

## **Graphomania and the all-or-nothing problem**

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*Abstract.* When Milan Kundera introduces the concept of graphomania, he seems to register only two extremes: the person who writes for a few known people and the person who writes for a very large audience. Joe Horton's all-or-nothing problem provides a way of making sense of this conceptualization of the situation, though in a way that breaks with Kundera's emphasis on a writer's craving for audience attention.

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*"I don't write for a friend or two—*

*I write for the many, not the few!"*

In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera introduces readers to the concept of graphomania:

You might say that the taxi driver is not a writer but a graphomaniac. So we need to be precise about our concepts. A woman who writes her lover four letters a day is not a graphomaniac. She is a lover. But my friend who makes photocopies of his love letters to publish them some day is a graphomaniac. (1996: 126-127)

Here is his definition:

Graphomania is not a desire to write letters, personal diaries, or family chronicles (to write for oneself or one's close relations) but a desire to write books (to have a public of unknown readers). (1996: 127)

From Kundera's examples, it is natural to interpret him as only having in mind two extremes: one is that of writing for a small circle of family or friends; the other is writing for a very large public. Are there not in-between cases? There is a way of making sense of this conception in terms of extremes, by returning to slightly earlier material in the book: the dialogue with the taxi driver (1996: 126).

The taxi driver, who was once a sailor, is writing his life story. This is the dialogue.

KUNDERA: Are you writing it for your children? As a family chronicle?

TAXI DRIVER: For my children? They're not interested in that. I'm writing a book. I think it could help a lot of people.

Kundera latches onto his children's lack of interest as a cause, but a different approach is to not get too involved with this and focus on the thought of helping a lot of people. The taxi driver does not have to write a book but he thinks a book about his life could help a lot of people. In ethics, we refer to an action one is not obliged to do but has moral value as supererogatory.

Now there is an interesting puzzle about supererogation, called "The all-or-nothing problem." (Horton 2017) Suppose that you are not obliged to take a lifesaving course of action, owing to the danger involved, but if you do, your options are save one life of someone else and save two. But the cost to you of saving two is the same as saving one. It would seem morally wrong then to choose to save but save only one. But then saving one is somehow worse not only than saving two but also saving none, since it is morally wrong whereas saving none is acceptable, since there is no obligation on you to save. The puzzle is how to avoid this counterintuitive conclusion. We can think of the taxi driver as in a parallel situation, though it is disputable that we should. He does not have to write his book that can help people. But if he does, let us say that he has two options: he can write specifically for depressed former sailors or

for just about anyone depressed. And let us suppose that it is of no greater cost to him to write for the larger audience of just about anyone depressed, or the cost is minimal, and the book will not be less helpful. Thus, given that he has chosen the route of trying to help by means of writing, from the perspective of morality he should write for just about anyone depressed. Focusing on helping people very similar to him in occupational history is morally worse than both not writing and writing for a wider audience. That is one way of explaining why there is an emptying out of in-between territory: why the option of writing but only for quite a specific group, though not friends or family, is not considered. It is logically possible, but given the nature of the project it is not worth mentioning. The taxi driver, and many other aspiring book authors, are in this situation, given their book writing projects. (But in real life, I don't know if this kind of situation so often obtains. Maybe the most helpful book the taxi driver could write is more targeted in terms of its audience, though it might struggle to find publishers. And some might question whether the situation is parallel to the all-or-nothing problem's example, on the grounds that he is entitled to write and try to publish what he wants, within broad limits, and that is all there is to the perspective of morality here. There is no: "He is entitled to write his helpful book for a more specific audience but that is a morally worse option.")

## **References**

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

Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.