

A compensatory solution to the all-or-nothing problem

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Abstract. The all-or-nothing problem, formulated by Joe Horton, presents us with a situation in which you can do nothing or save one child or save two. It is dangerous to save any, making doing nothing morally permissible, but there is no extra danger in saving two, so it seems wrong to just save one. But then doing nothing is morally better than saving one. I present a solution in response to this problematic result, which is that doing nothing is not an accurate description of a permissible option.

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“Into your boat I ram and ram

To show you what a shark I am!”

I wish to present a solution, or an attempted solution, to Joe Horton’s all-or-nothing problem (2017). At present I do not myself endorse this particular solution, but it should be of interest for readers interested in the problem. He developed it from an example by Derek Parfit, but I shall use another example. Two children are drowning. It is risky for you to take the boat out and try to save them. So staying on the beach is morally acceptable – permissible. But if you do take the boat out, saving two is not significantly more dangerous than saving one. Saving just one child seems wrong then. But then saving one is morally worse than doing nothing. The problem is: how can we avoid that result?

A proposal is that doing nothing is not strictly permissible. You can stay on the beach

while the children drown but only if you engage in some “compensatory” behaviour afterwards, since you did not bravely attempt to save the children. For example, if you are wealthy, you must give more money to charity, especially one which is oriented towards saving children. This proposal allows us to say that saving one is better than simply doing nothing – doing nothing without such compensatory behaviour afterwards. Both are morally impermissible but doing nothing is worse. I fear there is some example which troublingly gets around this solution, which is why I do not endorse it at present.

Reference

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