

Farewell to arms? The all-or-nothing problem again

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Abstract. Joe Horton's all-or-nothing problem concerns a situation in which it is morally permissible to do nothing and to save two people but not to save only one. This description seems to entail that we should do nothing rather than save only one. I object to Horton's solution and challenge a principle he draws attention to, which is required to generate the problem but which Horton regards as beyond dispute.

Joe Horton has formulated a fascinating philosophical problem, called the all-or-nothing problem, and also presented a solution to it (Horton 2017). To the best of my knowledge, he was the first to formulate the problem, but Horton acknowledges that the kind of example which gives rise to it was in the literature beforehand (Parfit 1982: 131). This kind of example was put to other uses before. There are already some commentaries on Horton's problem (Sinclair 2018; Pummer 2019), and I aim to add to these.

Horton formulates the problem by first presenting his example. I am not sure that there could be a real-life case that corresponds exactly with this example, but there could be a different real-life case that gives rise to the same problem.¹ Horton's example involves two children who are about to be crushed by a building on the verge of collapse. You have three options: you can do nothing, save one child, or save both. However, the second and third options will both result in your arms' being crushed. That is a large sacrifice and the children are not yours. One good thing is that there is no extra cost in saving two rather than one. The problem arises from the

¹ There are two drowning people and it is risky to try to save either, but saving both is almost as easy as saving one. I read about this situation in an abstract for a research seminar paper. I do not have access to the abstract at present.

following plausible claims and an inference from them:

(1) It is morally permissible for you to not save the children.

(2) It is morally wrong for you to save only one child.

The conclusion inferred from these claims is that you ought to save neither child rather than save only one. But this conclusion is counterintuitive. You should not be encouraged to save neither child over saving one.

There is actually another premise which is needed in order to validly infer the counterintuitive conclusion. I shall come to it after evaluating Horton's solution to this problem. His solution is to reject claim (1) and replace it with a more qualified claim which makes what is morally permissible depend on what you are willing to do: if you are not willing to save either child, it is permissible for you to save neither, owing to the large sacrifice involved; but if you are willing to save at least one, there is a moral obligation on you to save both (2017: 97). This appears to be a neat solution, but there are objections to it. Horton responds to one objection (2017: 97-98). However, there are others that he does not consider.

(a) There is a question that Horton does not address, and unless he answers it, it is unclear why we should regard him as having solved the problem. If someone tells us that they are willing to save just one child, does Horton's proposal require that we not take up the offer, even in the absence of any others? If we take up the offer, the person is going to do something morally wrong, which gives us a reason not to take it up; but not taking it up puts us in much the same position as we were before Horton's proposed solution. This objection, in its most forceful form, says that Horton has solved nothing. We are still encouraging a person to save neither rather than save one. The premise I shall later identify reveals that Horton's room for manoeuvre here is quite limited. Nevertheless, I suppose he could say, "Given that this person is willing to save

one, he has a moral obligation to save two; but if he is not going to save two, it is better for him to partially fulfil the obligation than to not fulfil it at all, so we should take up the offer.”² The other objections I wish to present concern the underlying idea that merely being willing generates this obligation.

(b) Some people are willing to do something because of pressure from others and it is doubtful that, in this context, a moral obligation can result merely from a willingness that has arisen in this way. For example, let us imagine that you are a famous former wrestler. People have turned to you and said, “You should do it. You cannot let down your fans!” You were initially unwilling to save the children; but after being pressurized enough, you are now willing. Do you now have a moral obligation? It is doubtful that you do.

(c) It would not be surprising if a person who decides to save the children nevertheless spends the rest of his or her life regretting this decision, even if they were not pressured into doing this. (They might be willing from having an especially good day so far.) Given the risk of lifelong regret, it seems that something stronger than merely being willing is needed to give rise to an obligation to save the children. In our current circumstances, probably there needs to at least be a signed agreement. Of course, a signature will not necessarily prevent life-long regret, but it is a step towards protecting a person from being saddled with a very heavy obligation without having given the matter adequate consideration. I anticipate someone’s saying, “By the time you get a signature it will be too late,” but that just raises the question of whether you cannot generate an obligation in this context.

² Joseph Raz says that partial compliance with a moral requirement is better than no compliance, and gives the example of paying \$60 when you owe \$100 (2003: 348-349). Of course, in applying this point to the case of not saving a child one could easily save, we must somehow close our eyes to something very disturbing.

(I am making these objections while assuming a broadly liberal outlook,³ which is the outlook that Horton and previous commentators work within. I don't know if liberalism will be replaced with "survivalism," in which the aim is to enable the human race to survive and people's moral intuitions adapt to serve this end. People will look back on liberalism as a disaster caused by giving too much freedom; they will believe adults must sacrifice themselves for children unless special circumstances obtain; etc. Well, survivalism sounds like it could easily turn into a horror too!)

The missing premise

The conclusion inferred from (1) and (2) requires a further premise: if it is morally permissible for you to save neither child and morally wrong for you to save only one, then you ought to save neither child rather than save only one. This premise is an application of a general principle: if A is morally permissible and B is morally wrong, then you ought⁴ to do A rather than B. Horton identifies this principle but does not give a name to it. We can call it the permissibility-first principle.

Horton says that this principle is intuitively correct and that there are countless cases that support it (2017: 96). I wish to make a slightly complicated point about the principle and also a simple one. Let us start with the complicated point. It seems that we can only accept the principle by also accepting the following related principle: if A is morally permissible and B is morally wrong, then you ought to prefer A over B. (Indeed, I am tempted to recast the entire problem in terms of preferences.) But what is it to prefer A over B? A well-known answer is this: if you

³ I suppose some would say that Horton's solution favours "the meane classes." I more or less learnt this term from an article by Patricia Crawford (1981: 51). It seems that it could potentially be put to more Marxist use, though I personally favour some kind of liberalism.

⁴ I guess "ought" here refers to what we ought to do, all things considered.

were given a choice of only A and B, you would choose A. But there is a difficulty that arises when applying this answer to Horton's example. If your only options are (A) save no children and (B) save one child, then option B loses its quality of being morally wrong. B is only morally wrong when a third option is available, to save more than one child at no extra cost. So here is the complicated point: the all-or-nothing problem depends on the permissibility-first principle; you cannot coherently accept this principle without accepting a related preference-based principle; there is a well-known definition of preference which helps clarify this principle; but you cannot apply the preference-based principle, when clarified with this definition, to Horton's example in a way that is consistent with other propositions involved in the all-or-nothing problem, specifically the representation of saving only one child as morally wrong. Thus a challenge for the all-or-nothing problem is how to fill in the details in a coherent way.

There is a simple point nearby, which does not depend on this definition of preference and may be more robust as a consequence.⁵ I cannot see that there is anything so counterintuitive about admitting exceptions to the permissibility-first principle when the moral difference between two options – the fact that A has the quality of being morally permissible while B does not – cannot be explained purely by comparing these two options. There is nothing in A in itself which makes it morally better than B.⁶ One has to introduce a third option to explain why B is morally wrong. In this kind of situation, I do not see why one ought to choose A over B.⁷

⁵ Some might argue that the clash between this definition of preference and Horton's all-or-nothing problem ultimately reveals this definition to be flawed. See Ahmed 2017: 977 for more information about the definition.

⁶ If the "in itself" suggests a disregard of consequences, much the same thought can be formulated for those who think that the morality of an action is determined by consequences (see Bradley 2006: 106). Note also that if option B in Horton's example is somehow unintelligible without reference to a third option, one can change the example.

⁷ The proposition that A is morally permissible, whereas B is not, does not by itself reveal crucial information about how A morally compares to B, information which seems just as relevant to deciding between the two, if not more so. The permissibility-first principle allows us to ignore this information, because it combines with this kind of proposition to entail what we ought to do. Though apparently moral, it strikes me as actually a principle of reduced moral sensitivity.

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