

4. Why Don't We Give More?

The world would be a much simpler place if one could bring about social change merely by making a logically consistent moral argument. But it's clear that even people who believe that they should give more don't always do so. We've learned a lot, in recent decades, about the psychological factors that lead people to behave in various ways. Now it's time to apply some of that knowledge to our problem: why people don't give more than they do, and what might lead them to give more.

If everyday life has not already convinced you that there is a human tendency to favor our own interests, psychologists have set up experiments to prove it. For example, Daniel Batson and Elizabeth Thompson gave participants in an experiment tasks to assign themselves and another participant, who was not present. One of the tasks was described as relatively interesting and included a significant benefit, while the other was described as boring and had no benefit. The participants were also told: "Most participants feel that giving both people an equal chance—by, for example, flipping a coin—is the fairest way to assign themselves and the other participant the tasks." A coin was provided for that purpose. Nobody except the par-

participant could see how the coin fell. Interviewed after they had assigned the task, all of the participants said that the most moral response was either to flip the coin or to give the more rewarding task to the other participant. Yet about half chose not to flip the coin, and of those who did not use the coin, more than 80 percent gave themselves the more rewarding task. More remarkably, however, it seems that on 85 percent of the occasions when the coin was tossed, it landed on the side that assigned the more rewarding task to the person who tossed it!¹

Yet we often do kind and generous things. The medical services of most developed nations rely for their blood supply on the altruism of ordinary citizens who donate their own blood to strangers. They give up their time and go through having a needle inserted in a vein—an experience many find unsettling—for no reward except perhaps a cup of indifferent coffee or tea. They don't even get priority if they should need blood themselves. And when people say without the slightest hesitation that they would save the drowning child, they are probably telling the truth. So why don't we save children in developing countries, if the cost of doing so is modest? Beyond the simple battle between selfishness and altruism, other psychological factors are at work, and in this chapter I will describe six of the most important.

The Identifiable Victim

Researchers seeking to find out what triggers generous responses paid participants in a psychological experiment and then gave them the opportunity to donate some of the money to Save the Children, an organization that helps children in poverty both in the United States and in developing countries. One group was given general information about the need for donations, including statements like “Food shortages in

Malawi are affecting more than three million children.” A second group was shown the photo of a seven-year-old Malawian girl named Rokia; they were told that Rokia is desperately poor and that “her life will be changed for the better by your gift.”

The group receiving information about Rokia gave significantly more than the group receiving only general information. Then a third group was given the general information, the photo, and the information about Rokia. That group gave more than the group that had received only the general information, but still gave less than the group that had received *only* the information about Rokia.² Indeed, even adding a second identifiable child to the information about Rokia—while providing no general information—led to a lower average donation than when only one child was mentioned. The subjects of the experiment reported feeling stronger emotions when told about one child than when told about two children.³

Another study produced a similar result. One group of people was told that a single child needed lifesaving medical treatment that costs \$300,000. A second group was told that eight children would die unless they were given treatment that could be provided for all of them at a total cost of \$300,000. Again, those told about the single child gave more.⁴

This “identifiable victim effect” leads to “the rule of rescue”: we will spend far more to rescue an identifiable victim than we will to save a “statistical life.” Consider the case of Jessica McClure, who was eighteen months old in 1987 when she fell into a dry well in Midland, Texas. As rescuers worked for two and a half days to reach her, CNN broadcast images of the rescue to millions of viewers around the world. Donors sent in so much money that Jessica now has what has been reported to be a million-dollar trust fund.⁵ Elsewhere in the world, unnoticed by the media and not helped by the money

donated to Jessica, about 67,500 children died from avoidable poverty-related causes during those two and a half days according to UNICEF. Yet it was obvious to everyone involved that Jessica must be rescued, no matter what the cost. Similarly, we do not abandon trapped miners or lost sailors, even though we could save more lives by using the money spent on such rescues on making dangerous intersections safer. In providing health care, too, we will spend much more trying to save a particular patient, often in vain, than promoting preventive measures that would save many people from becoming ill.⁶

The identifiable person moves us in a way that more-abstract information does not. But the phenomenon doesn't even require particular details about the person. People asked by researchers to make a donation to Habitat for Humanity in order to house a needy family were told either that the family "has been selected" or that the family "will be selected." In every other detail, the wording of the request was the same. In neither case were the subjects told who the family was, or would be, nor were they given any other information about the family. Yet the group told that the family had already been selected gave substantially more.⁷

Paul Slovic, a leading researcher in this field, believes that the identifiable—or even predetermined—person appeals to us so much because we use two distinct processes for grasping reality and deciding what to do: the affective system and the deliberative system.⁸ The affective system is grounded in our emotional responses. It works with images, real or metaphorical, and with stories, rapidly processing them to generate an intuitive feeling that something is right or wrong, good or bad. That feeling leads to immediate action. The deliberative system draws on our reasoning abilities, rather than our emotions, and it works with words, numbers, and abstractions rather than with images and stories. These processes are conscious, and they require us to appraise logic and evidence. As a result, the deliberative system

takes a little longer than the affective system, and does not result in such immediate action.

An individual in need tugs at our emotions. That's our affective system at work. Mother Teresa expressed this when she said: "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."⁹ If we pause to think about it, we know that "the mass" is made up of individuals, each with needs as pressing as "the one," and our reason tells us that it is better to act to help that individual *plus* an additional individual than to help just the one, and even better to help those two individuals *plus* a third individual, and so on. We know that our deliberative system is right, yet for Mother Teresa as for many others, this knowledge lacks the impact of something that tugs on our emotions the way a single needy person does.

More evidence about the distinctive ways in which these two systems work comes from some more-complicated experiments carried out by the same team that did the experiments comparing the responses of people given information about a "Rokia" with those given more general information. This time the researchers were investigating whether arousing the emotions of the research subjects led them to respond differently to the two kinds of information. Once again, the participants all completed a standard survey, and then one randomly selected group was given emotionally neutral questions (for example, math puzzles) while the other group was given questions designed to arouse their emotions (for example, "When you hear the word 'baby,' what do you feel?"). Then everyone was given the opportunity to donate some of their payment for the experiment to a charity, but for half of each group the information included Rokia only, while the other half was given the more general information about people in need. Those who had answered the emotionally arousing questions and received the information about Rokia gave almost twice as much as those who got the same information but had responded to the emotionally neutral questions.

But the amount given by those who received the general information was not significantly affected by the questions they had answered. Our response to the images and stories—and thus to identifiable victims—is dependent on our emotions, but our response to more-abstract facts, conveyed in words and numbers, remains much the same whatever the state of our emotions.¹⁰

Parochialism

Two hundred and fifty years ago, philosopher and economist Adam Smith invited his readers to reflect on their attitudes to distant strangers by asking them to imagine that “the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake.” Consider, he then asked his readers, “how a man of humanity in Europe,” who had no special connection with that part of the world, would receive the news. Whatever that person might say, Smith contends, “he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened.”¹¹

The tragic earthquake that struck China’s Sichuan province in 2008 showed only too clearly that Smith’s observation still holds. Though the earthquake killed 70,000 people, injured 350,000, and made nearly 5 million homeless, its impact on me was quite temporary. Reading about the deaths and seeing the devastation on television aroused my sympathy for the families of the victims, but I did not stop work, lose sleep, or even cease to enjoy the normal pleasures of life. No one I knew did. Our intellect—our deliberative system—takes in the news of the disaster, but our emotions are rarely disturbed by tragedies that occur to strangers far away with whom we have no special connection. Even if we are moved to donate to

emergency relief, hearing such terrible news does not change our lives in any fundamental way.

At our best, we give far less to help foreigners than we give to those within our own country. The tsunami that struck Southeast Asia just after Christmas 2004, killed 220,000 people and rendered millions homeless and destitute. It prompted Americans to give \$1.54 billion for disaster relief work, the largest amount that Americans have ever given after any natural disaster outside the United States. But it was less than a quarter of the \$6.5 billion Americans gave the following year to help those affected by Hurricane Katrina, which killed about 1,600 people and left far fewer homeless than the tsunami. An earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005 that killed 73,000 people elicited a comparatively small \$150 million in donations from Americans. (The earthquake was the only one of these three tragic events that was not caught on video and so did not result in dramatic and oft-repeated television coverage.) Bear in mind that the victims of the American disasters were also being helped by a government with far greater resources than the governments of the countries struck by the tsunami and the earthquake.¹²

Discomforting as our relative indifference to foreigners may be, it is easy to understand why we are like this. Our species has spent millions of years evolving as social mammals with offspring who need their parents' care for many years. For most of these millions of years, parents who did not care for their children during this period of dependence were unlikely to pass on their genes.¹³ Hence our concern for the welfare of others tends to be limited to our kin, and to those with whom we are in cooperative relationships, and perhaps to members of our own small tribal group.

Even when nation-states formed and tribal ethics began to be constricted by the requirements of the larger society, the intuition that we should help others usually extended only to

helping our compatriots. In *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens lends his support to parochialism by ridiculing the “telescopic philanthropy” of Mrs. Jellyby, who “could see nothing nearer than Africa.” She works hard on a project that will educate the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger, but her house is a mess and her children are neglected.¹⁴ It was easy for Dickens to make fun of Mrs. Jellyby, for such philanthropy was, in his day, misguided. It was hard to know whether people far away needed our help; if they did, it was even harder to find effective ways of helping them. Anyway, there were many British poor in circumstances scarcely less desperate. In noting the limits to our sympathy for those far away, Adam Smith said that this state of affairs “seems wisely ordered by Nature,” since those far from us are people “we can neither serve nor hurt.” If we cared more, it would “produce only anxiety to ourselves, without any manner of advantage to them.”¹⁵ Today these words are as obsolete as the quill with which Smith wrote them. As our response to the tsunami vividly demonstrated, instant communications and rapid transport mean that we *can* help those far from us in ways that were impossible in Smith’s day. In addition, the gap between the living standards of people in developed nations and those in developing nations has increased enormously, so that those living in industrialized nations have greater capacity to help those far away, and greater reason to focus our aid on them: far away is where the vast majority of the extremely poor are.

Futility

In one study, people were told that there were several thousand refugees at risk in a camp in Rwanda and were asked how willing they were to send aid that would save the lives of 1,500 of them. In asking this question, the researchers varied the total

number of people they said were at risk, but kept the number that the aid would save at 1,500. People turned out to be more willing to send aid that saved 1,500 out of 3,000 people at risk than they were to send aid that saved 1,500 out of 10,000 at risk. In general, the smaller the proportion of people at risk who can be saved, the less willing people are to send aid.¹⁶ We seem to respond as if anything that leaves most of the people in the camp at risk is “futile”—although, of course, for the 1,500 who will be saved by the aid, and for their families and friends, the rescue is anything but futile, irrespective of the total number in the camp. Paul Slovic, who coauthored this study, concludes that “the *proportion* of lives saved often carries more weight than the *number* of lives saved.” The implication is that people will give more support for saving 80 percent of 100 lives at risk than for saving 20 percent of 1,000 lives at risk—in other words, for saving 80 lives rather than for saving 200 lives, even when the cost of saving each group is the same.¹⁷

The high school students introduced in the previous chapter said things like “It’s going to go on” and “There will never be enough money to help all these people.” Many of us engage in what psychologists label “futility thinking.” We say that aid to the poor is “drops in the ocean,” implying that it is not worth giving, because no matter how much we do, the ocean of people in need will seem just as vast as it was before.

The Diffusion of Responsibility

We are also much less likely to help someone if the responsibility for helping does not rest entirely on us. In a famous case that jolted the American psyche, Kitty Genovese, a young woman in Queens, New York, was brutally attacked and killed while thirty-eight people in different apartments reportedly

saw or heard what was happening but did nothing to aid her. The revelation that so many people heard Genovese's screams, but failed even to pick up the phone to call the police, led to a national debate about "what kind of people we have become."^{*}

The public debate that followed the Kitty Genovese murder led psychologists John Darley and Bib Latané to explore the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility. They invited students to participate in a market research survey. The students went to an office, where they were met by a young woman who told them to sit down and gave them some questionnaires to fill out. She then went into an adjacent room separated from the office only by a curtain. After a few minutes, the students heard noises suggesting that she had climbed on a chair to get something from a high shelf, and the chair had fallen over. She cried out: "Oh, my God, my foot . . ." "I . . . I . . . can't move . . . it. Oh, my ankle. I . . . can't . . . can't . . . get . . . this thing off . . . me." The moaning and crying went on for about another minute.¹⁹ Of those students who were alone in the adjoining room filling out the market research survey, 70 percent offered to help. When another person who appeared to be a student completing the survey—but was in fact a stooge—was also present, and that person did not respond to the calls for help, only 7 percent offered to help. Even when two genuine students were together in the room, the proportion offering to help was much lower than when there was only one student. The diffusion of responsibility had a marked inhibiting effect—the "bystander effect." Other experiments have yielded similar results.²⁰

^{*}Long after the name "Kitty Genovese" had become a byword for the indifference of big-city residents to their neighbors, a more thorough investigation raised serious doubts about the initial reports, specifically about how many witnesses really knew what was happening and had the opportunity to report it.¹⁸

The Sense of Fairness

Nobody likes being the only one cleaning up while everyone else stands around. In the same way, our willingness to help the poor can be reduced if we think that we would be doing more than our fair share. The person considering giving a substantial portion of his or her disposable income can't help but be aware that others, including those with a lot more disposable income, are not. Imagine writing that first big check for UNICEF or Oxfam, and then running into your neighbors coming back from a winter vacation in the Caribbean, looking relaxed and tanned, and telling you about their great adventures sailing and scuba diving. How would you feel?

So strong is our sense of fairness that, to prevent others getting more than their fair share, we are often willing to take less for ourselves. In the "ultimatum game," two players are told that one of them, the proposer, will be given a sum of money, say \$10, and must divide it with the second player, the responder, but *how* the money is divided is up to the proposer, who can offer as much or as little as she wishes. If the responder rejects the offer, neither will get anything. The game is played only once, and the players' identities are not revealed, so their decisions will not be influenced by any thoughts of pay-back if they should meet again. If the players acted purely from self-interest, the proposer would offer the smallest possible amount and the responder would accept it, because after all, even a little is better than nothing at all. But in many different cultures, most proposers offer an equal split of the money. That offer is invariably accepted. Occasionally, however, proposers behave as economists would expect them to, and offer less than 20 percent. Then most responders confound the economists by rejecting the offer.²¹ Even monkeys will reject a reward for a task if they see another monkey getting a better reward for performing the same task.²²

Responders who reject small offers show that even when dealing with a complete stranger with whom they will never interact again, they would rather punish unfairness than gain money. Why would people (and monkeys) act in ways that seem contrary to their own interest? The most plausible answer is that moral intuitions like fairness developed because they enhanced the reproductive fitness of those who had them and the groups to which they belonged. Among social animals, those who form cooperative relationships tend to do much better than those who do not. By making a fair offer, you signal that you are the kind of person who would make a good partner for cooperating. Conversely, by rejecting an unfair offer, you show that you are not going to put up with getting a raw deal, and thus you deter others from trying to take advantage of you. There are also social advantages to such intuitions. A society in which most people act fairly will generally do better than one in which everyone is always seeking to take unfair advantage, because people will be better able to trust each other and form cooperative relationships.

Money

Are we less likely to respond to the needs of others if the only way to respond is to send money? We already know that the lack of an identifiable individual lengthens the odds against our helping. But is it possible that the fact that money is often the only feasible means of helping the distant poor also reduces our willingness to help those we cannot reach?

If you have ever read Karl Marx, you will not be surprised at the idea that the use of money undermines what is best and noblest in human relationships. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a youthful work that remained unpublished and largely unknown until the mid-twentieth

century, Marx describes money as “the universal agent of separation” because it transforms human characteristics and powers into something else. As an example, he suggested, a man may be ugly, but if he has money, he can buy for himself “the most beautiful of women.” Money alienates us, Marx thought, from our true human nature and from our fellow human beings.

If we had only Marx’s authority for this view, we could dismiss it as ideologically motivated. But a report in *Science* by Kathleen Vohs, Nicole Mead, and Miranda Goode, who work in marketing and psychology, and display no awareness that Marx had anything to say about their topic, suggests that on this point, at least, Marx was on to something.

Vohs and her colleagues conducted a series of experiments that involved priming subjects to think about money. They gave them tasks that involved unscrambling phrases about money, or they placed piles of Monopoly money nearby, or they ensured that the subjects saw a screen saver with various denominations of money. Other subjects, randomly selected, unscrambled phrases that were not about money, did not see Monopoly money, and saw different screen savers. In each case, those who had been primed to think about money—let’s call them the “money group”—behaved in ways that showed greater distance from others and more self-sufficiency. The money group

- Took longer to ask for help when engaged in a difficult task and told that help was available
- Left a greater distance between chairs when told to move their chair so they could talk with another participant
- Were more likely to choose a leisure activity that could be enjoyed alone than one that involved others
- Were less helpful to others

- When invited to donate some of the money they had been paid for participation in the experiment, gave less

The researchers were struck by how great a difference the trivial reminders of money made. For example, where the control group offered to spend an average of forty-two minutes helping someone with a task, those primed to think about money offered only twenty-five minutes. Similarly, when someone pretending to be another participant in the experiment asked for help, the money group spent only half as much time helping her. When asked to make a donation, the money group gave just a little over half as much as the control group.²³

Why does money make us less willing to seek or give help, and to be close to others? Vohs and her colleagues suggest that as societies began to use money, the need to rely on family and friends diminished, and people were able to become more self-sufficient. “In this way,” they conclude, “money enhanced individualism but diminished communal motivations, an effect that is still apparent in people’s responses today.” British social scientist Richard Titmuss made a similar point nearly forty years ago, in response to the tide of economic opinion then flowing in favor of allowing blood to be bought and sold for medical purposes. Most economists took the view that the best way to obtain an adequate supply of any commodity is to allow the laws of supply and demand to set the price. British law prohibited the sale of blood, relying on voluntary, altruistic donations, and thus interfering with the laws of supply and demand. In *The Gift Relationship*, Titmuss defended this system on the grounds that it strengthened ties of community. If blood is literally priceless, we all must rely, in a medical emergency, on the lifesaving gifts of strangers. And anyone, no matter how rich or poor, can give back to the community by offering the gift of life to strangers in need. Once you allow

blood to be bought and sold, it becomes a commodity and there is no need for altruism, because if there are not enough altruistic donors, blood can be bought.²⁴

Psychology, Evolution, and Ethics

To many, the intuitions discussed in this chapter amount to a reasonable rejoinder, gathered under the general notion “It’s not in our nature,” to arguments for the moral necessity to give to the distant poor. And, at first glance, the moral judgment that we should help the victim we can see over the victim we can’t feels right. If we think again, however, the intuition doesn’t stand up to examination. Suppose that we are in a boat in a storm and we see two capsized yachts. We can either rescue one person clinging to one upturned yacht, or five people who we cannot see, but we know are trapped inside the other upturned yacht. We will have time to go to only one of the yachts before they are pounded onto the rocks and, most likely, anyone clinging to the yacht we do not go to will be drowned. We can identify the man who is alone—we know his name and what he looks like, although otherwise we know nothing about him and have no connection with him. We don’t know anything about who is trapped inside the other yacht, except that there are five of them. If we have no reason to think that the single identifiable victim is in any way more worthy of rescue than each of the five nonidentifiable people, surely we should rescue the larger number of people. What’s more, if we put ourselves in the position of the people needing to be rescued—but without knowing which of the six we are—we would want the rescuers to go to the capsized yacht with five people, because that will give us the best chance of being rescued.

The same is true for each of the other five psychological factors we have investigated. Our parochial feelings are a restric-

tion on our willingness to act on our capacity, both financial and technological, to give to those beyond the borders of our nation and thereby to do much more good than we can do if our philanthropy stops at those borders. Bill Gates, the master of global technology, has drawn the implications for ethics of the fact that we are now one world. His philanthropy is primarily focused on doing the most good in the world as a whole. When asked by an interviewer for *Forbes* what advice he'd offer the next U.S. president to improve American competitiveness and innovation, Gates batted the question straight back, saying: "I tend to think more about improving the entire world as opposed to relative positions. Otherwise you could say, 'Hey, World War Two was great because the U.S. was in its strongest relative position when that was over.'" ²⁵

Even less defensible than parochialism are the feelings of futility that lead us to focus on the number of people we cannot help, rather than the number we can. The "drops in the ocean" response to the argument for giving aid overlooks the fact that my aid will help specific individuals, families, or even villages, and the good that I do for them is not lessened by the fact that there are many more needy people I cannot help.

Others find intuitive appeal in the diffusion of responsibility. Thus they believe that I have a stronger obligation to save the drowning child than to give aid to the poor, because I am the only person in a position to save the child, whereas there are a billion people in a position to save the 10 million children dying annually from poverty-related causes. But even though a billion others *could* help the children who will be helped by your donation, what difference does that make if you know that they won't, or anyway that not enough of them will for all of those 10 million children to be saved?

Patterns of behavior that helped our ancestors survive and reproduce may, in today's very different circumstances, be of no benefit to us or to our descendants. Even if some evolved in-

tuition or way of acting were still conducive to our survival and reproduction, however, that would not, as Darwin himself recognized, make it right. Evolution has no moral direction. An evolutionary understanding of human nature can explain the differing intuitions we have when we are faced with an individual rather than with a mass of people, or with people close to us rather than with those far away, but it does not justify those feelings.

But of course, concluding that others' needs should count as much as our own is not the same as feeling it, and that is the core of the problem of why we do not respond to the needs of the world's poorest people as we would respond to someone in need of rescue right in front of us.²⁶ Skeptics doubt that reason has any influence on whether we act ethically. It's all a matter of what we want, or desire, they say, of what feels good or bad to us, of what we find attractive or repugnant. They deny that understanding or argument—in a word, the kind of thing that philosophers write, and of which this book largely consists—is ever going to lead anyone to action. Here is one small piece of evidence to counter that. In the same *New York Times* piece about global poverty that the Glennview High School students read, I included telephone numbers that readers could call to donate to UNICEF or Oxfam America. These organizations later told me that in the month after the article appeared, those phone lines brought in about \$600,000 more than they usually took in. Now that's not a vast sum, given how many people read *The New York Times* on Sundays. Still, it does mean that the article persuaded a significant number of people to give. Some of those donors have continued to do so. Several years after the article was published, I have been told, someone came to the Oxfam office in Boston, took a carefully preserved copy of my article out of her bag, and told the staff that she had been meaning to give to the organization ever since reading it. She has since become a major donor. My knowledge of

the impact that this kind of work can have has been a powerful reason for writing this book.

Now let's look at some of those who do respond to appeals to give, and ask what we can do to encourage others to respond in the same way.