

Note: an adult version of the all-or-nothing problem

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Abstract. I present an example in which the all-or-nothing problem involves adults, rather than children in danger.

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“She is always watching us

Whom she does not give A+”

It may seem that the all-or-nothing problem, first formulated by Joe Horton, must involve children in danger, and I fear I have encouraged this impression (see Edward 2022). But it is possible to construct an adult version of the problem and probably it is of value for this to be added to the literature. I should warn readers that the example is not very pleasant. Imagine that you live in an apartment. A voyeur is observing two couples who rent apartments below you – such thin curtains! You observe the observer from your window. If you go to your balcony and climb over the barrier onto the little ledge, you can hang a blanket in the voyeur’s line of vision, preventing the couples from being seen. But it is risky. That is a very thin ledge to stand on, and you will injure yourself badly if you fall onto the bushes below. So it is morally acceptable not to do this.

Now if you nevertheless decide to climb over, you can either hold the blanket to hide one couple or, by your positioning, hold it to hide both. There is no extra cost with the second option

for you. So it is morally wrong to take the first option and protect only one couple. But then it is morally acceptable to protect neither and to protect both, but not to protect one. The problem is how to avoid that counterintuitive conclusion.

This example is probably less moving than examples with dead children. Perhaps it has some use, however, beyond being an example with adults and even beyond absorbing the qualities of some fiction.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022. Philosophy and fiction: common problems, uncommon solutions? (By D*n*ld D*vids*n?) Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWPAF>

Horton, J. 2017. The All-or-nothing Problem. *Journal of Philosophy* 114: 94-102.