

## **A metaphysical solution to the all-or-nothing problem**

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*Abstract.* In this paper, I present a metaphysical solution to the all-or-nothing problem, which rejects the description of the choices in favour of lower-level descriptions.

Two children are drowning. You could take your boat and try to rescue them but that would be a significant risk to your life. So it is morally acceptable for you to do nothing. However, if you sail your boat out, then there is no extra cost in rescuing both. So it is morally acceptable to rescue both, but not to just rescue one. To leave the other child to drown: that would be very wrong. But then if it is morally acceptable for you to do nothing but not to rescue only one, then doing nothing is somehow morally better than rescuing one drowning child. You ought to do nothing rather than rescue only one. That is a counterintuitive conclusion. How, if at all, can we avoid that conclusion? Joe Horton devised this philosophical problem (2017), by adapting an example presented by Derek Parfit.

Here is an observation. Instead of describing the options as do nothing or save only one child or save both, we can break them down into more specific sequences of actions and omissions. There is stay on the beach as the children shout for help and continue to stay on the beach as they submerge. Let us call that sequence 0. Then there is sequence 1: sail out to where the children are, pull one child on board, sail back leaving the other child. Sequence 2, finally, is the following: sail out to where the children are, pull one child on board, pull another child on board, then sail back.

Now let us compare sequence 0 and sequence 1, attributing the qualities of being morally acceptable or wrong in accordance with the setup of the problem. So here is sequence 0:

Stay on the beach as they shout for help – *morally acceptable*.

Stay on the beach as the children submerge – *morally acceptable*.

And here is sequence 1:

Sail out to where the children are – *morally acceptable*.

Pull one child on board – *morally acceptable*.

Sail back, leaving the other child – *morally wrong*.

There is a metaphysical solution to Horton's problem, which I am going to present rather than endorse, because I endorse another solution. I call this one metaphysical because it is about what there really is. In reality, there is no such thing as saving only one child, according to this solution. There are the actions and omissions listed above and for the sake of verbal convenience we describe them as "Saving only one child," rather than stating them completely. It is a more specific action or omission that has the quality of being morally acceptable or morally wrong. When we employ the convenience, we get a counterintuitive result, hence the problem of how to avoid it. But when we give up the convenience and work with what there really is, attributing acceptability and wrongness to what there really is – these more basic "items" – then we find nothing counterintuitive. Given the moral outlook presupposed by the problem, it gets everything intuitively right. (Also, once we switch to this "lower level," there are other sequences of actions. There is also sailing out and sailing back, without pulling on board any children, and perhaps

pulling a child on board and then putting the child back in the water!)

Of course, there is still the problem of what to do if you are unwilling to risk sailing out and someone says, “I will save only one if you give me some money,” because that sequence involves something morally wrong. Here one might turn to epistemology instead of metaphysics: the study of what we can know. Pay them, because from your point of view there is still some chance they will save both. But you might ask, “What if I am absolutely certain that they will save only one?” But how did you end up so certain about what such a person will do? There do not seem to be grounds for such certainty. If not, then you have reason to pay. The epistemological solution is probably not ideal, but an advocate of it can say, “You provide a better solution than. Otherwise we are going with this one.”

## **Reference**

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