



Fellow Strangers: Physical Distance and Evaluations of Blameworthiness

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Accepted: 16 April 2021
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1 Introduction

For most of us, often unthinkingly, physical distance deeply informs our sense of moral obligation towards one another, and especially our obligation to offer assistance to those in need. Call this intuitive notion the standard view.¹

We see the assumptions of the standard view at work everywhere. We would consider it utterly depraved to ignore a starving person on our doorstep, whereas it is largely considered permissible to ignore the starvation of distant others (to donate to such causes is often considered philanthropic, rather than obligatory). The standard view is aligned with the influential idea that charity begins at home, and that we should first attend to the needs of people close to us before addressing the needs of people who are farther-flung, even if those distant needs are considerably more urgent. This idea has massive geopolitical ramifications, especially since the nature of global inequality means that those with the most urgent need for help are often situated at a great physical distance from those who would most easily be able to provide it. The moral relevance of physical distance is also crucial in considering the global refugee crisis. The standard view implies that countries that have the greatest obligation to assist refugees and asylum-seekers are not necessarily those which are the most able to do so (financially and infrastructurally) but those which are nearest. It is also implicated in the perilous journeys that refugees and asylum-seekers regularly undertake in their efforts to attain the crucial physical proximity which would strengthen their moral claims to assistance.² It is no exaggeration to say that

¹ Following Frances M. Kamm, *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (OUP, 2006).

² See Constanze Binder & Conrad Heilmann, "Duty and Distance," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2017): 558–561 for a further discussion of the question of distance with regards to refugees.

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in many ways the standard view concerning the moral relevance of distance shapes our world.

A significant literature in moral philosophy is dedicated to challenging the standard view. Peter Singer and Peter Unger, in particular, have argued that the alleged moral significance of distance is in fact illusory.³ Many others have responded in turn, disputing the impartialist conception of morality that informs Singer and Unger's positions. In this paper I will argue that the distinction between evaluations of blameworthiness and evaluations of wrongdoing is crucial to properly understand the role of distance in our moral lives. In making this case I will draw on Quality of Will accounts of blameworthiness, and suggest that physical distance between strangers can be fundamentally relevant to appraisals of inter-personal moral concern, even if it is irrelevant to the moral permissibility and impermissibility of certain acts or omissions. I will consider the explanatory value of this distinction with regards to the moral relevance of distance, both in the philosophical literature, and in our everyday deliberations about what we owe to one another, and when.

Singer and Unger's key arguments against the standard view famously proceed via analogy. We feel a patent sense of obligation to assist strangers in distress, provided they are physically near to us. In Singer's example you encounter a child drowning in a pond: it is clear that you ought to save the child, even if doing so comes at a cost to yourself (for instance, destroying your expensive suit).⁴ In Unger's example you encounter a wounded man at the intersection of two desolate roads: if you assist the man the fine upholstery of your vintage sedan will be soaked through with blood, which will be costly to restore. Once again, it seems patent that you ought to incur the cost and assist the stranger.⁵

Contrast these cases with a more common scene: say I get an email asking me to donate \$50 dollars to save the life of a child in Yemen. Let's stipulate that the cause is true and that my donation would succeed in this rescue. In this case we commonly think that while it would be good of me to donate, I have no moral obligation to assist and it would be permissible for me to ignore the email (mark as spam and unsubscribe) and keep my money.

How can we have such stringent obligations to assist strangers in distress in some cases, but so little obligation in others? One of the fundamental differences here is physical distance. In *Pond* and *Sedan* someone and their urgent needs are right in front of us; in *Email* they are far away. But once we isolate this difference, it seems like an astonishingly irrelevant distinction. How could our moral instincts compel us so incontrovertibly to save the person in front of us, but feel so little for another person because they happen to be farther away? How could our most fundamental moral obligations towards one another turn not on facts about our mutual humanity, or about what could be gained at what cost, but rather on the simple progression of

³ Key texts here include Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence & Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, 3 (1972): 229–243 (and many subsequent developments of this argument) and Peter Unger *Living High and Letting Die* (OUP, 1996).

⁴ The case first appears in Singer op. cit., p. 231.

⁵ See Unger, op. cit., pp. 24 and 25.

meters through space? As Singer writes: “If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him).”⁶

According to Singer and Unger, distance functions as a sort of moral optical illusion that we ought to liberate ourselves from. Our psychological limitations obscure the moral question, but we glimpse the moral truth in the near case (in the patent obligation to assist), and it is in the far case that we are tragically mistaken.⁷ In turn, the genuine nature of our moral obligations—both personally and geopolitically—is profoundly different from what we often suppose. In particular: we have far greater obligations to assist distant strangers in need than generally presumed, and we live utterly impermissibly in ignoring their preventable suffering.⁸ If we were not so deceived, we would recognize that (at the very least) we ought to be giving away a substantial portion of our income to assist distant strangers in absolute poverty.

This view has become very influential and underlies prevalent positions within the Effective Altruism movement, which challenge the relevance of proximity with regards to our duties to assist. This challenge emerges both with regard to who we have obligations towards (i.e. the distant as well as the proximate), and also with regard to how we ought to meet these obligations. For instance, it might be better, all told, to make a fortune on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley and give away your millions to people you have never encountered than it would be to earn less in a more hands-on philanthropic role.

An immediate response to our divergent reactions to proximate cases like *Pond* or *Sedan* and distant cases like *Email* is to question whether or not our intuitions are genuinely responding to distance itself, or whether distance is merely acting as a proxy or heuristic for some other factor. Much of the debate concerning the moral relevance of distance has involved the proposition and analysis of these alternatives.⁹ For the remainder of this section I will look at some of the main contenders. (I will return to some of these proxies in Section III, when I consider the sort of relevance they have to assessments of blameworthiness, rather than to assessments of moral permissibility and impermissibility).

As yet I have been using the term *distance* loosely, and largely with reference to physical distance. Physical distance, however, is often correlated to social or relational distance. When someone is closer to us in space, it often indicates that we have a closer relationship: they are a neighbor, a colleague, a fellow citizen. One suggestion is therefore that we intuit physical proximity as possessing moral

⁶ Singer, op. cit., p. 232.

⁷ Unger quickly dismisses the significance of distance to our intuitions, and focuses instead on the related factor of salience, to which I will soon turn.

⁸ Importantly I am focusing on the question of assistance. It is far less controversial that we have negative obligations not to harm or exploit others (regardless of whether they are distant strangers), which is not to deny that we often fail with regards to these negative obligations.

⁹ Kamm, in particular, has undertaken an extensive project of “equalizing cases,” constructing comparisons where all but one variable is held constant. She argues on this basis that physical distance can have moral relevance in itself; i.e. that nearness can matter from the moral point of view. (See Francesco Orsi, “Obligations of Nearness,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 41 (2008): 1–21 for a response to Kamm).

relevance simply because it correlates with social and relational proximity. Such relationships have moral relevance: we all take ourselves to have special obligations generated by our special relationships, even if there is significant ongoing debate about the foundation and limits of these obligations.¹⁰

The question of special relationships is important to my discussion, and I will return to it. But for present purposes we can quickly dispense with the idea that physical distance is only a proxy for relational distance. The correlation is wildly imperfect, after all, and it is easy to distinguish the two factors. Our close relationships are becoming increasingly uncoupled from physical proximity, helped along by communication technologies. On the other hand, the encounters involved in *Pond* and *Sedan*, which seem to generate such strong obligations, explicitly involve *strangers*, with whom we have no established relationship, and who could be interchanged with any other individual without affecting the case. We could even move the near cases to foreign countries, or stipulate that those requiring assistance are in a foreign country, without reducing the sense of obligation.¹¹ So it seems that social and relational proximity cannot be doing all the work in these cases.

Alternatively, we might think that distance is merely a proxy for (different forms of) causal efficacy with regards to our abilities to assist. Distance affects our capacity to assist in many significant respects. We are often unaware of distant suffering which means we are unable to assist. We might also be able to help more efficiently, and at less cost, when we are near, and our efforts might have more certain or determinate outcomes. If I drag the drowning person to the edge of the pond, they will be saved, but who knows what will happen if I click the donate now hyperlink? These considerations seem to have both pragmatic and moral relevance because they clearly impact the effectiveness of our interventions. But once again: these considerations needn't correspond to distance, and in many cases they don't. If this philosophical conversation is to have any point at all, we must grant the possible efficacy of distant indirect assistance. But doing so is hardly implausible: it is easy to imagine near and far cases which are equally certain and equally costly; indeed, given the nature of the global economy (and how far a dollar will get you in different economies), you might be able to do a lot more to alleviate distant rather than near suffering.

So while these alternative factors—concerning social and relational distance, and causal efficacy—have moral relevance, they do not necessarily distinguish near cases from far cases. And yet the cases are clearly distinct in important respects, which seem to have bearing on our intuitive responses to them.

In deliberating about what the crucial distinction amounts to, Unger suggests that the main factor we are responding to in the near cases, rather than distance, is the salience or conspicuousness of the need. “Even while the imperiled folks peopling certain cases have absolutely vital needs to be met, since their dire needs *aren't*

¹⁰ See Soran Reader, “Distance, Relationship and Moral Obligation,” *The Monist*, 86, 3 (2003): 367–381 and Diane Jeske, “Special Obligations,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall Edition, 2019), Edward N. Zalta (Ed) for overviews.

¹¹ See Kamm, *op. cit.*

conspicuous to you, the examples' agent, our intuitive response has your conduct as quite all right."¹² Someone drowning right in front of us, or badly injured, is forceful and striking in a way that an email charity solicitation can never be. This clearly makes a massive psychological difference to us, but (as Unger argues) it does not seem to hold moral weight. Someone's life should not matter any less or be any less worth saving because their distress does not make for a compelling or wrenching scene to their would-be rescuer.

Unger also considers the powerful psychological effect of futility thinking. In the case of global poverty, we are overwhelmed by the vastness of the problem and how insignificant our individual contributions would be: no matter what we do, the world will still be consumed by avoidable death, disease and suffering. On the other hand, with *Pond* or *Sedan* we seem able to offer a comprehensive solution: once we have intervened, everything is set right. In turn we feel immense purposefulness with regards to the near cases, and immense futility with regards to the distant cases. But once again, as Unger argues, this is not a sound basis for moral judgment.¹³ What's more, instead of an alternative to the moral illusion generated by distance, it is merely a version of the illusion. After all, we are not actually able to take care of the whole problem in the case of *Pond* or *Sedan* (it is not that we thereby rid the world of dire need); the only thing we resolve is the *near* problem. If we were to assist in distant causes we could also resolve the dire need of certain individuals, but of course we would not resolve the dire needs of every individual. That happens in neither case, and again distance is doing the work here, insofar as we mistake the near problem for the only problem.

Finally, factors concerning how many potential helpers are present seem to make an enormous difference to our perceived sense of moral obligation. In *Pond* and *Sedan* we are presented as the only hope of salvation. On the other hand, the email solicitation was presumably distributed very widely. But the extent to which this factor should hold moral weight has also been challenged. "I admit that there is a psychological difference between the cases; one feels less guilty about doing nothing if one can point to others, similarly placed, who have also done nothing," Singer writes. "Yet this can make no real difference to our moral obligations. Should I consider that I am less obliged to pull the drowning child out of the pond if on looking around I see other people, no farther away than I am, who have also noticed the child but are doing nothing?"¹⁴ From this vantage, the sense in which it is *wrong* to allow the person to drown cannot turn on the number of bystanders, and indeed it would be strangely paradoxical if it did: if it became more and more permissible to allow the person to drown as more and more people were able to prevent it.

Scenarios like *Pond* and *Sedan* are often construed as rescue cases, and we intuitively feel that a range of special moral obligations attends to such life-threatening situations. To fail to assist in such cases strikes us as a moral failure of the most fundamental kind, and an indication of gross indifference to the value of other lives

¹² Unger, op. cit., p. 28.

¹³ See Unger, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁴ Singer, op. cit., p. 233.

and the suffering of other people.¹⁵ Yet even our impression that some situations as rescue cases, and others not, seems fundamentally responsive to distance. After all, we are indifferent to so much suffering in the world (much of it life-threatening) while feeling we are acting permissibly. How does business-as-usual transform into rescue? How does permissible indifference transform into *gross* indifference? How could such a fundamental transformation in what is required of us be necessitated by something as morally neutral and seemingly meaningless as physical distance?

For the likes of Singer and Unger, while these alternative factors might make a big psychological difference (as, indeed, does distance), none of them carries sufficient moral weight, and certainly not in comparison to the fundamental moral question: what good can I do and at what cost to myself?¹⁶ If these factors are morally irrelevant in themselves, then they do not provide successful proxies for distance or grant our divergent reactions to the near and far cases any moral foundation. When we interrogate the moral relevance of distance, it seems that one person cannot be less worth saving than another simply because they are farther away. But nor can a person be less worth saving because their need doesn't make for a compelling scene, or because their crisis doesn't falsely present itself as an isolated incident, or because there are many people in a position to assist, rather than few.

I will revisit some these factors while making the case for the relevance of distance to evaluations of blameworthiness. I will begin, in Section II, by elaborating on the distinction I am drawing here between wrongdoing and blameworthiness, and by introducing the Quality of Will conception of blameworthiness which I will be drawing on. Thereafter, in Section III, I will argue that factors (including distance) which might be irrelevant from the point of view of morality can nevertheless be deeply relevant to assessments of moral concern between individuals, and therefore to evaluations of blameworthiness. In the fourth and final section I will consider the explanatory value of this distinction. I explore two arguments in particular. The first I call the No Worse argument: the rejection of the standard view counterintuitively implies that it is no worse to ignore proximate suffering than it is to ignore distant suffering (a version of this argument is sometimes invoked in a self-serving way by wealthy individuals living in impoverished societies, arguing that their failure to assist is no worse than the failure of wealthy individuals farther away). Secondly, I will respond to what is sometimes called the Callousness Objection: the argument that rejecting the standard view implies that we should not intervene in either *Pond* or *Sedan*, and should rather direct the resources we thereby preserve to distant poverty relief. Throughout I will make the case that drawing out this distinction—and emphasizing the difference between these two paradigms of moral evaluation—elucidates some of our confounding intuitions with regards to the relevance of proximity and distance in our moral lives.

¹⁵ See Judith Lichtenberg, *Distant Strangers* (CUP, 2014), p. 120.

¹⁶ These costs needn't be construed in a consequentialist sense. Singer's proposed principle holds that if we can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of (comparable) moral worth, you ought to do it. Singer's phrasing is deliberately ambiguous on the question of what constitutes moral worth. Singer has offered the principle in various strengths, and the weaker iterations do not require a comparable sacrifice.

2 Paradigms of Moral Evaluation

A central aspect of this debate has been the standoff between partial and impartial conceptions of morality, where these two conceptions are pitted against each other as competing interpretations of what morality requires. Our intuitions of impartiality—the inherent moral equality of people—fundamentally conflict with our intuitions of partiality: that I am morally permitted, and even required, to favor me and mine. Either extreme seems to generate morally repulsive implications. Full partiality would say that we owe nothing to the person drowning in the pond, or the bleeding man on the side of the road (they are strangers after all). And full impartiality would require us to rescue two drowning strangers instead of our own child.

Partialists have argued that any relationships to which we attach significance also generate special obligations.¹⁷ To question the value of such obligations is therefore also to question the value of our most important relationships. Impartialists, on the other hand, have contended that this lauded partiality is ultimately a sort of prejudice—albeit a prejudice to which we sometimes attach a great deal of sentiment—and that insofar as our partial inclinations conflict with independent values like fairness, equality, and beneficence, then they also conflict with morality.¹⁸ Importantly, this disagreement concerns how these two forces should be balanced from the point of view of morality, or about what morality itself requires.

In contrast, I will propose that two different and indeed independent paradigms of moral evaluation are at play. One paradigm concerns objective conceptions of right and wrong action. The other paradigm concerns the praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of particular agents. In emphasizing the distinction between these two paradigms, I am not pitting partialist and impartialist conceptions of morality against each other. Instead, I am looking at two very different paradigms of moral evaluation that do not necessarily track each other (and indeed often radically diverge). This can leave open that there is a partialist aspect to morality, or a balance to be struck, while maintaining that the factors that determine what morality requires are distinct from the factors that determine when an agent is blameworthy, and to what extent.

In folk use, we often think of blameworthiness and wrongdoing as two sides of the same coin. But while there is of course a strong relationship between these two forms of evaluation, they are also very different, and they can fundamentally diverge. Blameworthiness and wrongdoing plainly come apart: this is the basis of excuse. When someone is excused (as opposed to when they are justified) we recognize that they have done wrong, but we mitigate their blameworthiness.¹⁹ Say the members of some Jonestown-like cult have been manipulated into believing that they ought to kill their own children by poison. Now if, under the circumstances, we

¹⁷ See, for example, Samuel Scheffler, “Relationships and Responsibilities” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 26, 3 (1997): 189–209.

¹⁸ See Unger, op. cit.

¹⁹ See Lichtenberg, 2014, p. 125. Conversely, though more controversially, some have argued that one can be blameworthy even when you have done no wrong (See Peter A. Graham, “A Sketch of a Theory of Moral Blameworthiness” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 88, 2 (2014): 388–409).

have misgivings about the blameworthiness of these brainwashed parents, it need not imply that they did no wrong in killing their children, nor that they did not violate fundamental moral requirements in their acts.

There are different ways to describe the remit of moral action, some substantially more demanding than others, but this variability is compatible with the distinction between evaluations of wrongdoing and evaluations of blameworthiness I am drawing on here. If we adopt a particularly demanding, impartialist interpretation of right action, the divergence between wrongdoing from blameworthiness becomes particularly stark (given how often we will fall short of morality's stringent demands). In what follows I will often draw on the impartialist perspective on right action, since the different perspective the paradigm of blameworthiness offers is most interesting to consider in those cases where it diverges furthest from the paradigm of wrongdoing. But the divergence between these evaluations does not rely on adopting such a demanding interpretation. Various conceptions of moral worth are compatible with the independence of evaluations of blameworthiness.²⁰ This is particularly so when blameworthiness is conceived on the attitudinal, Quality of Will grounds which I will be evoking, and to which I now turn.

To say that someone is blameworthy is to say that blaming them would be warranted or appropriate. Blame here involves negative reactive attitudes, and particularly feelings of resentment or indignation. There are competing accounts concerning the circumstances under which blame is warranted. Prominently among them, Quality of Will (QW) accounts propose that blame is ultimately warranted in response to the insufficient moral concern of one agent to another. We generally demand that other moral agents—even complete strangers—have a certain degree of good will towards us, or at the very least that they do not possess ill will towards us, or gross indifference. This implicit demand is, in some respects, the very basis of our shared moral community. And when a moral agent fails to meet this demand—with regards to ourselves, or with regards to others—we are warranted in feeling resentment or indignation towards them, and in blaming them for their failure.

On QW accounts, a person is excused from wrongdoing when we see that (contrary to first appearances, perhaps) their wrongdoing neither arose from nor expressed an objectionable pattern of moral concern. There is a massive array of different attitudes we can have towards one another: at the most hostile end of the spectrum we can feel malice or ill will towards someone, whereas at the most benevolent end we may even prioritize someone else's equivalent interests above our own.

²⁰ For instance Liam Murphy has argued for far less demanding moral requirements than those proposed by Singer and Unger, on the grounds that morality must be responsive to concerns about fairness. Drawing on the distinction I am emphasising here, Murphy evokes the concept of “blameworthy right-doing” when considering actors who decline to assist (though they could easily do so) beyond their fair share. According to Murphy, what they have done (the act) is permissible, but it is callous and otherwise deficient in ways that render them blameworthy. (See Liam B. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (OUP, 2000), p. 132; See Richard J. Arneson “Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence?” in D. Chatterjee (Ed) *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, (CUP, 2004), pp. 33–58 for a response to Murphy on this question).

There are many gradations in between: we may feel apathy and indifference; recognition and respect; care and good will.

On their own, these attitudes do not correspond in any straightforward way with evaluations of sufficient or insufficient concern, and therefore with appraisals of blameworthiness. What constitutes insufficient concern will be entirely determined by facts about our moral relationship to one another. One might be blameworthy even if you have a great deal of concern for someone if what the moral relationship calls for is prioritization. (A parent of a small child is perhaps the paradigm instance where prioritization of another person's interests is sometimes required as an expression of sufficient concern). On the other hand, even our most negative attitudes can be appropriate in certain circumstances: if you abused or betrayed me, for instance, my subsequent ill will towards you is not constitutive of insufficient concern, and blame towards me would not be warranted on account of my justified contempt.

With this in mind let me look at a modified *Sedan* case.

Sedan (SUV): While attempting to travel long distance in your vintage sedan, you have found yourself stranded on the side of a dirt road for hours. Finally, another driver approaches in a new SUV, much better suited to the terrain. You wave your arms frantically, fully anticipating rescue. But while the driver slows down enough to look at you (and give you and your enfeebled sedan a disdainful stare) he soon drives on, leaving you abandoned in his dust. Fueled by a surging resentment you eventually manage to get the sedan to start again and continue driving. When, some miles later, who should you find standing lamely near their smoking SUV than that very same man! What's more, he seems to have cut his leg, which is bleeding profusely. If you were to help him, you would forever destroy the original upholstery on your seats, which will cost a fortune to replace. The larger issue, though, is that you despise this man. You smile broadly at him as you drive by.

In evaluating this case, we do not only have recourse to assessments of what is morally permissible and impermissible, we also have recourse to assessments of blameworthiness and its extent. Whoever drives past the bleeding man—whether in *Sedan* or *SUV*—expresses contemptible attitudes towards him and his wellbeing. But our analysis of the propriety of these contemptible attitudes is sensitive to facts about the relationship between the agents involved. In *SUV* the bleeding man is someone who has wronged you and shown you disdain. As I suggested above, what qualifies as sufficient concern for someone who has wronged you is plausibly less than what qualifies as sufficient concern for a complete stranger. In this respect, the contemptible attitudes expressed in failing to assist are more justified in *SUV* than they are in *Sedan*, and we therefore consider you less blameworthy for driving on.

I think this analysis captures some of our contradictory feelings with regards to the case. We consider you significantly less blameworthy for driving off in *SUV*, and we further recognize that the bleeding man has little standing to blame you. Nevertheless, this assessment with regards to blameworthiness is distinct to assessments about what morality requires under the circumstances, and to whether or not your failure to assist was morally permissible. From this vantage, it could remain

straightforwardly obligatory to save the bleeding man in *SUV*, and straightforwardly wrong to drive on. He does not cease being worthy of rescue because of how he has treated you, even if your unwillingness to rescue him becomes much more understandable. It matters enormously that this person has treated you badly, but it does not necessarily matter to the moral reasons that generate the obligation to assist. And while we might find you less blameworthy, this need not imply that you do no wrong (or even less wrong) in driving off.

When we emphasize the distinction between these paradigms, we see that evaluations of blameworthiness admit a range of considerations—and sometimes relatively petty considerations—that do not seem relevant to the ideals of morality itself, or to assessments of the permissibility or impermissibility of particular acts, even if they are plainly relevant to the intricate attitudinal exchanges, understandings and expectations which inevitably manifest between moral agents, and which blameworthiness fundamentally concerns.

As we have seen, what qualifies as sufficient concern within our moral relationships is immensely variable and context-dependent. This is especially clear within our established relationships. My interest, however, is what we demand of strangers. I will argue that some of this enormous variability also enters into our relationships with strangers, depending on how our lives intersect with each other. In particular, I will argue that the rudimentary relationship established by physical proximity can markedly increase what is required between strangers as an expression of sufficient concern. If this is so, physical proximity can vastly amplify and intensify blameworthiness in cases where one falls short of these higher standards of concern.

3 Distance & Blameworthiness

Almost everyone in the world is a stranger to us, and us to them. If there is any requirement of sufficient concern for these billions of people it must be of the most minimal, negative variety. Generally we demand nothing more from distant strangers than that they not hinder or harm us.²¹ If distant strangers have ill will towards us, or if they are indifferent to the fact that they are causing us harm, we might be warranted in resenting them. But otherwise, we expect nothing. Of course we might hope that all people care generally about each other—that everyone wants less suffering and injustice in the world—but we cannot fairly expect all people to care specifically about *us*.

The way in which our lives intersect with the lives of strangers, however, can change things profoundly. One powerful way in which our lives intersect is via physical proximity. Physical proximity often generates an encounter between individuals: we are brought together in space. The fact of encounter, and the establishment of a relationship of you specifically to me specifically, has immediate implications to our

²¹ Though, as Judith Lichtenberg has argued, even this negative requirement is very difficult to meet in an increasingly extractive and exploitative globalized economy (See Judith Lichtenberg, “Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the ‘New Harms’” *Ethics*, 120, 3 (2010): 557–578).

sense of interpersonal expectation, and to our assessments of what is required as an expression of sufficient concern.²² Mere encounters with strangers are not the sorts of relationships to which we attach great value, or which would normally be taken to ground special moral obligations. Nevertheless, the dynamic of encounter is deeply morally transformative in our blame relationships. It becomes personal, and what we mean when we say that something is personal is precisely that we are liable to feel determinate moral hurt or anger on its account. To show somebody who I encounter sufficient concern will often involve some gesture of consideration or respect, rather than mere indifference. The forms these gestures take vary a great deal and are dependent on social custom and practice, but they are all methods of expressing mutual moral acknowledgement and methods of communicating that we care adequately for each other.

Let me take a simple example: if I am walking out of the library and someone is following behind me, it would be inconsiderate and disrespectful to let the door slam in their face, and should they feel a fleeting moment of resentment towards me on account of my lack of consideration, it would not be unwarranted or inappropriate. This is an instance of what we may call common decency. Yotam Benziman provides a variety of other examples of common decency between strangers: say somebody asks for a light, or for directions, or you see someone struggling with their packages.²³

We all feel that something is owed in these cases, though they are obviously trivial scenarios (little of moral worth is at stake in someone lighting their smoke). Rather, our sense of what is owed is tied up with our innate emotional investment in the bearing of other agents towards us, and our liability to feel moral hurt or anger when we perceive that bearing as dismissive, contemptuous or worse. The affront of having the door slam in your face has little to do with having to push it open yourself, and everything to do with feeling disrespected or unacknowledged by another person. The quality of this particular exchange depends on your lives having intersected in some significant way—in this case via proximity—since it is only under such circumstances that this particular appraisal of mutual bearings becomes possible. In this sense physical encounter can vastly expand the requirements of sufficient concern. The stranger who you snub when they ask for a light is warranted if they

²² Importantly I am exploring the relevance of these factors to evaluations of blameworthiness, rather than to evaluations of what morality itself requires, or to questions of moral permissibility and impermissibility. In contrast, Soran Reader and Fiona Woollard have both argued that factors, including proximity, are relevant to what morality requires, and to which failures to assist are morally impermissible (See Reader op. cit. and Fiona Woollard, *Doing and Allowing Harm*, (OUP, 2015)). Reader's partialist account endeavours to extend what qualifies as an obligation-generating relationship so as to capture the sense in which we owe assistance (even at great personal cost) to the strangers encountered in cases like *Pond* and *Sedan*. She contends that a relationship should be obligation-generating insofar as it involves an "actual connection" between agent and patient, and she argues that physical presence is one form that this connection can take. Woollard maintains that morality is responsive to whether the potential-helper is "personally involved" in a crisis, where proximity, personal encounter, and being in a unique position to help all establish personal involvement, and are individually sufficient to require assistance (even at great personal cost).

²³ See Yotam Benziman, "The Ethics of Common Decency," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 48 (2014): 87–94

feel some resentment; your dismissal of them becomes rude and disrespectful, even though prior to your encounter they could have almost no legitimate expectations of you at all.

These situations of courtesy and common decency are far removed from the life-and-death scenarios in *Pond* and *Sedan*. We might not even consider failures to assist in these trivial cases wrong, whereas failure to assist in the life-and-death scenarios constitutes a severe moral transgression. Yet even these more trivial scenarios allow us to recognize the changed interpersonal dynamic, and the higher standard of sufficient concern, that encounter can generate. If these factors are significant even when so little of moral worth is at stake, they become all the more so when the moral stakes are higher, and when our objectionable attitudes bind us to severe moral failures and serious wrongs.

As we have seen, much of the debate on this issue has concerned efforts to describe morally-relevant reasons why it is seriously wrong to fail to intervene in near cases, which nevertheless do not apply to distant cases (and, in turn, the rejection of these efforts). But, again, we also have recourse to the vantage of blame and blameworthiness in appraising these cases, and we might have grounds to consider the failure to intervene in near cases far more blameworthy than in distant cases. This could be true even for someone who held that there was ultimately no morally-relevant distinction between the reasons to rescue in the proximate and distant scenarios. This position allows that the fundamentally attitudinal, emotional and interpersonal considerations which ground blameworthiness, and its extent, can be altogether different from the sorts of considerations that establish what morality requires.

The division I am drawing on here, while often overlooked, has precedent within this debate. Richard Arneson, in particular, has emphasized the distinction between evaluations of wrongdoing and evaluations of blameworthiness, and has drawn on this distinction as a way of responding to over-demandingness objections leveled at Singer's conclusions.²⁴ Utilitarianism itself does not offer an account of blameworthiness, aside from the suggestion that we ought to blame those who it is most fruitful to blame, where this may or may not overlap with who is most deserving of blame.²⁵ Arneson holds that the practice of blaming, and holding responsible, can be judged by consequentialist standards (and can diverge significantly from conceptions of right and wrong), but he considers the question of *blameworthiness* separate: "Whether what I do is blameworthy depends on the character and quality of what I do and not on the further question of whether blaming me or administering sanctions would produce good consequences."²⁶

²⁴ See Arneson, 2009, op. cit., and Richard Arneson, "What Do We Owe to Distant Needy Strangers?" in J. Schaler (Ed) *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics* (Open Court, 2009), 267–293. Robert Goodin has also drawn on the distinction with regard to demandingness objections. See Robert Goodin, "Demandingness as a Virtue" *The Journal of Ethics*, 13, 1, (2009): 1–13.

²⁵ See J. J. C. Smart, "Free Will, Praise and Blame," *Mind*, 70, 279 (1961): 291–306; see also Richard J. Arneson, "The Smart Theory of Moral Responsibility and Desert," in Olsaretti, S. (Ed), *Desert and Justice* (Clarendon Press, 2003), 233–258.

²⁶ Arneson, 2009, p. 291.

I have argued that the fact of interpersonal encounter between strangers is morally transformative in our blame relationships. A related factor here, which is important to Arneson's position, is that of prevailing moral norms and conventions. In some respects our reasonable interpersonal expectations are established by common practice. What is commonly thought of as required within a society (the governing moral code) informs our sense of what is owed, expected and demanded between individuals, and therefore our sense of who is blameworthy for failing to meet these demands. Likewise, our sense of disrespect or disregard is compounded when we are let down by other moral agents in defiance of well-established expectations.

This is complicated terrain, for in proceeding we must distinguish between prevailing moral codes within a society and questions about what morality genuinely requires, and also between our blaming practice and genuine blameworthiness, while simultaneously acknowledging the interplay between these various descriptive and normative forces.²⁷ So in one respect we could offer an entirely descriptive appraisal: our established code deems it obligatory to intervene in *Pond*, but not in *Email*, and we blame failure to do so severely in *Pond*, but not in *Email*. But what does this have to do with the more normative realms of assessment? Importantly, I am not only saying that we *do* blame the individuals in the near cases like *Pond* and *Sedan* more than the far cases—though insofar as we consider these reactions separate from assessments of right action, this itself is not trivial—but that, in certain cases, they are indeed more blameworthy. To consider someone blameworthy is to make a morally evaluative claim about them. I am arguing that certain factors with regards to the near cases are indeed relevant to evaluations of blameworthiness, and not merely that we treat them as such.

Convention itself can have normative relevance. For Arneson, blameworthiness is determined by whether an agent had “reasonable opportunity” to do the right thing.²⁸ Given that the prevailing moral code within a society “exerts a massive gravitational pull on individual judgment and choice,” he argues that this prevailing code can substantially inhibit reasonable opportunity (and therefore blameworthiness).²⁹ None of this is to say, however, that evaluations of blameworthiness reliably track what morality genuinely requires. You may sometimes be excused on the basis of prevailing moral codes, but your conduct is not therefore made permissible.

This notion of opportunity is related to factors of ease and difficulty. Acting in accordance with prevailing codes—falling into the massive gravitational pull—is far easier than acting against them. We often treat difficulty as blame-mitigating: where doing the right thing would have been very easy, we treat non-compliance as more blameworthy than when doing the right thing would have been very difficult.³⁰ So the mere fact that our prevailing moral code largely treats near cases like *Pond* and

²⁷ Arneson distinguishes (following Hare) between “established moral codes” and “critical level morality.” (See Arneson, 2009, p. 289).

²⁸ Arneson, 2009, p. 291.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Dana K. Nelkin, “Difficulty and Degrees of Moral Praiseworthiness and Blameworthiness,” *Nous*, 50, 2 (2016): 356–378.

Sedan as obligatory, but distant cases like *Email* as non-obligatory, has bearing on assessments of blameworthiness for failure to assist in the respective cases.

I have argued that these features about near cases—the interpersonal aspects of proximity, which raise the requirements of sufficient concern between strangers, and factors about prevailing moral codes—are relevant to assessments of blameworthiness regardless of their relevance to moral permissibility and impermissibility. I will conclude this section by considering two further features of the near cases which, I will argue, also have bearing on assessments of blameworthiness. Earlier, when I explored some of the proxies for nearness, we looked at salience or conspicuousness, and also at the number of potential helpers. As we saw then, the moral relevance of these features has been contested by impartialists, yet in both cases it was acknowledged that these features made a significant psychological difference.

Unger rejected the relevance of conspicuousness or salience to appraisals of what morality requires. In many respects this rejection is compelling: the wrongness of letting someone suffer and die cannot turn on how much pathos their plight generates to their would-be rescuer. But once again, though we might consider morality itself above such considerations, this feature plausibly has significance in appraisals of blameworthiness. We are each capable of empathy, compassion, and moral imagination, though these capacities are limited. Still, some situations make it much easier for us to empathise and feel compassion than others. We are far more capable of feeling compassion for individuals than we are for collectives: one person's struggle is immediately more psychologically compelling to us than the struggle of thousands or millions of people. While we understand the former concretely, we can only comprehend the latter abstractly. And of course it is much easier to empathise with a person who is right in front of us than it is to empathise with people far away.³¹ In fact it becomes very difficult *not* to empathise, even if you think you should not: like the Russian villagers who, almost helplessly, gave food to starved Nazi prisoners of war, even when (at a more abstract level) they were sworn enemies.³²

Factors of ease and difficulty are relevant here too, in this case related to psychological forces. When it is very *easy* for us to have a moral response, when we are naturally motivated, the failure to do so seems to evince an altogether more troublesome pattern of concern than when it is very difficult. It is far more difficult, and it takes more imagination and effort, to feel compassion towards unseen and unknown people. On the other hand, when someone's pain and anguish is right in front of you, it becomes almost impossible not to empathise. These factors of psychological ease and difficulty play into our expectations of each other, and what sufficient concern requires in different circumstances. If you do nothing, despite the wrenching salience of my circumstances, then you must be monstrous indeed; you must care not only insufficiently, but *deeply* insufficiently, to remain unmoved by such a plight; you are not merely indifferent, like so many others, but *grossly* indifferent.

³¹ See Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (Routledge, 2007), 21–25 for further discussion on empathy and proximity.

³² See Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (Penguin, 2017).

Finally, let me turn to the powerful role played by how many potential helpers are present. As we saw earlier, Singer dismisses the moral relevance of such considerations to assessments of right action: as the number of bystanders increases, it does not become more and more permissible to allow the person to drown (until that person scarcely has a moral claim to assistance from anyone in the assembled crowd). And if we are less liable to intervene in such situations, due to whatever psychological limitations of ours, it is not because that is how it ought to be. But there is no denying that the presence of other agents makes a massive difference to our assessments of the various individuals involved, and (as Singer acknowledges) to our feelings of personal guilt and responsibility.

Again, one could consistently hold that while these psychological features do not necessarily determine what morality requires, they can nevertheless be relevant to evaluations of blameworthiness. Imagine (to use the *Sedan* case) that instead of the deserted intersection that Unger initially suggests, I see the bleeding man at a busy intersection where there are many other cars present. Say we all fail to intervene at the busy intersection (some sort of bystander effect); let us grant that we thereby all fail to do what we ought. Perhaps we are also all blameworthy, to some degree, for this failure. But shared or collective blameworthiness is a very different proposition to individual blameworthiness; while our evaluations of blameworthiness are highly determinate in individual cases, they become far more indeterminate in shared cases. If, months later, the bleeding man held a particular resentment for me alone we would feel that there was something unfair about this targeted ire. I was only in the same position as everyone else, after all; I did no worse than they did. And if he were to hold a more diffuse resentment for everyone involved in forsaking him, then we would struggle to ascertain what portion of that resentment was owed to me: how much of it was warranted, and therefore the extent to which I am individually blameworthy for the shared wrongdoing. This is a very different scenario to the one presented at the deserted intersection.

Aside from this indeterminate quality, the number of bystanders also seems relevant to our assessments of the attitudes expressed in the respective cases. When I drive past the bleeding man at the deserted intersection, I plainly evince grossly insufficient concern. Surveying the scenario, knowing well that I am his only hope of rescue, I decided that I would sooner he lose his leg than me having to ruin my seat covers. This is plainly, inescapably contemptuous. But when there are other people around, the situation is far less clear-cut. Since no one's failure to assist constitutes his fate, there is no point at which they have to make the blunt calculation of respective interests that is necessitated by the deserted intersection. They may well be thinking—as we so often do—I wish someone would do something. (Or, in our more righteous moments: Why does somebody not do something?). They can simultaneously hold that the man should be helped—must be helped!—even while they themselves do not help him. There is therefore far more room for them to do nothing in a way that does not straightforwardly express the deeply contemptuous attitude that is necessitated by failing to assist at the deserted intersection.

So we see that while these factors, which do not necessarily matter to morality itself, nevertheless matter to us: to the moral relationship between the individuals involved, and to what failure to assist would therefore mean and express. When

there is some sort of interpersonal implication between strangers—of me specifically to you specifically—it makes a massive difference to our base-level expectations towards one another. And while factors about distance (and related factors of conspicuousness, and the presence of other helpers) might not make a difference to the moral principles involved, they do make a difference to assessments of sufficient concern and evaluations of blameworthiness in the various cases.

4 Explanatory Value

The moral relevance of distance is not only of philosophical interest: it is also straightforwardly applicable to each of our lives, especially insofar as we are (at any given time) in the position of being able to provide assistance to strangers. We are all aware that there is much that we could do to alleviate distant suffering. But we are also all confronted, to varying degrees, with the needs of people who we encounter, or who are otherwise nearer to us, who might be struggling to get by in one way or another. Presumably the cases which populate this debate—while necessarily contrived in many ways—are also intended to help us to think through what is required of us in our moral lives.

In this final section I would like to consider the relevance of the distinction I am drawing here both to ongoing debates within moral philosophy, and with regards to our more informal debates concerning the moral relevance of distance. Let me begin with the latter, and in particular with what I am calling the No Worse argument. In challenging the standard view, Singer and Unger intend to compel us to recognize that our obligations are far greater than we often suppose; if this is the insight their arguments are intended to generate, I would now like to consider the *unintended* insight. Something resembling the rejection of the standard view is sometimes used in a self-serving way by wealthy individuals who live in impoverished societies who argue that, although it seems particularly bad for them to live lavishly surrounded by extreme poverty, they are in fact no worse than wealthy individuals who happen to live farther away.

In general, lavish expenditures take on a very different moral complexion in close proximity to poverty, especially where this poverty is generating suffering and even death. Usually, we have a distinct moral revulsion for people who overlook desperate need within their midst, especially if they continue to indulge their trivial desires and appetites. For this reason we typically judge well-off individuals living within impoverished societies particularly harshly.³³ Someone sitting down for a \$500 dollar dinner in Stockholm or Oslo, seems to be in a different moral position from someone sitting down for the same meal in Lagos or Delhi or Johannesburg or Manila, having potentially passed, on their way to the restaurant, hundreds of people in desperate material need.

³³ As before: there are complications here with regards to questions of harm or justice, which I am trying to isolate. Often nearness is also indicative of being *at fault* in some respect (of your material comfort being at the expense of other people's material suffering).

Let me introduce a new character to elaborate:

Tomas retired comfortably in Norway, but to really live lavishly he decided to move to a part of the world where his money would go a lot further. He settled on a rambling mansion somewhere in South East Asia. For a fee he has all his favorite delicacies imported from Europe. The area surrounding the mansion, though, is devastatingly poor. Many people work in a kind of indentured servitude, and many others are worse off still; death from malnutrition and infection are common, especially when there is drought or flooding in the region. Tomas sees this all playing out quite plainly, but he never gets involved. He didn't move here to be some sort of hero! But when he speaks to his old friends about his situation they always seem a little perturbed, and often quite judgmental. "How can you bear it Tomas?" they invariably ask. He always gets irritated when they bring this attitude to bear on his life. He knows what they think: that he is cruel, immoral; a psychopath, perhaps. But in reality they are no different. He is *near* this suffering, that it all, and they are far away from it. He bears no special obligation to these starving strangers on account of his nearness, and they possess no special reprieve on account of their distance. The world is filled with starvation and suffering and preventable disease, and everyone who does nothing about it, when they may do otherwise, is in a state of moral equivalence, whether they choose to live in the midst of all of it, as he does, or in a chic apartment in Oslo like his friends.

This No Worse argument is the shadow reasoning cast by the rejection of the standard view. Instead of dismissing the moral relevance of distance in order to obligate you *more*, you can also dismiss it in order to feel *less* obligated. If we should reject the standard view—as Singer and Unger argue—then Tomas is right too.³⁴ Although he seems particularly grotesque, this appearance of moral dereliction is *also* an optical illusion of sorts. The suffering he ignores is nearby, and he fails to respond to far more salient and conspicuous need, yes, but what does that matter to morality? He does wrong in ignoring this proximate need, and in prioritizing his trivial desires over the desperate needs of those near to him, granted, but he is *only as wrong* as any other person of his means, who similarly does nothing. All those wealthy people in wealthy societies might look, at first glance, less monstrous—they might even have the temerity to judge—but once we see that distance is morally irrelevant, we realize that this appearance is mistaken.

I think the distinction I have been emphasizing gives us a way of responding to the No Worse argument. Even if, in spending lavishly on themselves in a world where people starve needlessly, none of these people has acted as morality requires,

³⁴ In *Bungalow Compound* Unger provides a case where you arrive at your holiday Bungalow to find a plea from a local charity asking for money to save sick and dying children, including children next door. Unger posits that our intuitions in this case do not consider failure to assist wrong (See Unger, op. cit., p. 34). Like Woollard, I think we would judge the holiday-maker in Bungalow Compound more harshly than someone in a distant land. As Woollard writes: "It is not okay to sit beside your pool, sipping a margarita, knowing that the orphans are starving next door and doing nothing to help." Understood through the paradigm I am suggesting, the failure in this proximate case is more blameworthy.

it can still be the case that Tomas, who spends lavishly in close proximity to starving people, is more blameworthy for his failure, and that contrary to his protestations there is a relevant difference between himself and his distant friends.

There are various factors related to Tomas's proximity that exacerbate his blameworthiness for his failure to assist, and make resentment toward him for this failure not only more likely but also more warranted. The interpersonal aspects of encounter and the emergence of an attitudinal dynamic between individuals that proximity facilitates is one such factor; we understand the impoverished villagers as having a far more warranted claim to Tomas's concern than they would have of distant, unseen and unknown strangers. The salience and conspicuousness of their need to Tomas, who nevertheless remains unmoved, is another. His lack of motivation to assist under such circumstances, when motivation should come so easily, seems to reveal a more profound callousness than the same indifference of his distant friends. And irrespective of the moral permissibility of their acts, the attitudinal dimensions of Tomas's omissions—the flagrant, blatant and garish disregard of the desperate needs of others in favour of his own trivial desires—makes him more blameworthy. We are therefore able to capture something of the particular brutality of the wrong in Tomas' case, and its deeper relationship to him, despite his self-serving impartialist arguments.

Finally, to return to the initial cases: if we take Singer and Unger's conclusions seriously, our strong sense that we ought to help the individuals in *Pond* and *Sedan* might be mistaken. Imagine someone rushing to a meeting who passes someone drowning. They rush on though, because if they attend the meeting, they know they will make \$1000 dollars, which they will immediately use to save ten distant lives. We find this decision repellent, yet it seems that this is the course of action that Singer's principle would endorse or necessitate. Call this the Callousness Objection.³⁵ This argument has recently received more sustained attention. Anton Markoč has argued on the basis of something resembling the Callousness Objection that Singer's position is self-defeating: we are compelled by *Pond* to accept a principle that would ultimately defy the very case which has established it.³⁶

For his part Markoč holds that leaving the child to drown for the sake of the distant lives would be "gravely morally wrong."³⁷ He briefly considers the response that the act might be "cruel, callous and blameworthy" while still being morally right. I would like to end by considering this response in more detail, in light of the emphasis I have been placing on the distinction between assessments of blameworthiness and assessments of wrongdoing. I argue that having separate recourse to the attitudinal dimensions that govern blameworthiness renders the impartialist position far more compelling than it would otherwise be.

³⁵ Following Andreas Mogensen, "The Callousness Objection," in Hilary Greaves & Theron Pummer (Eds) *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* (OUP, 2019), 227–243.

³⁶ See Anton Markoč, "Draining the Pond: Why Singer's Defense of the Duty to Aid the World's Poor is Self-Defeating," *Philosophical Studies*, 177 (2020): 1953–1970.

³⁷ Markoč, op. cit., p. 1964.

To begin with, I suspect that our sense that there is no moral question here (that rescuing the proximate individual is the blatant moral requirement) is deeply informed by a range of tacit assumptions about the distant intervention. The people assisted by the abstract, distant donations never quite become real to us, nor do their hardships and struggles, and the nature of these mediated interventions remain shrouded in skepticism and suspicion regarding their efficacy. But again: if this debate is worth having, and if there is to be any moral dilemma here whatsoever, then we have to grant that the distant intervention can genuinely alleviate more suffering than the near intervention. So to begin we must endeavor to bear in mind that the suffering of these ten distant people is as real as that of the near person, and that it will be as surely alleviated by the proposed intervention.

Nevertheless, as represented, I agree that we find the callous do-gooder repellent. But how much of this disapproval stems from our response to the presumed attitudes of the actor, rather than to what they have done? The callous do-gooder is presented as acting like some sort of algorithm (doing good in cold blood or winning at life-saving, without any genuine empathy or compassion for those involved). What happens if we redescribe the case without a callous do-gooder at all, and instead evoke someone who is pained, anguished and horrified at having to make such a terrible moral choice? Imagine that they desperately want to save everyone, and yet they are forced to choose: they feel deeply compelled to rescue the person before them, but unlike most other people, they also feel deeply moved by the greater suffering they know they can prevent further away. With intense torment and remorse they choose to prevent the greater harm.

Now the decision in this case is the exact same, but are we still so sure it is gravely morally wrong? Insofar as we are more sympathetic to the anguished do-gooder's decision—and find them less repellent—our initial aversions were not based on our appraisal of the moral defensibility of their decision alone (which remains the same), but rather on a range of assumptions about the sort of callous or unfeeling nature that would allow someone to decide against the proximate intervention, despite all the social, interpersonal and psychological forces that gravitate in its favour. That is to say: quite aside from appraisals of the permissibility of their decision, we find the callous do-gooder deeply blameworthy. When we perceive them as unmoved or unmotivated in the proximate case, as feeling no care or empathy in response to the desperate scene they are confronted with, we appraise them of having fallen far short of the standards of sufficient concern for the person before them. And since the forces that generate a higher standard of sufficient concern in the near case (such as those explored in the previous section) are absent in the distant case, we consider indifference to those distant lives far less blameworthy.

Once we diminish these grounds for blameworthiness, as in the case of the anguished do-gooder, the case becomes more complex, and we are no longer as certain in our condemnation of the anguished do-gooder's difficult decision.

The demands of proximity implicate us all differently. There will be huge amounts of luck and chance involved in the scenarios we encounter. There will also be choice involved: physical distance is traversable, after all, and there will be those who take it upon themselves to go towards, rather than away from, the places in the world where assistance is most required; be they aid workers, first responders, social

workers, physicians or many others. When we consider the near cases we often seem to imagine that any decent person would invariably undertake the requisite rescues. Yet many people who find themselves in these situations, particularly in times of disaster and crisis, find they are unequal to these basic moral demands. The psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein has been studying the condition of moral injury amongst war and disaster reporters, who—through their deliberate proximity—find themselves in positions where they fail to live up to their deeply held moral convictions.³⁸ (Who do not save the bleeding man, or the drowning child). An iconic case is that of the photographer Kevin Carter, who travelled to Sudan to report on the famine in 1993. He took what became the defining image of that tragedy: a starving child buckled over on the ground, with a vulture surveying them from meters away. Carter's photograph probably did more to bring global attention to that famine than anything else. Nevertheless there was a vitriolic backlash against Carter on the publication of the photograph (which some suggest contributed to his suicide some months later). The resentment and anger turned on Carter's failure to intervene sufficiently to assist the child.

In some respects it is ludicrous that people far away and comfortable should be in a position to look down on Carter's choices in Sudan, or those of many other people who try (albeit imperfectly) to confront the cruelty, brutality and desperation of the world, rather than keeping it at a safe remove. It is surely a fiction of ours to believe that we live fundamentally more moral lives, or altogether more permissibly, on account of this cultivated distance. On the other hand, if there is truth to what I have been arguing, it also remains the case that facts about proximity are morally transformative when it comes to assessments of blameworthiness, and those individuals who brave proximity open themselves up to forms of moral evaluation, scrutiny and critique that those who stay far away do not.

These two forms of evaluation are incommensurable, in many ways. We can't compare what we owe the person we encounter in desperate need with all the people who are far away who we could similarly assist. If someone right in front of you is imploring you for food, is it any kind of answer to explain how much you give to charity? In some respects the one thing doesn't seem to have anything to do with the other. And navigating the demands of these different realms is never done without some cost, and without forsaking something in the effort to find balance. Scheffler refers to the "deep and persistent tension," perhaps irresolvable, at the heart of the debate between the partialists and the impartialists.³⁹ And though I suggest that some of this tension (or at least contradiction) can be avoided in recognizing the distinction between evaluations of blameworthiness and evaluations of wrongdoing, it is also clear that this tension persists, and these different paradigms of evaluation will often pull us in different directions.

Doing the least wrong does not necessarily make you the least blameworthy. This has some tragic implications in our moral lives. Sometimes it is precisely the people

³⁸ See Anthony Feinstein, Bennis Pavisian, & Hannah Storm, "Journalists covering the refugee and migration crisis are affected by moral injury not PTSD" *JRSM*, 9, 3 (2018).

³⁹ Scheffler, op. cit., pp. 207 and 208.

who make the greatest moral efforts who land up opening themselves up to the most rebuke from the perspective of blame and blameworthiness. There is a prevalent instinct within us—the “I don’t want to get involved” instinct—to retreat from, rather than approach, situations in which assistance and intervention are most desperately required. In some respects this can be understood as simple laziness or selfishness. But there is also an aspect of cowardice and fear to it. It can seem safer, preferable, to withdraw from these contested efforts and be, rather, only abstractly in the wrong, and have no one to answer to on account of the inadequacy of your imperfect efforts. Often to do more is to make yourself more open to a kind of interpersonal moral rebuke. The worst among us are sometimes rewarded in this way: they rarely disappoint these expectations, since they rarely put themselves in a position to generate any. On the other hand the best among us can sometimes be punished in this way, and it is often the people nearest by—even when this very nearness indicates something relatively good about them—who will experience the most indignation and resentment.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to the journal editor and readers for their helpful feedback, and to Anton Markoč who generously took the time read a draft of this paper.

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