The story of Scylla and Charybdis is related, and can lead to, what philosophers call ‘the trolley problem’. The ‘trolley’ refers to a trolley car on a train track and it’s a problem because it describes a situation known as a ‘dilemma’. A dilemma is a difficult decision where neither of the outcomes is a good outcome but where we nevertheless have to make a decision. Here’s the traditional trolley problem:

Imagine there is a trolley car travelling along a railway track and its brakes have failed. Up ahead is a party of five people on the tracks but they haven’t seen the trolley car. You are in control of the tracks. If you pull a lever you will divert the train onto another track avoiding the trolley car crashing into the party of five people and killing them. Only, on the other track is one person, also unaware that the trolley car is coming. If you pull the lever you will divert the trolley car from the party of five but you will kill the single person on the other track.

Should you allow the trolley car to plough into the party of five people killing them all, or should you pull the lever to divert the trolley car killing one person? What do you think is the right thing to do here?
Here are some philosopher’s ideas for you to apply to the problem:

- **Mill’s ‘Greatest Happiness Principle’**: this says that the right thing to do is to find out where the greatest amount of happiness is and then to act to preserve the greatest amount of happiness (and by ‘happiness’ he means ‘the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain’). What do you think Mill should recommend?

- **Kant’s duty towards ‘the kingdom of ends’**: this says that we have a duty never to treat other people as a means to an end but only as ends in themselves. What course of action do you think Kant should recommend?

  - **Aristotle’s best kind of person**: this says that we should cultivate the kind of virtues that allow human beings to be the best kind of life-form that they can be. The end of all human action, he says, is for us to be able to flourish according to our ultimate purpose - which is to be rational and reflective. What course of action do you think Aristotle should recommend?

There are many variations on this problem. Here are just a few of them:

- Imagine that the one person is very young but that the five people are very old. Does this affect your decision?
- Imagine that the one person is known to you and is important to you, but that the five people are unknown to you.
- Imagine that the only way you can stop the trolley is to push a fat man onto the tracks.
- Imagine that the only way you can stop the trolley is to push an evil man onto the tracks, who it was set up the trolley situation in the first place.

In each of these situations what do you think you should do?
Meet a philosopher: Philippa Foot and ‘the trolley problem’

The trolley problem was invented by a philosopher called Philippa Foot (1920–2010 CE) in a paper called ‘The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect.’