Redefining Altruism: A Dialogue of Morality

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Essay Contest 2021 Submission

22 November 2021

In his novel, *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel, an American philosopher, describes a scenario in which a spider, stuck in a toilet and in imminent danger, is rescued by Nagel. Despite being rescued, the spider remains sedentary; a few hours later, the spider meets its inevitable fate and is squished. Nagel unknowingly sends the helpless spider to its demise, though he does so with noble intentions. In all likelihood, the spider would have had a far greater chance of surviving had it remained in the toilet, though Nagel, unaware of this, swooped in, believing that the spider was in grave danger; while that was true, Nagel’s action, with good intention, intervenes in the spider’s situation, in a matter concerning its life, without complete information. Thus, we arrive at the following questions: Are good intentions sufficient to make an action good? Is intervention permissible even if one doesn’t operate on incomplete information? In this essay, I will be offering my opinion on the matter and, in doing so, I hope to bring resolution to the troubling case of the death-bound spider trapped in the toilet.

Firstly, a strict definition of good and, moreover, what it means to be good is essential for any further discussion of morality. For our purposes, let goodness be defined by its value relative to its antithesis: evil. If evil is any action that is detrimental to an entity without any benefit, then good is precisely the opposite. By this definition, good is the opposite of evil, a force that benefits an entity without any collateral detriment to that entity. To be morally, objectively good is to feel compassion for other beings, to bring about whatever it is that maximizes the benefit for all surrounding entities. There is, of course, a distinction between subjective good and objective good: subjective good is relative (i.e. whatever makes one feel pleasure), like a banana. You may hate bananas, while I love them and derive pleasure from the consumption of such an elongated, yellow fruit. As previously mentioned, the objective good is the quality of maximizing pleasure and benefit for the wellbeing of all. In all cases, good can be defined as the moral value which is compared to other metrics, like success and pleasure.

Now, with semantics aside, what is the verdict? Can intention make an action good, despite the consequences? It depends. If the intention brings about an action that is successful/resembles some other desired metric, then the intentions of that action are ought to be good, since they motivated a good act. The opposite is true regarding good intentions without good action as a result. From a moralistic perspective, intentions matter, but do not define the act. An act exists as good or bad, according to one of the two aforementioned definitions, regardless of the intention behind it. The act itself is not determined by the intention. If one intends to save ten seals but ends up killing those seals, the intention is good, but the action, as pure action, is not. In our case, Nagel’s intent to rescue the spider from its watery fate is beneficial to all parties involved and is therefore good. However, the result of his intention resulted in the prolonged death of the spider. Therefore, that action was a bad one, regardless of the intent behind that action. Sure, he had no way of knowing whether the spider would survive, but that changes nothing. If the action and intention are separate, one cannot feasibly consider that good intentions are sufficient to make an action good. Hopefully, for the reader, this doesn’t detract from the positivity of good intention: good intention is still valuable, especially when the resulting action cannot be predicted. Obviously, one cannot possibly tell the future. Good intention is far superior to bad intention, morally speaking, but, overall, the intention does not define the action.

In such a case, is it morally good to intervene, thereby freeing the spider from its watery grave to be, when one isn’t operating on complete information? Nagel had no idea that the spider would die a worse death as a result of his actions, yet he moved it regardless; he had no way to know. Given our above dialogues regarding the nature of ‘good,’ the natural conclusion is that intervention can only be considered permissible when it results in an action of ‘good’ nature. Obviously, this would all be in retrospect, so there is no way to discern whether or not the decision to intervene will yield a good act. Thus, since one can’t know either way, intervention, operating on incomplete information is encouraged; perhaps it will yield a good result, perhaps not, in which case the spider dies and the world, eventually, forgets it, moving on in its typical steadfast manner.

 Works Cited

Nagel, T. (1989). *The view from nowhere*. Oxford University Press.