

## Prologue

The levity of the examples is not meant to offend.

—*Philippa Foot*

THIS BOOK IS GOING TO LEAVE in its wake a litter of corpses and a trail of blood. Only one animal will suffer within its pages, but many humans will die. They will be mostly blameless victims caught up in bizarre circumstances. A heavyset man may or may not topple from a footbridge.

Fortunately, almost all these fatalities are fictional. However, the thought experiments are designed to test our moral intuitions, to help us develop moral principles and thus to be of some practical use in a world in which real choices have to be made, and real people get hurt. The point of any thought experiment in ethics is to exclude irrelevant considerations that might cloud our judgment in real cases. But the experiment has to have some structural similarities with real cases to be of use. And so, in the forthcoming pages, you will also read about a few episodes involving genuine matters of life and death. Making cameo appearances, for example, will be Winston Churchill, the twenty-fourth president of the United States, a German kidnapper, and a nineteenth-century sailor accused of cannibalism.

Thought experiments don't exist until they have been thought up. Books covering philosophy tend, rightly, to focus on ideas, not people. But ideas do not emerge from a vacuum; they are the product of time and place, of upbringing and per-

## PROLOGUE

sonality. Perhaps they have been conceived as a rebuttal to other ideas, or as a reflection of the concerns of the moment. Perhaps they reflect a thinker's particular preoccupation. In any case, intellectual history is fascinating, and I wanted to weave in the stories of one or two of those responsible for the ideas on which this book is based.

There is a reason why the crime at the heart of this book, the killing of the fat man, has never been fully solved, philosophically: it is complicated . . . really complicated. Questions that, at first glance, appear straightforward—such as “When you pushed the fat man, did you *intend* to kill him?”—turn out to be multi-dimensional. A book that attempted to address every aspect of all the fraught issues raised by the killing would be ten times the length of this one. In any case, although some of the intricacies can't be avoided—indeed, they provide much of the scholarly excitement—my aim was to write a book that did not require readers to hold a philosophy PhD.

When I first came across the trolley problem I was an undergraduate. When the fat man was introduced to philosophy I was a postgraduate. That was a long time ago. Since then, though, what has reignited my interest has been the perspective brought to bear on the problem from several other disciplines.

My hope is that the text that follows will give some insight into why philosophers and non-philosophers alike have found the fat man's imaginary death so fascinating.