SMALL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Consider the appeal from the pseudonymous Peter Keim in "America's Finest News Source," *The Onion*:

> Why do I boycott multinational oil and gas corporations that fail to acknowledge and address global-warming issues, resulting in a few less dollars in their swollen coffers? Or participate in demonstrations against local wetland destruction that are attended by as many as a dozen people, before the wetland is eventually drained and cleared for a new Wal-Mart anyway? Why make the effort? Because I care. And I want these feelings to manifest themselves in barely measurable ways. . . .
>
> Won't you join me in this ongoing effort to foster an imperceptible improvement to this doomed and dying planet? You'll be rewarded with the knowledge that, despite the irreversible effects of centuries of sustained environmental abuse by the human race, individuals, working together, can fight this inevitability in a real, concrete, tiny, and totally ineffective show of unity.
>
> Together, we can make an unbelievably negligible difference.[1]

That is satire, of course, but it strikes a nerve because it touches upon the real concern that our small contributions are really *pointless* contributions. I shall be discussing *small contributions* and the reasons that can be given for making or continuing to make them, but a bit of preliminary clarification and limitation is needed. Sadly, I can only make a small contribution to the discussion of small contributions; there are some issues in the neighborhood that I will simply ignore or set aside. First, though I shall be talking about small contributions to worthy causes, I shall not be concerned with whatever reasons are relevant to identifying a cause as

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[1] *The Onion* 2006.

worthy in the first place. If you wish to know what causes are worthy, that's a topic for another occasion. Nor shall I address the question how to distribute small contributions *among* worthy causes. Third, when I speak of small contributions, I mean contributions that are small *relative to the problem or cause* to which they are directed, but they may or may not be small relative to the donor. Fourth, perhaps the largest omission, I shall not be discussing the particular (and dramatic) case of a Tragedy of the Commons,[2] in which all parties have incentives to act in such a way that all are worse off.[3] This is not because the case is uninteresting, but because it has attracted lots of attention, to which I have nothing to add at present.

Last, my interest is in the *instrumental* or *consequentialist* justification (or lack thereof) for small contributions. If we think that we should contribute to, say, feeding the hungry, our reasons have to do, somehow, with the hungry being fed, not with cultivating what Hume might have called the "monkish virtue" of divesting ourselves of assets. Some moral theories may prove immune to the worry. A Kantian might argue that refusal to make small contributions cannot be universalized. A virtue theorist might hold that refusal to make small contributions exhibits bad character. If their arguments can be made out in thoroughly non-consequentialist ways, those theorists need not be concerned about the negligible importance of their contributions. And perhaps, if we are *both* sufficiently confident that we ought to make small contributions *and* that small contributions make no difference, we will want to look again at what

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[2] Hardin 1968.

[3] In Garret Hardin's example (1968), a common resource, such as a pasture, is overgrazed because villagers each have incentives to graze additional animals on the pasture. A villager gets most of the benefit of having and being able to feed an extra animal, while whatever damage or degradation the pasture suffers is shared by all the other villagers. Of course, every other villager is in the same situation: gaining more from grazing aditional animals than suffering from the addition of those same animals. Since everyone is in that position, everyone grazes extra animals and the pasture is degraded, eventually to the point of being worthless for grazing. Further, there is no gain to be had from restraint. The conscientious villager who puts no more than his fair share of animals on the pasture only ends up worse off for having pastured fewer animals, but the pasture is still degraded due to the actions of his less conscientious fellows.

non-consequentialists have to offer. I suspect, however, that most of us are not comfortable being so thoroughly non-consequentialist.

Of course, full-fledged consequentialists, who hold that all moral reasons are ultimately to be cashed out in terms of the promotion of better consequences, have cause for concern. So do all the non-consequentialists who think there are serious objections to acting in ways that seem pointless or futile in terms of the very goals that supposedly rationalize the acting.

With that background, consider that many of the world's problems – severe poverty and starvation, global warming, religious war, oppressive and tyrannical regimes – are large, well beyond anything an ordinary person might reasonably expect to have a significant impact upon. I am only one person in more than six billion. I cannot hope to do more than make a small contribution. If millions or billions of us worked together, the problems might prove manageable, even easy. The joint effects of millions or billions of small contributions might solve the problems, but getting the millions or billions to work together is itself a large problem – to which I can only make a small contribution.

I take it that there is nothing special about me in this regard. None of you is in a position to make more than a small contribution. This fact is behind a seductive argument: there is nothing I can do about the large problems; since there is nothing I can do, there is nothing I ought to do, and thus I can, in good conscience, decline to contribute at all.[4]

There may be something to this argument, but we should not make too much of it. What I shall argue is that much depends on the details, that sometimes small contributions, even with

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[4] This is distinct from the collective version of the argument – that there is nothing we can do about the large problems; since there is nothing we can do, there is nothing we ought to do, and thus we can, in good conscience, decline to contribute at all. That version seems more problematic, since, on one hand, the first premise is more doubtful, and on the other, it is less clear what it means for a collectivity to be obligated to do something. What am I obligated to do by virtue of being part of a collectivity that is obligated to do something?

little prospect of solving the large problem, may be warranted. Worries about the smallness of our contribution do not undermine all reasons for contributing.

Let's begin by taking a more formal look at the argument. It has this form:

1. I cannot do anything to solve Large Problem X.
2. If I cannot do anything to solve a large problem, then I am not obligated to do anything to solve it.

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3. Therefore, I am not obligated to do anything to solve Large Problem X.

Call this *the Argument*. Certainly, it is valid. The second premise can be viewed as a contraposition of the slogan, *"ought" implies "can"*: If "ought" implies "can," then, if it is not true that one can do something, it is also not true that one ought to do it. I think the slogan has its limits, but I am not concerned to challenge it here. That means everything turns upon the truth of the first premise.

Why might I (or anyone comparably placed) think that there is nothing I can do to solve a large problem? One reason might depend on a mistake about what might be *meant* by doing something to solve a problem. We can illustrate this in the following way. It may be that I do not expect the large problem to be solved, whatever I do. I foresee, let us say, environmental degradation growing worse for the foreseeable future. I don't imagine that anything I do or can do will stop that. So I cannot do anything about the problem.

But this is too quick. Suppose that we are speaking of a problem whose solution would have to be an elimination of the problem.[5] It is not immediately clear that because I cannot do

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[5] A possibility that might be relevant in some contexts is that there may be responses to a problem that, perhaps, do not count as solutions, but nonetheless, can be assesssed as better or worse. Some problems can only be approached by learning how best to live with them, by establishing a *modus vivendi.* For example, in individual life, there are problems of chronic disease. On a societal level, there is the problem of dealing with violent crime. In neither case do we imagine that the problem will go away, but that does not mean that there are not better or worse responses.

anything that will bring about the elimination of the problem that I cannot do anything to eliminate the problem. For there is a potential ambiguity in "cannot do anything to eliminate the problem." It may mean "cannot do anything that brings it about that the problem is eliminated." But it also may mean, "cannot do anything that contributes to eliminating the problem." Which reading should be favored? Suppose I am a smoker. I say "I cannot do anything to eliminate my chance of contracting lung cancer." That is true. The chance is non-zero, for smokers and non-smokers alike. But certainly, that would be a mistake on my part. I can reduce my risk by quitting. That is something I can do that contributes to eliminating the problem. The fact that the action is not by itself *sufficient* to eliminate the risk is not a good objection. Relatedly, neither is it a good objection that the risk cannot be eliminated.[6]

We have just been surveying a straightforward issue about what is meant by *contributing to a solution*. We can contribute to the solution of a problem, even if we cannot eliminate the problem. More interesting questions arise when, given the agreed meaning, we consider why it might be true that we cannot do anything about a large problem. Without pretensions of exhaustiveness, I shall focus upon three interestingly different, but possibly overlapping, kinds of cases:

Incremental Contribution Cases

Consider this case: 30,000 children under the age of six will die today, of starvation and easily treatable disease. For about two hundred dollars, I could save one, could give one child a decent chance at a healthy and productive life. But if I do, that will not change even what the

[6] It may be that actions of others would have to be combined with mine in order to actually eliminate the problem. But suppose further that I cannot realistically expect the other actions to be forthcoming. Does *that* mean I have no reason to contribute? That is not clear without further detail, but is a question to which we will return.

total rounds off to. It will not change the fact that 30,000 more children will die tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Suppose I spend some of my time convincing other people to give. Even if I am phenomenally successful, the difference will be at most a statisical blip, barely noticeable on the scale of a month or a year. Still, tens of thousands will die today, and tomorrow, and so on – almost 11 million in a year. What difference do I make?

If the facts are as I have described, do they license the conclusion that I cannot do anything about the large probem of millions of children dying of readily preventable causes, and thus license me in drawing the Argument's conclusion that I have no obligation to contribute? It seems that that conclusion is warranted only under implausible further assumptions.

It is true that I cannot reasonably expect to save the millions of children or even to make a large dent in the number. But that does not mean I cannot make a difference for one child. There will be one less child dying in readily preventable ways, because I will have prevented it. Or at least, there will be one less child dying than there otherwise would have been. The fact that I cannot identify some particular child who has been helped[7] does not make a difference. Still, a modest contribution can save a child's life. In this case, it seems that what we object to about millions of children dying is that individual children are dying. The overall statistic is composed of the individuals, and if there were no reason to prevent each individual death in the total, there would also be no reason to be concerned about the total. Running that in reverse, if there's reason to be concerned about the total, there's reason to be concerned about the individual deaths that comprise it. And if that's so, there is something I can do about the millions of children dying. For this kind of case, the Argument is unsound.

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[7] It may not even make sense to say that there is some particular child who is *the child* my contribution has saved, due to the fungibility of dollars. My check will be deposited, say, in Oxfam's account, where my funds will be inextricably commingled with others' contributions.

High Threshold Cases

Consider voting in a two-candidate, majority-rule election with a relatively large electorate. Suppose I know who should win. The chance that the electorate will split evenly so that my vote will be decisive is less than microscopic. Likewise, for the chance that my vote will create an even split and turn a loss into a tie. Those two minuscule chances, that my vote will create or break a tie, are the only ways my vote will make any difference. The overwhelming likelihoods are that either my favored candidate will win, with or without my vote, or that she will lose, with or without my vote. So my vote will make no difference.

Why, then, should I vote? Perhaps the answer will be that there is that chance of my vote making a difference, however small. But that doesn't seem adequate. There is also the chance that a lottery ticket will win. If you combine that with the entertainment value of fantasizing yourself the winner of a multi-million-dollar jackpot, that may show that it is not unreasonable to buy the lottery ticket.[8] But it could hardly amount to more. The tiny chance that your vote will make a difference – far less, really, than the chance of winning a lottery – might, with some color of plausibility, be said to make it optional to vote, not clearly wrong or irrational. It is very hard, though, to see how it could provide any positive reason *for* voting.

The problem here is that my vote makes a difference only under very special circumstances, when and if a particular threshold is reached – and exactly reached. If the threshold is missed, by even a single vote, my vote will make no difference. If the threshold is overshot, by even a single vote, my vote will make no difference. For this kind of case, and for any others where the relevant threshold that must be reached seems unlikely to *be reached*, it

[8] A friend once told me that he viewed his occasional purchases of lottery tickets as purchasing the right to a fantasy.

seems that the first premise of the argument is true, at least with high probability: I cannot do anything (by voting) to elect my candidate. So the Argument is sound for high threshold cases.

Low Threshold Cases

I'm a vegan, primarily out of concern for animal suffering and death. One counter-argument, possibly the best, is called the Causal Impotence argument. Its claim is that the market is, relatively speaking, insensitive to the food choices of individuals. I may not eat steak for dinner tonight, but one steak will not make a difference in how many cows are slaughtered or mistreated. One less steak purchased may go unnoticed in the "noise" of the market, in inevitable wastage, and so on. There are some who are confident that the market is much more sensitive, that individual abstinence is registered and does make a difference. I have trouble being so optimistic about the efficiency of the market at detecting even the tiniest perturbations, so I am willing to assume that the animals I don't eat are just a blip in the market, too tiny even to be detected by the companies that raise and kill animals for food. If so, then my action is causally impotent. My contribution is too small. It makes no difference to the lives or deaths of the animals I would like to save – so what's the point?

I'd like to present an unoriginal reply to this.[9] (Actually, I'd like to present an original reply, but the unoriginal one is the best I have at the moment!) Note that, however plausible it is that my actions alone will not affect the market for meat, it is not at all plausible that the market is not affected by the general demand for meat. Perhaps one vegetarian can go unnoticed, but there must be some number – say ten or a hundred or a thousand – whose abstinence from meat would make a noticeable difference, a difference that would cut into the revenues and profits of

[9] Singer 1980.

the industries that raise and kill animals. Let's suppose, for the sake of discussion, that the relevant number is a thousand vegetarians. For every thousand vegetarians, the industries will take notice and correspondingly reduce their production. It may be that my abstinence will make no difference, but I will have one chance in a thousand of being the one who passes the threshold and makes a noticeable difference. How much is that worth? If a single vegetarian will not consume, say, 93 animals in a year, then a thousand will not consume 93,000. I'll have a one in a thousand chance of saving 93,000 animals – which is equivalent in value to saving 93. If saving 93 animals in a year is worth it, so is a tenth of a percent shot at saving 93,000.

Now, I do not know what the actual threshold of detectability is. I suspect that it is well under a thousand, though probably considerably more than one. But within broad limits, it doesn't matter. The expected number of animals saved will be the same as your own consumption, so far as you are average. A limitation is that the relevant threshold must be sufficiently low that it is reasonable to expect it to be met or reached occasionally. If the threshold of detectability were so high that it were never reached, then we would be back with the thought that our own abstinence couldn't be expected to make a difference. Thankfully, that is only a theoretical worry.

For a case of this kind, the premise that I cannot do anything to save animals appears false. I can do something equivalent to saving animals, and the less my chance of saving any animals, the greater the number I have a chance of saving. What is lost in the form of reduced chance is made up by the greater numbers. For a (sufficiently) low threshold case, the Argument is unsound.

Conclusion

In a way, I have an unexciting conclusion. For some types of cases, the Argument is sound. We do not have instrumental reasons for making the small contributions. For other cases, the Argument is unsound. Despite the smallness of our contributions, we have or may have reason to make them. Details matter. That may be unexciting, but it is, I think, the truth.

References

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