PART ONE

HISTORICAL USES OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS
Philosophers tend to be rather conservative when it comes to choosing examples to illustrate and back up their theories. That is to say, there are many examples in the history of philosophy, which have been used again and again by different philosophers in different periods, sometimes for the same and sometimes for different purposes. For instance, the example of the square large tower which looks small and round at a distance is mentioned by the Epicureans and the Stoics as well as by Descartes. Similarly, the example of the man who suffers from jaundice and perceives everything as yellow is found both in Sextus Empiricus’ and in Hume’s writings, though one would expect that philosophers at some early point could have recognised its implausibility and abandoned it. Indeed, this conservative attitude does not only apply to the case of examples. It is even more intriguing that philosophers decide to also borrow thought experiments from previous philosophers, often from philosophers who belong to a different philosophical tradition with a very different outlook. And I think that the case of the re-used thought experiments is even more intriguing than that of the borrowed examples, because a thought experiment does not primarily depend on our common experience; rather, it is the product of the imagination of a specific philosopher who constructs it sometimes in order to prove, and not simply to illustrate, a certain philosophical theory.

There are, in fact, some thought experiments which were obviously perceived as very illuminating by philosophers with very different positions, since they keep on reappearing in different periods in the history of philosophy. The first recorded thought experiment, the ancient thought experiment of the man who stands at the edge of the universe extending his hand or his stick, certainly is such a case. It was initially meant to prove the infinity of the universe and it is first attributed to the Pythagorean Archytas of Tarentum in the first half of the 4th century; it was then appropriated by the Epicureans and the Stoics during the Hellenistic period, while in late antiquity the Aristotelian commentators discussed its uses in detail; in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, followed