Discussion: On the Common Lament, that a Person Cannot Make Much Difference in This World

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It is commonly said that a person, usually referring to an ordinary person without unusual power, abilities, or wealth, cannot make a difference in this world. Much can be said in refutation of this claim, but I will confine myself to a quick review of some ways pointing out its falsity, before turning to my main topic, the exploration of the *benefits* of our relative impotence, the fact that, as individuals, we cannot make *much* difference.

First, frequently we leap too soon from a reality wherein people *did not* make a difference to the inference that they *could not* have done so. A person who chose not to try to do something and so naturally did not succeed, might have succeeded, had he tried. Second, some differences do matter even if they are small in comparison. Though no one ordinary individual can solve the problem of poverty in the world, most people, at least in Western countries, can save individual lives by donating money to organizations such as Oxfam. Similarly, though one cannot bring happiness to all those who are distressed, volunteering once or twice a week to help the blind or the sick in one's neighbourhood can make a big difference to some individual lives. If destitute or suffering individuals do not matter at all, then the bigger 'problem' they are part of does not matter either so, unless we are nihilists, we had better acknowledge that saving or helping some individuals, which we undeniably *can* do even without unusual effort or expense, does matter.[1] Moreover, 'small' individual actions can sometimes generate a viral effect by influencing other people, and modest beginnings can have larger effective consequences. One recent example is the influence of environmentalists; they began as a small endeavour and managed to persuade large numbers of people that their concerns merited serious attention. And so the 'small' difference that we can make is frequently significant, in

[1] Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

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itself, and, sometimes, we can even make a 'big' difference; such prospects make at least trying to make a difference often worthwhile.[2]

An epistemic issue is also at stake here. A person doing guard duty usually does not know what good he has done. His presence at his post night after night might have deterred those who had checked out the site and might have broken in and caused great damage had he and his peers not done their duty. So such widespread and routine doings probably often matter although we would not usually see the benefits. There is also a chance that they might be of great importance: recall that one of the most significant persons in contemporary American history is the guard who discovered the Watergate break-in. But even setting aside epistemic uncertainties, making a small difference is often significant. We all believe this and therefore invest a great deal of effort in the health and education of our children, although we know that this can have no effect on whether millions of other children in our society will eat healthy food or come to love reading. The importance of our children suffices to justify the investment (and surely most people would not think that their children only matter subjectively, to them, but do not matter at all in themselves). Even one noisy or meddlesome person in our surroundings can make our lives miserable in a way that we will think very significant, although he may do no harm beyond this limited sphere.[3]

Once matters are clarified, then the idea that a person cannot make a difference turns out to be quite exaggerated: being kind even to a few people, let alone saving their lives, does matter. One underlying motivation for such a statement, one suspects, is that many people find it comfortable to think that they cannot do much to confront widespread social problems, and can therefore be excused for not doing even what can be done. Yet these reflections, however significant, have all been set forth before, and although that is hardly a reason for failing to repeat them in public if some good might result from it, it is a reason for refraining from it when doing philosophy. Hence, after we have seen where the idea we started with is false and often merely self-serving self-deception or hypocrisy, I will take

[2] There are two splendid seminal discussions of the 'A person cannot make a difference' issue: ch.3 of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Jonathan Glover's 'It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It', in Peter Singer, ed., *Applied Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[3] There is an interesting and difficult question at this point, of whether it is easier to make a positive or negative difference that matters, but we shall not take this up here.

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the other side and explore the implications of the extent to which it is true, that is, a single person indeed usually cannot make *much* difference in our world. To the extent that it is true, I consider this largely fortunate in a way that does not seem to have been acknowledged. This will be my concern in the rest of this essay.

When I speak of making a difference, I refer to the actual effectiveness in the world, outside the agent. Our actions can have meaning to us even if they have little effect on the external state of affairs and, in some systems of thought, everything that an individual does carries meaning, mattering internally to his or her religious or moral worth. In some sense it may be thought that it even matters impersonally, whenever someone tells a lie, say, to the moral state of the universe. My focus here, however, is on actual effectiveness, in contrast with the unconditional or 'in principle' meaning of our actions.

If ordinary people *could* make much difference in our world, the immediate implication would be that our world is extremely *vulnerable*. Billions of people live in the world and, were all of them capable of making a big difference and were many to act on this ability, they would sometimes cancel each other out. When this was not the case, the world would constantly be wavering as a result of these attempts, and we with it. Since many people are not good and since we have no guarantee that the good would invariably be able to block the influence of the bad, or turn them into good people, or that similarly propitious occurrences will occur, then if anyone could make much of a difference in this world, powerful bad people would constantly pose a grave danger. We should thus realize that under likely eventualities, having a relatively robust world is in fact probably good, and that we are fortunate that it is not subject to the whims of all individuals or dependent on their good will. We are not constantly dependent on their abstaining from harm or on their commitment to attempt positive endeavours. All of us surely know many people whom we would never allow any significant role in our lives since they are not trustworthy. What a relief, then, that they and their likes usually cannot make much difference in this world.

'A Person Cannot Make Much Difference In This World' And The Nature Of Morality

The fact of our relative impotence matters greatly for the nature of morality. Common sense morality is heavily deontological, that is, it is rule-based and imposes categorical constraints and demands in a way that is not closely related to consequences. The model here is

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the Ten Commandments, which require that certain things be done or, more typically, are forbidden. Mostly, they do not specify why we should perform or abstain from certain actions – this is what the commandments require. In secular societies too, much of morality takes a similar form and, psychologically, moral development attempts to instill in people strong inner restraints that will bring them to abstain without reflection from doing certain types of wrong. One will have a strong aversion to stealing, telling lies, or breaking one's promises; and murder or rape will be unthinkable. There are numerous sources for the predominantly deontological character of prevailing morality, one of them being (as the example of the Ten Commandments shows) the influence of religion. But another plausible explanation is the topic being discussed here: often, whether or not we do something does not really matter; and it is functional for morality to evolve in a way that bypasses the embarrassment of this admission. A morality focusing mainly on the *effects* of the actions of the single individual could not function well. Murder is bad not only because it crosses a grave moral line but also because of what it does to the victim – it does matter even if there is 'only' one such victim. Likewise for other actions that may help or hinder specific individuals or have other effects that may be limited when put in a broad perspective, yet matter in themselves (as we saw in the beginning of the paper). In many circumstances, however, the impact of the single individual would be an unwelcome criterion, from the point of view of morality.

Take the issue of collective action. Under conditions of scarcity, whether a large number of people water their gardens abundantly matters a great deal, but whether any specific individual does so matters so little to the issue of water scarcity that we may dismiss it. Now consider what would happen if a person had the following thoughts: (1) Whether I water my garden or not will hardly make any difference to the water supply. (2) It will, however, make a big difference to my flowers, which will die if I do not water them. (3) The blooming of my flowers matters a great deal to me and to my family. Consequently: (4) If no discernible harm ensues from my watering my flowers but failing to do so would be fatal to them, and this matters to me and to my family, I may water them. Only by focusing *away* from such thoughts will most people refrain from watering their gardens, thereby collectively preserving the water supply. People ought to focus on the thought that one simply must obey the law, that it would be unfair for them to water their gardens while others restrain themselves, and that a good person would simply not do so. Then, most people will not use much

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water and, collectively, this will maintain a sufficient water supply for all.[4]

This analysis does not follow from some peculiarity in this example and is relevant to many real-life situations. Consider the huge current effort to move people to recycle. The rubbish of one person or family cannot matter, whatever their behaviour, yet such 'dangerous' facts are not often pointed out. A measure of subtle deception prevails, as when the damages allegedly caused by one's pollution are graphically detailed. In any event, a quasi-deontological and virtue-based ethic aims to keep enough people in line and invest serious effort in recycling. The same sort of logic will prevail in more demanding situations such as when people are called out to war and, even more so, when asked to volunteer for service.

Threshold cases – where an individual's contribution is not even infinitesimal but indeed non-existent – highlight these circumstances. When what matters is whether we have passed some threshold and we are significantly below or above it, strict observance has *no effect*. Going to vote or using electricity will not really matter – in almost any circumstance it is safe to assume that one individual makes no difference and thinking otherwise would be irrational. But even in such cases, we would like people to make a sacrifice (make an effort to vote, limit their electricity usage at certain times) without having to show them that, in practice, it does matter – to the election or the electricity grid – whether they individually do so or not. Since it does not matter, we could not show them, but if enough people were to adopt this way of thinking and tell themselves that it does not matter whether they did something, then *collectively* it would matter.

[4] Derek Parfit has claimed that 'It is not enough to ask, "Will my act harm other people?" Even if the answer is No, my act may still be wrong, *because* of its effects on other people. I should ask, "Will my act be one of a set of acts that will *together* harm other people?" (op. cit. note 2, 86). I have serious doubts whether this sort of consideration can sway most people, when they are required to sacrifice something that matters to them. When preparing this paper for publication, Shelly Kagan's 'Do I Make a Difference?' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **39**:(2011), 105–141 appeared. Kagan concludes by emphasizing the *risk* that one might after all make a difference. In some cases this may be a salient consideration, but in most of the relevant cases it is not. As far as I can see, his points do not much affect my claims, particularly in threshold cases where one can know, beyond any reasonable doubt, that it does not matter what one, as an individual, will do.

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And yet, the fact that it would matter collectively does not make one individual's action significant, while the loss to that individual may be of significance to him. In this predicament, morality itself is fashioned so as to circumvent the reality that in many spheres of agency 'A person cannot make a difference in this world'. This approach could be viewed as a form of social manipulation, a deceptive indirect utilitarianism or some other view cynically driving people to sacrifice their own interests in situations where what they do matters little or even not at all. Matters, however, are more complex. Rather than individual difference-making, morality in these situations broadly tracks considerations that have to do with collective action together with considerations of equity. Since the problem of collective action is real, and since we need to discourage free riding on the efforts of others, morality needs to be formulated in broad deontological terms. Doing so, however, also allows our moral lives much of their meaning. Linking morality only to actual, significant effects would deny meaning to many of our actions because, as shown, they often do not really matter. By contrast, if morality is largely about keeping certain rules and obligations and those who do so can express their good will and become virtuous, then, as Kant taught, that path is open to everyone. In the current situation, regardless of how weak or ineffective they might be, people can acquire moral worth and a sense of meaning even when their actions are irrelevant. One can express good will and carry one's share of the load, thereby being a decent person who behaves fairly, irrespective of the actual effect of one's actions in the world. Perhaps in many situations morality respects persons best by not paying undue attention to the impact of their actions.

Weakness Is Strength, Strength Is Weakness

Our relative weakness and insignificance help us to survive and, often, weakness is strength and strength would be a weakness. Consider the tigers that surround us everywhere: the domestic cat version. There are estimated to be hundreds of millions of domestic cats in the world, as compared to around three thousand tigers, for example. Members of the household variety generally thrive and are allowed to go pretty much where they please, while their larger relatives face extinction outside zoos. The difference, of course, is that house cats do not pose a danger to those who matter in interspecies *realpolitik* – human beings. Mice might well be more apprehensive about house cats than about tigers but, outside cartoons,

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the concern with the wishes of mice is quite limited. In fact, humans domesticated the ancestors of the cats in large measure in order to deal with rodents. If tigers were even stronger, or smarter, then perhaps we humans would have become extinct rather than becoming those who decide on the fate of other creatures but, things being what they are, feline strength is, as a rule, a *weakness*.

Much of human life goes on in catlike fashion, because what we do does not make much of a difference. One of the major features distinguishing liberal from totalitarian regimes is that a liberal regime allows its citizens to make most decisions in their daily lives, decisions that, after all, matter very little to anyone else. Beyond certain required obligations (do not harm others directly, pay taxes, recycle), a good liberal society will leave us alone, whereas a totalitarian regime will not, and will seek to control us *unnecessarily*. My claim is not that non-liberal regimes lord over their members only because they hold that their actions matter immensely, or that liberal regimes should permit only those actions that do not matter. Rather, my point is that most actions, particularly in private life, matter very little if at all (in the sense of mattering that I am using, which concerns actual effects in the world), and a liberal attitude in their regard is therefore possible. Intervention would thus require very good reasons. Since by and large it does not matter much, except to ourselves, whom we marry, how we have sex, or what if any are our religious beliefs, we should be left alone to do as we please. Many collective goods (a clean environment, an electricity grid) depend on a large measure of conformist individual behavior, where there is some temptation to free-ride. Most private actions do not matter even in this way, since people can be left alone to do as they please and no significant negative effects need be expected.[5]

Some decisions, such as whether to go to war or whether to initiate radical reforms in the economy, do matter in the grand scheme of things. In that case, a liberal regime will need to say, roughly, that individuals should choose those who determine what to do and retain the ability to replace them periodically, in order to have some measure of collective control over those whose actions do

[5] Because totalitarian regimes are 'control freaks' and care so much about individual conformity, even small divergences made in protest can, under certain conditions, make a difference in practice, whereas a similar action would have no effect in a liberal democracy. Such actions may also have positive moral or spiritual meaning because of the need to resist the oppressor, at least internally, but this form of 'mattering' exceeds the scope of this paper.

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matter more broadly. My focus here, however, is on private individual life, where choices and decisions can be made without any need for control by other people. The basis for the possibility for this benign neglect is that these choices and decisions by and large matter only to those who make them. Those fortunate to be living in liberal societies live in a social order that recognizes this and lets people be.

Not only does what we do in our personal sphere matter little to others, but so does much of what we do beyond our personal sphere. Others, even powerful others, do not care about it. The very rich do, or at least can, make a big difference in this world, yet often they do not wield their power against the rest of us because they do not need to. We are as cats to them. Even an organized crime outfit would, in most circumstances, do well not to bother with most people and leave them alone precisely because they do not matter much to its potential profits. It needs to focus on the fatter cats – politicians or prosecutors, for example. We do not need personal bodyguards for ourselves and our loved ones because we are insignificant targets for malevolence. We could not afford such bodyguards in any case but the point is that we do not need them and in a moderately ordered society we can live our lives and walk about safely without them. By remaining weak, we remain 'under the radar' of the rich or the powerful so that, even if they were vaguely aware of us, they could not be bothered to trouble us precisely because we do not really matter.

My claim is not that being weak or poor is always and overall preferable to being strong and wealthy but rather that, systematically, we sometimes benefit in interesting ways from being relatively weak, from living as cats rather than as tigers. If we were stronger, we might pose a greater threat or present more of a temptation and require further 'treatment'. I am happy to be able to go around at will without the need for bodyguards, and do not envy the ultra-rich or powerful who often cannot do so; again, the fact that we cannot make much difference in this world might often have a positive outcome for us.

The Super-person Paradox

Another prudential advantage of the fact that what we do does not matter much is that it limits our *moral* obligations, implying what can be termed the '*Superman Paradox*' or '*Super-person Paradox*': if you can save the world, you will continuously be called upon to

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do so, leaving you little time for anything else, perhaps not even for having much of a life at all. A moral Super-person is one who, either through special abilities or due to an unusual position, can be very effective. Such people are often morally obliged to devote to such causes much of their lives, and perhaps even to risk them, just because they can make a *huge* difference. Since human beings are mortal, being a moral Super-person can be fatal, in ways that weaker types would not confront simply because they are so much weaker.

The Super-person paradox often materializes in the form of such individuals confronting moral demands that the weak do not. Although the king's son might prefer not to be king, he perhaps ought to be one because *he* can make a difference in this world in a way that most people cannot, and the alternative might be much worse. That George VI, rather than his elder brother Edward VIII, of weak character and Nazi sympathies, was the British king during the Second World War mattered a great deal, for example. Were we in a position to make major positive changes, we would *prima facie* be morally obliged to do so, in ways that do not compel us as the far less effective creatures that we are. Such obligations may entail not only a potential for substantial contributions and perhaps even for greatness, but also significant risks.

Imagine a situation in which we could all find ourselves although mercifully few of us in fact do – seeing terrorists on their way to commit a massive atrocity. Assume that no one knows that we are there, and that if we shout out we run great personal risk. However, we are the only ones who can sound the alarm, and alert nearby police, who would then kill the terrorists; we are the only ones who can foil the terrorist triumph and save a large number of innocent people. Were we to shout out, this would make a big difference, but in the process we would be putting ourselves at significant risk. Ought we to do so? I think that common sense would be inclined to say that morally we ought to shout out.

The problem here resembles the over-demandingness issue for utilitarianism. Our discussion shows that a *similar* problem arises within commonsense morality, once we consider not ordinary (rather powerless) persons, but people with the potential for great influence. Here commonsense morality might ask of such people what utilitarians regularly ask of all of us. Could one then raise a similar objection to commonsense morality, and reject such demands even of Super-persons? If not, why? And would this then weaken the standard criticism of utilitarianism? I will not pursue the comparison with utilitarianism further here; the present point is that not finding

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ourselves in such a situation, retaining our relative powerlessness, can be seen as great good luck for us.

It is possible to be too risk averse morally as well, and some people would welcome the opportunity to be Super-persons, as a way of doing good and living a more meaningful life. But except if one chooses to put oneself at risk, being thrown into a position of great danger coupled with great moral opportunity would not be welcomed by most.[6]

Likewise, consider the risk that soldiers, firefighters, secret agents, or police officers take in their work, obviously a greater one than that confronting, say, university professors, at least in Western countries. The professional ethics of academic research and teaching is in some ways demanding and requires that one keep up to date with the state of knowledge in one's field, and investigate problems, write, and evaluate others with integrity. Yet nothing in that code requires professors to risk their lives in the service of the university or its students. Academics do not differ in this regard from most people, and shopkeepers or hairdressers are not professionally obliged to risk their lives either, in order to carry out their professional duties. Indeed, this is a major difference between people, to which we do not pay sufficient attention – some people routinely engage in pursuits that place their lives on the line for the sake of others, while most of us do not.

But even for those who regularly engage in risky activities in their work, the risks that they take ought to bear some proportion to the good they can do. If one can change the battle, save innocent lives, uncover the enemy's plans, or expose the regional Mafia, one is under much *higher* moral obligations than if one can do much less. Even as a firefighter or as a police officer, one should limit the risks one assumes and refrain, for instance, from unnecessary dangers when only property is at stake. Being particularly capable or well-positioned might place us at great risk and, moreover, sometimes put us under an obligation to seek further risk, even though we lack the indestructible properties (Kryptonite aside) of the fictional Superman. When whatever we do does not much matter, we are spared such risky endeavours or are exposed to them less often.[7]

[6] As I have argued elsewhere, morality is obliged to attempt to eliminate the conditions under which moral heroism is required, even if this will abolish as a result the heights of moral worth. See Saul Smilansky, 'Morality and moral worth', in *10 Moral Paradoxes* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

[7] Since by now we already know when and where bad things are about to happen in history, would it not be morally wonderful if they could be

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'Because we can do it' is in itself an insufficient argument in favour of a moral obligation to act. 'Can' does not entail 'Ought'. Even when we can make an important contribution, there are limitations to what we can be morally required to do, particularly when personal sacrifices are involved.[8] The realistic potential for making a big positive difference, however, ostensibly entails greater moral pressure to do so, at times an all-compelling one. Such strong inclining reasons are not plausibly present for most people, who can typically know that they are not Super-persons. For good reasons, such as the requirement of fairness in situations of collective action noted above, people frequently ought to do things that do not matter. Nothing in the actual difference they make, however, is morally salient. But when one *can* make a big positive difference, the potential as such may be morally salient.

Indeed, we often tacitly recognize this. Many people carefully avoid positions of power and do not go into politics although they have a talent for it, and do not join services such as the army, the police, or the intelligence services, where risking one's life may be part of the game. *Knowingly, we choose to remain weak though we could have become strong, so as not to awaken the latent moral obligations that would then apply to us*.[9]

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modified in a benevolent fashion? If we could travel back in time, we would arguably be obliged to do so and change bad things that were about to happen. In principle, we would be morally obliged to change things even at the cost of preventing our later coming into existence, meaning that we ought to be ready to prevent historical calamities even when those calamities are a necessary condition for the existence of ourselves or our loved ones. Given the logical limitations to the possibility of changing the past in major ways, if not necessarily to time travel itself, this option can be set aside. I have discussed this issue in 'Morally, should we prefer never to have existed?', (unpublished manuscript).

[8] When our integrity is on the line, however, moral considerations about the difference one can make may become surprisingly demanding, even under more or less commonsensical views. See Saul Smilansky, 'The paradox of beneficial retirement', in *10 Moral Paradoxes* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

[9] The 'ethics of potential' brings up interesting questions, but can be left for another occasion. It seems to me that while I might incur certain obligations in lieu of being in a certain powerful position, and may not 'degrade' my powers just in order to avoid those obligations, I am not typically under obligation to maneuver myself into that position, let alone transform myself into a person who might reach such a position.

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The Rarity Effect

The fact that one single person usually makes little difference in this world is also significant because it sheds light on the more unusual cases where people do make a big difference. In a world where many things do not matter a great deal, those that do shine by contrast.

Consider the common complaint deploring the difficulty of creativity, of finding something genuinely new and important to say in literature, art, philosophy, or science. But were it easy to do this, would it matter as much, when accomplished? Surely, what makes some discoveries or creative works so significant is, at least in part, their relative rarity and the hardships involved in the struggle to achieve them. When they do occur, something *special* has happened. Breathing is a condition for everything else, but every baby manages to do it so that we do not even notice the success. My suspicion, therefore, is that we lament only our own difficulties in making the big cognitive or artistic breakthrough, without in fact wanting it to be easy for all others to do so. This applies in other areas as well.

People who have made a substantial positive difference can look upon their lives with particular satisfaction, at least in this respect. Most of us, however, should reconcile ourselves to the notion that we are not effective players on a grand scale, and recognize the advantages.

The End Of Our Lives

Some thoughts related to our topic might comfort us at the end of our lives. If it were true that people could often make a great difference then we might have a strong reason for regret if we have not done so. Without this belief, there is less room for regret. It becomes, in one way, easier to lead a good life. This does not change the fact that those with great powers who successfully use them have in a sense led far better lives, but realizing how uncommon such lives are, realistically, may make not having lived such a life less disappointing. Moreover, if we were about to die and still had significant powers which not everyone did, our imminent death would be a great misfortune for the world (rather than, at best, just for our few close relatives and friends). But as it is, we can, in this respect, die in peace, for

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our continued existence could hardly matter more than what little our existence mattered so far in life.

Conclusion

In some ways, virtually every individual can make a difference because even the 'small' differences that we can undoubtedly make do often matter, and sometimes our actions can have wider effects. In the larger scheme of things, however, most individuals will not matter much, if at all. More remains to be said on this topic, but progressing further would depend on substantive discussion of more detailed cases. I have sought to offer a broad outline of ways whereby the fact (when it is a fact) that one single person cannot make much difference in this world is significant and, surprisingly, in many ways *positive*. The illusion that it is otherwise can be conducive to our happiness but here the truth also has its benefits. Frequently, our impotence is a piece of good fortune.

The inability to make much difference is fortunate, first, in reflecting the relative robustness of our world. A world wherein everyone could make a big difference would be a nightmare. All things considered, we cannot rationally want this, and to lament it appears to make no sense. Second, the inability to make much of a difference also contributes to the mainly deontological nature of morality, whereby we can become good by doing (or refraining from doing) things when this matters very little or not at all. Our moral worth and sense of value are thus largely independent of the extent of our effect on the world. Third, this inability often results in our being left alone to pursue our wishes, something that we might otherwise not be permitted to do. We are too small to be worth bothering with, most of our actions do not matter, and we present neither enough of a threat nor a sufficient prize. Fourth, we *should* thus be left to ourselves, in most matters, as we are in a liberal society, in large part because in many aspects of life (particularly those of personal life-style) what we do does not typically have much significance except to ourselves. Fifth, our relative lack of importance also limits the moral obligations that we might incur were we more powerful agents (let alone Super-persons). The lives of the potentially very effective can be morally demanding, harder and more dangerous in significant ways. Sixth, the fact that typically we do not make a big difference highlights the significance of those people who can make a very big difference, making the struggle and the attainment of great things even more meaningful. Finally, our relative

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insignificance in the world can limit our regret and comfort us, at the end of our lives.[10]

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