Problem Wagonika, efekt uczenia się.