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On Inaction

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On Inaction

Abstract

In this paper, I establish the grounds and rationale for a new ethical framework with regards to the responsibility of entities in the developed world – people, corporations, organizations, and governments – towards victims of humanitarian crises such as inescapable poverty and disease in the third world. I will examine why the prevention of global problems is not perceived as urgent and what may be needed to align policies and actions with more ethically appropriate principles in a global context.

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On Inaction

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Honorable Mention

2007 Marvin and Sybil Weiner Undergraduate Essay Prize
in the Humanities

Penn Library and Penn Humanities Forum

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In this paper, I establish the grounds and rationale for a new ethical framework with regards to the responsibility of entities in the developed world – people, corporations, organizations, and governments – towards victims of humanitarian crises such as inescapable poverty and disease in the third world. I will examine why the prevention of global problems is not perceived as urgent and what may be needed to align policies and actions with more ethically appropriate principles in a global context.

I begin by creating a thought experiment to make a point. Please imagine yourself in the following two scenarios:

Scenario A: A train is speeding down a track with a child stuck to the train tracks just 300 meters away. Two hundred meters from the train, the track splits and goes a different way. You, a passerby, happen to be standing next to a switch. A nearby sign clearly indicates that if and only if the switch is pulled will the tracks change such that the train will go in the other direction, and the child will not be killed. If you do not pull the switch, the train will be unable to stop and the child will be killed immediately

Scenario B: The situation is the same as in scenario A, except that the train tracks are already positioned to direct the train down the track that the child is not on. Again you are by the switch. Pulling the switch in this case would direct the train towards the child. If you do not pull the switch, the child will live. If you do pull the switch the train will kill the child.

For both scenarios, let us make the following assumptions:

Assumption 1: It matters to you that the child lives.

Assumption 2: You are capable of operating the switch.

Assumption 3: You trust that the switch will work as intended.

Assumption 4: You have complete knowledge of the consequences of your decision to the child.

Now, consider the following question:

Is there a moral difference between a) *not pulling* the switch in Scenario A (letting the train take its course, thus killing the child) and b) *pulling* the switch in Scenario B (changing the train's course, thus killing the child)?

Consider your answer to that, whatever it may be. Now analyze the following more generalized question:

Is there a moral difference between a) an informed inaction that takes a life and b) a deliberate action that takes a life?

And finally, a very specific and contextually-modified version of the question:

Is there a moral difference between a) flying to a third-world country and shooting to death a malnourished man and b) being able to donate funds which would have provided food, water and medicine to save a man from starvation-caused death, but choosing, instead, not to donate these funds for personal reasons?

Through this succession of questions, I wish to demonstrate the fallacy of the existence of a moral difference between action and inaction. Few would doubt the immorality of not pulling a switch to save a child's life when it is so blindingly easy to do so. Yet somehow, the silent death of a person so distant and removed from our reality, barely seems to matter, barely lets Assumption 1 hold by analogy.

In the simple thought experiment, we see that the act of circumstantially having to flip or not flip a switch is entirely trivial; the effect of the child's death is singularly relevant and should be the only matter of real concern. That is, there exists a moral equivalence between action and inaction when the consequential effect is the same and the cost difference between action and inaction is negligible. In less simple and obvious scenarios, however, failure to prevent harm (inaction) is erroneously treated as different from an action to cause harm. There seems nothing wrong with not donating one's hard-earned money to something or someone so unrelated and unconnected to our everyday lives and reality. This fallacy, however, lies at the root of the ethical deficiencies that persist in the present conditions of humanitarian efforts in our globalized world. Specifically, this fallacy introduces severe limitations to individuals' willingness to act

when faced with a humanitarian decision, and to legal and ethical systems' ability prescribe actions which are for the world's greater good.

The phenomenon of globalization has single-handedly elevated the relevance and scope of this problem to epic proportions because the ability to aid in global poverty is overwhelmingly possible and obvious. We can no longer plead ignorance to such devastating crises that persist in the very world in which we reside. While we reap the economic and cultural benefits of a unified world, we can not selectively choose to ignore the immense hardships suffered by those living in impoverished, indebted, and unstable regions of the world. The ability to prevent tragedy belongs to you, and me, and everyone around us just as much as if we were the ones standing by the deterministic train switch.

Statistics help to demonstrate the problems. One in six in sub-Saharan Africa dies before the age of 5.¹ 11,000,000 lives are prematurely claimed due to preventable hunger alone each 365 days. A child in the developing world consumes less than 1/30th of the water a child in the developed world does² due to adverse climate and insufficient clean water. Imagine that it were your children or siblings that had such a high probability of mortality. Imagine not having sanitary water to offer a dehydrated infant crying in your arms. The list of facts and statistics and realities goes on, and I believe everyone should take an honest look at the numbers, conditions, and stories for themselves. But passively observing statistics and expressing disapproval is ethically irrelevant without action.

As previously argued, failure to prevent harm is morally indistinguishable from directly delivering harm when costs are negligible. Peter Singer, a professor at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University, has a similar idea. In his essay, "Famine,

¹ Borgen Project, "Hunger and Poverty Facts"

² "The UN Water Development Report: Facts and Figures"

Affluence and Morality," he insists, "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." Taking this seriously, aiding against humanitarian crises is not just an ability, it is a responsibility. If we treat failure to prevent harm, suffering and death as morally wrong, then this implies that the extent to which the developed world does not act in making donations and providing sufficient aid to the developing world constitutes an immense breach of moral standards not unlike genocide, mass murder, and ethnic cleansing and persecution. I recognize that this claim is extreme, but it is not one which deserves any tempering or qualification out of rational expedience.

To the affluent (note that I use the term "affluent" loosely considering that the average per capita income of an American [\$43,400] is 260 times, for instance, that of Malawi³, and still 73 times that of Malawi when adjusting for costs of surviving), sacrificing a portion of income or wealth is of absolutely no comparable moral importance when juxtaposed with the abhorrent suffering and death that can be found in many parts of the world. Consider that the spending in American restaurants⁴ alone is more than the GDP of the poorest 97 countries combined.⁵ Consider that America's less-than-1% foreign aid spending is the lowest of any industrialized country in the world. Consider that if everyone in America donated the cost of a single movie ticket per year, we could double our current aid to both Africa and Asia.

Instead, in America, we have consumerism. American consumerism is founded on diverting attention, on numbing the mind, on covertly fueling addiction. It has become far too easy and far too common to dilute recognition of remediable world problems with

³ "World Economic and Financial Surveys"

⁴ "Restaurant Industry Facts"

⁵ "World Economic and Financial Surveys"

entertainment, with pleasant social relationships, with blind pursuit of personal satisfaction. Wasteful consumerism is one of the greatest marketing strategies out there and it is this false premise of "I will be best off if I spend on myself and those that I directly care for" that is gnawing at the ethics of inaction.

As a side note, I'd like to remark here that while I personally believe monetary donations to be the most effective for individuals' humanitarian efforts, due to the ability of individuals and humanitarian organizations to specialize in income-generating and efficient⁶ humanitarian use of funds, respectively, this assumption is not critical. Those individuals, organizations, or nations who believe themselves better able to contribute to humanitarian ends through other means such as activism, social entrepreneurship, marketing, and policy development should feel free to substitute these endeavors for monetary donations.

Obviously no one feels nearly as guilty for not donating their hard-earned money to people living in a distant country as they would for deliberately harming a person. In large part, I believe the perceived moral difference between action and inaction can be attributed to what social psychologists term the *bystander effect*. The bystander effect is the phenomenon responsible for individuals' inaction when faced with an emergency for which they are neither directly responsible for nor solely capable of remedying.⁷ In the context of global poverty, the bystander effect manifests itself in many familiar ways. I create the following list of causes and related examples which illustrate how and why individuals act as passive bystanders to the emergencies of global famine and pestilence

⁶ The American Institute of Philanthropy (www.charitywatch.org), for example, provides an unbiased assessment and rating of charities and philanthropic organizations of all kinds based on their efficient uses of funds and actual impact for their cause

⁷ Wikipedia Contributors, "Bystander Effect"

without moral qualms. The following list is not meant to be humorous or facetious; it represents what I believe are actual factors in developed world's unwillingness to treat inaction as ethically relevant in a global context:

- Self-concerns ("I have my own family to feed! And bills to pay!")
- Diffusion of responsibility ("If it's so urgent, someone else is surely doing something about it, right?")
- Distraction ("I should donate. Well, not now, the Yankees game is on.")
- Pluralistic ignorance ("No one else seems particularly worried about world hunger. It must not be that big of a problem.")
- Perceived relationship between culture and problem ("If the people weren't so lazy and their political system weren't so corrupt, they would be able to provide for themselves.")
- Perceived lack of effectiveness ("Humanitarian organizations squander most funds on administrative costs.")
- Costs exceed rewards ("Personally, I would gain more from taking my family to Disneyland.")
- Perception of a lost cause ("Poverty has always existed and will always exist. There's no hope.")

As can be seen, we as Americans are distracted, self-concerned, and skeptical. In fact, donating is easy, rewarding, and extremely effective in preventing death and alleviating suffering of people in very critical states of health. While writing this essay, I donated \$45 to Africare (www.africare.org), a newfound personal favorite organization. It took me 6 minutes to learn about the organization's initiatives, sign up, and donate. It

will take you less. Chances are, though, if you follow suit, no one will know. You may receive no recognition or honor; you may find no observable difference in the state of the world. Yet there is someone that is deeply thankful, as you would be if in their situation, and there is truly is some inner gratification in helping someone you will never see or know. While by no means a justification in and of itself, the gratification of selflessly and silently donating is a feeling that offers a new check on materialistic desires, and on one's inextricable connection to the rest of the world. Try it.

The interesting thing is, though, that I do not feel that the developed world does not care about famine, disease, infant mortality and the like. When it comes to giving a few bucks to a homeless person or volunteering at a soup kitchen, it isn't such a big deal. When we try to care about much more pressing, immense, and distant world problems, though, we feel helpless. We feel overwhelmed and incapable of making a difference. So we blame those with more power, resources, clout, or contact with the third world. Hence, major ethical controversies stem from the actions of corporations in the developing world. The premise of the controversy usually goes something like this: Company X makes so much profit that they can more than afford to pay workers better, provide better living conditions, implement greater safety measures and so on. While corporations should under no circumstance treat workers inhumanely, pressuring companies to engage in profit-reducing acts of benevolence is illogical (hypocritical?) if the people touting such claims are not themselves willing to sacrifice their own wealth or income to prevent atrocities. All entities – be it an individual, a company, and organization or a country – bear responsibility for the harmful effects of poverty that persist due to their unwillingness to act or donate; all must sacrifice something that is

legally – but perhaps not ethically – theirs to make a difference. It is arbitrary to deflect a shared humanitarian responsibility to other entities simply because they have contact with or clout in the developing world.

Further, there exists a problem in the way is the way funds used for corporate responsibility initiatives are allocated, assessed, and regulated. Tort law in America is designed to ensure that corporate safety expenditures equal or exceed the expected reduction in harm that stakeholders would be willing to pay for. For example, if spending \$2 million would prevent \$2.1 million in expected losses to stakeholders, the tort system will penalize the corporation for investing any less than \$2 million. Such mandates ignore the opportunity cost of such corporate social responsibility. In financial management, no investment decision is made without first considering the opportunity cost of capital – that is, a comparison of investment opportunities with comparable risk. I propose that opportunity costs be considered in ethical decisions too – not in the sense of financial cost of capital, but instead, in the sense of the social benefit the money could alternatively have if used to aid those that stand the most to gain from monetary resources. For example, if spending \$1 million dollars in safety precautions is expected to save the lives of two American consumers, but those same funds could save 500 lives of non-stakeholders, perhaps non-citizens of the country, the latter should invariably be chosen.

Unfortunately, even the most proactive branches of business ethics typically limit prescriptions of ethical actions to welfare of direct stakeholders. Almost by definition, systems of corporate social responsibility commonly favor stakeholder interests over corporate profits. The problem is that these frameworks prescribe profit-reducing actions in cases where the benefits received by parties on the receiving end of profit-reduction

are far smaller than benefits that could be offered with extra profit to individuals, such as those on the brink of starvation, who are far more sensitive to monetary donations. While economic efficiency is one of the most researched, debated, and valued aspects of globalization, it seems illogical that ethical efficiency is not, too, taken into account when making decisions that have the potential for global reach. It may well be more ethically efficient to capture more profits at the expense of direct stakeholders if the additional profits may be distributed to prevent extreme and pressing tragedies from occurring well outside an entity's realm of operation. While this idea is not practically flawless to implement, the point is that just because it is more legally and socially defensible to limit the scope of ethical responsibility to those to whom we have a direct relationship, it does not mean that it is ethically optimal to accord consideration only to those that who come in direct contact with our actions.

The concept of responsibility to stakeholders represents a deeper fallacy with which we have all grown up, where there seems to exist dichotomies in the way we value lives. We learn early on that it is natural to place forms of life into a hierarchy, to mentally compartmentalize the beings that have value and those that don't. Stepping on a spider is fine; strangling a cat is not. We are good at rationalizing. The spider doesn't feel pain. The spider can't think. The spider is ugly. The spider is worthless. The spider this, the spider that: the spider just died. Somewhere along the line, humans, too, got tossed into this absurd ranking of values based on absurd lines of reasoning. Well over \$200 billion was spent re-building New Orleans after Katrina, yet under \$28 billion was donated by America to foreign development assistance in 2005. Clearly we value the well-being of an American immensely greater than we value the life of someone abroad

that has a disease unfamiliar to us. More generally, we value lives in direct proportion to the extent to we can relate to them. We all have our biases, and we all see life on a relative value scale. We will readily spend hundreds of thousands of dollars locating a lost backpacker in Colorado, but ignore the fact that it would cost under a dollar a day to sustain the life of the world's most destitute people and this trifling amount of money is not being spent. "They" are not contributing. "They" are immoral. "They" are unlucky. "They" are not innovative. "They" owe debt. "They" will never be self-sustaining. "They" impose a cost on society "They" are greedy. "They" are used to it. "They" are a lost cause. One of Them just died, and we can not continue heeding the ethically deceptive hierarchy which we continue to construct in determining what – and who – matters.

Remedying apathy and eliminating biases are no small tasks by any standards. The emotional appeal has been attempted time and again with limited success through advertisements depicting frail, malnourished children. In my opinion, society needs very extreme and necessarily controversial jolts into ethical reality. Perhaps we could mandate labels, adjacent to health and nutritional warnings that read, "The cost of this pack of cigarettes could sustain 5 people on the verge of death. Please donate instead." We should make this tradeoff obvious for all products, for all court decisions, for all military spending, and so on. An even more extreme example, the government could bring a starving child from India to America, and enclose him in a transparent case in Times Square, requiring that \$5 million be donated by the public in order to save the child, otherwise, the child will be permitted to die unaided in public visibility. This would tangibly (although perversely and controversially) blur the difference between murder

and permission of death for onlookers and bystanders. Murder is an inherently emotionally-charged issue. Permitting death is not. Yet it is as much of an ethical breach not to prevent suffering and death through monetary donations and humanitarian activism as it is to murder someone unprovoked.

Only once murder and permission of death are thoroughly equated in the minds of society, and only once we begin to rid our minds of a value-scaled hierarchy of life of which we find ourselves at the top, will we willingly reach out to support those who are in the most crucial need. The switches of benevolence are well within our grasps and every one of us has the economic strength and humanitarian voice needed to pull the switch that yes, may deprive us of one extra pair of shoes, of one extra political vote, of one extra happy shareholder, but that will be *the* deciding factor in one extra infant's life, in one extra disease's contagion. Globally-encompassing systems of ethics are a necessary consequence of globalization as we know it, and today, inaction stands as the greatest obstacle in attaining such ethical ideals. I envision, anticipate, and desperately hope for a future in which the recognition that inaction has real effects to real people will be widespread, in which social pressure to eliminate preventable suffering and death will be overwhelming. Only when each of us recognizes our ethical role in the global community – in a world that happens staring at a switch stuck in "Scenario A" by default – can we truly claim to have recognized and unleashed the benefits of global humanitarianism. It is in our power, and well within the scope of our ethical duty, to eliminate our biases, to give lives equal moral weight, and to see our ability as an unequivocal responsibility. It is up to each one of us to make the critical decision – on which our fellow humans' lives precariously hinge – to act, ignore, or defer.

"On Inaction" by Nikhil A. Nirmel

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