

Phil 108, February 7, 2008

A common defense:

“It makes no difference, or only an insignificant difference, if I do it.”

What, if anything, is wrong with this defense?

Related to a paradox:

- If *all* of us X, then we *together* do something such that if any one of us did it individually, his or her act would be wrong for a certain reason (e.g. because it would have bad effects).
- However, when *each* of us X's, what he or she does *individually* is not wrong for that reason (e.g., does not have bad effects).

Two kinds of defense:

1. My doing it makes only an *insignificant* difference
2. My doing it makes *no* difference.
 - (a) “If I don't do it, somebody else will.” E.g., developing biological weapons.
 - (b) “One person makes no difference.” E.g., voting in an election, where you know that your vote won't break any tie.

Two kinds of threshold:

1. *Absolute*: each action below and above the threshold makes no difference. Only the action at the threshold makes a difference, e.g. voting.
2. *Discrimination*: each action below the threshold makes a difference, but one too small to be noticed, e.g., keeping heater on leads the blackout to last a millisecond longer for everyone.

Replies to the insignificant difference defense:

1. In many cases, it is simply a mistake to say that your doing it makes an insignificant difference. It may look insignificant *in comparison* to the scale of the problem (“A drop in the bucket”). But this does not mean that it is insignificant. (Recall Unger and futility thinking.)

2. Where there is a discrimination threshold, we can appeal to:

Principle of Divisibility: “Where harm is a matter of degree, sub-threshold actions are wrong to the extent that they cause harm, and where a hundred acts like mine are necessary to cause a detectable difference I have caused 1/100 of that detectable harm.”

The beans case: 100 villagers each with a lunch of 100 beans. Vertical bandits each steal a different villager's entire lunch. Horizontal bandits each steal one bean from every single villager. If we deny the Principle of Divisibility, then the vertical bandits act wrongly, but the horizontal bandits do not.

Worry: What if so few others do it that the discriminability threshold is never met?

Reply: Then no one has caused harm. Whether your act is wrong depends on what others do.

Question: Should discriminability thresholds be treated any differently from absolute thresholds?

The reply to the no difference defense that Glover accepts:

1. *Side effects:* Even if somebody else will do it, your doing it may have worse effects. The others willing to take the job are less likely to do socially beneficial work; my refusal can have positive effects on others' attitudes; taking it can have bad effects on me (like the lapsed Catholic who feels bad about missing mass).

A special case is a "spiral." For example, the fewer people who vote, the more demoralized the party becomes, the fewer will vote, and so on. (Objection: "But surely whether or not I vote will have no effect on morale." Reply: The effect is below the discrimination threshold, but still we need to take into account the Principle of Divisibility.)

Replies to the no difference defense that Glover rejects:

2. *Generalization test:* "What if everyone did that?"

Glover's objection: Not a good test, since it is often important to take into account that others will *not* do it. E.g., disarming when no one else will.

3. *Unfairness:* Even when it will make no difference, it is unfair to rely on the contributions of others without contributing oneself. This is most applicable to the (b) cases. (Recall Cullity.)

Glover's objection:

- Unfair only if free riding *increases* the contributions that others must make, e.g. six men pushing a car up a hill.
- Not unfair if free riding does not increase the contributions that others must make, e.g., voting. "It seems a dog-in-the-manger version of justice that objects to one person benefiting because others are left unchanged."

4. *The Solzhenitsyn Principle:* "And the simple step of a simple courageous man is not to take part in the lie, not to support deceit. Let the lie come into the world, even dominate the world, but not through me." Most applicable to the (a) cases.

Glover's objection: Isn't it just a selfish concern to keep one's own hands clean?

Notice what these replies have in common: They say that your action can be wrong for some reason *other* than that it produces a bad outcome. That is, they deny consequentialism.