

Phil 108, January 28, 2014

Salience

- Last time: Unger argued that the reason we intuitively think Sedan is wrong, but Envelope is not wrong is that the needs are *salient* to us in Sedan, but not salient to us in Envelope.
- Salience is not morally important.
- So why does salience affect our intuitions?
- Salience frees us from *futility thinking*.
 - (1) Suppose that *all* you knew was that you can help some people who were in great need. Then you would think (correctly) that it would be wrong not to help them.
 - (2) *Futility Thinking*: Most of the time, however, you think of the people you can help as belonging to a *hopelessly overwhelming group*—a group such that many of its members will still be in great need no matter what you do. So helping those people seems to you futile. So you think (incorrectly) that it would *not* be wrong not to help them.
 - (3) In special cases, however, certain *positive highly subjective factors* prevent us from thinking of people as belonging to a hopelessly overwhelming group. Then helping those people does not seem futile. So you think (once again, correctly) that it would be wrong not to help them.

These *positive highly subjective factors* include:

- Salience.
- Dramatic Trouble: A bomb will go off unless James Bond...!
- Descriptive Segregation: Two *Cal students* have been...

Grouping and Segregating:

Bank Card: Leave: Nothing happens. Pick up: One more Cambodian child, picked at random, will have its foot cut off. But \$100 will not be deducted from your account. You pick up. Wrong!

Why is Bank Card wrong, whereas Envelope is not wrong? Puzzling because:

- (i) As far as the “initially promising factors” are concerned, Bank Card is more like Envelope than Sedan. (Exercise: check this.)
- (ii) The children are *not* more salient to you in Bank Card.
- (iii) Consequences of Bank Card are not as bad as those of Envelope.

Heart Card: Like Bank Card, except: Instead of *your* not losing \$100, 60 Ethiopian children, made vividly salient to you, will be saved from dying by diarrhea. You pick up. Wrong!

Lesser Loss Card: Leave: One more African, chosen at random, will lose a foot and a hand. Pick up: One more Asian, chosen at random, will lose a foot. You pick up. Not wrong!

Why is Lesser Loss Card not wrong, whereas Heart Card is wrong? Puzzling because:

- (i) You save more people from a *worse fate* in Heart Card.
- (ii) The people you save are *more salient* to you in Heart Card.
- (iii) In Heart Card you *know which people* you save (neither epistemically nor causally “amorphous”).

Explanation:

- In Lesser Loss Card, you group together the Africans and Asians, because the threat they face has the *same source*: namely, Strangemind and his minions. You’re just making the best of a bad situation.

- In Heart Card, you do *not* group together the Ethiopians and the Asians, because they face threats with different sources; the Ethiopians' diarrhea that has nothing to do with Strangemind.
- In Bank Card, there is revelatory projective grouping, since you and the Asians face threats with the same source. So it seems wrong not to make the best of a bad situation.
- In Envelope, there is distorting projective separating, because you and the children you would help save do not face threats with the same source.

The demands of morality:

A Pretty Demanding Dictate: On pain of living a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others.—In fact, not just money, but time, etc.

Bob's Bugatti: If he turns the train to his Bugatti, he is left with only \$3,000 to retire on. If he does not, then a child is run over. He allows the train to run over the child. Wrong!

Ray's Big Request from UNICEF: If he responds, he is left with only \$30,000 to retire on. If he does not, then thousands of children will die. He does not respond. Not wrong?

The big questions:

- Why do our responses differ?
- Do these different responses reflect our real Values?
- If not, which responses do reflect our real Values?

Weak Principle of Ethical Integrity: Other things being even nearly equal, if it's all right for you to impose losses on others with the result that there's a significant lessening in the serious losses suffered by others overall, then, if you're to avoid doing what's seriously wrong, you can't fail to impose *much lesser losses* on yourself, nor can you fail to accept such lesser losses, when the result's *a much more significant lessening* of such serious losses overall.

- Weak Principle + It's *not* wrong to turn the trolley onto one stranger in order to save five other strangers implies:
- It *is* wrong for you not to give up most of your money in order to save thousands.

Reasonable Principle of Ethical Integrity: Like Weak Principle, but stronger: it demands *equal or lesser* losses on yourself for *equal or greater lessening* of losses suffered by others.

- Reasonable Principle + It's *not* wrong to turn the trolley onto one stranger in order to save five other strangers implies:
- It *is* wrong for you *not* to turn the trolley on yourself!

Review Questions:

1. How would you change the Shallow Pond scenario to test/confirm whether we are given to "Futility Thinking"?
2. What is "revelatory projective grouping"? What is an example? What is "distorting projective separating"? What is an example?
3. Can one derive "Reasonable Principle of Ethical Integrity" from the assumption that ethical permissions are universalizable: that if you may X in circumstances C, then anyone else may X in circumstances C? Does your answer make the Reasonable Principle more or less plausible, in your view?