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The Donate Button: Whom Should We Help?

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Abstract

When your phone asks you to choose between helping a flooded village across the world or fixing your local school's playground, philosophy suddenly becomes personal. This article explores that everyday moral tension: should we care more for those close to us or for strangers in greater need? Moving beyond the cold logic of moral calculus, it shows how the ethics of care reframes this question not as a choice between near and far, but as a recognition of our interdependence. In a world already bound together, caring may be our deepest moral challenge.

You're on the couch, scrolling through your phone. You see a heartbreaking news story: a flood in a distant country has left tens of thousands homeless. You see faces of anguish, homes reduced to rubble, people who have lost everything. Just below, a humanitarian organization's ad offers a simple, direct solution: a 'Donate Now' button. You feel a pang of compassion, a genuine urge to help. It's easy, almost instantaneous.

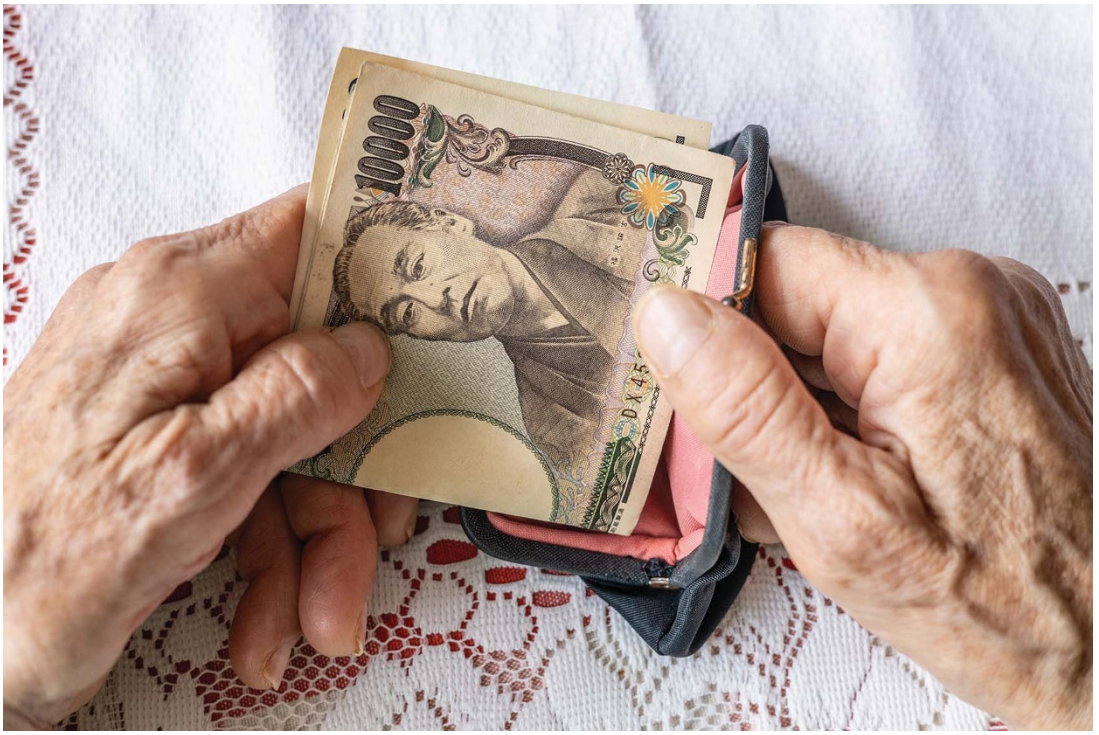
But just as your finger approaches the screen, your phone buzzes again. It's a message from your neighbourhood's school WhatsApp group. The principal reports that the playground has become dangerously dilapidated and they need to raise funds to repair it. She attaches a photo of a broken swing and a rusty slide. The message ends with a direct request: 'Could you contribute?'

You can't do both. Your budget is limited. And now you face a dilemma that is, in essence, one of the oldest and most persistent problems in ethics: To whom do you owe your help? To the distant strangers whose suffering is a matter of life and death, or to the people of your own community, whose faces you know and whose needs, though less urgent, are part of your immediate world?

This is a dilemma we all face. Inside us, two moral intuitions are constantly at war. One intuition, let's call it the impartial intuition, tells us that geography is irrelevant. A suffering child on another continent matters just as much as a suffering child on your street. Borders are arbitrary lines on a map, and our obligation is to direct our help where it can have the greatest impact, without favouritism. If your donation can save a life on the other side of the world, this intuition argues, any other use of that money is, at best, a whim. Therefore, from this point of view, we should send our help where it can have the greatest impact, regardless of distance.

The other intuition, the partial intuition, makes us think something different. It tells us that our relationships matter, a great deal. That we have a special and primary responsibility to our family, our friends, our neighbours. That building and maintaining a strong community is fundamental. That neglecting those who are

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near to care for those who are far away feels, instinctively, like a betrayal, a disconnection from our own roots.

For centuries, moral philosophy has tried to resolve this tension. And most of the time, it has sided with the impartial intuition.

The Philosophers of Impartiality and Their Strange Heroes

The two dominant moral theories from modernity to the present day are Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. Both moral theories are impartial. These moral theories, based on a type of abstract and formal reasoning, appeal to the impartial perspective as the fundamental criterion of morality in which everyone's interests are equally important. For a utilitarian like Peter Singer, the answer to the dilemma is quite simple: just do the maths. Morality consists of maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering in the world. Your personal location or your feelings are not relevant factors in that equation. In his famous article 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', Singer argues that if you see a child drowning in a pond, you would not hesitate to ruin your expensive suit to save them. Why, then, do we hesitate to donate the same amount of money to save a child from malaria, just because they are far away? For Singer, there is no moral difference whatsoever. Your child, your neighbour and a stranger in Bangladesh are worth exactly the same.

Kant, on the other hand, reaches a similar conclusion by a different path. For him, morality is not about consequences, but about universal duties. The fundamental principle, the categorical imperative, requires us to act only according to maxims that we would want to become universal law. This implies an absolute respect for the dignity and autonomy of each person. Every human being is an 'end in himself' and should never be used merely as a means to another's ends. This obligation of respect, Kant argues, knows no borders. It doesn't matter if the person is in front of you or on another continent;

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their humanity demands the same fundamental respect from you.

> ‘To whom do you owe your help? To the distant strangers whose suffering is a matter of life and death, or to the people of your own community, whose faces you know and whose needs, though less urgent, are part of your immediate world?’

These ideas are powerful and have inspired millions of people to act. But if we take them to their extreme, they can create characters that seem morally strange to us, almost inhuman. Charles Dickens gave us a perfect example in his novel *Bleak House* with the character of Mrs Jellyby. She is a philanthropist obsessed with a project to help communities in Africa. She dedicates every minute of her life to this noble cause, writing letters and organizing meetings; she always seems to be looking at something in the distance, as if she can see nothing nearer than Africa. The problem is that while she looks towards a distant continent, she is unable to see her own children, who wander around the house dirty, neglected and hungry.

Mrs Jellyby is not evil; from a purely impartial perspective, she could be considered a saint. But her sainthood is unsettling. It shows us the danger of a morality that is disconnected from human affections, that sees people as mere data points on a global map of suffering. Mrs Jellyby, as an example of impartiality, shows us that a life that does not take personal relationships into account can feel empty, because for many of us, these relationships give meaning to our lives.

Caring Only for Our Own

Faced with Mrs Jellyby’s impartiality, most of us feel that the partial intuition has a very valid point. It seems not only natural but morally right to give priority to the people with whom we share a life, a history and an emotional bond. If a building is on fire and you can only save one person, and one of them is your father and the other a complete stranger, most of us would not stop to calculate who could contribute more to the general welfare. We would simply save our father. As the philosopher John Cottingham points out, a father who in that situation decided to save the stranger (perhaps because he was a brilliant scientist about to discover the cure for a major disease) would not be hailed as a hero, but would rightly be ‘an object of moral contempt’.

In the 1980s, the ethics of care began to gain strength, proposing a moral theory in which the particular identity of people is indeed a relevant element, as well as the type of relationship we have with them and the concrete circumstances in which the moral action takes place. Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings argued that traditional morality, with its emphasis on abstract principles, justice and universal rights, reflected a predominantly masculine perspective. They proposed that there was another moral ‘voice’, historically silenced, that understood morality not as a set of rules to follow, but as the challenge of maintaining and nurturing the web of relationships that sustains us.

From the perspective of care, morality is personal, contextual and based on the responsibility we feel for concrete people. It is not about applying a universal law, but about responding to the particular needs of someone we care about. It focuses on attention and receptivity. It focuses on attending to the particular needs of each individual, not on treating them as interchangeable units in a global calculation. A mother who cares for her child does not do so because a universal

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principle commands it, but because of the bond of love and dependence that unites them.

This sounds much more human and realistic. It resonates with our feeling that our duties to our children, parents, friends and community are, in some way, deeper and more urgent. But what happens if we take this idea to its extreme? Imagine a family that is incredibly loyal and protective of its members. They take care of each other, support each other unconditionally, and always put the family first. Sounds good, right? Now, imagine that this family is the Corleone clan in *The Godfather*. Their intense internal care and mutual responsibility are built upon a morality of absolute contempt, violence and exploitation towards anyone outside the clan. Care for 'our own' becomes the perfect justification for the most brutal injustice towards 'others'.

This example shows us the danger of limitless partiality. If morality is limited to our circle of loyalty, we run the risk of legitimizing tribalism, nepotism and indifference to the suffering of those we perceive as outsiders. 'The morally good' dangerously becomes 'that which is good for those who are like me'. So, it seems we are trapped. The impartial intuition can turn us into Mrs Jellyby, disconnected from our most basic affections. The partial intuition threatens to turn us into Don Corleone, locked in a fortress of tribal loyalty. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

How Care Connects Us to Strangers

Nel Noddings argues that we have no moral obligations to geographically distant people. In her book *The Maternal Factor*, she maintains that care requires a concrete relationship between the caregiver and the one being cared for. For Noddings, attempting to attempting to replace genuine care with actions like making a donation may dilute our responsibility to those we have nearby and with whom we could establish a caring relationship. But what if we have misunderstood the ethics of care? What if, instead of being an ethic only for those who are close, it actually gives us the best tool to understand our obligations to those who are far away? Joan Tronto, for example, has taken an explicit position regarding our obligations to those who are geographically distant. According to this care theorist, we have moral obligations to both near and distant people. In a hyperconnected world, our actions and omissions have concrete effects on those we include or exclude from our care. The ethics of care, far from being limited to the domestic sphere, must recognize its global dimension. The key lies in two concepts we often overlook: interdependence and relational responsibilities.

Let's think about our daily lives. The phone in your hand was assembled by workers on another continent. The coffee you drank this morning was grown by farmers in Colombia or Ethiopia, transported on ships that crossed oceans, and processed in your country. The economic decisions made by your nation's leaders have ripple effects on global markets, affecting the livelihoods of people you will never meet. And, more dramatically, the carbon emissions generated by our lifestyle contribute to a climate change that causes droughts in the Sahel and typhoons in Southeast Asia. Whether we like it or not, we do not live on isolated islands. We are part of a deeply complex global network of interdependence. Our lives, our well-being and our destinies are inextricably intertwined with those of countless strangers. As the philosopher Judith Butler puts it, 'we share the world and maintain relationships of interdependence. Our destinies are, as they always were, given over to one another.'

Here is the crucial point: if the core of the ethics of care is that our moral obligations arise from our relationships with others, and if we have just acknowledged that we are, in fact, in a relationship of interdependence with the entire planet, then the conclusion is inescapable: our moral obligations do not end at our doorstep or at our country's borders. We have, as Joan Tronto says, relational responsibilities to those distant people, not because we share an abstract humanity, but because our lives are materially and relationally connected. The ethics of care, Tronto reminds us, must attend to the smallest, most intimate gestures of care as well as to the vast social and political structures that sustain or neglect it.

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‘Singer argues that if you see a child drowning in a pond, you would not hesitate to ruin your expensive suit to save them. Why, then, do we hesitate to donate the same amount of money to save a child from malaria, just because they are far away?’

Let’s think about it. If my country has a colonial history with another nation, that historical relationship generates responsibilities today. If I buy clothes made in sweatshops with exploitative labour conditions, that economic relationship implicates me morally. If my lifestyle contributes to the climate change that threatens a coastal community, that ecological relationship generates a duty to act. These are not abstract obligations to a faceless ‘humanity’. They are concrete responsibilities that arise from the way our lives are, in fact, connected.

This idea resolves the initial dilemma in a much more satisfactory and nuanced way. Unlike utilitarianism, the ethics of care does not say that your obligation to your child and to a child on another continent is identical. It recognizes that we have different types and degrees of relationships, and therefore different types and degrees of responsibility. The relationship with your child is one of intimacy, love and direct dependence, and it generates intense and particular obligations (like reading them a bedtime story, something you are not obligated to do for every child in the world). Your relationship with the farmer who grew your coffee is one of economic interdependence, which generates another type of responsibility (perhaps to inform yourself and support fair trade practices). Your relationship with the flood victims is one of shared humanity within a global system, which generates the responsibility to contribute to humanitarian aid, not as an optional act of charity, but as a recognition of our bond.

The ethics of care, understood in this way, does not ask us to be impartial in an inhuman way. It accepts that partiality is a natural and valuable part of our moral life. But it challenges us to expand radically our concept of ‘relationship’ and, therefore, to expand our circle of care. It pushes us to be aware of the vast network of connections in which we are already immersed and to act accordingly.

So, the next time you find yourself facing the dilemma of the donate button and the school fundraiser, the answer for care theorists is not a mathematical formula or a universal rule. It is an invitation to a deeper reflection: What is my real relationship with these people, both near and far? What kind of interdependence unites us? And what kind of concrete responsibility arises from that specific connection?

Perhaps true morality is not about choosing between those who are near and those who are far. Perhaps it is about learning to care for everyone, in different but equally meaningful ways, within the single complex world that, whether we realize it or not, we already share.

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